Constructing familyness: Pedagogical conversations between professional parents and adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes conversation between professional 'parents' and of out-of-home placed adolescents in specialized foster care. Videotaped and transcribed interactions of six family treatment homes were analyzed by interactional analysis. The topics of all conversations were initiated by the adolescents and reconstructed by the parents into pedagogical moments.

When parents dominated the conversation, the positive content of their contributions resulted in an active position of the adolescent. In dinner table discussions, parents tried to elicit the adolescents' perspectives, while, by joking and provoking, creating an atmosphere of familyness. The adolescents seemed familiar with talking about their perspectives, views, and future plans.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare policy is intended to provide safety for children who are at risk. A major goal in Dutch child welfare policy is to prevent the out-of-home-placement of children as much as possible and if this is not feasible to place children in a foster family or family home (de Baat and Berg-le Clercq, 2010). This policy has led to a rise in the number of family homes.

Family home care is specialized juvenile care for out-of-home-placed children who are unable to live in a regular foster family due to problematic behavioral issues and complex backgrounds. Its goal is to create conditions of real family life in which children can focus on their future (citizenship). The children live in family-like circumstances on a small scale. The homes consist of professional parents (at least one of whom is paid and trained for the job), their biological children and approximately four placed children. The pedagogical climate in these family homes is hybrid; professional parents combining family life and professional interventions.

In this article we will examine the interactions between professional parents and adolescents in this hybrid context. We are specifically interested in interactions that demonstrate professional parenting 'at work', instances in which professional parents turn daily conversations into pedagogical ones. We will first examine the literature on parent–child (adolescent) communication, and then introduce our results coming from video-observations of daily conversations in family homes.

1.1. Parenting and adolescent's autonomy

On the basis of her groundbreaking study of parenting styles, Baumrind (1991) concluded that authoritative parents raise their children to become socially responsible citizens who are cooperative and capable of regulating themselves. On the basis of her observational studies, she distinguished this parenting style from authoritarian and permissive styles. Authoritative parenthood, based on a mixture of disciplinary and communication strategies, has become a middle-class ideal in Western societies. Parents act supportively and assertively, rather than being restrictive or over-pliant. There certainly are rules and guidelines, but the strategy is more democratic and leaves room for the child to participate. As children grow older, their developmental progress generally permits more room to follow their own compass. Characteristic for parent–adolescent relationships, at least in western societies, is both negotiating freedom and responsibility (De Swaan, 1988; Giddens, 1992; Ashbourne, 2009). Children learn to participate by engaging in and reflecting on personal relationships. Preadolescents' tendency to rise against their parents' opinion is approached as a manner to construct a separate identity of their own (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009). In line with the Baumrind studies, analysis of dinner conversations show that parents first try to reason with their children and provide arguments to convince them to do what is advised, but that when that is not effective, the reference to the fact of authority in itself is often sufficient. When parents are open, informal, and calm during conversations, the adolescents are less anxious and less avoidant (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008).

There are however significant differences between children who spent their youth with their parents and out-of-home placed children in achieving social responsible autonomy. Familial disturbances in the

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histories of the latter have made them precocious in some developmental aspects and slowed them down in other ones. There are relevant differences between children who grow up in their family of origin and children who don't. Firstly, out-of-home placed children have negative experiences with parent–child relationships. They often have a troubled family history which has disrupted their development. This may put extra pressure on the relationship between PP's and adolescents. Secondly, a new relationship with a professional PP lacks a shared history. This is crucial as formulations of parental demands depend on the familiarity of the ones involved.

Family homes are 'communities of practice' with common ways of doing, views, ways of talking (Eckert, 2006). Contrary to people who do not know each other well, family members easily produce unmitigated directives (Aronsson & Cekaite, 2011). Yet adolescents who are placed in a family home have not lived there for all their life and accordingly do not share all familial understandings. So, moving into a new family may create communication problems for both adolescents and PP's. These adolescents need to be raised as any other child but simultaneously they need help to come to terms about a troubled history. This requires a child-tailored strategy of parenting in which idiosyncratic and social factors are acknowledged, taking into account the adolescent's specific strengths and weaknesses. The goal is to find the golden mean between autonomy and guidance (Smollar & Youniss, 1989). However, how this golden mean is found and how this translates into daily practices of parenting has not been researched in great detail yet.

