

Transparency in Social Work: Mapping Polarities Faced by Social Workers

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Abstract

During recent decades, the notion of transparency has become a guiding framework in social work policy and practice. Transparency is often approached in this context as a managerial notion. In this article, we approach transparency as a relational notion, a key attitude in social work. Relational transparency is a prerequisite for achieving democratic partnership with service users and their family and social network. Transparency as a key attitude of the social worker is often taken for granted, both by practitioners as by policymakers. In the first face of our action research, we found that the way in which transparency is realized in the everyday practice of social work is a major challenge. After discussing the shift from a managerial to a relational notion of transparency, we analyse the various polarities social workers have to deal with in order to develop a transparent practice vis-à-vis service users. The question is whether we repeatedly fall into the trap of thinking that these dilemmas can be resolved instead of looking for ways to deal with them in daily practice without losing the fundamental values and ethical standards that social work represents.

Keywords: child and family social work, pedagogical dialogue, relational transparency, vulnerability

Introduction

During recent decades, the notion of transparency has become a guiding framework in social work policy and practice (Devlieghere et al., 2018; Devlieghere & Gillingham, 2020; Scholtes, 2012). However, the notion of transparency in social work is a complex and multidimensional concept that takes on different meanings depending on who it is about, who is using it or the context in which it is used (Devlieghere & Gillingham, 2020; Fox, 2007; Scholtes, 2012). Transparency can be approached as a managerial or a relational notion. From a managerial logic, there is a strong focus on accountability to the government (Clarke & Newman, 1997), in which social work is under pressure to account for a transparent and efficient use of tax money (Van der Tier, Hermans & Potting, 2021). The impact of technology (ICT) has also added to a heightened emphasis on transparency (Curtin, Meijer, Brandsma & Grimmelikhuisen, 2006; Dawes, 2010), as digital tools are increasingly used to account for welfare work (Devlieghere & Gillingham, 2020; Devlieghere & Roose, 2019; Kunneman, 2005). However, the growing demand for more transparency in social work is also underpinned by anti-oppressive logics and accountability to services users. The risk is high that important decisions may be taken over people's heads without their voice being heard (Beresford, 2002; Cappon & Vander Laenen, 2015; Naert, 2018). For instance, the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018) states: *'Social workers acknowledge that they are accountable for their actions to the people they work with; Social workers must be prepared to be transparent about the reasons for their decisions.'* From that perspective, transparency becomes a relational instead of a managerial notion and one of the basic values of social workers. In reality, however, this relational approach is not at all evident. The way in which transparency is realised in the everyday practice of social work is a major challenge. For instance, research on Flemish child and family social work showed that the grounds for interventions often remain vague for children and parents, leading to so-called 'unargued' interventions (De Vos, 2015). In this article we report on research on the way in which social workers give shape to relational transparency in the concrete practice of child and family social work. After discussing the shift from a managerial to a relational notion of transparency, we analyse the various polarities social workers have to deal with in order to develop a transparent practice vis-à-vis service users.

From a managerial to a relational notion of transparency

All too often, the term transparency is used in a rather loose and figurative way. People make their own interpretation of it and give it meaning from their experience (Fox, 2007; Meyer et al., 2010). From a managerial perspective, the notion of transparency is seen as highly rational with the emphasis

on 'objectification' becoming ever more important. People's needs are translated through objective diagnosis into 'problem definitions', which are increasingly promoted as legitimisation to reformulate people's questions and adopt specific forms of intervention (De Vos, 2015). In this context, transparency is translated into the search for tools and aimed at consensus decisions and for ways for social professionals to clarify and justify their decisions (Devlieghere & Gillingham, 2020; Long et al., 2006). From a managerial logic, service users become customers who need to have full information about the services and the conditions of use so that they can make the right choices (Benoot, 2020; Lorenz, 2005). Transparency here can be seen as a benefit at the customer level in a market-oriented system (Scholtes, 2012).

