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Children with no voice: the paradox of children invisibility in the context of home-based interventions

ISPCAN International Congress, Milan 2021 – Julie Chapeau

1 Introduction

My name is Julie CHAPEAU. I'm a French PhD student in Education at the University Paris Nanterre under the supervision of H el ene Join-Lambert.

Since September 2020, I've also worked as technical and scientific advisor to the Deputy Director General in charge of Child and Family Welfare at the D epartement du Nord. My mission, among other things, consists in developing and monitoring actions related to child participation. I also work on knowledge transfer and social workers' training in the child protection system.

2 Context and goals of the research

The French child protection system has undergone significant changes in the last fifteen years. Home-based interventions have grown quickly and become a viable alternative to institutionalisation. Alongside, policy makers have paid more and more attention in recent law changes and strategies to children's basic needs and expression, and more broadly their participation.

How do these changes really impact the CPS? Put at the centre of the CPS's intervention, is the child more present in intervention strategies? How did the social workers transform their practices?

My doctoral research focuses on supportive practices following family reunification after out-of-home care developed in this context.

This ethnographic study identifies conditions under which these interventions guarantee the safety of children while meeting their needs at the same time.

3 Methodology

To open the black box of child protection services practices, I conducted participant observation of French social workers for one week per month from January 2019 to September 2019.

Social workers visited 6 families and 22 children 0 to 14 years old.

Settings included the household, a neutral venue, and social work service facilities.

4 Results

Inspired both by Harry Ferguson's work on children invisibility and Gerald de Montigny ethnographic study, this communication relies on the analysis of a triad of clinical vignettes.

As Ferguson did, quoting Winnicott and Bion, we consider that “invisible children are those who become ‘unthought’ about and are not ‘held in mind’ by workers and systems.”

From these ethnographic tales, we will identify mechanisms leading to children invisibilisation in the context of home based interventions. I will pay more attention to symbolic and physical spaces of intervention and more specifically the way they cause invisibility.

Triptych of clinical vignettes

Picture 1. The door

Jade was barely 2 years old. She was 6 months old when her 4 brothers and sisters got placed under court-order after their parents committed acts of physical violence against them. She was not a victim of these acts, therefore she remained home. Almost a year later, her siblings came back and a home placement court order was established. Jade was excluded from this measure, even though domestic violence was still the main element of danger.

I met the family for the first time a few days after the intervention. The parents first seemed open to the intervention of social workers in their home. While we were talking, Jade tried to hang onto her mom. Not getting any response, she picked up objects around her and threw them at us before running towards the



cupboards to look for sweets. She tried to draw her parents’ attention to her all along the interview.

Every time we visited the family, we could notice an avoiding behavior from Jade towards the social workers. She was always around, but she never participated in any of the activities organized for the brothers and sisters. Whereas the persisting acts of violence within the family were concerning and worried the professional workers, Jade’s situation was never questioned, not in the professional publications nor during team meetings. Yet Jade’s behavior during the interventions was concerning. She scratched and bit her parents and siblings, and threw herself to the floor. She hit her big brothers during games and always stood in opposition to the adults around her.

What is even more disturbing is the fact that she spent most of the intervention at the foot of the front door, waving at us to encourage our departure. She never spoke to the social workers, except to say “goodbye”. The image of the door is significant, even more so in the context of a home placement court order. The door is the frontier between intervention areas. It symbolizes the limit of the control exercised by the social workers. Standing on the doorstep, Jade was outside their observation spectrum.

Picture 2. The forest

We had been following the G family for a few months already. The six brothers and sisters had been placed in emergency under court order because of acts of physical violence, and they were back home after a year of separation. A home placement court-order was also established for them. The social workers’ intervention focused on the relationships in the family, and its size required a specific organization. In the course of the week, the two-person team of educators – sometimes along with a psychologist – led collective interviews with the whole family, interviews with the parents alone and others with specific dyads of the siblings.



Even though the parents had banned all acts of violence towards their children, they couldn’t prevent them from fighting with each other. The educative work set up by the social workers proved insufficient to change the climate of domestic violence which was strongest among the eldest siblings.

On a Wednesday afternoon, in spring, I went on a stroll in the forest with D, an experienced educator, and the two teenagers. The smallness of the family home, the noise, the constant passing and the different family rituals made educative intervention impossible there. Therefore, the team generally opted for neutral places. D. chose the forest to work on the contentious relationship between the brothers. The teenagers did not seem eager to go out at all. They used delaying tactics, tried to distract us, they confronted us verbally and questioned the pertinence of our presence, during a time usually dedicated to leisure activities.

