PROTECTIVE WRAPS

A way of counselling by which parents and children from We-systems are embedded into their families and cultures

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PROTECTIVE WRAPS ²

A way of counselling by which parents and children from We-systems³ are embedded into their families and cultures

Summary

It is admirable how people succeed in carrying on with their lives despite major setbacks and experiences of loss. They often derive their strength to do so from their (extended) families. Migration can lead to the disruption of the customary channels in the families and the need for new ones. In search of new perspectives and social recognition, people sometimes turn to social health services and to government agencies for help. In the Netherlands, however, that assistance is primarily based on knowledge and theories concerning members of the white, Western middle-class. It's on this basis that assistance is offered to migrant and refugee families, be it the nuclear family or the extended family. This leads to cultural confusion.
Bearing in mind that continuity and stability are the basis for growing up securely, social health institutions and government agencies should think much more in terms of the intrinsic strength of the extended family system. By first connecting to the existing protective systems of the extended family, new, alternative and adequate forms of support become possible. This type of tailor-made assistance functions like a protective wrap.

INTRODUCTION

The therapeutic process surrounding children and parents in the Netherlands is often restricted to the nuclear family. When dealing with parents and children, one only sees what is taking place there. One does not then see that uncles and aunts, grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles often have responsibilities and powers that are of vital importance to the upbringing of the children. Due to the fact that the extended family system is ignored, hardly any attention is paid to the value of the supporting and correcting forces and the resolving capabilities of the extended family. Grandparents, uncles and aunts or other important people concerned are often requested to stay in the waiting room and if that is not achieved, their presence is often just for the show. This doesn't fit in well with many migrants and refugees.

It is not surprising that Dutch social workers and therapists are not acquainted with this particular approach, with the perspective of the extended family system. Quite often they have never been exposed to such a line of thought, neither personally nor professionally. Social workers of a non-Western background have also been trained according to the Western theories and concepts and have 'forgotten' the way in which extended families function.

In order to amplify on this phenomenon of children being raised in a broader family context, I would like to go into my own family history and family tradition. Occasionally, I will add some examples of cases that others and I have dealt with. First, I will discuss the cultural confusion that can arise when representatives of the We-culture and the I-culture meet with each other. Next, what it means to grow up in a We-system where authority, relational dependence and family continuity are more important than autonomous development. Subsequently, I will deal with migration as a special life stage transition. It is important to first activate the memory and then connect to the existing protective systems and resolution strategies of the extended family in order to look for new forms of support together with the family. Finally, some suggestions will follow for the therapeutic process along this line of thought.

This article is primarily meant to entice and to advocate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural baggage and of acquiring knowledge about other cultures. It is through this awareness of differences and similarities that one can open oneself up to a different approach from what one has learned; an approach that can help to create possibilities for families from We-cultures to reconnect with their own sources of strength. In turn, these families can then open themselves up to new Western ideas.

CULTURAL CONFUSION

When representatives of two different worlds, the I-culture (the therapist) and the We-culture (the extended family) offer their help on the basis of joint responsibility, dilemmas arise.

One of my sisters has a daughter. The girl was sent to my youngest sister and my mother in Surinam when she was sixteen. She met a man there in Surinam and they had a son who is now four years old. Problems arose concerning his upbringing and my niece, with everyone's approval, took her son to the grandfather from father's side. The father moved to Holland and is now living with his mother. The boy's grandfather was divorced and is now remarried, but still maintains strong ties with his former wife. That part of the family is characterized by strong and domineering persons with strong family ties. The father and the grandfather as well as the two grandmothers have a say in matters concerning the little one and of course his mother too.

All the same, my eldest sister feels that she must also step in and she occasionally asks for my advice. My sister's mother-in-law as well as my sister-in-law, who at

some point in the past also looked after my niece, feel that they hav the right to voice their opinion in matters concerning my great-nephew.

If this four-year-old boy had come to Holland with his grandfather or grandmother and had been exposed to Dutch youth work, what would have happened? There would have been a large risk of the the therapist denouncing the involvement of such a large number of people as meddlesome and chaotic. A therapist raised and educated here could easily find such a system harmful to the child's autonomy and well-being. The therapists would probably try to extricate the mother and the child from this meddlesome family. The possibility that they would take action by placing the child under supervision or placing him in care is not just hypothetical (Rottenberg, 1999). Such a course of action disqualifies the involvement of the extended family and ignores the system's internal sources of strength.

With regard to the development and identity formation of growing migrant children, an important difference of opinion stands out between the native population of a Western country and the population of foreign origin. While in Western societies the individual and self-realization are important and decisive for the well-being of the participants, in most non-Western countries group identity and feelings of connection and solidarity are predominant. The well-being of the individual can/may never exceed the interests of the group (Jessurun & Limburg Okken,1993; Wekker, 1994). This underlying attitude continues having a strong influence on many migrant parents and children. Raising children is not just, not even in the first place, the parents' business, but that of the extended family and even that of the group.

Authority and authority figures
What does it mean to grow up in a We-system in which joint responsibility, interdependence and hierarchy are more important than autonomous development and making one's own choices? To illustrate this, I will sketch part of my family's history, by means of which I hope to illustrate the terms 'authority' and 'authority figures'.

