

Systemic Therapy in an Expert Oriented World



An invitation to join us –with your reflections



We are planning to write
an article about this
workshop

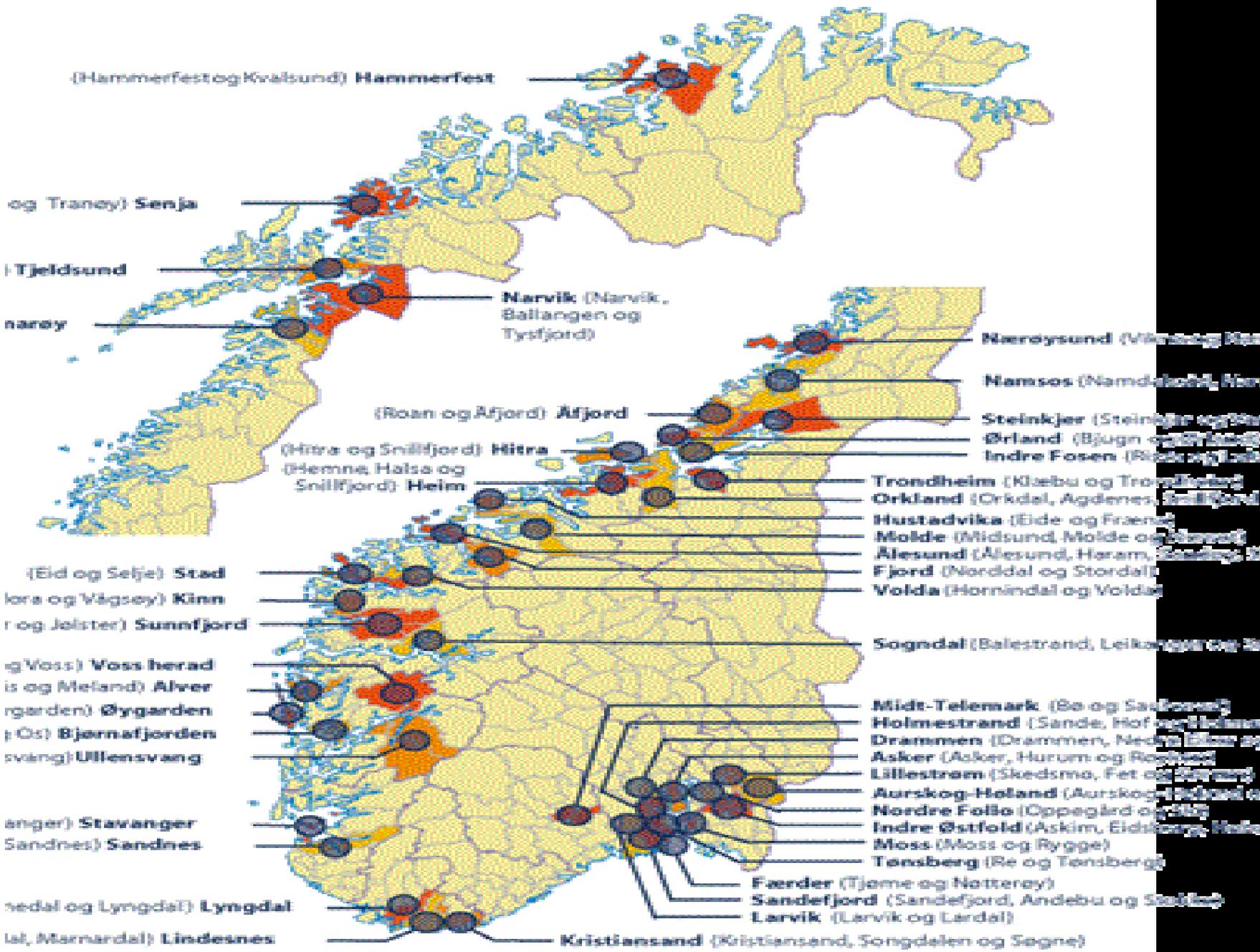
Your reflections ?

What do you think we
should write about ?

Three PhD studies in a specialized systemic service

- **Context: the unique Family Counselling services in Norway**
- Own Act (1997)“specialized relational service”
- Not a mental health/ or a social service.
- Systemic underpinnings
- Free access/low threshold services –relational difficulties (no use of diagnosis)
- Couple/family therapy
- Compulsory family mediation after divorce(cohabiting) parent with children under 16 years. Child involved mediation

- **What perspective does the three Phd projects give on systemic family therapy of today ?**

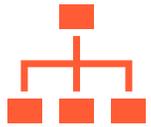


National Family Counseling Services (since 1958)

from focus on couples to focus on couples with children

- Child involvement
- High Conflict Divorce and Family Violence
- Parental support therapy after child removal

From Systemic Family orientation to “intrapsychic expertise”



Organizational changes
From autonomous local offices in
the county to state governed



2004
Part of a governmental
child protection services
(BUFETAT)



Interdisciplinary family therapists
1999 end of compulsory
family therapy training
as a compulsory requirement



Child involvement in services
“expert child knowledge”
recruitment of clinical psychologist
without systemic training

70% -social workers (others) with
family therapy training and 30% of
psychologist with intrapsychic health
training

Can systemic thinking survive under the pressure of “new public management” ?