From a relational perspective, transparency requires a pedagogical dialogue and negotiations between social workers and service users, instead of working with fixed and standardised procedures (Van Haute et al., 2018). Transparency is a form of 'language in action', a medium for reaching agreement between people (Boothman, 2008). However, systemic boundaries embedded in professional language, as well as individual restraints, define the space in which people act. Like Bourdieu and Foucault, we assume that aiming to achieve 'perfectly transparent communication' without obstacles or coercive effects would be utopian, since power relations are omnipresent. Social workers and service users belong to different 'social fields' and do not have the same access to different types of capital (cf. Bourdieu) (Garret, 2018). Not every service user has the verbal proficiency, the minimum cognitive competences, the courage to speak or the autonomy. Service users are all too often perceived as objects in need of 'care' instead of subjects, who give meaning to their lives through interaction with others (Pols, 2005). Pedagogical dialogue and transparent negotiations refer to a focus on looking for ways in which we define problems and solutions to these problems in dialogue with service users themselves (Freire, 1985; Portengen & Moonen, 2018; Roose, 2019). The starting point in this perspective is that transparency refers to a key attitude of social workers. Flyverbom talks about transparency as an arena of communication (Flyverbom et al. in Scholtes, 2012). According to Scholtes, transparency means:

Each of the actors gives meaning to information on the basis of their own situation. The one truth does not exist ... Knowledge is a product of interpretation of information. And actors will in many cases aim to influence the information to be made transparent themselves as well... Transparency is a concept with reciprocity attached and where dependency is at stake, where a certain risk is taken (Scholtes, 2012, pp. 243-244).

As such, transparency requires the courage to allow oneself to be vulnerable as a social worker. Brown (2012) defines vulnerability as the emotion we experience in times of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure:

There is nothing that requires more vulnerability than holding people accountable for ethics and values, especially if ... there is a lot of ..., power or influence involved. Then you will be belittled, people will ... dislike you and sometimes try to discredit you to protect themselves. So if (...) you “don't do vulnerability” and/or you have a culture that thinks vulnerability is weakness, then it's no wonder that making ethical decisions is a problem (Brown, 2012, p. 49).

Hence, referring to Scholtes (2012) and Brown (2012), we could define relational transparency as a form of clarity, honesty and reliability in the everyday practice of social workers. To have the courage to be vulnerable, even when it is uncomfortable.

Ambiguity is inherently embedded in this relational approach, as social workers are always caught between their mission to meet the needs of service users on the one hand and to fulfil a normative social function on the other. For instance, in Flemish child and family social work, the child at risk is currently the central notion, which might limit the space for dialogue (De Vos, 2015; Devlieghere & Roose, 2017; Vyvey et al., 2014). Also, in their daily practice, social workers are always confronted. Social workers are confronted with different – sometimes opposing – perspectives of the various parties involved. Boundaries are challenged and tested. Where social workers are not willing or able to deal with this ambiguity, the voice of vulnerable service users tends to be ignored (Pols, 2005; Portengen, 2019) and the grounds for decisions and actions become obscured.

Our argument in this article is that in order to realise relational transparency, these fields of tension cannot be avoided or resolved but that this requires reflection on how social workers work with them. To be able to deal with them, a first step is to recognise and make them transparent. In our research, we explored the tensions – which we called polarities – which social workers constantly need to leverage in order to realise a relational approach of transparency.

Methodology

The research context

The research we describe in this article is the first phase of a larger action research programme, in which we analyse how a transparent practice can be realised in child and family social work in the context of three projects called ‘1 Family, 1 Plan’ (‘1F,1P’), in the region of East Flanders (Belgium). The three projects are part of 16 regional partnerships that cover the whole of Flanders and Brussels. These

