

## The Case of *Het Beschermjassenhuis*: How Families and Professionals hold a Transcultural Space for Diversity and Empowerment in Collective Learning Communities

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### Abstract

In this workshop we illustrate what caring and effective contemporary-empowering family support can look like, by introducing the action research-based work model *Het Beschermjassenhuis*. In *Het Beschermjassenhuis* an interdisciplinary and multi-ethnic team welcomes a family and their social worker to explore how to bring the counseling process forward. Starting from a learning question of the social worker, the family and team are invited to search together for answers. Working with biographical-narrative dialogue and 'transcultural resonance' within the team, we embed the family in their familial and cultural resources (Tjin A Djie & Zwaan, 2016) and offer multiple perspectives on the issue (Moro, 1990). As such, *Het Beschermjassenhuis* creates a collective learning community (Wenger, 2010) among families and professionals. We tackle the urgent questions: Who needs to receive empowerment and who needs to give it? How do we grow our ability to provide space for different perspectives as a resource rather than an obstacle? And what about the empowerment of professionals? Conform our experience-oriented learning approach, we take congress attendants along in a workshop that allows them to experience first-hand how to use their own family and cultural history to learn together, create space for diversity and empower families and professionals.

### Elaborate workshop description

Social programs concerned with the empowerment of migrant and low-income families are increasingly initiated to bridge mismatches between social services and minority families. However, culturalist tendencies in public discourses and neoliberal reforms in education and social work present conceptual and practical dilemmas attached to the notion of empowerment. Studies that have critically examined emancipatory policies and programs shed light on how non-mainstream families are perceived as 'unknowledgeable' and 'in need of empowerment'. In their wish to "activate those that lag behind" (Van den Berg, 2016) western emancipatory ideals may (unintentionally) dismiss families' own familial and cultural resources; reinforcing assimilation rather than allowing for diversity and family strength (Gillies, 2005; Ghorashi, 2018; Holvino & Kamp, 2009). In addition, neoliberal perspectives increasingly enter the work sphere, holding professionals individually accountable for social work 'failures' (e.g. the Dutch case of Savanna in 2004). Underlying the issues of empowerment and professional accountability are some fundamental epistemological questions: Who is in power to define and create family knowledge, development and care? Who needs to receive empowerment and who needs to give it? What about the empowerment of professionals? And with respect to our present-day context of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), how can we grow our ability to provide space for difference as a resource rather than an obstacle?

In order to tackle these issues and illustrate what caring and effective contemporary-empowering family support and professional development can look like, we introduce the work model *Het Beschermjassenhuis*. Originating in a 2017/18 action research-based project, the work model provides a contemporary-emancipatory practice that moves beyond the 'empowerment of minority families in need' and challenges notions of expertise, knowledge production and justice in

family support and professional development. Conform our experience-oriented learning approach, we take attendants along in a 1-hour workshop that allows them to experience first-hand how they can use their own family history to learn together and empower professionals and families.

Drawing upon transcultural-systemic family studies (Moro, 1990; Tjin A Djie & Zwaan, 2016) and social learning theory (Wenger, 2010), the work model provides a transcultural space in which families and professionals form a learning community together. In *Het Beschermjassenhuis* an interdisciplinary and multi-ethnic team welcomes a family and their social worker to explore how to bring the counseling process forward. Starting from a learning question of the social worker, the family and team are invited to search together for answers. Working with biographical-narrative dialogue and visualizations (such as genograms and life lines) and ‘transcultural resonance’ within the team, we embed the family in their own familial and cultural resources and offer multiple perspectives on the issue (Moro, 1990; Tjin A Djie & Zwaan, 2016). As families explore their family knowledge through the unfolding narrative and mapping out of their family rituals, their expertise is mobilized to support the professional, and in such themselves. Derived from the intention to learn together, *Het Beschermjassenhuis* works with the collective empowerment (‘eigen-kracht’) of both families and professionals.

The work model is grounded in several theoretical perspectives. The first is derived from the transcultural-systemic work of Moro (1990) and Tjin A Djie (Tjin A Djie & Zwaan, 2016), who both offer postmigration families a ‘protective wrap’ (‘beschermjas’; Van Bekkum, Helberg, Tjin A Djie, & Zwaan, 2010) by meeting them in a group of diverse professionals. This group embodies the ‘we-oriented’ social structure in which many non-western migrants are socialized. Moreover, by including the familial, cultural and historic background of both professionals and families as diverse perspectives on the issue, knowledge becomes plural and as being co-constructed in relation with each another. As such, the ‘multiperspectivity’ offered within the group serves as a means to decentralize knowledge and adapt to the diversity between and within families. Furthermore, it invites for professionals to reflect upon how their own background resonates with the family narrative, in order to gain insight into ‘blind spots’ that may frustrate the counseling process.

Second, we draw upon Wenger’s (2010) ‘communities of practice’ perspective to conceptualize the exchange among families and professionals as holding a social learning space. Wenger and Trayner define this space as “(...) *social containers that enable genuine interactions among participants, who can bring to the learning table both their experience of practice and their experience of themselves in that practice*”. By positioning professionals as ‘learners’, families are upgraded to a ‘knowledge-owning’ status. As such, their own experiences and family wisdom become available as a learning resource in the counseling. Professionals on the other hand are dismissed to provide all expertise and be knowledgeable; instead they can find support and collaboration in the group of professionals and clients to enhance their practice and share accountability. At last, thinking as a learning community adds an additional dimension to the counseling, by providing a collective meta-analytical lens; as we work, we reflect upon what we learn individually and collectively and how this informs our future practice. In this way, the empowerment found can be collectively anchored.

Find more information about *Het Beschermjassenhuis* here:

<https://www.beschermjassen.nl/beschermjassenhuis/>

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