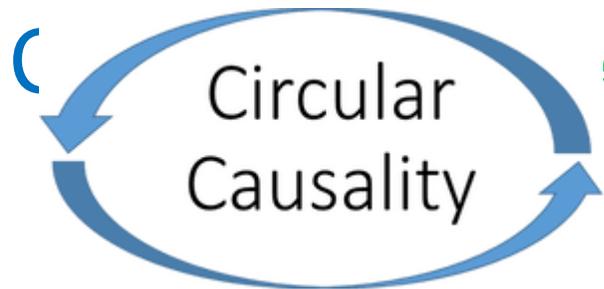
What does a systemic family orientation mean ?

Three Phd project with different understandings on :

What is Systemic Therapy ?

Context interdependency Feedback Equilibrium

Meaning systems



relational 1.order

2.order - in what order?

No consensus' on what is Systemic Therapy

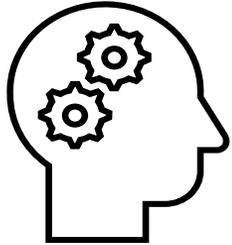
- An modality of therapy with emphasis on (couple, family) relationships
- An ontological/epistemological meta model of human systems
- A meta model with the need of integration with other theoretical/methodological concepts (agency, self, specific knowledge of child development)

«Simply put, there is no consensus about what is and what is not systemic therapy» (Friedlander et al., 2021, s. 540).

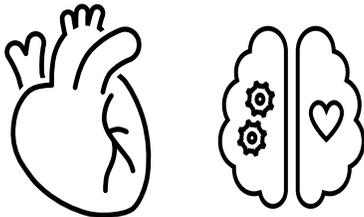
Systemic Therapy

–an dual opposition to or expansion of the intra-psychic ?

Intra-psychic

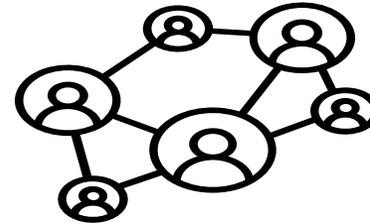


psychodynamic of individuals/
Cognitions of a self

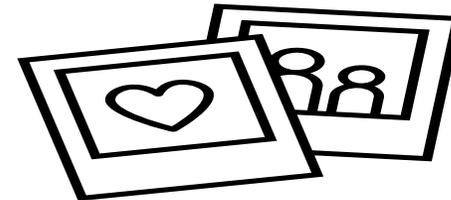


emotion focused (brain)

Systemic



relations/ interpsychic dynamics/ as part of
a system and context



relations/ interpsychic dynamics with
emphasis on emotions

Three empirical examples from Family Counselling Services

Ellen

- Parental support after child removal

Jan

- Parents in prolonged postdivorce conflict

Trine

- Child involvement in divorce mediation

Parental support after child removal

- Why this topic?
- A qualitative ph-d-project
- 6 parents and 7 family therapist were interviewed three times
- Is it possible to work systemically with involuntary child removals?

To understand the incomprehensible: A qualitative study of parents' challenges after child removal and their experiences with support services

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Funding information

VID Specialized University

Abstract

This article elucidates the challenges parents face when they lose the care of their children and their experiences of family counselling as a support service in Norway. A qualitative study following five mothers and one father whose children were in care was conducted through two focus groups and six individual interviews. The study found that the parents struggled to understand why their children had been placed in care and felt disempowered by the Child Protection Services (CPS). This situation led to complicated relationships with the CPS. We drew upon positioning theory and Goffman's theories about stigma and identity in this study, and these theories are explicitly used in discussing our analytic results. The study reveals the challenges encountered by CPS due to their dual role: On the one hand, they remove the children, and on the other hand, they offer support. The parents in this study also received

1. The struggle to understand why their children are placed in public care

A person wearing a black hooded coat and black boots stands on a paved path in a misty forest. They are holding a bright red umbrella. The path is surrounded by trees with some autumn-colored leaves. The overall atmosphere is somber and reflective.

"It would have been easier to visit a cemetery. Then I at least would have understood why they placed my child in public care"

2. There is no point in trying to go against the system

I: How do you know what to do when you do not understand why your children are placed in public care?

M: We do not know. This is only suggestions you must fix. For example, are 1000 Norwegian kroner too much to pay for a pair of shoes?

I: Does the CPS check how much money you spend on buying shoes?

M: No. But this is an automatic thought that occurs in every choice I do. What I am used to, is that all my choices are turned to something negative in court.

Is it possible to understand when your identity is threaten?

