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**Managing the flow of private information on children and parents in poverty situations: creating a panoptic eye in inter-organisational networks?**

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Review

# Managing the flow of private information on children and parents in poverty situations: creating a panoptic eye in inter-organisational networks?

## Abstract

In this article, we discuss how the flow of private information about children and families in poverty situations is managed in inter-organisational networks that aim to combat child poverty. Although practices for sharing information and documentation between child and family social work services are highly encouraged and recommended to create supportive features for parents and children, this development often results in undesirable forms of governmentality. Inter-organisational networking also creates controlling side-effects because the exchange of information in networks of child and family services may wield a holistic power over families. We theorise this issue by using the Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon and pastoral power, which allows us to grapple with the major tension between support and control in the information and documentation sharing practices of social workers. A critical analysis of our empirical data reveals four central fields of tension in which social workers and their organisations must position themselves: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including and excluding families.

## Keywords

Inter-organisational networks, child poverty, sharing information and documentation, panopticon, pastoral power

## Introduction

Influenced by broader historical developments and contemporary pressures, child and family social work is often organised in categorical and fragmented ways at the inter-organisational and policy levels (Statham, 2011; Rochford et al., 2014). The well-intended idea of providing a differentiated supply of social services for families (Mkandawire, 2005), however, implies that welfare recipients often encounter substantial obstacles or thresholds at the supply side of welfare provision, preventing them from benefiting from high-quality social services (Author's own, 2016). Moreover, welfare recipients increasingly seem to suffer from "the complex and multidimensional character of social problems in contemporary Western welfare states" (De Corte et al., 2016: 4). In research, this phenomenon is referred to as "wicked issues", "which cut across a diversity of service areas and policy domains and are too complex to be dealt with by single welfare organisations" (De Corte et al., 2016: 4). In recent decades, many countries have therefore initiated a countermovement of inter-organisational networking to fill the gaps in social work service provision and to overcome deficiencies in the institutional division and distribution of welfare knowledge (Author's own, 2014b; Provan, 1997; Allen, 2003). Also in the field of child and family social work, many efforts have been made to create inter-organisational networks that involve a wide range of locally embedded social work actors (see Author's own, 2016; Allen, 2003; Frost, 2005; Garrett, 2008; De Corte et al., 2016). In this development, inter-organisational collaboration and the integration of services are perceived as systemic and sustainable solutions for the current and historical fragmentation of services (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011). It is argued that inter-organisational networking across many different actors in service provision may generate and cluster the necessary knowledge and resources to provide a productive and progressive response to better meet the multiple needs of children and families (Hood, 2014; Provan & Kenis, 2008).

In this article, we explore insights emerging from a research project on inter-organisational networking, which is perceived by policy makers as a productive strategy for tackling the wicked issue of child poverty in Belgium. Given that an extensive body of international research shows that child poverty has remained a stubborn, complex and multi-dimensional problem in most Western societies (Platt, 2005), policy makers in Belgium and beyond believe that the struggle against child poverty may benefit from the creation of inter-organisational networks between a wide range of local social work services targeting children and families (Project reference). **In the international realm, it is important to note that although families are supposed to make use of social services provided by these inter-organisational networks on a voluntary basis, our research project reveals that some of the child and family social work services being involved in the networks tend to acquire an orientation being rooted within a child protection discourse rather than in a child welfare discourse (see Spratt, 2001; Parton, 2008b; Roose et al., 2013). In this context, we focus more in particular on the increasing pressure that emerges in these inter-organisational networks to document and share information about parents and children among public services (Bellamy et al., 2008; Richardson & Asthana, 2006; 6 et al., 2005). Concerning the sharing of information, the network members depend on their own organisational rules, protocols and background, so the local network, and the families it serves, are confronted with different approaches and regulations. There is currently no shared governmental policy on information sharing practices in the networks in Belgium (see Parton (2008b) for a critical analysis of how the relationship between parents, children, professionals and the state have changed in children's services in the UK, for**