I am the fourth of six daughters. My mother is the firstborn in a family of two daughters. Her father had German-Portugese parents and her mother a creole father and a jewish-Portugese mother. My grandmother and her mother had the final say in this family dominated by women. My father had many brothers and sisters and also a half-brother from a previous relationship of my grandfather's. Grandfather from father's side had a lot of money, various mistresses and many children. Great-grandfather from that side arrived in Surinam in 1882 from Themsemwui, South-Eastern China, under the terms of a family reunification program and married a Chinese woman.
My grandfather married a young woman from what was formerly known as Indo-China. He was working as a joint proprietor at the gold mines near the frontier between Surinam and French Guyana and often went to French Guyana for shopping purposes where he met my grandmother. They were married in 1908 and my grandmother emigrated to Surinam. She took along not only her élan, her savoir-vivre, her French hats and porcelain, but also the French language and introduced all of that into the extended Chinese family system. That system, by the way, was no ordinary system, for although ethnically speaking the members were Chinese, my grandfather was a catholic and besides only Dutch was spoken in his family. This last fact entailed that the family was in fact situated outside of the Chinese community:

Chinese people who no longer speak Chinese don't count. But grandfather did continue to eat with chop-sticks. Grandmother continued speaking French. When someone once asked: 'And in what language did your grandparents speak to each other?' I had admit I didn't know the answer. This aroused my curiosity and I wanted to ask my Aunt Agnes (my father's older, second eldest sister) about it. Via Aunt Agnes, I have reached the subject of authority and authority figures.

I use the term authority figures for the people who, within the extended family system, have the greatest say in decision making matters and what precedes them. Their authority has either been acquired by them or has been delegated to them and in this capacity they are responsible for the well-being of the family.

Aunt Agnes ranks highly in the family hierarchy. So my eldest sister, who has much easier access to her than I do because of her own position, provided me with the missing information. It turned out that my grandparents spoke Sranang Tongo to each other, the Surinamese language.

It's quite an important position that Aunt Agnes occupies in our family. As a woman in a Chinese family it is exceptional for her to have such a high position. This aunt has acquired her authority through special merits. The fact is that she has been quite active in politics, particularly on behalf of women's voting rights in Surinam.

In systems like my family's, you will find one or more persons who represent authority in each generation. Authority figures are very important for decision making and therefore for familial relationships and family continuity.

My uncle Leo, my father's third eldest brother, has the highest authority. It was originally reserved for my eldest uncle, but he passed away at a young age. The next brother in line was too gentle in nature and actually never had much status. Therefore, my grandfather delegated the authority to his third son.

Acquiring authority follows its own rules in different cultures. In addition, these rules also vary per family. In most cultures, authority is primarily based on seniority, which is also the case in my culture. I look after the two sisters who come after me, they are to do what I instruct them to do and I am to do what my older sisters impose on me. Shifts can take place in authority structures due to someone passing away, divorce, migration or other changes. It is a dynamic phenomenon.

So the firstborn in one generation has authority over the largest group. The proportion of authority between authority figures from different generations is also generally determined by seniority. Moreover, the person to whom authority has been delegated, has a higher place in the hierarchic structure than the person who has acquired the authority himself/herself.

In family systems where the men dominate, as in my Chinese family, the authority figures are more often men than women. My mother comes from a matriarchal system in which her mother ran the show, like my mother subsequently did in our (nuclear) family. Within the general set of rules, all kinds of variations are possible. Therefore, it is not possible to know in advance who does or does not have any authority. One

thing is certain though, once you have acquired or been delegated authority, it is clear to every member of the family how that must be dealt with.

One of my sisters did something bad a long, long time ago. It was clear to everyone that it was unacceptable and so my Aunt Agnes and my Uncle Leo (both from father's side) had reason to call my parents to account. They were given to understand that something of the sort was never to happen again. My mother still talks about how difficult it was for her to be brought into line by this patriarchal system. She comes from a system in which the women are dominant and she still feels indignant about this incident.

Within my generation, my eldest sister firmly holds the authority delegated to her. I have acquired authority through my work. This became clear to me in an indirect manner. I was called by my eldest sister about a problem. During our conversation it became clear that I was the first one she was calling and that she hadn't yet consulted with my older sisters. From this incident, I could only conclude that I had been promoted to authority figure. That's an honour for me and important too, but it also makes one feel insecure, as being an authority figure is sometimes accompanied by serious responsibilities.

Authority figures can lose their position due to the way certain things develop, to life events and migration. After migrating, authority figures can be replaced by other members of the extended family already residing in the host country. But what also sometimes occurs, is that authority figures from the country of origin acquire much more influence after migrating.

An African social worker, employed by a guardianship institution for placement of parentless, underage asylum seekers, recounts: 'I had placed three African children with an uncle in Groningen. Unfortunately, this uncle could no longer look after the children. I found three relatives in Holland who were willing to take them in, but none of them wanted all three children. One of the relatives was willing to take in two children, the other one was willing to take in one child, two at the most. I racked my brains over which of the two children should be kept together, until one of the members of the family said: 'That's no problem at all, you should call our grandfather in Africa.' This was no sooner said than done and grandfather decided that the relatives in Dordrecht, who wanted one child, would get two, that the family in Amsterdam would get none as they had a big problem and that the relatives living in Nijmegen had to take in one child. That's how it went and nobody within the family quarreled over it. The African social worker himself was surprised that something as self-evident as asking an authority figure in the family or the tribe for advice had vanished from his own way of thinking under the influence of his Dutch education.

It is not terribly important whether the therapist bonds with the clients or not. The important thing is to find out which persons in the system have the final say, which ones support and reprimand. The fact is that more often than not, other family members, rather than the parents, are the ones who make the decisions with regard to the children.