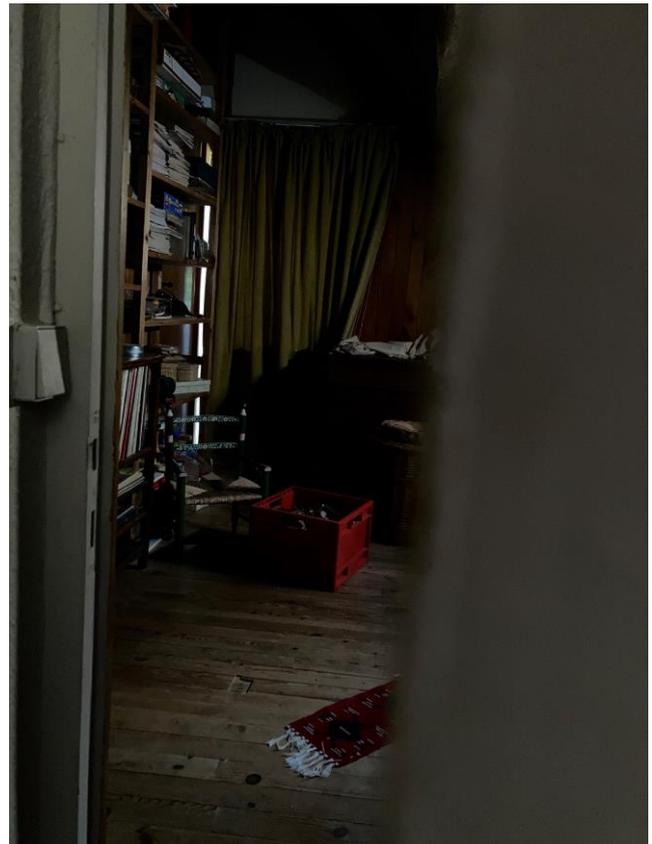
Once in the forest, that they knew very well, the two boys joined forces to leave us behind. We had planned to stop at the picnic area to engage the discussion but we never got the chance. They clearly showed us that they rejected our intervention. However, their position

was never really questioned during team meetings, even though the elements of danger had moved towards the eldest brother, who had become the main author of the acts of violence. The collaboration with the parents remains the first object of the social workers' attention, especially regarding their commitment to the resolution of domestic violence.

The social workers see the child through their problematic behaviour, but they can't hear them. By playing hide-and-seek in the forest, a place they know and have control over, the child used their absence to inform us of their presence in the world.

Picture 3. The dark baby's room

The service had been following a complex situation for 18 months. Clara, 2 years old, lived at home with her mom and her mom's partner, who was not her biological father. The maternal grandmother was very often there. The conditions in which the family lived constituted an element of danger. The hygiene in the accommodation was deplorable, and the little girl played and ate surrounded by trash. The observations regarding nutrition, sleep and Clara's body hygiene were more reassuring. But the main concerning object for the workers was the mother/daughter relationship. They described mechanical care, with no spontaneity. The verbal and gestural interactions were poor. Thanks to the grandmother, however, the little girl seemed to develop in a satisfactory way.



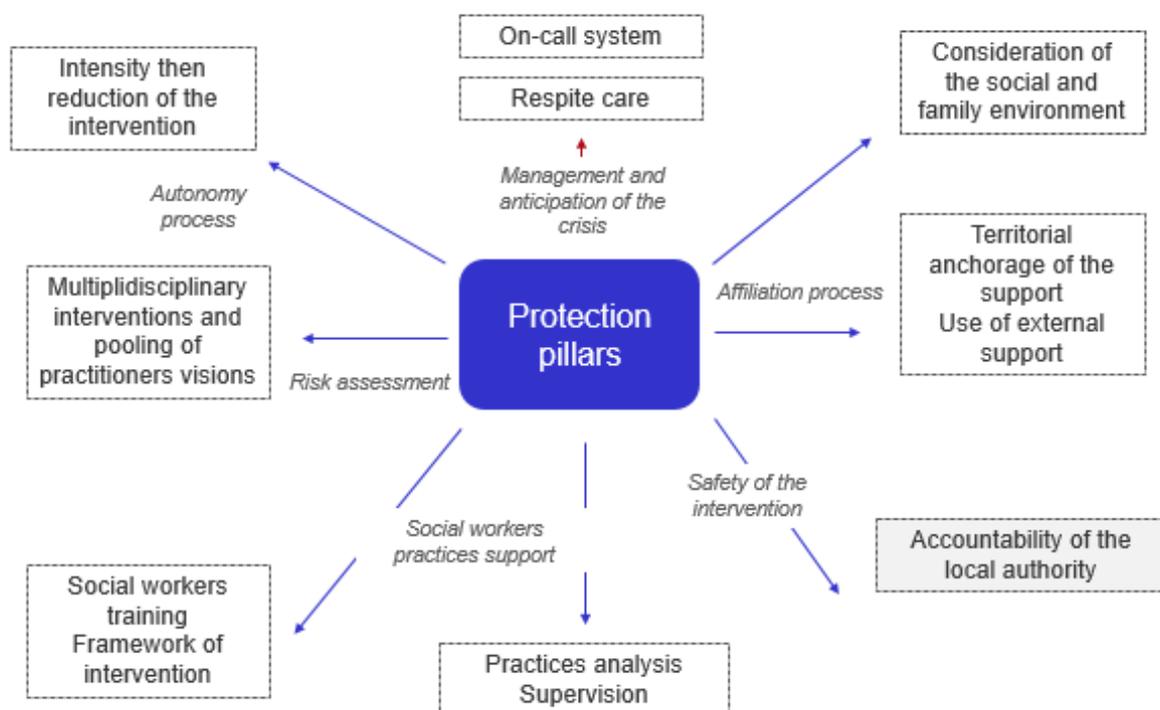
The mom was in a position of opposition during the interventions. The visits made the social workers very uncomfortable. They were plunged into the very hostile environment of the family home, and they felt helpless, incapable of engaging educative work. Their writings gave evidence of the underlying tension they faced, and of their terror regarding a situation they couldn't get under control and a child they couldn't protect.