When the parents actions are identified as immoral, not only will coping strategies protect their self-identity (Breakwell, 1986), but also doubt can arise regarding their own judgement. These doubts may lead to a redefinition of themselves, where they see themselves as morally incompetent (Lindemann Nelson, 2001).

3. Parents meeting with family counselling services



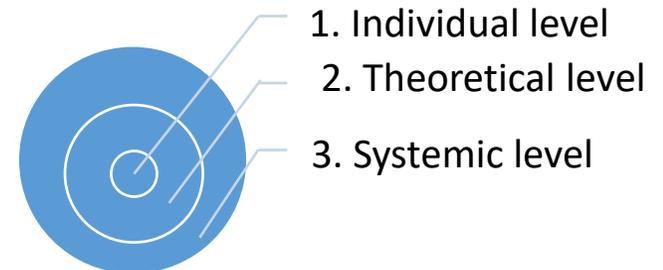
«They open up their arms, you are not longer just a failure»



To Navigate the Normative and the Not-Normative Family Therapists Negotiating Their Professional Identities with Parents Whose Children are Placed in Public Care

Ellen Syrstad¹  · Ottar Ness²

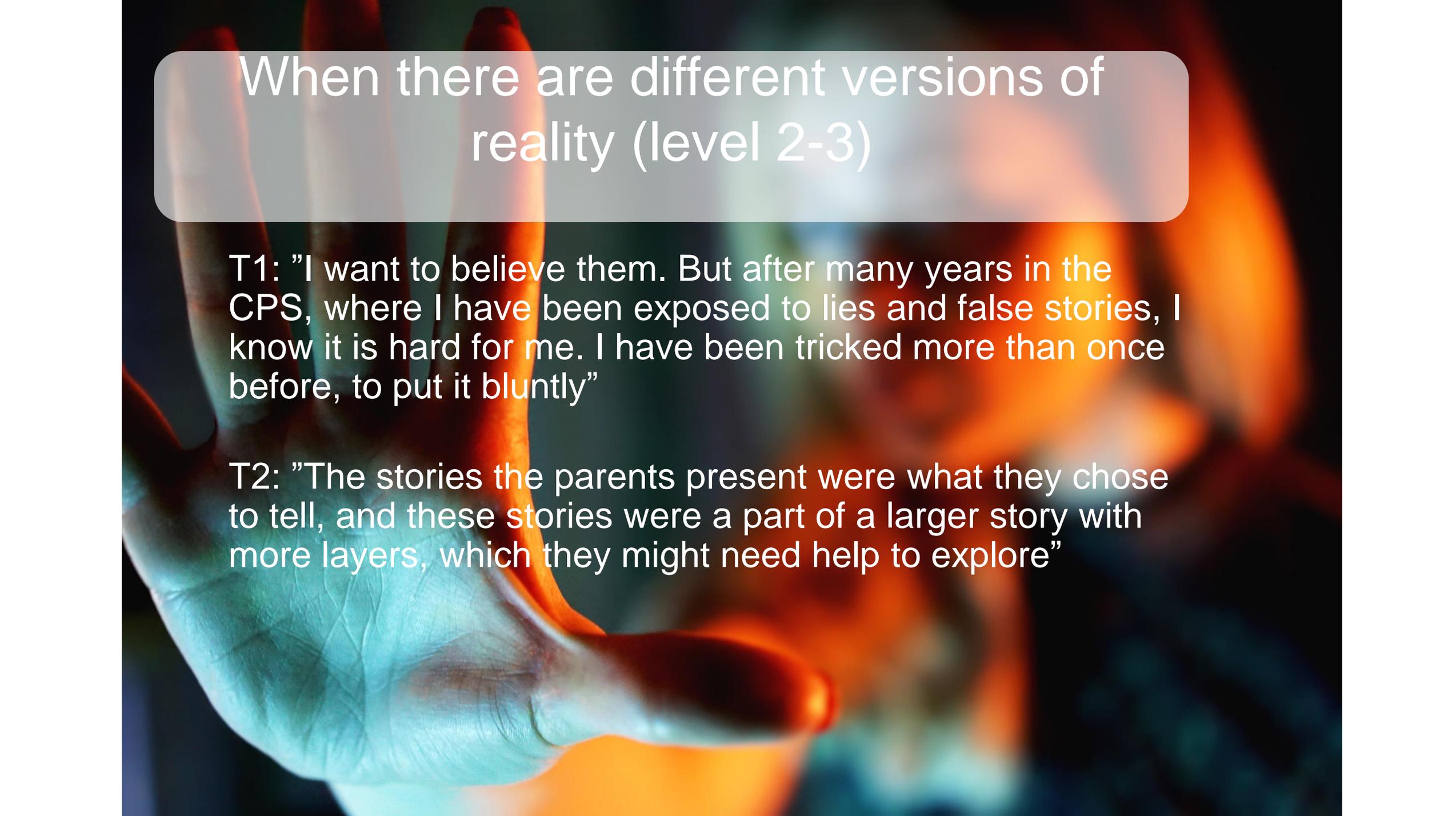
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A photograph of a therapist sitting at a table with a client. The therapist is wearing a white tank top and has their hand on the client's hand. The client is wearing blue jeans. The background is a blurred office setting.