Effective interventions that apply to these cases are:
- stimulating parents to repair broken ties;

- inviting authority figures, sending them an e-mail, calling them or even having them come over for a family meeting.

In this paragraph migration was discussed as one of the reasons for authority relations to change. However, migration has a profound impact on several aspects of life. The next paragraph will go into this.

MIGRATION

Migration can be seen as a special transition.from one stage of life to the next (Jessurun, 1994). In We-systems everything takes place in a larger context and that's why I speak of an extended family life-stage transition. After all, the inter-personal emotional bonds are strong and span many generations. One person's well-being is related to that of everyone else's and loss may be felt across four or five generations. Not only one person, but the whole extended family system is vulnerable in such life-stage transitions. The family must start to function in a complete different manner to recreate family continuity. Family continuity is oriented towards making use of all available efforts of the members of the (extended) family in order to guarantee the continued existence of the family. These efforts are by definition of a positive nature, because the existence of a family is directed at continuity, at development, at survival in the long term. This implies that in many instances individual interests are tuned to family interests.

To illustrate migration as a transitional stage characterized by numerous elements, an outline follows which was developed by Van Bekkum, together with other cultural anthropologists (Van Bekkum, Van den Ende, Heezen & Hijmans van den Bergh, 1996).

- The departure: disengagement takes place and old role patterns must be given up. This is accompanied by mourning (Akhtar, 1995).
- The liminal stage: a confusing in-between stage in which nothing fits in any longer (liminal = on the threshold). A stage in which problems can become manifest, but also in which new ideas and insights can help to find creative solutions. Boedjarath (1996) calls this creative stage 'the in-between culture'. It is the stage in which shuttling between two cultures can be beneficial and favourable to emotional growth. Not in order to hold on to the culture of origin, but to recharge, to become re-energized in order to go on (Tjin a Djie, 2001).
- The re-integration: the stage in which one becomes attached again. Adaptation to the new system takes place, the role patterns concur with, or at least no longer conflict with, those of the host country.

Migration is always a cultural transition and I find it important in my work to pay attention to the particular vulnerability in the liminal stage. Home-sickness, the loss of everything familiar, the sadness of those staying behind, the tension over everything unfamiliar and the hope of another (better) future all play an important role. In this stage, the risk that the system will derail and appeal for help is at its greatest. Most likely, the people concerned will be confronted with a Western therapeutic context where hardly anything is familiar. In the next paragraphs I will illustrate how to offer a safer context.

PROTECTIVE WRAPS

Our family is scattered all over the world. My sisters and I were sent to the Netherlands to continue our education. My eldest sister stayed on in Amsterdam and so did I. The one after her moved to the United States and my third sister is now living in Rotterdam again, after having lived in Surinam for ten years. My second youngest sister set off to Aruba and the youngest went back to Surinam.

The interesting thing is that our extended family system remains intact in spite of the dispersion over different parts of the world. Increased mobility and easy telecommunication obviously contribute to its remaining intact, but I find it impressive to see how resilient We-systems are and how resourceful the members are in recreating a protective system.

Yagyahoui (1988) uses the term *enveloppement* for this. The word comes from the French transcultural psychology and roughly means being embedded into the group and the culture. The cultural surroundings offer a texture, a cultural fabric to hold on to, a safe wrap (enveloppement) that helps the individual to cope with painful and anxiety provoking experiences. This *enveloppement* is similar to terms such as *holding* and *containment*, but refers to a larger group, to the extended family and the whole cultural context (Sterman, 1999).

'*Enveloppement*', which I call 'protective wrap' is badly needed when people find themselves in anxious situations, specifically surrounding migration. Being torn away from your own culture and the confusion that follows during and just after migrating requires being embedded in a group. Venema (1992) investigated the mechanisms of embedding before and after migration in matriarchal, creole systems. It turns out that 'social motherhood', whereby parenthood tasks are performed by various members of the extended family, remains intact even after migration, and that so does their rendering of psycho-social assistance. Fortunately so, as migration is accompanied by feelings of loss and other far-reaching emotions. To an outsider, such an extended family may seem chaotic at a moment like that, but the opposite is true. In fact it functions as a well-defined system within which people know where they stand.

KEEPING THE MEMORY OF THE PROTECTIVE WRAP ALIVE

Psychosocial help in the liminal stage should focus on and go along with the sources of strength that enabled families to confront their difficulties and adversities in their systems of origin. In We-systems, matters such as loyalty, close relationships and a collective history are important positive factors.

It's not development and achievement of individual autonomy that plays a key role, but rather authority, interdependence, solidarity and family continuity (Lau, 1995). When extending help to migrants or refugees or to any parent(s) at all who feel that they have lost their own cultural system, the therapist becomes a 'professional reminder' (Ramdas, 1996). Together with the client, the therapist searches for the threads that led to their becoming embedded into the culture and into the group. It is important to search for the decision-making mechanisms in the family and for what the system's most important norms and values are with regard to family continuity

and to who supervise its preservation. This search, which reminds the client of the folds, pockets, weaving patterns and threadbare spots in the protective wrap, is necessary to reduce anxiety and to revitalize, so that energy is released in order to go on.

The use of a genealogy chart can be of great help (Jessurun, 1994). Making a genealogy is more than just charting the family, it also serves to clarify the mechanisms of the decision-making process. Asking questions and visualizing the family often leads to the client's almost physically experiencing the protective wrap. Ask questions about the context and by doing so, find out who the authority figures are:

- What are your habits, traditions, norms and values surrounding decision-making like?
- How do you reshape family continuity?
- What are your solution strategies?
- Who are the patrons and patronesses in the system?
- Who may say what when?