partnerships received 24 million euros from the Flemish government to support families and to build a strong network of support in the regions concerned. Each of these projects was commissioned by the government to create a single care plan, together with the families, in which social work should be participatory, strength-oriented and network-strengthening. '1 Family, 1 Plan' moves between general services and the more specialised care services. Every family, together with their social worker, draws up a family plan. The starting point for this is the needs of children and parents and the search for strengths within the family and its network. The family is central and co-determines the further course of the care process. The regional partnerships consist of various organisations and services from welfare and education (Centre for General Welfare Work (CGWW), Pupil Guidance Centres (PGC), Mental Healthcare, Youth Care, Organisations for People with a Disability (OPD), Centres for Child Care and Family Support (CCCFS), local authorities, etc.) (Vlaamse Overheid, z.d.). Each social worker who works for one of the projects does so from their own organisation, which is part of the network. So several employers, from a variety of organisations within youth and general welfare work, participate in the same intersectoral teams of a project. The three projects involved in this research are all coached to a greater or lesser extent by the East Flanders Support Plan Organisation (SPO), of which the first author of this article is the manager. SPO employs coaches to facilitate processes with people who, at a certain point in their lives, get stuck or appear likely to get stuck. They always work together with the people themselves, with the mission of giving them (back) control over their lives. The focus here is on an equal partnership. The expertise built up as a facilitator of (network) strengthening processes, based on a full partnership with people in establishing a support plan, is now being applied in the '1F,1P' projects in East Flanders. This is done through coaching, training and supervision.

The mission of the '1 Family, 1Plan' projects is fully in line with the Flemish government's vision text 'Youth Aid 2020', issued in 2012. This states that in an empowering child welfare system, the minor and their parents are considered important actors in the care process, of which they become co-producers. In 2014, a new decree was voted in as the basis for a new phase leading towards a more *transparent*, demand-oriented, emancipatory and participative youth assistance system (explanatory memorandum to the draft decree of 19 March 2013, p. 7). As such, the '1 Family, 1 Plan' projects exemplify the question how to make explicit the concept relational transparency and the dilemmas encountered by social workers in this context.

Research design

Since their mission is to work in democratic partnership with families to come up with a joint plan of action based on the issues that arise in the lives of those seeking help, these projects were looking for tools to put this into practice. It soon became clear that training alone was not enough to achieve real

change in the behaviour of practitioners. This also required a different key attitude. For this reason, it was decided that supervision should also be carried out. One of the things that was noted by the coordinators of the different projects was that when there was 'concern' among the workers because they suspected that the safety of a child was at risk, or when a counsellor from the juvenile court was involved, practitioners found it very difficult to talk about this with the service users themselves. Honest, transparent communication then became a major challenge. More specifically, the greatest challenges were situated around concepts such as ambiguity (of social work) and power/knowledge.

Because of these challenges, there was a request from the projects to explore the dilemmas that practitioners encounter when they try to adopt a key attitude on transparency. In consultation with the actors involved, we decided to set up an action research project. The first phase, which we describe here, concerned clarification of the fields of tension that arise when practitioners aim for a key attitude on transparency. The intended change is that when practitioners encounter a dilemma, they no longer look at it as a problem that needs to be solved, but rather as a field of tension specific to social work that they can learn to deal with on the basis of self-reflection about their own actions and professional standards. Of course there are also limits to this research. The phase of the action research described here is focused on the perspective of professionals. In order to understand the challenges in dealing with ambiguity and power relations, we will in the next research steps incorporate the perspective of children and parents.

The actions

On the basis of six sessions of supervision in November 2020 with practitioners of the three projects, the areas of tension they encountered were mapped out. Each session lasted between 2.5 and 3 hours and was led by a supervisor from SPO. We specifically looked for underlying fears and values experienced by social workers when they interacted with service users from a key attitude on transparency. For many of the practitioners, it was the first time they had worked under supervision. In this supervision, transparency as a key attitude to achieve a democratic partnership with the families with whom a plan was being drawn up was thematised. The supervisor introduced the theme and then asked several in-depth questions. The supervised groups varied from 3 to 13 participants. A total of 47 practitioners participated. The majority were women, most of whom had already accumulated a number of years' experience in their respective sectors. The researcher was an observer and did not participate in the supervision. The supervised sessions took place online (via Zoom), given the Covid-19 public health measures. We followed the ethical guidelines developed by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of XXXXX. Each time, permission was asked from the participants in advance to record the supervisions. It was agreed that names would be anonymised

but that the type of organisation from which they were bringing their experience into the project could be mentioned. The researcher took notes during the supervisions. The supervisors and practitioners received the research proposal in advance, which also included a description of a key attitude on transparency, based on Brown and Scholtes, which we mentioned in the introduction. After the description had been presented to the practitioners, they were asked what they encountered in practice. This created a dialogue between the social workers and the supervisor. The supervisors mainly continued to ask questions about issues that the participants brought up.

