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Conversation Groups for Children of Divorced Parents – an Emerging Social Representation for a New Service in Schools.

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In this article, the emergence of a new Social Representation of children of divorced parents in connection with conversation groups in Danish schools is identified and analysed. Based on an empirical study combining document analysis of training materials for teachers with focus-group interviews with functioning group leaders, the new SR is identified and analysed as part of an argument for establishing conversation groups and also expanding this service to all schools in Denmark. It is argued that defensive tactics are used in the process of negotiating and evaluating the value and necessity of these groups in order to legitimize their relevance. Social Representation Theory and Gillespie's concept of defensive tactics are used as analytical framework for studying how this new service is established and legitimized among the parties (NGO and group leaders) based on the formation of a new SR of children with divorced parents as encountering special needs that can only be accommodated for in conversation groups. This article documents that SR of children with divorced parents are influenced by values and economic interests that make it difficult for schools to refuse to invest in establishing conversation groups. This has numerous implications as the new SR inform the way these children are recognised as members of a particular social category, possibly affecting social identities and self-understandings for children with divorced parents.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, the emergence of a new Social Representation (hence SR) of children of divorced parents in connection with conversation groups in Danish schools is identified and analysed. In 2014, a new legislation for the Danish public primary school system was effectuated, strengthening the focus on improving well-being for all children in the learning environment (Ministeriet for Børn, Undervisning og Ligestilling, 2020). This current reform of the Danish *Folkeskole* has increased the political emphasis on the importance of well-being including pupil´s mental health by implementing educational initiatives to help vulnerable children. Hence, a rise in various forms of conversation groups established for children in challenging life-circumstances (children with divorced parents, children bereaved of a parent/sibling, or next of kin to a seriously ill family member). This is a new institutional service, with no prior practice tradition at Danish schools. Nonetheless, this is a growing practice in Denmark, where conversation groups are authorized in schools in every municipality across the country. The exact ratio of conversation groups in Danish schools are not yet specified, but there is an increased number of teachers and social educators every year certified to lead the conversation groups (this topic see Center for Familieudvikling/Center for Family Development, 2021). Establishing conversation groups in schools require investment and resources and some form of argumentation to legitimize it as a priority among many tasks for the schools is called for. Therefore, it becomes necessary to provide convincing rationales and argumentation that legitimize these groups and their purpose as well as relevance needs to be made explicit and clear to all. These are fruitful grounds for studying the processes involved in the emergence and process of SR, in this case focussing on children of divorced parents and their needs in the context of the new service. Alongside constituting a new institutional practice (the conversation group in itself), such services also establish new social categorisations (children of divorced parents become an identifiable group among the whole group of children, and teachers trained as group leaders become a new category of professionals among the whole group of teachers at schools). New social categories hence allow for new social identities for children and collective professional identities for teachers in this new field of practice (Thorton & Ocasio, 2008). Since this practice and its social categories are new, as is the rationale for SR of children with divorced

parents, their needs and the new role and responsibility of school and teachers are likely to become explicit and debated. This historical time, provides opportunity to study SR as they develop in interplay with institutional logics and social categories because a new practice is being promoted calling for a new SR. Why do children with divorced parents need help in school? Do these children have more in common than the fact that their parents are not living together? Are the troubles these children encounter well addressed and solved in conversation groups?

Alex Gillespie (2020) argues that people as well as institutional systems are likely to become defensive when confronted with alternative practices, understandings, convictions, and worldviews other than their own. He calls these disturbances 'disruptive meanings' and in the language of Theory of Social Representations Theory (TSR) one could say that disruptive meanings are ideas that disturb a hegemonic SR of a particular group and its usual practices. He proposes an analytical model to identify defensive tactics that people and institutional systems apply in order to avoid changing their practice and rationales. Using this analytical framework to understand the processes of establishing conversation groups for children in Danish school illustrate that various defensive strategies are in fact at play, and that more interests are present and serve as motivating forces than merely 'helping the children' when it comes to promoting the intervention program and avoid objections to its establishment.