Should it turn out that grandmother was an important authority figure in the country of origin, then ask the parents or children questions about the context such as:

- Who comforts grandma when she is sad?
- Who helps grandma to make decisions, what would they advise her to do?
- What would grandma advise you to do?
- What would grandma advise the social services workers in Holland to do?

These types of questions help parents and children to look at things from grandma's perspective. This is something which is continually done in the countries of origin, so matter of factly, that one isn't even aware of doing it: continually putting oneself in the perspectives of other family members. After migrating and under the influence of Western I-thinking, looking at matters from the perspective of those who stayed behind may occur less frequently and consequently sources of strength are lost. What are the consequences of this approach for parents? It is important for migrants in countries where individualistic norms and values are held in high regard to work at self-development, at developing their own sense of responsibility and at making their own choices. But at the same time, there must be room for a type of self-confidence in which space is granted to both cultures. In order to achieve this, questions such as listed below can be of help:

- To what extent are you free to make your own choices?
- Who else has a say in this?
- Taking the above questions into account, what do you, yourself, want, decide?
- Have any other family members paved the way for you? Do they still keep in touch with the rest?

In the confusion of the liminal stage, parents tend to forget what their own sources are. It is important to go searching for them together with the parents: stay along the sideline, the intention is not to lead the way or to want to be the example.

- Facilitate family meetings.
- Ask the family to give the therapists advice.
- Help the family to take the reigns back into their own hands; to take ownership of their lives again.

CONCLUSION

If family therapists underestimate the supportive and corrective systems within the etended family, or even worse, if they find it annoying, disclaim it or play it down, they will cut off the parents, vulnerable enough as it is, from their systems, with far-reaching consequences (Tjin A Djie, 1991). What complicates matters is that this approach involves a radically different position for westerly oriented therapists from what they are used to taking up. It goes further than just *taking things into account*. As a family therapist, you are really no more than a facilitator, someone who sets up conditions so that the system can confer, come up with solution strategies and also carry them out. This position, leaving the responsibility and the decision-making process surrounding the children to the extended family system, appears to be extremely hard to swallow for contemporary, Western, social services workers. The difference with the customary, exclusive therapist-client relationship that characterizes the Western social services plays an important role in this. When working with migrant families, one tries to clarify the ideas of the extended family and continually asks oneself whether there is enough support for the decisions that must be reached. In order to do so, as a therapist, one must become part of the family system, probably in the position of authority figure, possibly also in the position of aunt or uncle, older sister or brother. In my experience, one constantly shifts positions: from therapist to authority figure in the family and then to the position of the person who in the country of origin has a say over the problems between parents and children. Western therapists may at times feel uneasy about shifting positions.

Not everyone is convinced that the interculturalization of the therapeutic context is of vital importance. An argument that is often put forward is that if therapists interact with their clients in an open and honest manner, the basis will be sound enough for adequate assitance, irrespective of the backgrounds of the clients. I think there's more to it than that. It goes without saying that openness and honesty are of great importance. However, it is even more important for therapists to be aware of their own Western, personal and professional cultural baggage and of the fact that knowledge of non-Western family systems and of the appropriate forms of assitance are crucial to good results.

By continually dealing with non-Western family systems and by striving to gain in-depth knowledge of the possibilities and impossibilities of providing a theoretical framework for therapeutic contexts, I have not only discovered my strengths but also my limitations. An important moment was when I realized that I, in spite of the fact that I have been counselling families for such a long time in Holland, sometimes make the mistake of thinking that I understand all the intricacies of a certain matter. When asking Dutch parents: 'What does grandma think of this, how important is your mother in this story, where are all the cousins and why don't they come by to help you raise the children?' an uneasy silence often followed. And then I would find myself with empty hands. For I didn't know how to deal with a single mother and a daughter who said that they really didn't have anybody whom they could ask for advice; that there really wasn't anybody to suggest that they do things this or that way, or to take a decision for them. That would leave me with my hands up in the air. I too found it difficult to imagine myself in someone else's situation, to accept that there are various truths: the notion, based purely on individual freedom and self-realization, that

children have the right to be raised so as to become autonomous beings, as well as the truth that the system predominates and that the goal in the decision making process is always that of yielding optimal results for the entire system.

A solution that contains the best of both worlds asks of both parties involved that they have knowledge of their own culture and of other cultures and it certainly requires intercultural skills. Experience shows that being curious about someone else's motives and deepening one's understanding of other people's cultures can lead to surprising and enriching experiences.

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Notes

1. Kitlyn Tjin a Djie
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2. Protective Wraps
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3. We-systems
In a large part of the households in We-cultures, the majority of the tasks are performed by the women. Apart from having responsibility for generating the family income, they play a key role in raising and educating the children. In contrast to traditional Western families, the boundaries of what is regarded as 'family' are much wider; frequently, a number of women within the extended family network assume the mother role. Whether these women belong to the same generation (aunts), or to another generation (mother/grandmother), makes no difference. The children have no problem with having several mothers. They distinguish them by the way they call them, e.g. mother Nita or mother Agnes.
As it is the extended family that bears the ultimate responsibility for the results, if conflicts arise within this system, they are dealt with on a higher level.