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3 **example due to priority given to the accumulation, monitoring, and exchange of electronic**  
4 **information), and by consequence no standardised way of working between the services.**  
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7 In what follows, we therefore explore the complexities, dilemmas and side-effects that emerge in inter-  
8 organisational networks of child and family social work services when they are handling the gathering,  
9 sharing, and (mis)use of information about children and families in poverty. More specifically, we focus  
10 on the major field of tension between supporting and controlling families in these information sharing  
11 practices. Frost (2005: 19) raises this matter when he argues that inter-organisational networks may be  
12 'formed as practices that can "see everything", "know everything" and "do anything", and thus they  
13 produce a "holistic power" to discipline and control every aspect of welfare recipients' lives', particularly  
14 in the case of documentation and information sharing. In this contribution, we theorise this issue inspired  
15 by Foucault's (1975, 1993, 2001) notions of the panopticon and pastoral power. In the article, this  
16 tension between support and control serves as an analytical framework to analyse our empirical data.  
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### 19 20 21 **Inter-organisational networking and the integration of services: a need for sharing** 22 **information and documentation** 23

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25 In the configuration of inter-organisational networks, the sharing of information and documentation has  
26 been noted as an essential aspect (Reamer, 2005; Parton, 2008a). Much attention has been devoted to  
27 the improvement of communication and to the sharing of information to enhance the continuity of  
28 service delivery (Allen, 2003; Anthony et al., 2011; Statham, 2011) and to avoid striking gaps and  
29 overlaps in service provision for families (Warin, 2007; McKeown et al., 2014). The pressure on sharing  
30 information also derives from a protection logic and the need for a higher control of children at risk  
31 (Lees, 2017; Thompson, 2013). It has been argued that sharing information and documentation  
32 prevents the receipt of conflicting information, which often produces frustration on the side of social  
33 service providers because it results in a duplication of their efforts (Provan, 1997). Many professionals  
34 are expected to keep extensive data sets on clients to facilitate the development of multi-agency  
35 interventions that engage the full range of their needs (6 et al., 2005; Parton, 2008a).  
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40 Nevertheless, documentation and information sharing practices may provoke challenges and raise  
41 pertinent questions about how the flow of information between services is managed in the formation of a  
42 network, because "in more integrated services information is likely to flow more freely" (Provan, 1997:  
43 21). The manner in which information and documentation are shared is an important issue to consider,  
44 given that the flux of information can be difficult to control, particularly in a movement towards the inter-  
45 organisational networking in the field of child and family social work. Moreover, making sense of  
46 information "is complex, with the needs of children and families often shifting" over time (Thompson,  
47 2013: 191). In this context, we observe a major field of tension appear between controlling versus  
48 supporting families in the documentation and information sharing practices of social workers. The  
49 assumption that children and families inherently benefit from documentation and information sharing  
50 practices is questionable since these child and family social work practices may also have undesirable  
51 side-effects and downsides. Support and control, however, often appear together and operate in a field  
52 of tension.  
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### ***Practices of documentation and sharing information: creating a panoptic eye?***

Documentation and sharing information can lead to a reduction in freedom and an extension of surveillance over parents and children (Jefferies & Smith, 2002) and may interfere with their autonomy and right to privacy. When documentation and information sharing results in a narrow monitoring of clients, it can create renewed family policing and practices of surveillance. We can deepen this discussion by considering the notion of the panopticon. In its architectural form, the panopticon was designed by Bentham as a more efficient form of prison. With its central watchtower and its translucent cells, one guardian could overlook all of the cells. However, the panopticon, as Foucault (1975, 2001) analysed it, lies in the idea that each of the inmates can be watched all of the time, not in the question of whether he or she actually is. This is the disciplining power of the panopticon: the knowledge that one can be watched. It is achieved by the constant presence of light in the cells, in contrast to the dark in the central watchtower. It is the lack of reciprocity in the perspective of the guardian and the prisoners, however, that exercises the disciplinary power of the panopticon in which the guardian can see everything without being seen.

Here, the question emerges of the extent to which an inter-organisational network of welfare services may also create the effect of a panopticon. In its metaphorical meaning, the panopticon can be used for its relevance in grasping that continuous observation and supervision are possible in a network at all times. This is made possible by an increased flow of information: documentation and information sharing in social work is a possible instrument of control and surveillance and a medium through which professionals can exercise power in the practice of assessing, judging and documenting, particularly when they are brought together in a network (Author's own, 2016, 2017). The permanent visibility and observation lead to the automatic functioning of the disciplinary power. Supervision is exercised by individual professionals and social workers; however, it is not situated and individualised within one person but, rather, in a structure that makes it more anonymous and independent of those exercising control. In this sense, it is not clear who is watching what at what time; thus, children and families remain unaware of the precise nature of their visibility. Therefore, the surveillance is based on a system of permanent observation and registration in which documentation and information sharing may function as a method of exercising power, as "the documentation somehow detaches the statements from the people who have made them and transforms them into external or objective "facts". In other words, the written word seems to give special weight and authority to the statement" (Author's own, 2014a: 99).