When therapist's own feelings threaten their professional ideals (level 1-2)

The more I feel powerless, the more eager I get to make changes on their behalf. I would like to help, to do something. We get so emotionally involved. It feels that there is so little we can do for them

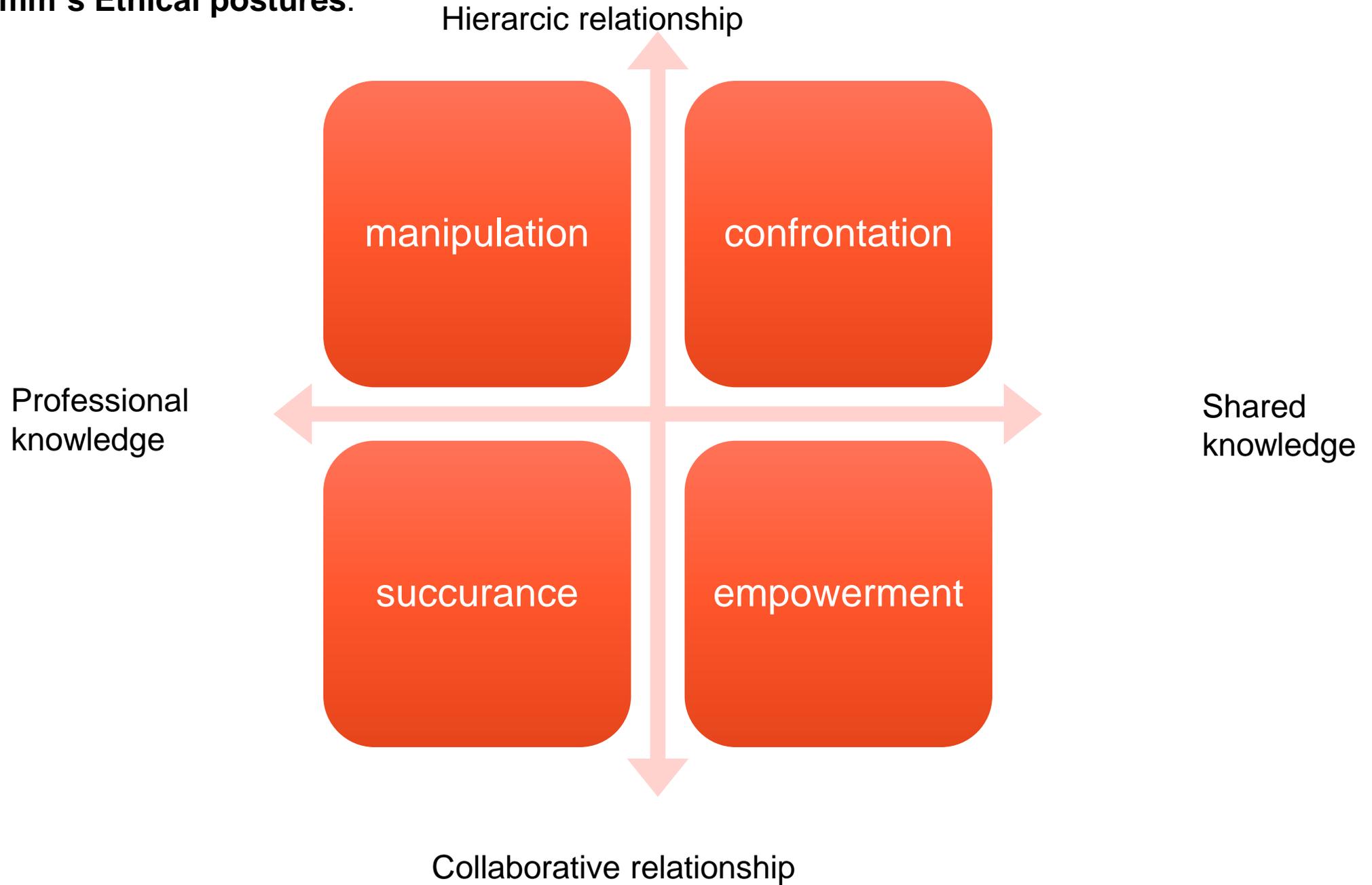
A hand is shown holding a glowing, orange and yellow orb. The background is a blurred, fiery scene with orange and red flames. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box.