Data analysis

Because of the underlying tensions inherently interwoven with the concept of transparency, we introduced the model of 'polarity thinking' as a framework for mapping out the dilemmas as experienced by child and family social workers (Johnson, 1996, 2020; Portengen, 2019). This concerns the dynamics between two underlying perspectives (poles) that are inextricably linked and interdependent; one cannot exist without the other (over time), for example 'autonomy and connection'. According to polarity thinking, both poles are equally necessary to realise movement and development. Each of these poles is dependent on the other. An excessive focus on one of the poles, such as autonomy, can yield results in the short term in which citizens may completely determine their own lives. But neglecting connectedness can have the side effect of putting people into isolation. Polarity thinking helps to clarify underlying ideas (values and fears) and thus the underlying dynamics. According to polarity thinking, people always prefer a certain pole. This preferred pole is determined by a combination of values and fears. When people are in conflict about opposite poles, it is actually about conflicting values and fears that are under tension. Based on the statements made by practitioners, the underlying fields of tension related to transparency as a key attitude were drawn out.

We analysed the data from the supervised sessions in a conventional data analysis. This type of data analysis lends itself well to research where the available scientific literature is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The categories and names for these categories arise from the data itself. The data were approached by making notes about the first impressions of the first author, which were discussed with the second and third author. In this way, themes emerged that recurred in the various sessions. These were clustered into a number of categories. The advantage of this way of working is that information is collected directly from the practitioners without imposing certain categories in advance.

From the analysis of the six supervised sessions, we distinguished nine different polarities: 1) *Social work as a technical-methodical practice/as a social, political practice*; 2) *Individual rights/social*

interest 3) Protection/space for development; 4) Power: authority/equity; 5) Goal-oriented work/relationship-oriented work; 6) Participation/representation; 7) Problem-oriented/solution-oriented work; 8) Different perspectives on expertise; 9) Inter-personal/intra-personal themes. We discuss these themes further in the next section.

Findings

Social work as a technical-methodical and social work as a socio-political practice

Social workers seem to be caught between their mission to meet the needs of service users on the one hand and their need to meet managerial criteria or societal expectations on the other. As previously described, there is increasing pressure on social workers to work more efficiently and to be accountable for the use of public funds. A lack of time to work on behalf of the service users was a recurring theme in our study. It was said that it is easier and faster to make decisions without service users, as then there is no need to consider language barriers or a possible disability. A participant from an OPD mentioned:

Sometimes I notice that transparency makes cooperation with other care workers less smooth or slower because you say "I can't pass on that information, I have to check with the family first". (supervision 6)

The participants indicated that they work with a lot of standardised tools, such as databases containing service user information, application forms and intake procedures. One participant (supervision 5) volunteered that she works with a stress tolerance window (a tool to measure the stress responses) to determine how transparent she can be. Others indicated that tailoring work to the needs of service users cannot be done using standardised systems and tools. One participant said: *'talking about distress is not measurable'* (supervision 3). They indicated that it is more important to go through a process together than to ensure that a report is shared. Transparency was seen here as talking about the situation together, trying to put oneself in the shoes of the service user and acknowledging each other's efforts.

Finally, practitioners indicated that they knew many theoretical frameworks, but that the underlying vision of the social work organisation in which they worked determined the attitude they adopted. They knew that a key attitude on transparency was expected but that this was not evident in practice. Social workers experience a strong tension between expectations of the policy level and a decision

based on ethical reflection on the consequences of the choices they make. One participant in supervision 4 shared her experience:

You notice that you have responded differently in so many situations. Why did I give certain opportunities in one situation and in another situation I'm not going to talk about my concern.