### ***Practices of documentation and information sharing: creating supportive features in child and family social work?***

Inter-organisational networks are, however, primarily installed to create supportive effects for children and parents in poverty situations. A supportive intention is clearly not necessarily in contrast to a controlling effect. This is perfectly illustrated by the concept of pastoral power proposed by Foucault. This concept implies a beneficial power, using the metaphor of the shepherd and his flock of sheep (Author's own, 2006; Foucault, 1993; Golder, 2007). For the shepherd to fulfil his duty, he must protect and care for each individual sheep to lead it to salvation. To be able to account for and guide the sheep and protect them from misfortune, the shepherd must know all of the information about each sheep. For him to know about each of the sheep's situations, Foucault (1993) argues, each individual must examine, verbalise and publicly "confess" his or her behaviour and thoughts. This illustrates that the caring and protecting intention and the controlling effect appear together; moreover, disciplining power

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3 is used in somewhat implicit ways as the effect of care, rather than of mistrust and explicitly controlling  
4 intentions. This raises the question of the extent to which the relationship between networks of child and  
5 family social work services and children and families in poverty situations can be considered a form of  
6 pastoral power.  
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## 10 **Methodology**

### 11 **Research context**

12 A qualitative research approach, which is considered a relevant research strategy to study social work  
13 practices and their underlying theoretical assumptions within their respective social contexts, is adopted  
14 in our research project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our qualitative research project includes three relevant  
15 cases studies (Yin, 2008) of documentation and information sharing practices in the field of child and  
16 family social work. It involves three local, inter-organisational networks of social work services that are  
17 constructed to combat child poverty. These networks are situated in three diverse cities in Belgium.  
18 They are not self-supporting but, rather, funded by regional or national governments; however, they  
19 maintain great autonomy in the construction and development of strategies, partnerships and  
20 interventions oriented towards families in poverty. It is important to note that for the construction of these  
21 networks in Belgium, no formal changes in information sharing regulations were made. Within the  
22 networks, documentation and information are gathered and shared across different life domains by  
23 varying organisations. The case selection was based on a diversity of the networks in age, location  
24 (urban & rural), size, methods and social work organisations.  
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### 31 **Data collection strategies**

32 Our empirical research results from an ongoing qualitative research project in which different research  
33 strategies were combined. First, the researcher engaged with ethnographic research (Spradley, 1980).  
34 A participant observation was performed during meetings with all of the social work services involved in  
35 the networks, and case discussions were followed up and documented in two networks. They were  
36 spread over a two-year period, and the frequency depended on the frequency of the meetings of the  
37 networks. The meetings or informal discussions were not audio-recorded, but field notes were taken.  
38 This fieldwork was used to gain insight into and be involved in actual practices of documenting and  
39 sharing private information in the networks. The analysis is based on 8 moments of observation in  
40 Network A and 13 moments in Network B, which each took between two and three hours. In network C,  
41 there were no case discussions to observe. To deepen the knowledge that was gathered during the  
42 ethnographic fieldwork, 23 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted with social  
43 workers who participate in the network: in network A, 7 individual interviews were conducted; in network  
44 B, 9 interviews and one focus group with members of the steering group of the network were conducted;  
45 and in network C, 7 individual interviews were conducted with social workers. The interviews took  
46 between one and two hours, and the focus group lasted 2.5 hours. The interviews were fully transcribed  
47 and anonymised. The entire research project was approved by the ethics committee of the university,  
48 and informed consent forms were systematically obtained.  
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### 54 **Strategies of data analysis**

55 The data were analysed based on a directed approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh &  
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Shannon, 2005). The goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate, reconsider, and refine a conceptual framework or theory while relying on empirically based feedback loops, which enable newly identified categories to emerge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This directed approach to content analysis served to enrich an in-depth understanding of the theoretical conceptualisation of the tension between support versus control in handling private information in inter-organisational networks of social workers (see Myring, 2000). We performed a cross-analysis of our interview data and field notes across the three case studies, which allowed us to identify four underlying themes in the data: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including and excluding families.