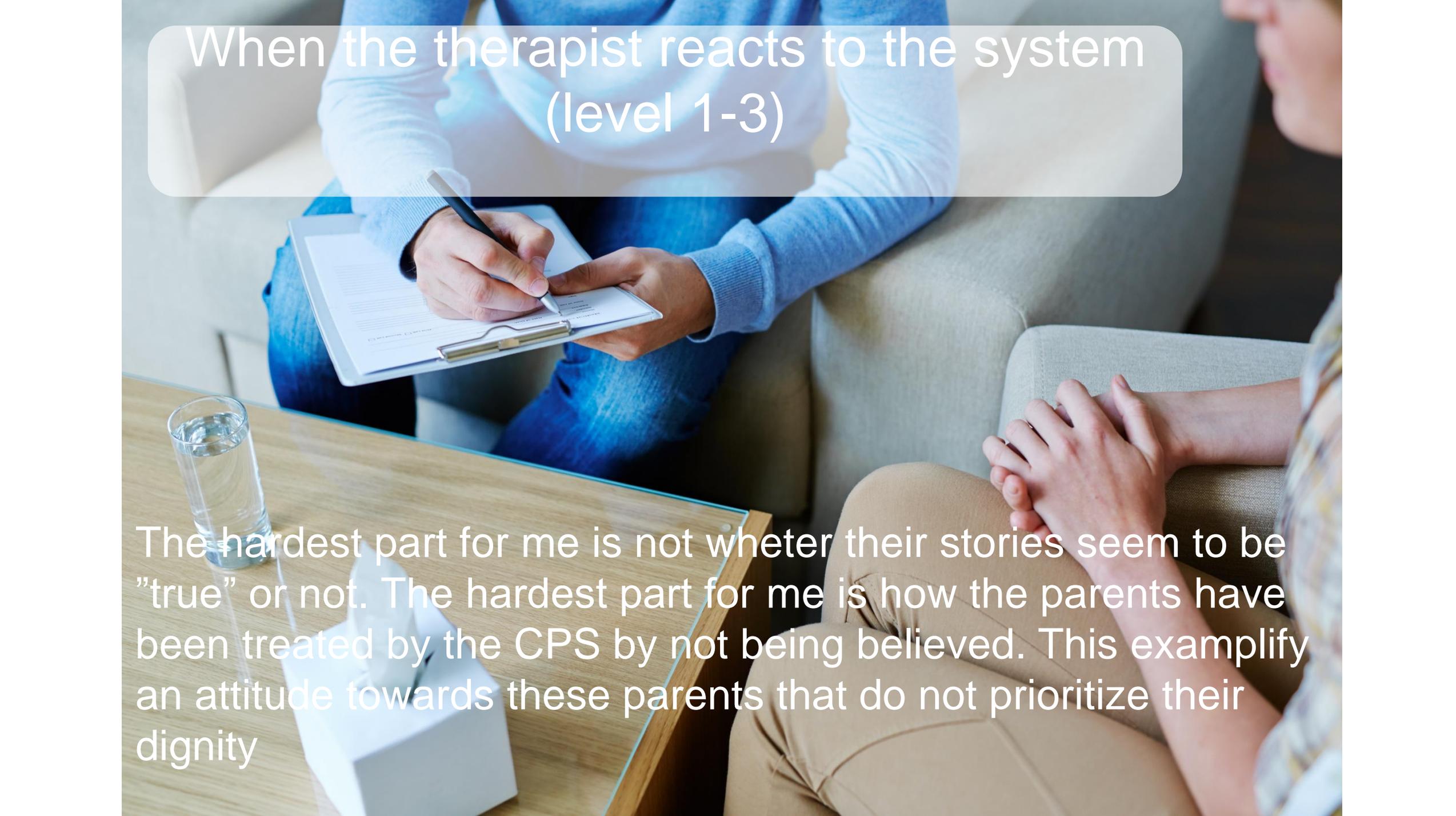
When there are different versions of reality (level 2-3)

T1: "I want to believe them. But after many years in the CPS, where I have been exposed to lies and false stories, I know it is hard for me. I have been tricked more than once before, to put it bluntly"

T2: "The stories the parents present were what they chose to tell, and these stories were a part of a larger story with more layers, which they might need help to explore"

Karl Tomm's Ethical postures:



A photograph of a therapist and a client in a session. The therapist, wearing a light blue sweater, is seated on a grey couch and is writing on a clipboard with a pen. The client, wearing a patterned shirt and tan pants, is seated next to them with their hands clasped. In the foreground, there is a wooden coffee table with a glass of water and a white tissue box.

When the therapist reacts to the system (level 1-3)

The hardest part for me is not whether their stories seem to be "true" or not. The hardest part for me is how the parents have been treated by the CPS by not being believed. This exemplify an attitude towards these parents that do not prioritize their dignity



PHD PROJECT: STRENGTHNING CHILDREN IN HIGH CONFLICT POSTDIVORCE FAMILIES

Jan Stokkebekk, PhD – Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen

ABOUT MYSELF

- Jan Stokkebekk, PhD in Family psychology, Faculty of Psychology University of Bergen, Norway. (Finalized my PhD in June 2022)
- Clinical Social Worker, Clinical Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practise
- National competence-team for family therapy offices working with domestic violence and high conflict between parents (Bufetat)

CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN PROLONGED POSTDIVORCE CONFLICT



Navigating Prolonged Conflict:

Subject positions and meaning constructions in postdivorce families

Jan Stokkebekk

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
University of Bergen, Norway
2022

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN



Overarching research question of the PhD Thesis :

How do two-household families with parents in prolonged conflict construct and position themselves and others in family life?