When this came up during the supervision sessions, the struggle also surfaced there. The dialogue below in supervision 1 between the participant from a CPG and the participant from the CGWW illustrates this:

I would find it difficult that if I want to enter into a dialogue with service users, there is a team meeting in my own organisation ..., and that you then have the unpleasant task of communicating things that they have decided. ... you would have to say to your team 'I'm not going to do that', but that's difficult because you do work with your team. But you do have to work with your service users too.

To which the other participant replied:

... I gave the message 'I'm not going to pass this on to a client because that's not a decision I've made. That is the decision made by the management,... and it makes me feel very uncomfortable when I hear this..... I wouldn't be able to do that, it would clash with me.... no matter how difficult it is.

Individual rights and social interests

Linked to the first theme, participants indicated that they sometimes got caught up in a dilemma between the individual rights of service users they defended and the social interests that they also needed to take into account. On the one hand, they indicated that people were entitled to fair and objective information and that their rights should be pointed out to them. On the other hand, they indicated that, as care workers, they should take over when there was a concern and then, they should give the family a clear framework.

During supervised session 4, a discussion took place on the dilemmas that arise when there is concern. Someone from a PGC indicated clearly:

I think there is a difference if you are in a situation of concern or not. Then it is suddenly much more difficult... Then you get that pressure as a care worker, and you take on a very different role in that family..that is actually something that works against transparency.

Another participant from CCCFS agreed:

There are simply rights and obligations that parents have to take on with regard to their children... you cannot just make an unlimited choice as a parent and that there can also be forced help if the safety of a child is not fully protected there..... that child is not fully theirs, that's not what I mean, but there are limits.

Yet other perspectives of social workers were also heard here. Someone from the CGWW put it this way:

Taking over this concern is sometimes a pitfall (...) The intention is that this also lives in the family and that they will deal with it themselves. The pitfall is that you take on too much as a social worker and as the person responsible for the concern. (supervision 4)

Protection and space for development

Some practitioners indicated that they were less transparent when it came to enforced care because they did not dare to be brusque or they were scared of the adverse consequences for the children. They did not express their own doubts and found it easier to discuss the situation with professionals. Several participants stated that it was sometimes easier and safer not to include the service users in the communication. Others, on the other hand, said that they always communicated honestly about their concerns and were open to the service users' perspective on what they were doing. They indicated that they dared to put their own vulnerability on the table and take risks. According to them, people sense when you are not honest. The discussion below illustrates this. Someone from a mental health service remarked:

The moment there is concern, transparency becomes very important.... Whereas sometimes, when there is concern, we start talking about clients ... but the clients don't know about it yet.

A colleague from an observation and orientation centre (OOC) commented:

When identifying concerns, ..., you always have to weigh up the pros and cons... what if you are the only one left in that family? ...

A colleague from the CGWW gave support:

I do follow that, delayed transparency until you have sufficient mandate.

But the caregiver from the CCCFS reacted:

Not saying it yourself is not OK. If I am worried about a family, I want to say so myself even though it would damage my relationship of trust. If they hear afterwards that it was your concern and you didn't put it there, that will also damage your relationship of trust ...

The caregiver from the CPG responded:

It's such a classic that people say "we're not going to say it because we're afraid" ... You often hear that in meetings, social workers don't say anything because they are afraid of breaking

trust. ... I think our work is great ... until suddenly there is concern. Either by yourself or by the environment, and then I notice that positions become completely different... (supervision 5)

Power: authority and equity

Practitioners recognise that power plays an important role in doing their job. It was said that when you work on the basis of equity, the underlying framework from which you work is communicated. Then things are shared with service users in the same way as with professionals. You do not avoid confrontation. As someone from the mental health sector pointed out, this is not always easy:

The greatest tension is that we place ourselves next to the service user. ...In what way do you work with their plans and their perspective without completely denying your position as a care provider and the responsibilities that go with it? ... We are equal but we are not equal. And being able to discuss that in a safe way is still a difficult point for me. Being transparent in the responsibility I have, when I am worried. That is a constant balancing act.