## Research findings

### Craving control and handling uncertainty

Whereas social work services and social workers often struggle with a lack of control over families, others radically embrace uncertainty in the ways they develop strategies in the network. In particular, when families are difficult to contact and not willing to open up, network partners explain they interpret this distance as a need for more and intensive support and guidance. In a specific case discussion, the network coordinator, a welfare worker and a nurse express their worries because they do not succeed in reaching a certain family, particularly because the family no longer wants to receive support. Moreover, the family moved out, and the network partners did not know its new address. The discussion circles around the question of whether it is legal to trace their new home address in the national register. They are concerned about the father's irresponsible behaviour in deliberately breaking the contact and refusing any meddling in his family situation. The partners discuss their observation that the child has bruises, and they assume that the justifications being offered were not consistent and credible and suspect the father of being responsible for abusing the child. Having this said in the group and having all of the arguments displayed, they state that they do not want to leave the situation as it is, based on arguments such as "Emergency breaks the law?" and "If we can get in again, then we can move on". The "we" in the last sentence is important to note because it implies that the social workers want to proceed, even if doing so is against the will of the family/father, and they prioritise their own craving for control. **Participation of families is voluntary, but if they there are concerns of abuse than participation may become more coercive.**

Our research findings, however, also indicate that the collective concern in networks not only can evolve into a controlling approach but also enables networks to embrace uncertainty when they act. Although an increasing control and monitoring mechanism emerges, the joint efforts may also result in an extra sensitivity for the difficulties that parents may experience. **In this example, a nurse hears from another partner that a certain mother isn't doing well, which stimulates her to ask the mother how she feels and wants to provide extra attention and support:**

*When a partner of the network says: "Oh yes, Helen [a mother] didn't go to work those times". Then you think like: hmm, maybe she feels a bit down or maybe she is struggling with something? I'm going to focus on that next time I see her, asking: how do you feel about going to work, and would you prefer staying with the children instead of taking them to day care?*



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4 Here, the moments of consultation between the different network members challenge the diversity of  
5 services and social workers to handle the pressures of social policy imperatives and the range of  
6 managerial and procedural measures that aim to regulate social work practices. The role of the  
7 coordinator in this process seems crucial when this coordinator takes a fierce stance in reminding the  
8 network members of the principles of social justice and the realisation of welfare rights. As one of the  
9 network partners explains:  
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12 *We get together and look at: "What did we already realise, where do we still need to focus?". I*  
13 *think that's very important, that someone is in charge of this. Every service has its busy periods,*  
14 *and then, there are things that you don't dwell on in a family, like looking after their rights. "Oh,*  
15 *we still need to do this!" Well, that's important for me, that you know someone keeps an eye on*  
16 *it, keeps it going.*  
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19 Although many network actors work under great time pressure due to performance-driven management  
20 systems and managerial policy values, for example, the joint moments of consultation enable a more  
21 open-minded search process and attention to the concerns of families when they engage in a collective  
22 effort to realise support for families.  
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#### 25 Using and misusing private information and trust

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27 A second field of tension can be situated as using and misusing information and trust. In this sense, one  
28 of the networks aims to make a clear separation between "controlling" and "supporting" network  
29 partners. To that end, only certain network partners are allowed to exchange confidential and private  
30 information that is acquired on the basis of the trust of the families. For example, the coordinator made a  
31 construction that blocks the exchange of private information between actors who give financial  
32 assistance and actors who only engage in providing immaterial resources. Whereas social workers who  
33 are in charge of providing financial assistance are bound by policy regulations and must control the  
34 family's right to this assistance to avoid social fraud, **family support workers will not share**  
35 **information about social fraud that could have negative financial consequences. They only find**  
36 **it legitimate to share this information with the coordinator who will not punish families:**  
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41 *In fact, we may say everything to the coordinator, but we don't tell everything to the social*  
42 *welfare worker. For example, when a mother says she's single and we know after a home visit*  
43 *that a man lives there, that makes a difference in the financial situation... We don't tell what*  
44 *people entrust us with because we have a duty to professional confidentiality at our home visits*  
45 *too.*  
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48 The family support workers note that they will not punish families if they commit financial fraud because  
49 they want to prioritise the families' wellbeing and want to respect the confidence of the family and not  
50 scare it away. In their view, the information, and the exchange of it, only becomes damaging when it  
51 reaches the ears of a partner who will intervene with a punishment. By making this artificial separation,  
52 however, we observe that supportive social workers strongly underestimate their controlling effect on  
53 families in handling private information. Moreover, the network partners who officially have been  
54 designated a controlling function disagree with making this boundary in information exchange. They  
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consider it unfair that the partners from the network would hide this sensitive or even damaging information from them, even if the family could lose their financial assistance. They clearly prioritise combating social fraud above keeping the trust of the family due to their attempt to embrace both individual and collective concerns in our society. In this example, their willingness to punish becomes clear:

**Welfare worker:** *I don't think Peter [the coordinator] can keep it a secret, don't misunderstand me. If Peter thinks that they live together, then he should report that to us. ... Ultimately, it's not Peter who will withdraw the financial assistance or that income or extra support or whatever.*

**Interviewer:** *At that certain moment, is the trust from families in Peter lasting?*

**Welfare worker:** *Lasting. Maybe it's going to be damaged for a moment but not that badly.*

Simultaneously, they (mis)use the trust relationship that the family support workers have with the family to discover more private information. For them, a boundary between controlling and supporting actors is beneficial if the exchange in information between both is possible. It is interesting to observe that the network partners all presume that a clear distinction between controlling and supporting actors should be made but for very different reasons and both pushing the balance between support and control towards the other end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, the main problem here is that private information and trusting relationships with the families are used and abused without an explicit dialogue with the families about these matters, which refers to our third research finding.

### Constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention

In the three networks, the level of transparency in the flow of private information varies widely. Some practitioners treat parents as subjects of intervention and remain loyal to the principle of transparency of their motives and of what they (will) do, whereas other practitioners approach the families as objects of intervention. In a first example, we observe that confidential information between network partners is being shared in a very subtle yet dubious manner. During a network meeting, the partners discuss that it is a pity that they are formally not allowed to receive any feedback after they have referred a family to a certain organisation. A welfare worker suggests that to know whether the family actually followed this referral, they can use the code: "*Le Beaujolais nouveau est arrivé*" (The new Beaujolais has arrived), whereupon the entire group starts laughing. This shows that network partners actually have the desire to transmit confidential messages that travel in the network without the families being aware of this dynamic. **In this way, they avoid the duty to professional secrecy, but also the right to privacy which creates a higher surveillance over families.** When information is incomplete, only a small hint between network partners is enough to keep an extra eye on the family or to cause an extra intervention by a partner. On another occasion, the school is worried about the children in a certain family they suspect from having a drug problem and attempt to make use of another partner's knowledge and mandate (in this case the police) to verify their concern **which causes an extra intervention:**

*They [the school] know that we [the police] do unexpected house visits; they also know that we know things, especially concerning drugs and what the family is doing. So, yes, in that sense, we can approach the parents a bit easier.*

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3 Thus, if the school does not dare to ask the parents themselves, it is enough to say to the police “We  
4 *are worried about that family*” to keep an eye on it and to perform an extra house visit. In this case, the  
5 family also remains unaware of who actually initiated this intervention **and for what reason**:  
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8 *If the school mentions it, that doesn't mean that we're going to say that it comes from the*  
9 *school. But, actually, we look into our own files: “Did we already go there in the past?” Or was*  
10 *there a violation before?”. So, we work from there, to make sure that they still trust the school.*  
11