- as a child
- as a coparent vis-à vis the other parent,
- as a parent vis-à-vis their child.

The qualitative research project (in depth interviews with members of 8 families) was informed by social construction, systemic theory, and the discursive framework of positioning theory

Stokkebekk, J. (2022). Navigating Prolonged Conflict: Subject positions and meaning constructions in postdivorce families. Faculty of Psychology, UIB. PhD.

<https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2996343>

Papers

Paper I :Child positions

Stokkebekk, J., Iversen, A. C., Hollekim, R., & Ness, O. (2019). “Keeping balance”, “Keeping distance” and “Keeping on with life”: Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts. *Children and Youth Service Review*, 102, 108-119.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.04.021>

Paper II: Dyadic positions a coparent vis-à vis the other parent,

Stokkebekk J, Iversen A, Hollekim R, Ness O. (2021) “The Troublesome Other and I”: Parallel stories of separated parents in prolonged conflicts. *Journal of Marital Family Therapy*, 47(1), 52-68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12474>

Paper III: Positioning as a parent (father) vis-à-vis their child

Stokkebekk, J., Törrönen, J. Emery, R.E., Iversen, A. C., & Hollekim, R. (2022) The Heroic Savior, the Jungle Guide and the Beacon Amidst a Fog of Uncertainty: Agency of Fathers in Prolonged Postdivorce Conflicts and their Positioning of Children. Manuscript submitted for publication.

HOW DO CHILDREN
POSITION THEMSELVES
TO CHALLENGES IN
IN POST-DIVORCE
FAMILY CONFLCIT,
AND HOW IS FAMILY
CONFLCIT
POSITIONING
CHILDREN ?



“Keeping Balance”, “Keeping distance” and “Keeping on with life”: Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts

Jan Stokkebekk ^{a, b}, Anette Christine Iversen ^b, Ragnhild Hollekim ^b, Ottar Ness ^c

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2019.04.021>

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Highlights

- Children take up three dominant positions to deal with family conflict.
- Positions: Keeping balance, Keeping distance and Keeping on with life.
- Dominant positions is acts of healthy resistance against threats from family conflict.
- Adolescents navigate challenges of prolonged family conflict on their own.

STORYLINES ABOUT THE CHALLENGES IN THE FAMILY PRESENTED ITSELF AS.....

1. The storyline of family conflict
2. The storyline of «the troubling parent»
3. The storyline of life-as more than family
Challenges

In the storyline of family conflict

The child take up a dominant position of

Keeping Balance



KEEPING BALANCE

Staying out of conflict

Being the responsible

Being silent



IN THE STORYLINE OF THE TROUBLING PARENT»

Children take up the dominant position of

Keeping Distance



KEEPING DISTANCE ;

Moving out-reducing contact

“Aligning with one parent

IN THE STORYLINE OF LIFE AS MORE THAN FAMILY CHALLENGES »

Children take up a dominant position of
Keeping on with life



KEEPING ON WITH LIFE

Managing it on my own

Doing my regular routines

Obtaining the necessary support

Re-positioning children as agents rather than passive victims

- Presented in the literature as victims without agency
- Throughout the papers, two parallel positionings of children seem to exist within a storyline of risk and victimization and within a storyline of being an agent that addresses the various challenges of conflict.
- Parents are other-positioning their children as victims of parents' conflict.
- However, children themselves talk about their efforts to reposition themselves as agents that deal with various challenges of conflict.

Linear and diagnostic understanding of postdivorce conflict

Fixed/rigid positioning of families in postdivorce conflict

“There is a risk of a shift from a systemic, nonjudgmental, and contextual framework of family conflict to a more individualistic and linear description of postdivorce challenges.”

(examples: the typology of “high conflict”, children refusing contact with one of their parents)

Positioning of Children as victims of Parental Alienation Syndrome

- Rejections, or refusal of contact with parents are often understood as pathologic and unwanted child behavior
- In some cases, as part of the nonscientific, ideology-based narrative of parental alienation (syndrome).
- There is a risk that children's efforts of self-protection is misinterpreted as unwanted contact refusal –masking family violence and child abuse

In PAS the rejected parent is positioned as a victim, and the preferred parent (residential) is often held responsible for denigrations against the other parent and aligning with the child against the rejected parent.

Children in this narrative are portrayed as victims who are easily manipulated. One parent is viewed as guilty of manipulation and the other parent is positioned as an innocent victim of refused contact .

Labeling children as manipulated (or brainwashed) turns children into objects (without a voice), that is, at the mercy of how adults/professionals interpret their behavior.