Someone from the PGC made a comparison with his previous job in a community group:

There are a lot of meetings about people. While those people are only 5 minutes away. ... That creates a kind of power relationship (supervision 1)

Finally, the manner of communication is also considered to be a form of power. For example, someone from the CCCFS indicated that especially when service users were not proficient in the Dutch language, the counsellors asked the social workers half an hour earlier than the service users to discuss the situation beforehand.

Goal- and relationship-oriented work

The participants in the study made a distinction between goal-oriented and relationship-oriented work. Goal-oriented work was understood as clarity of social workers' expectations of the family. Then social workers together form a front to reach the goal. Someone from the CCFS formulated this as follows:

I find the fact that other social workers ask for a meeting about the family very disturbing ... Even though you keep saying: "I'm not going to sit down together without the family members". Their arguments are to get their noses in the same line, form one strong front together, but I don't feel good about that. (supervision 5)

Someone from special youth care made the connection with reliability:

I think that because of the transparent communication and honesty, a trust is established ... If I can compare this with my former work in social work, it sometimes took a few months before the parents had confidence and could speak, and now there is confidence immediately because they feel that there is transparency. (supervision 1)

Participation and representation

Some participants indicated that when they took a participatory stance, the essence of the issues came to the table. They spoke a similar language and the minors themselves were also present during the conversations. When they worked in a participatory way, everyone who was important was included in the process from the beginning and they were asked how they saw the situation. There was openness to different, sometimes opposing, perspectives and interests. One of the participants from special youth care made the link with transparency as a condition for participation:

Participation is only the second step if the first has not been taken: transparency. If everyone knows what they have to work on or how everyone looks at that particular situation, only then can you participate in a particular situation (supervision 2)

Other participants indicated that they struggled with this. They were worried that parents would not be able to tell their children about it without burdening them. Someone from foster care said:

I sometimes have doubts, especially when you are talking to parents and their young child is walking around the room. ... Is it OK for them to hear the conversations between you and the parents when it comes to them? From when is it OK, from when is it not OK? Is it about everything? Is it about a part of it?

The supervisor asked:

And if that child is present in that family? What does it already know and what not?

The answer was:

That's a good question. (supervision 2)

Problem- and solution-oriented work

During the supervised sessions, it also became apparent that similar situations are looked at from different perspectives by practitioners. There were participants who assumed that certain families or target groups (they gave as examples destructive families, people with autism or behavioural and emotional disorders, people who are 'tired of help') should be looked at 'differently'. According to them, you could not be transparent with these target groups. As a participant from an OPD stated:

When it comes to children with autism or children with a serious attachment or behavioural disorder, I don't always think it's advisable to be transparent about it, because often those people can't do anything with it, but it often comes back to haunt you (supervision 5)

Or as someone from the CGWW remarked:

We have to listen carefully to the young person or the child because it is often assumed that when the parents come to us ... they can fill in things for the child. ... if the question is about the young person, then that young person should also be in charge and not just the parents. (supervision 1)

Differing views on expertise

We heard stories in which participants indicated that they acted on the basis of the role or expertise they had because of the organisation for which they worked. In this view, expertise is mainly seen unidirectionally: the professional 'possesses' expertise that needs to be transmitted to parents.

Someone from the CGWW said:

For me, the key attitude on transparency is determined by my role. I worked for the juvenile court.... I had to make an assessment of how safe children were growing up..... I think I now take an even more questioning attitude towards people and that I try just that little bit harder to understand them... (supervision 5)

Or another story from someone from an OOC:

You go and do research and give advice to service users which also sets the relationship as "we know". So when I started in the project, I did feel that's a very different approach that took me out of my comfort zone When I have to work in a family where there are many caregivers... then it's a challenge. (supervision 1)

Other participants indicated that regardless of the role they took on from the organisation they worked for, they always work with a relational orientation. Here, expertise was seen as a co-construction that emerged in the process and in dialogue with parents and youngsters. As someone from special youth care remarked:

I just can't do that, do something that I don't support. I would find that much easier if I could. But you can already see that on my face and people will say "this guy is saying things here that he doesn't agree with". (supervision 1)

This view on expertise on the part of professionals seems to have an effect on the way they view aspects of the care trajectory as more or less important. This leads to sometimes contradictory effects,

for example seeing transparency as a threshold for building a relationship of trust. Or as someone from mental healthcare put it:

You notice that people speak more carefully when they are present ..., while when there are phone calls between care workers, what they sometimes don't get to say to service users is shared much more quickly.