1.2. The nature of familyness in a family home

Family is not just a biological, legal, financial or societal construct but also a discursive one (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). "Family members remember and draw on shared prior interactions of various types to create shared meanings and affirm a shared past, that is, to (re)create a sense of familyness" (Gordon, 2009, 196). For that matter, the situation of out-of-home placed children is radically different from the situation of children who live at home with their biological parents. They are no longer raised by their birthparents but by unknown adults who, as professionals, assume a parental role. A new relationship has to be built between PP's and children, meaning that daily habits appear to belong to the original family and have to be reconstructed in the new professional family situation. New understandings have to be shared to build up a new common idea of family-belonging. In this respect, children who live in a family home are re-socialized within the next context. Age plays a huge role in this, where younger children might slot into in the ways of a family home more easily than adolescent children. Logically, the older children were when they were placed, the more practices of troubled familyness they carry with them. Consequently, they miss the negotiating practices aimed at achieving shared understanding, that is common in untroubled families, and the norms that make it possible to achieve a shared understanding between parents and children about the nature of their common situation and activity (Voutilainen, Peräkylä, & Ruusuvuori, 2010). Moving into a new family with its own sense of familyness and a shared understanding that excludes the child, simply due to the lack of history with the family, therefore involves communication problems.

In the focus groups that preceded this study, PPs reported that they support the adolescents' development of age-appropriate agency by stimulating social responsibility and autonomy but that the adolescents sometimes need a more directive policy because of their developmental disturbances (van de Koot & Schep, 2014). In our study, we analyze how parental pedagogical practices are talked into being (Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001; Sterponi, 2003; Sterponi, 2009). We expected a mixed picture of parental contributions, with PPs sometimes taking the lead in the conversations with adolescents and other times addressing them as 'adults-in-the-making', the adolescents having a substantial contribution in the conversations and taking initiatives to introduce topics. We also looked for signs of shared beliefs and understanding.

We will now dig into the practice of PP-adolescent communication and come to answer the following two questions:

1. What does a discourse analysis of the interaction reveal about the pedagogical function of professional parent talk that follows child-initiated statements/questions?
2. What is the role of familyness in these conversations?

2. Method

This study looks into the professional activity of family homes as a discourse practice (Hall, Juhila, Matarese, & van Nijnatten, 2014). We methodologically and conceptually combine an ethnographically-oriented approach with a discourse analytical approach that relates family homes to broader discourses, in particular to the field of social work, counseling and pedagogy (van der Haar, 2007; Juhila, Mäkitalo, & Noordegraaf, 2014).

In order to answer the research questions we took the following steps:

- We asked two organizations to each select three family homes in which adolescents are raised by well-trained (undergraduate degree) and experienced (in working with adolescents) professional parents.
- In the six homes we installed a camera on a tripod in the dinner rooms that recorded between the hours of 4 to 7 PM over the course of three weeks.
- Together with a group of students we watched all (over 300 h of) tapes and selected conversations in which professional parents and adolescents were having a significant discussion. The term significant was operationalized as: interactions in which conversational work is done to achieve an educational goal (like setting a rule, giving feedback). In total 156 interactions were selected and studies by both authors.
- The interactions were selected in which the topic of discussion was introduced by an adolescent and that consisted of an exchange of at least twenty turns (to be able to analyze the course of the conversation). This resulted in eleven cases of discussions that exist of twenty turns or more and that are initiated by an adolescent. All other interactions are either initiated by parents or are very short. In our analysis we will focus on how the PPs in our collection conversationally and pedagogically succeed in the transformation from the initiation of a topic to a pedagogical conversation.
- From the collection of 11 conversations we distinguished between three strategies that PPs used to get a conversation going:

1. Transforming a topic into a discussion (2/11)
2. Taking a topic as a stepping stone to discuss delicate matters (4/11)
3. Taking a topic as a request for explanation (5/11)

From each category we present one fragment.

- The conversations were transcribed in detail according to the Jefferson (2004) conventions, and then translated into English. For all of the data in our corpus informed consent was obtained for scientific use. Names and other identifying details have been changed to preserve individuals' privacy.
- We used conversation analysis (using the notion of sequentiality, Sidnell, 2010) and discourse analysis to analyze the pedagogical interactions.

3. Results

3.1. Transforming a topic into a discussion

In our collection of discussions that start off with a topic initiation of an adolescent we found two examples of provocative responses of