What I found to be «Systemic» in my Project

- **Multiple (triangular) perspectives:** Systemic as a meta-level theory where positioning theory brings multiple perspectives on family life. All meaning constructing entities in the family take up positions not only within dyads but also by triangulation (e.g., child vs. parent dyad, parent vs. child–parent dyad)
- **Family as meaning systems vs linear diagnostic view of conflict**
- Contrast between a linear diagnostic view on conflict and a systemic nonjudgmental view that is sensitive to the meaning-making and subject positions of all parties in the conflict.

ABOUT ME AND THIS PROJECT

- Trine Eikrem
- Clinical psychologist and family therapist, leader of a national competence-team for family therapy offices working with domestic violence and high conflict between parents.
- On the finish-line for my phd-project investigating children and families from low-conflict families during mediation and a year after the divorce.

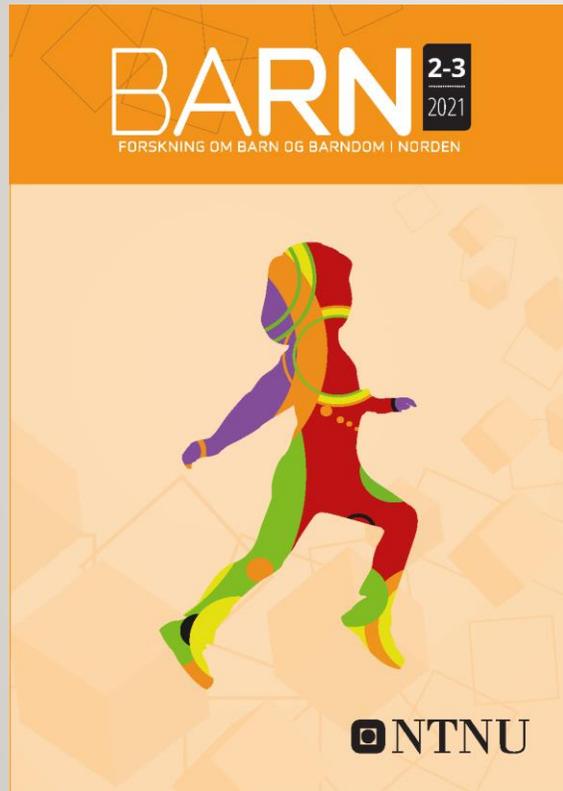
ARTICLES

- 1) Children participating in divorce-mediation (Eikrem & Andenæs, 2021).
- 2) *I do it for the children and it's not a walk in the park: Parents' stories about how to maintain cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process* (Eikrem & Sjøhelle, 2022).
- 3) *(In progress). Childrens descriptions about their adaption to their life as a «divorced child».* Eikrem & Andenæs).

CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN DIVORCE MEDIATION

- 15 families attending divorce-mediation, participated in this project.
- Both children and their parents were interviewed.
- **What if the clients also have adapted to the cultural norm- and expect the linear expert?**

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”

[Trine Eikrem & Agnes Andenæs](#)

<https://doi.org/10.5324/barn.v39i2-3.3790>

PARENTS' STORIES ABOUT THEIR EFFORT TO SHIELD THEIR CHILDREN

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DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12928

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

CHILD & FAMILY
SOCIAL WORK WILEY

I do it for the children, and it's not a walk in the park: Parents' stories about how to maintain cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process

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Funding information

The Office for Children, Youth and Family Affairs

Abstract

This article explores the transition of cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process. Eighteen parents, representing eight co-parenting pairs and two individuals who had just undergone mandatory mediation for parents applying for separation, participated in the study. Through in-depth interviews with parents who were classified as cooperative during the mediation process, we examined how they *reason* and the struggles they face during the divorce transition. The study applied a sociocultural perspective, focusing on the cultural ideals of equal parenthood, and used the concepts of *boundaries* and *shared care* as analytical tools. A main finding is that maintaining cooperative co-parenting requires hard work, even in no-or low-conflict divorces, but the parents do it for their children. The results showed that the transforming process involved efforts to (1) continue established parenting practices, (2) shield the children and (3) deal with their own emotions. The underlying premises