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Summary

It is admirable how people succeed in carrying on with their lives despite major setbacks and experiences of loss. They often derive their strength to do so from their (extended) families. Migration can lead to the disruption of the customary channels in the families and the need for new ones. In search of new perspectives and social recognition, people sometimes turn to social health services and to government agencies for help. In the Netherlands, however, that assistance is primarily based on knowledge and theories concerning members of the white, Western middle-class. It's on this basis that assistance is offered to migrant and refugee families, be it the nuclear family or the extended family. This leads to cultural confusion.
Bearing in mind that continuity and stability are the basis for growing up securely, social health institutions and government agencies should think much more in terms of the intrinsic strength of the extended family system. By first connecting to the existing protective systems of the extended family, new, alternative and adequate forms of support become possible. This type of tailor-made assistance functions like a protective wrap.

INTRODUCTION

The therapeutic process surrounding children and parents in the Netherlands is often restricted to the nuclear family. When dealing with parents and children, one only sees what is taking place there. One does not then see that uncles and aunts, grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles often have responsibilities and powers that are of vital importance to the upbringing of the children. Due to the fact that the extended family system is ignored, hardly any attention is paid to the value of the supporting and correcting forces and the resolving capabilities of the extended family. Grandparents, uncles and aunts or other important people concerned are often requested to stay in the waiting room and if that is not achieved, their presence is often just for the show. This doesn't fit in well with many migrants and refugees.

It is not surprising that Dutch social workers and therapists are not acquainted with this particular approach, with the perspective of the extended family system. Quite often they have never been exposed to such a line of thought, neither personally nor professionally. Social workers of a non-Western background have also been trained according to the Western theories and concepts and have 'forgotten' the way in which extended families function.

In order to amplify on this phenomenon of children being raised in a broader family context, I would like to go into my own family history and family tradition. Occasionally, I will add some examples of cases that others and I have dealt with. First, I will discuss the cultural confusion that can arise when representatives of the We-culture and the I-culture meet with each other. Next, what it means to grow up in a We-system where authority, relational dependence and family continuity are more important than autonomous development. Subsequently, I will deal with migration as a special life stage transition. It is important to first activate the memory and then connect to the existing protective systems and resolution strategies of the extended family in order to look for new forms of support together with the family. Finally, some suggestions will follow for the therapeutic process along this line of thought.

This article is primarily meant to entice and to advocate the importance of being aware of one's own cultural baggage and of acquiring knowledge about other cultures. It is through this awareness of differences and similarities that one can open oneself up to a different approach from what one has learned; an approach that can help to create possibilities for families from We-cultures to reconnect with their own sources of strength. In turn, these families can then open themselves up to new Western ideas.

CULTURAL CONFUSION

When representatives of two different worlds, the I-culture (the therapist) and the We-culture (the extended family) offer their help on the basis of joint responsibility, dilemmas arise.

One of my sisters has a daughter. The girl was sent to my youngest sister and my mother in Surinam when she was sixteen. She met a man there in Surinam and they had a son who is now four years old. Problems arose concerning his upbringing and my niece, with everyone's approval, took her son to the grandfather from father's side. The father moved to Holland and is now living with his mother. The boy's grandfather was divorced and is now remarried, but still maintains strong ties with his former wife. That part of the family is characterized by strong and domineering persons with strong family ties. The father and the grandfather as well as the two grandmothers have a say in matters concerning the little one and of course his mother too.

All the same, my eldest sister feels that she must also step in and she occasionally asks for my advice. My sister's mother-in-law as well as my sister-in-law, who at

some point in the past also looked after my niece, feel that they hav the right to voice their opinion in matters concerning my great-nephew.

If this four-year-old boy had come to Holland with his grandfather or grandmother and had been exposed to Dutch youth work, what would have happened? There would have been a large risk of the the therapist denouncing the involvement of such a large number of people as meddlesome and chaotic. A therapist raised and educated here could easily find such a system harmful to the child's autonomy and well-being. The therapists would probably try to extricate the mother and the child from this meddlesome family. The possibility that they would take action by placing the child under supervision or placing him in care is not just hypothetical (Rottenberg, 1999). Such a course of action disqualifies the involvement of the extended family and ignores the system's internal sources of strength.

With regard to the development and identity formation of growing migrant children, an important difference of opinion stands out between the native population of a Western country and the population of foreign origin. While in Western societies the individual and self-realization are important and decisive for the well-being of the participants, in most non-Western countries group identity and feelings of connection and solidarity are predominant. The well-being of the individual can/may never exceed the interests of the group (Jessurun & Limburg Okken,1993; Wekker, 1994). This underlying attitude continues having a strong influence on many migrant parents and children. Raising children is not just, not even in the first place, the parents' business, but that of the extended family and even that of the group.

Authority and authority figures
What does it mean to grow up in a We-system in which joint responsibility, interdependence and hierarchy are more important than autonomous development and making one's own choices? To illustrate this, I will sketch part of my family's history, by means of which I hope to illustrate the terms 'authority' and 'authority figures'.