12 Not being transparent is mainly used as a strategy to keep the trust of parents and to be able to support  
13 them. In this case, we observe the opposite effect occurring since another network actor, comes by to  
14 control the family. It is not an exchange of formal facts, but it is a worry that is expressed by the school  
15 which may lead to a serious intervention by the police and have major consequences for the parents  
16 and children. We observe that for families, it is often very unclear who works together with whom, and  
17 what occurs is out of their control and is possibly not supportive, but coercive.  
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20 In other situations, incomplete information and subtle signals are used, rather than displaying the entire  
21 stories. This arises from a caring logic: if too much information is spread to other partners, then some  
22 network actors believe this may be harmful. In a specific situation, for example, the care coordinator of  
23 the school is very cautious with the information that she notes in the child's personal record. A new child  
24 in the school suffered before from bullying and is afraid of going to school. The care coordinator  
25 expresses her concern to pay attention to the situation without colouring the image of the child in  
26 advance. For the wellbeing of the child, she is not fully transparent to the partners:  
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30 *If I'm going to write down everything I know and the teachers see this, no matter how you turn it,*  
31 *she is going to adapt a certain attitude. She is coloured in her vision of that child in advance,*  
32 *and that is bad. The only thing I do say is: “Support socially and emotionally, keep an eye on*  
33 *him, don't lose him. Look at the context.”*  
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35 The tricky issue of transparency regarding families is also at stake in relation to the network's meetings  
36 and moments of consultation. **An informed consent is signed at the beginning of the trajectory in**  
37 **the network, but is further in the process no longer subject of discussion.** There is a lack of  
38 systematic feedback to parents about what the actors of the network discussed together; thus, the  
39 network partners have doubts about the degree to which the parents are sufficiently well informed.  
40 Some members view this as a problem and want to change this:  
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44 *They know we have these moments of consultation, but recently, we wondered: “Shouldn't we*  
45 *go first to the parents to tell them: We are going to discuss this and that.” Because many*  
46 *parents, when they agree to our network interventions, so much is said there, and they don't*  
47 *remember or don't pay attention. I think half of the people don't have a clue about what we are*  
48 *doing. And we thought recently: “Shouldn't we go to the parents or telephone them before we*  
49 *are going to have this discussion together? Or even letting them participate”.*  
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52 These considerations raise important questions about the debate with families themselves. Making them  
53 part of the negotiations and making them aware of the flow of private information in the network may be  
54 a strategy to consider. Additionally, for many of the network partners, asking for permission is still an  
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3 important issue to consider, to give control back to the parents. Nevertheless, we observe in the  
4 networks that we study that this is strongly dependent on the individual practitioner's values.  
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### 6 Including and excluding families in poverty 7

8 In all of the networks, network members reflect on how families perceive the network in relation to the  
9 controlling and supporting roles of network actors. Although this often occurs unintentionally, they are  
10 aware of the fact that the network itself and the practices of sharing information have an influence on the  
11 types of families that feel comfortable with the network and, consequently, rely on the network for  
12 support. There are elements that suggest that the reasons for the, often unintentional, exclusion of  
13 certain families can be situated in the construction of the network and particularly in the overall fear and  
14 distrust of families in poverty with regard to social services as such may also play a significant role. The  
15 network seems to intensify this experience of the families, given that they are aware that the network  
16 partners share information about them. The inherent distrust of families, however, is also something that  
17 is being recognised as a relevant and legitimate issue. In this example, the interconnectivity between  
18 network partners leads to a certain fear, and a mother refused the support of the network **because of**  
19 **the possible involvement of one organisation that brings back bad memories of past**  
20 **experiences:**  
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26 *There was a mother that said: "I have, from childhood, been institutionalised and have had bad*  
27 *experiences with social services." And then, you have to explain how the network operates: "We*  
28 *collaborate with Kind & Gezin [Child & Family] and with CAW [Centre for general welfare work]*  
29 *if necessary". And she totally panicked about CAW. Then, I told her that it was also possible to*  
30 *do it without CAW, that we were not going to involve this organisation if she didn't want it and*  
31 *ensured her that we only work on a voluntary basis.*  
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34 The fear of families, as the reason why they refuse interventions of the network members, may also be  
35 legitimate in the context of interventions that lead to the out-of-home placement of their children by child  
36 welfare and protection services. Families in poverty that engage in an individual support trajectory of the  
37 network are described as families that have nothing to hide and do not distrust the services. One of the  
38 coordinators described this dynamic as a, however problematic, "natural selection" of the participants in  
39 the networks. Some network partners discuss this issue during one of the meetings:  
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43 *One of the partners opens the discussion: "Families that have a lot to hide will not participate in*  
44 *a trajectory like this. They don't want anyone close to them and prefer a more distant approach".*  
45 *Another network partner replies: "We had a couple of families like that, and after four months,*  
46 *they just fled and moved out." The overall consensus emerges that this happens not because of*  
47 *the network as such but because social work is coming too close and gets to know too much*  
48 *about the situation of the families.*  
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## 52 **Concluding reflections** 53 54