MANDATORY MEDIATION IN NORWAY



CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

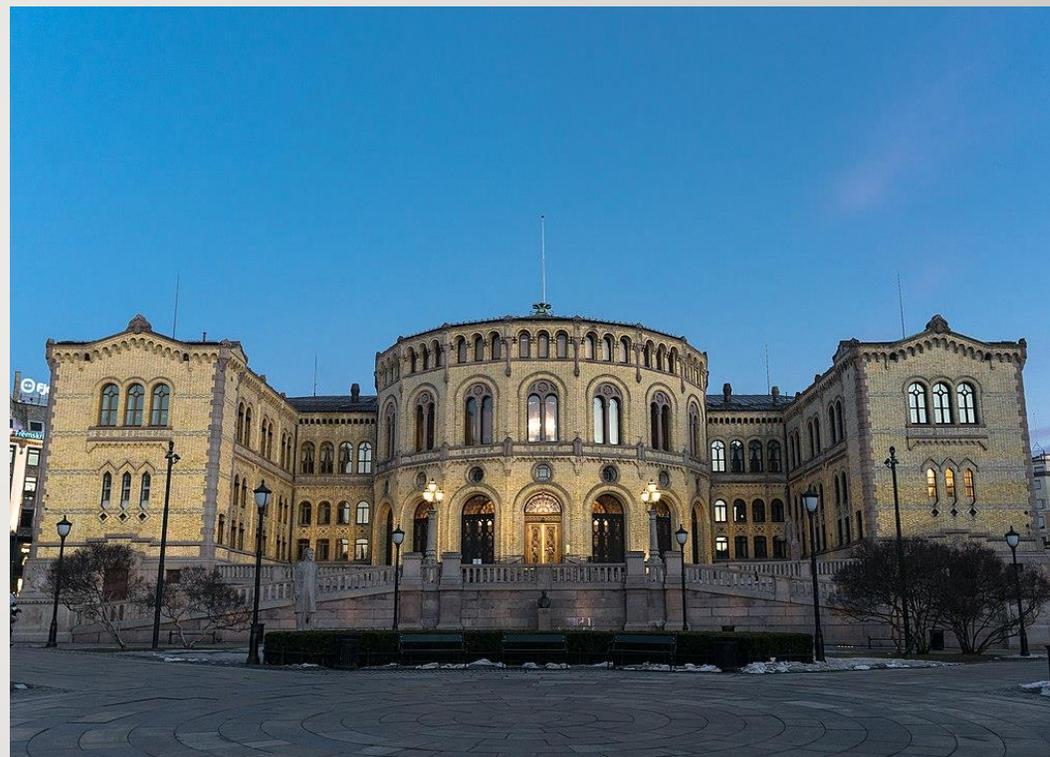


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- Child-focused
- Child-inclusive

INVITATION FROM THE GOVERNMENTS

- Before the mediation, parents receive an invitation to bring their children to the mediation, justified by children's needs to express themselves about their life situation and their rights to be heard, based on the UN child convention
- Political demand to meet children in 30% of all mediations



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RESULTS

- Main finding: Both the children and the parents described the mediator as «a friendly expert»
- The focus in the mediation was rarely on children's rights - we see as an indication of the child-inclusive mediation turning into a more therapy-like activity.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE MEDIATION:

- Little information –
- and in the last minute



MOTHER: .. I JUST TOLD THEM THE DAY BEFORE THAT WE ARE GOING TO THE FAMILY-THERAPY-CENTRE TOMORROW. – MOTHER AND FATHER HAVE BEEN THERE AND TALKED ABOUT THE DIVORCE WITH SOMEBODY WORKING THERE , AND THEY HAVE TO TALK WITH YOU TOO. THEY WANT TO HEAR ABOUT WHAT YOU THINK.

...AND IT WAS NICE TO KNOW THAT THEY
HAVE SPOKEN WITH OTHER CHILDREN IN
THE SAME SITUATION, THAT IT WAS NOT
JUST ME..

Aida (10 years)

THE NON-INTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF CONFIDENTIALITY



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NO, BECAUSE- FIRSTLY; I WANTED TO BE CAREFUL TO REFER TO THE CONVERSATION, I WANTED HER TO EXPERIENCE THAT SHE HAD HAD A CONFIDENTIAL CONVERSATION. SO I JUST.. I FEEL THAT OUR CONVERSATION MUST HAPPEN WHEN SHE IS READY. OR, THAT'S WHAT I'VE THOUGHT.. DA

Father

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION BETWEEN LEGAL RIGHTS AND THERAPY



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THE THERAPEUTIC CULTURE

- The ideas that “it is good to talk with somebody/an expert about how you feel, especially about things that are difficult/make you sad» can be placed in what we can call «the therapeutic culture» (Madsen, 2017). This is a way of thinking both adults and children in our culture describe- and use, and it has an impact that the legal conversation minimises. **We saw it as a risk that the conversation about children's experiences during the divorce are moved from the family to the professional therapists.**

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS



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- Provide better information prior to the mediation?
- Tailoring?
- Family-meetings?
- Timing of when to offer a meeting with the children?
- Helping the family to have an ongoing conversation about the divorce without the presence of an expert

DILEMMAS BEHIND THE GOOD INTENTIONS

- Do we individualize the children?
- Do we decontextualize the children- removing them from the parents?
- Who are the experts- we or the parents?
- Some children need help- how do we reach the children that need help to raise their voices when we do not meet all children?

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A NON-EXPERT IN AN EXPERT ORIENTED WORLD?

- These studies address complex issues that require to be understood through multiple perspectives
- An understanding is not something that is easily transferred from one person to another but something we create in dialogue. This is an example of the shortcomings of linear explanations
- The studies also shows challenges in being non-normative in interactions with normative systems and dilemmas in the meeting with control-systems
- By focusing on the individuals, do we loose the family-prosesses?
- Do the individual became the client on the behalf of the family

TAKK !

THANKS