A few months after the interventions started, the team learned that the mother was pregnant again. She tacitly assured that it was a wanted pregnancy, but she didn't show any sign of joy. She seemed indifferent to the arrival of a new baby. In France, contrary to other countries, there are no existing measures for unborn children. The workers had no mandate and, in a context of rejection of all interventions, they didn't allow themselves to meet the baby and even less to enter the baby's room. They were sometimes there when the baby woke up, and they could see the mother walk into a nearly empty, constantly darkened room. The mom

bottle-fed the child mechanically, sitting next to the bed, eyes fixed on her phone. Without a word nor a glance to her child, whom she put immediately back in bed afterwards. The lifeless child, in his cage-like crib, far from any interaction with their environment, never cried. His was left with his own devices, imprisoned in the paradox of a failing institution whose protection couldn't go further than the door of his room. In the darkness, his was invisible from an institution meant to protect him.

5 Discussion

Quite new in the CPS, the services I observed were designed to provide satisfactory conditions of intervention to guarantee child protection. They are based on protection pillars, listed on the image below.



With a low level of charge (5 to 6 measures per social worker), they suffer less from time pressure and organizational issues pointed out by Broadhurst, Munro, and Ferguson. The frequency of intervention (three times a week) and the measures duration (twelve to eighteen months) are particularly helpful to deepen the relationship necessary to keeping children safe. Moreover, a specific training support plan was defined for the services, focused on compelled help and systemic analysis, including training to use tools dedicated to children (playing cards, children's notebooks and so on). So what can explain these invisibilisation mechanisms? On the one hand, as noted by Ferguson, it is important to know that they were observed only in a few situations. On the other hand, Caroline Leeson shows that in addition to jeopardy it affects children in harmful ways (development of feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem and poor confidence).

The analysis of the triptych shows that these mechanisms are produced by mixed factors, which impact is emphasized by the context of home-based interventions, such as:

- Frequent home visits that expose social workers to a complex social and emotional environment. Social workers in these settings are more at risk of habituation that prevent them from identifying warning signs by children (LeBlanc and al., 2012).
- Then, despite their strategies developed to avoid conflicts with reluctant parents (Stanley and Goddard, Osted) most of the social workers' attention is captured by them. The intervention was mostly designed to address parents' problems and to develop their parenting skills. Even though services are equipped, most resources are not adapted to gather children's opinion in this context and are often inaccessible for informal settings, which facilitate children's expression (Ferguson, 2010)
- In home settings, control logics on symbolical and physical spaces of intervention are completely subverted.
- Finally, French child protection system's own features sometimes cannot guarantee the child safety. For example, siblings who are not automatically concerned by measures.

6 Conclusion

This research sheds on light different mechanisms from the ones identified by Ferguson producing children invisibility. These differences are directly related to the specificities of the French child protection system but also to the insufficient adaptation of the intervention framework to the context of home-based interventions. Considering these results, I suggest to:

- Systematically include siblings who are not concerned by the measures in the spectrum of observation
- Adapt social reference to the specific context of home-based interventions (one referee for the parents, the other one for the child)
- Adjust social worker training, social workers support and assessment tools to the specific context of home-based interventions and the growing need of child participation.

But this analysis raises another question. How do these mechanisms impact the ethnographic observation? Going further, how should we consider children invisibility in research processes?

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