I am the fourth of six daughters. My mother is the firstborn in a family of two daughters. Her father had German-Portugese parents and her mother a creole father and a jewish-Portugese mother. My grandmother and her mother had the final say in this family dominated by women. My father had many brothers and sisters and also a half-brother from a previous relationship of my grandfather's. Grandfather from father's side had a lot of money, various mistresses and many children. Great-grandfather from that side arrived in Surinam in 1882 from Themsemwui, South-Eastern China, under the terms of a family reunification program and married a Chinese woman.
My grandfather married a young woman from what was formerly known as Indo-China. He was working as a joint proprietor at the gold mines near the frontier between Surinam and French Guyana and often went to French Guyana for shopping purposes where he met my grandmother. They were married in 1908 and my grandmother emigrated to Surinam. She took along not only her élan, her savoir-vivre, her French hats and porcelain, but also the French language and introduced all of that into the extended Chinese family system. That system, by the way, was no ordinary system, for although ethnically speaking the members were Chinese, my grandfather was a catholic and besides only Dutch was spoken in his family. This last fact entailed that the family was in fact situated outside of the Chinese community:

Chinese people who no longer speak Chinese don't count. But grandfather did continue to eat with chop-sticks. Grandmother continued speaking French. When someone once asked: 'And in what language did your grandparents speak to each other?' I had admit I didn't know the answer. This aroused my curiosity and I wanted to ask my Aunt Agnes (my father's older, second eldest sister) about it. Via Aunt Agnes, I have reached the subject of authority and authority figures.

I use the term authority figures for the people who, within the extended family system, have the greatest say in decision making matters and what precedes them. Their authority has either been acquired by them or has been delegated to them and in this capacity they are responsible for the well-being of the family.

Aunt Agnes ranks highly in the family hierarchy. So my eldest sister, who has much easier access to her than I do because of her own position, provided me with the missing information. It turned out that my grandparents spoke Sranang Tongo to each other, the Surinamese language.

It's quite an important position that Aunt Agnes occupies in our family. As a woman in a Chinese family it is exceptional for her to have such a high position. This aunt has acquired her authority through special merits. The fact is that she has been quite active in politics, particularly on behalf of women's voting rights in Surinam.

In systems like my family's, you will find one or more persons who represent authority in each generation. Authority figures are very important for decision making and therefore for familial relationships and family continuity.

My uncle Leo, my father's third eldest brother, has the highest authority. It was originally reserved for my eldest uncle, but he passed away at a young age. The next brother in line was too gentle in nature and actually never had much status. Therefore, my grandfather delegated the authority to his third son.

Acquiring authority follows its own rules in different cultures. In addition, these rules also vary per family. In most cultures, authority is primarily based on seniority, which is also the case in my culture. I look after the two sisters who come after me, they are to do what I instruct them to do and I am to do what my older sisters impose on me. Shifts can take place in authority structures due to someone passing away, divorce, migration or other changes. It is a dynamic phenomenon.

So the firstborn in one generation has authority over the largest group. The proportion of authority between authority figures from different generations is also generally determined by seniority. Moreover, the person to whom authority has been delegated, has a higher place in the hierarchic structure than the person who has acquired the authority himself/herself.

In family systems where the men dominate, as in my Chinese family, the authority figures are more often men than women. My mother comes from a matriarchal system in which her mother ran the show, like my mother subsequently did in our (nuclear) family. Within the general set of rules, all kinds of variations are possible. Therefore, it is not possible to know in advance who does or does not have any authority. One

thing is certain though, once you have acquired or been delegated authority, it is clear to every member of the family how that must be dealt with.

One of my sisters did something bad a long, long time ago. It was clear to everyone that it was unacceptable and so my Aunt Agnes and my Uncle Leo (both from father's side) had reason to call my parents to account. They were given to understand that something of the sort was never to happen again. My mother still talks about how difficult it was for her to be brought into line by this patriarchal system. She comes from a system in which the women are dominant and she still feels indignant about this incident.

Within my generation, my eldest sister firmly holds the authority delegated to her. I have acquired authority through my work. This became clear to me in an indirect manner. I was called by my eldest sister about a problem. During our conversation it became clear that I was the first one she was calling and that she hadn't yet consulted with my older sisters. From this incident, I could only conclude that I had been promoted to authority figure. That's an honour for me and important too, but it also makes one feel insecure, as being an authority figure is sometimes accompanied by serious responsibilities.

Authority figures can lose their position due to the way certain things develop, to life events and migration. After migrating, authority figures can be replaced by other members of the extended family already residing in the host country. But what also sometimes occurs, is that authority figures from the country of origin acquire much more influence after migrating.

An African social worker, employed by a guardianship institution for placement of parentless, underage asylum seekers, recounts: 'I had placed three African children with an uncle in Groningen. Unfortunately, this uncle could no longer look after the children. I found three relatives in Holland who were willing to take them in, but none of them wanted all three children. One of the relatives was willing to take in two children, the other one was willing to take in one child, two at the most. I racked my brains over which of the two children should be kept together, until one of the members of the family said: 'That's no problem at all, you should call our grandfather in Africa.' This was no sooner said than done and grandfather decided that the relatives in Dordrecht, who wanted one child, would get two, that the family in Amsterdam would get none as they had a big problem and that the relatives living in Nijmegen had to take in one child. That's how it went and nobody within the family quarreled over it. The African social worker himself was surprised that something as self-evident as asking an authority figure in the family or the tribe for advice had vanished from his own way of thinking under the influence of his Dutch education.

It is not terribly important whether the therapist bonds with the clients or not. The important thing is to find out which persons in the system have the final say, which ones support and reprimand. The fact is that more often than not, other family members, rather than the parents, are the ones who make the decisions with regard to the children.

Effective interventions that apply to these cases are:
- stimulating parents to repair broken ties;

- inviting authority figures, sending them an e-mail, calling them or even having them come over for a family meeting.

In this paragraph migration was discussed as one of the reasons for authority relations to change. However, migration has a profound impact on several aspects of life. The next paragraph will go into this.