The supervisor asked:

What makes us not dare to do that?

The participant answered:

I think people want to preserve their relationship with the people a lot Your social worker's perspective is sometimes different. (supervision 6)

Inter- and intra-personal themes

The practitioners in the study indicated that they were sometimes not transparent because it was not clear to them whether in a concrete situation it was about an inter-personal issue between themselves and the service users or rather about an intra-personal issue. This was expressed in the following statement by someone from special youth care:

What do I run into when it comes to transparent key attitudes? it is always a weighing up of what is a piece of my own process that I am going through ..., which sometimes stops me from sharing my piece... Because of interpretations I make. I find that a pitfall and that sometimes stops me from sharing something with families and I will sooner go to my team first than talk it through with them. (supervision 5)

Or as a participant from the CCCFS remarked:

Your own personality plays a huge role Can you expect a social worker to change or drop his personality in order to communicate transparently with the family? I am thinking of very shy social workers ... Or the other way around, people who are very extroverted and who find it very difficult not to express it when they think differently. (supervision 4)

Discussion and conclusion

We argued that a key attitude on transparency is a prerequisite for achieving a democratic partnership with service users and their family and social network. In particular, we analysed the areas of tension that emerge when this transparent attitude is applied in practice. Social workers are confronted with dilemmas in the performance of their work. These dilemmas are intertwined with the context in which they do their job and, at the same time, with the values that they themselves consider important (Kunneman, 2005). As the research of De Bortoli & Dolan (2015) shows, social workers primarily make

decisions that are determined by their own normative framework and the context in which they are employed. The autonomy of social work practices is then situated in the design of social work within these fields of tension. The challenge is to give meaning to situations in a transparent dialogue with service users. This requires social workers who can take a vulnerable position to explore, recognise and connect (apparently) conflicting perspectives (Pols, 2017; Portengen, 2018), with special attention to the most vulnerable groups in our society so that their perspectives are taken into account. It is a search for the use of a truthful language (cf. Hannah Arendt), in which social workers open themselves up to meet the other, to open themselves up to the point of view of the other. Otherwise, social workers merely become civil servants who avoid reality and do not realise the harm that is thereby done. From this frame of reference, transparency as a key attitude, like social work itself, is complex and ambiguous. It requires professionals to have the courage to share power in identifying and constructing social problems (Freire, 1985; Kina & Gonçalves, 2018; Roose et al., 2013). Social professionals then share knowledge and make choices together with service users based on the different perspectives that may exist on a given situation (Levin, 2015).

As we saw in our research, the space between social workers themselves and service users for dialogical reflection is often limited. There is still a great lack of transparency in arguments leading to interventions in child and family social work. The reasons for this can be attributed to the dilemmas that practitioners at different levels encounter. These dilemmas are not new and can be traced back to the fundamental polarity in social work – subsidised by the government – between being controlling on the one hand and empowering on the other (Lorenz, 2014). The question is whether we repeatedly fall into the trap of thinking that these dilemmas can be resolved instead of looking for ways to deal with them in daily practice without losing the fundamental values and ethical standards that social work represents (Reamer, 2021). Social work, like any social behavioural science, is not neutral (Munro & Hardie, 2019). It can never be a purely technical-rational practice. Time and again, the question arises concerning a normative professional assessment of what is 'good and desirable'. This requires the development of 'a reflexive and learning relationship' with the normative charge of professional action in the organisational and social context. This concerns the relationship between the system world of organisations and policy and the world in which service users live.

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