55 The growing commitment to inter-organisational networking between welfare services to tackle the  
56 wicked issue of child poverty leads to an increasing pressure for child and family social work practices to  
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3 document and share information about parents and children. However, documentation and information  
4 sharing practices may provoke pertinent challenges in relation to how the flow of private information  
5 between services is managed in the networks as well as the complexities and side-effects of this effort,  
6 particularly because "information is likely to flow more freely" (Provan, 1997: 21). **In that vein, it might  
7 be interesting to consider how this flow of information is dealt with in other national contexts  
8 such as the UK. Parton (2008b), for example, describes the emergence of the preventive-  
9 surveillance state which relies on the monitoring and sharing of private information in children's  
10 services to ensure that no children fall through the net. As these practices might create a  
11 panoptic eye, Parton (2008b) argues that the purpose, goal and ground on which to intervene  
12 and exchange private information is important to consider and needs justification.** Although it  
13 may be desirable for the welfare state or welfare actors to acquire and share private information as  
14 efficiently as possible, our research shows that this desirability is not necessarily experienced as  
15 supportive by children and their parents as welfare recipients.  
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19 While relying on the Foucauldian concepts of the panopticon and pastoral power, our analysis reveals  
20 four central fields of tension in which child and family social workers and their organisations must  
21 position themselves: (1) craving control and handling uncertainty; (2) using and misusing private  
22 information and trust, (3) constructing families as subjects and objects of intervention, and (4) including  
23 and excluding families. In the vein of the metaphor of pastoral power, the shepherd (the practitioner who  
24 possesses confidential information) is confronted with the question of how the sharing of information,  
25 when revealed to the other partners of the network, can be either harmful or beneficial for the sheep (the  
26 families). This metaphor refers to a tension between the commitments to data sharing and to privacy,  
27 and it is not easy to build a comprehensive arrangement between the two (6 et al., 2005). Our results  
28 reveal that the need to control and intervene often results from a logic of care and concern for families. It  
29 is remarkable to observe that social work and welfare actors mainly develop strategies with good  
30 intentions but unintentional and even coercive side-effects often emerge, for example, when the  
31 shepherd is losing members of the flock or when the sheep are punished for their behaviour. **It is  
32 however important to acknowledge that the intention of a certain action or strategy may differ  
33 from the actual effects it will cause.**  
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39 **We therefore argue that a broad, flexible and ethical framework on a national level might make  
40 sense when it enables local networks and practitioners to further construct and discuss how  
41 they deal with information in collaboration and negotiation. This framework can be used as a  
42 touchstone and reflection tool in practices of exchanging information in local networks. We  
43 therefore argue that it is undesirable to formally protocol and pre-structure these practices.  
44 Rather than fixed and standardised regulations, a more pedagogical, dialogical and transparent  
45 negotiation between network partners and families can be suggested. An essential part of such  
46 a broad an ethical framework is being transparent towards families.** When we translate this to the  
47 concept of the panopticon: how reciprocal are the views of the guardian and those who are watched?  
48 The creation of a panoptic eye can imply that service users cannot dissociate themselves from the web  
49 that is formed by the network, particularly when people do not know what is being done above their  
50 heads. The results show that practices of information sharing are sometimes intentionally kept un-  
51 transparent and invisible. Even if this is done with good intentions, we may wonder what this means for  
52 families; where are their possibilities to (re-)act, judge, think, disagree with and resist what they  
53 experience as unsupportive and intrusive social work interventions? **It is important to see, and reflect**  
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3 **on, these (one-sided) power-relationships, particularly in the construction, interpretation and**  
4 **implementation of (national) protocols and guidelines. There is a risk to normalise the pastoral**  
5 **power that is created by gathering and exchanging private information.** This implies that social  
6 workers should consider what information is essential to properly become familiar with the diverse  
7 concerns and needs of children and parents, which requires well-reasoned decision-making in each  
8 situation (Reamer, 2005). Rather than believing in 'one size fits all' solutions, there is a need to provide  
9 tailor-made support for families. Our research also reveals that documentation and information sharing  
10 strategies, and the interventions of inter-organisational networks that follow from these practices, should  
11 actually contribute to the development of local anti-poverty strategies that are beneficial for the well-  
12 being of both children and parents.  
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For Peer Review



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