MIGRATION

Migration can be seen as a special transition.from one stage of life to the next (Jessurun, 1994). In We-systems everything takes place in a larger context and that's why I speak of an extended family life-stage transition. After all, the inter-personal emotional bonds are strong and span many generations. One person's well-being is related to that of everyone else's and loss may be felt across four or five generations. Not only one person, but the whole extended family system is vulnerable in such life-stage transitions. The family must start to function in a complete different manner to recreate family continuity. Family continuity is oriented towards making use of all available efforts of the members of the (extended) family in order to guarantee the continued existence of the family. These efforts are by definition of a positive nature, because the existence of a family is directed at continuity, at development, at survival in the long term. This implies that in many instances individual interests are tuned to family interests.

To illustrate migration as a transitional stage characterized by numerous elements, an outline follows which was developed by Van Bekkum, together with other cultural anthropologists (Van Bekkum, Van den Ende, Heezen & Hijmans van den Bergh, 1996).

- The departure: disengagement takes place and old role patterns must be given up. This is accompanied by mourning (Akhtar, 1995).
- The liminal stage: a confusing in-between stage in which nothing fits in any longer (liminal = on the threshold). A stage in which problems can become manifest, but also in which new ideas and insights can help to find creative solutions. Boedjarath (1996) calls this creative stage 'the in-between culture'. It is the stage in which shuttling between two cultures can be beneficial and favourable to emotional growth. Not in order to hold on to the culture of origin, but to recharge, to become re-energized in order to go on (Tjin a Djie, 2001).
- The re-integration: the stage in which one becomes attached again. Adaptation to the new system takes place, the role patterns concur with, or at least no longer conflict with, those of the host country.

Migration is always a cultural transition and I find it important in my work to pay attention to the particular vulnerability in the liminal stage. Home-sickness, the loss of everything familiar, the sadness of those staying behind, the tension over everything unfamiliar and the hope of another (better) future all play an important role. In this stage, the risk that the system will derail and appeal for help is at its greatest. Most likely, the people concerned will be confronted with a Western therapeutic context where hardly anything is familiar. In the next paragraphs I will illustrate how to offer a safer context.

PROTECTIVE WRAPS

*Our family is scattered all over the world. My sisters and I were sent to the
Netherlands to continue our education. My eldest sister stayed on in Amsterdam and
so did I. The one after her moved to the United States and my third sister is now living
in Rotterdam again, after having lived in Surinam for ten years. My second youngest
sister set off to Aruba and the youngest went back to Surinam.*

The interesting thing is that our extended family system remains intact in spite of the
dispersion over different parts of the world. Increased mobility and easy
telecommunication obviously contribute to its remaining intact, but I find it
impressive to see how resilient We-systems are and how resourceful the members are
in recreating a protective system.

Yagyahoui (1988) uses the term *enveloppement* for this. The word comes from the
French transcultural psychology and roughly means being embedded into the group
and the culture. The cultural surroundings offer a texture, a cultural fabric to hold on
to, a safe wrap (enveloppement) that helps the individual to cope with painful and
anxiety provoking experiences. This *enveloppement* is similar to terms such as
holding and *containment*, but refers to a larger group, to the extended family and the
whole cultural context (Sterman, 1999).

'*Enveloppement*', which I call 'protective wrap' is badly needed when people find
themselves in anxious situations, specifically surrounding migration. Being torn away
from your own culture and the confusion that follows during and just after migrating
requires being embedded in a group. Venema (1992) investigated the mechanisms of
embedding before and after migration in matriarchal, creole systems. It turns out that
'social motherhood', whereby parenthood tasks are performed by various members of
the extended family, remains intact even after migration, and that so does their
rendering of psycho-social assistance. Fortunately so, as migration is accompanied by
feelings of loss and other far-reaching emotions. To an outsider, such an extended
family may seem chaotic at a moment like that, but the opposite is true. In fact it
functions as a well-defined system within which people know where they stand.

KEEPING THE MEMORY OF THE PROTECTIVE WRAP ALIVE

Psychosocial help in the liminal stage should focus on and go along with the sources
of strength that enabled families to confront their difficulties and adversities in their
systems of origin. In We-systems, matters such as loyalty, close relationships and a
collective history are important positive factors.

It's not development and achievement of individual autonomy that plays a key role,
but rather authority, interdependence, solidarity and family continuity (Lau, 1995).
When extending help to migrants or refugees or to any parent(s) at all who feel that
they have lost their own cultural system, the therapist becomes a 'professional
reminder' (Ramdas, 1996). Together with the client, the therapist searches for the
threads that led to their becoming embedded into the culture and into the group. It is
important to search for the decision-making mechanisms in the family and for what
the system's most important norms and values are with regard to family continuity

and to who supervise its preservation. This search, which reminds the client of the folds, pockets, weaving patterns and threadbare spots in the protective wrap, is necessary to reduce anxiety and to revitalize, so that energy is released in order to go on.

The use of a genealogy chart can be of great help (Jessurun, 1994). Making a genealogy is more than just charting the family, it also serves to clarify the mechanisms of the decision-making process. Asking questions and visualizing the family often leads to the client's almost physically experiencing the protective wrap. Ask questions about the context and by doing so, find out who the authority figures are:

- What are your habits, traditions, norms and values surrounding decision-making like?
- How do you reshape family continuity?
- What are your solution strategies?
- Who are the patrons and patronesses in the system?
- Who may say what when?

Should it turn out that grandmother was an important authority figure in the country of origin, then ask the parents or children questions about the context such as:

- Who comforts grandma when she is sad?
- Who helps grandma to make decisions, what would they advise her to do?
- What would grandma advise you to do?
- What would grandma advise the social services workers in Holland to do?

These types of questions help parents and children to look at things from grandma's perspective. This is something which is continually done in the countries of origin, so matter of factly, that one isn't even aware of doing it: continually putting oneself in the perspectives of other family members. After migrating and under the influence of Western I-thinking, looking at matters from the perspective of those who stayed behind may occur less frequently and consequently sources of strength are lost. What are the consequences of this approach for parents? It is important for migrants in countries where individualistic norms and values are held in high regard to work at self-development, at developing their own sense of responsibility and at making their own choices. But at the same time, there must be room for a type of self-confidence in which space is granted to both cultures. In order to achieve this, questions such as listed below can be of help:

- To what extent are you free to make your own choices?
- Who else has a say in this?
- Taking the above questions into account, what do you, yourself, want, decide?
- Have any other family members paved the way for you? Do they still keep in touch with the rest?

In the confusion of the liminal stage, parents tend to forget what their own sources are. It is important to go searching for them together with the parents: stay along the sideline, the intention is not to lead the way or to want to be the example.

- Facilitate family meetings.
- Ask the family to give the therapists advice.
- Help the family to take the reigns back into their own hands; to take ownership of their lives again.

CONCLUSION

If family therapists underestimate the supportive and corrective systems within the etended family, or even worse, if they find it annoying, disclaim it or play it down, they will cut off the parents, vulnerable enough as it is, from their systems, with far-reaching consequences (Tjin A Djie, 1991). What complicates matters is that this approach involves a radically different position for westerly oriented therapists from what they are used to taking up. It goes further than just *taking things into account*. As a family therapist, you are really no more than a facilitator, someone who sets up conditions so that the system can confer, come up with solution strategies and also carry them out. This position, leaving the responsibility and the decision-making process surrounding the children to the extended family system, appears to be extremely hard to swallow for contemporary, Western, social services workers. The difference with the customary, exclusive therapist-client relationship that characterizes the Western social services plays an important role in this. When working with migrant families, one tries to clarify the ideas of the extended family and continually asks oneself whether there is enough support for the decisions that must be reached. In order to do so, as a therapist, one must become part of the family system, probably in the position of authority figure, possibly also in the position of aunt or uncle, older sister or brother. In my experience, one constantly shifts positions: from therapist to authority figure in the family and then to the position of the person who in the country of origin has a say over the problems between parents and children. Western therapists may at times feel uneasy about shifting positions.

Not everyone is convinced that the interculturalization of the therapeutic context is of vital importance. An argument that is often put forward is that if therapists interact with their clients in an open and honest manner, the basis will be sound enough for adequate assitance, irrespective of the backgrounds of the clients. I think there's more to it than that. It goes without saying that openness and honesty are of great importance. However, it is even more important for therapists to be aware of their own Western, personal and professional cultural baggage and of the fact that knowledge of non-Western family systems and of the appropriate forms of assitance are crucial to good results.

By continually dealing with non-Western family systems and by striving to gain in-depth knowledge of the possibilities and impossibilities of providing a theoretical framework for therapeutic contexts, I have not only discovered my strengths but also my limitations. An important moment was when I realized that I, in spite of the fact that I have been counselling families for such a long time in Holland, sometimes make the mistake of thinking that I understand all the intricacies of a certain matter. When asking Dutch parents: 'What does grandma think of this, how important is your mother in this story, where are all the cousins and why don't they come by to help you raise the children?' an uneasy silence often followed. And then I would find myself with empty hands. For I didn't know how to deal with a single mother and a daughter who said that they really didn't have anybody whom they could ask for advice; that there really wasn't anybody to suggest that they do things this or that way, or to take a decision for them. That would leave me with my hands up in the air. I too found it difficult to imagine myself in someone else's situation, to accept that there are various truths: the notion, based purely on individual freedom and self-realization, that

children have the right to be raised so as to become autonomous beings, as well as the truth that the system predominates and that the goal in the decision making process is always that of yielding optimal results for the entire system.

A solution that contains the best of both worlds asks of both parties involved that they have knowledge of their own culture and of other cultures and it certainly requires intercultural skills. Experience shows that being curious about someone else's motives and deepening one's understanding of other people's cultures can lead to surprising and enriching experiences.

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Notes

1. Kitlyn Tjin a Djie
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2. Protective Wraps
Yagyahoui (1988) uses the term *enveloppement* which comes from the French transcultural psychology and roughly means being embedded into the group and into the culture. The cultural surroundings offer a texture, a cultural fabric to hold on to, a safe wrap (enveloppement) that helps the individual to cope with painful and anxiety provoking experiences. This *enveloppement* is similar to terms such as *holding* and *containment*, but refers to a larger group, to the extended family and the whole cultural context (Sterman, 1999).

3. We-systems
In a large part of the households in We-cultures, the majority of the tasks are performed by the women. Apart from having responsibility for generating the family income, they play a key role in raising and educating the children. In contrast to traditional Western families, the boundaries of what is regarded as 'family' are much wider; frequently, a number of women within the extended family network assume the mother role. Whether these women belong to the same generation (aunts), or to another generation (mother/grandmother), makes no difference. The children have no problem with having several mothers. They distinguish them by the way they call them, e.g. mother Nita or mother Agnes.
As it is the extended family that bears the ultimate responsibility for the results, if conflicts arise within this system, they are dealt with on a higher level.

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