BACKGROUND FOR ESTABLISHING CONVERSATION GROUPS

Different organizations, NGO's and independent consultant companies thus have a new market for services, materials etc. aiming at improving children's well-being in school. The idea of establishing conversation groups in schools can be seen as part of an overall effort to increase well-being for various vulnerable student-groups (also in rural areas where highly specialized services are sparse), yet it can also be seen as a lucrative market for schools obligated to meet new legislation demands. Divorce is very common in Denmark, so many Danish primary school children are directly affected by parental divorce (Danmarks Statistik, 2018), thus conversation groups targeted this population group will never run out of business or exhaust the marked. International research has raised concerns about the uncritical use of these new professional programs targeted children, as schools and parents are quite easily persuaded by 'the power of goodness' (godhedsmagten) in these services. Who is going to deny children in difficult life

circumstances the help they deserve? (For this topic, see, e.g., Loga, 2005; Lilienfeld, 2007; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012). The particular way in which these groups are designed and the whole set-up around it is developed by the Danish NGO called Center for Family Development (hence CFF) (CFF 2014). In 2014, CFF launched a project called *Delebørn – hele børn*,[1] consisting in an intervention program for children (aged 8–16) of divorced parents. These groups are modelled on group-therapeutic techniques originally developed for grieving children (CFF, 2014; Dencker, 2012). In the conversation groups the children are encouraged to share their feelings about the divorce with each other. The intervention is organized in sequences of about eight sessions. The participation in the groups is either initiated by the children themselves or by their parents, and often by suggestion of a group leader (Rose, 2021b). The project of establishing conversation groups in schools is comprehensive, as the groups run in thirty schools in three municipalities (CFF, 2014). The goal for CFF is that it becomes a national standard that all public primary schools have conversation groups for children with divorced parents as part of their service (CFF, 2014). The CFF offers training of the professionals so that they become certified conversation group leaders by attending a four-day course. At the organizational level (NGO), the goal is to make this service available in all schools in Denmark as it serves the aim of this NGO in preventing family break-ups and helping children from broken homes (CFF, 2014). The purpose of the course is to prepare and qualify the professionals to handle their new role as group leaders, and maintain and provide for the children's well-being, as they move through the intervention program (CFF, 2014). The practice consists of the NGO offering courses to schools who wish to start conversation groups. The schools pay CFF for the course for upcoming group leaders among professionals (typically teachers and social educators), who upon return from their training are certified to start the service, consisting of about eight meetings within school hours. During the group sessions, children who all have in common that their parents are not living together, meet and exchange experiences and emotions, whilst the group leaders monitor the conversation by also following the program manual suggested in the course material (CFF, 2014). The manual program contains knowledge of divorce as well as various exercises the group leaders can present in the conversation groups. This manual also provides pre-decided themes, a story all children are told, and metaphors for how to engage with and share the emotions and experiences around the divorce. Even though

[1] The name of the CFF project, *Delebørn – hele børn*, is a Danish wordplay and translates into English as *divided children – united children.*

there is no open argument or conflict surrounding this new service in the public media or elsewhere, it still needs to be legitimized because it is not yet widespread, it is not a typical 'job' and role for the teachers, and its establishment has to be actively initiated and introduced as a new service in the schools. Thus, it requires an active decision to establish these groups, and some costs following from it. Thus, there is a need to communicate the necessity for these groups directed at children of divorced parents and in this process, we find the emerging contours of a new SR of this group as social category.

THE SR OF DIVORCE IN RESEARCH

The scientific community of divorce research plays a role in the public perception and SR of divorce and what it means for children to come from a broken home. Scientific knowledge remains an authoritative and persuasive source of knowledge and plays a central role in the NGO material and argumentation for establishing conversation groups for this group of children.

Hence, before analysing the diverse SR held by professionals, it is necessary to address the question of how divorce is understood in the complex landscape of research on this issue. The process and outcome of divorce is a multifaceted phenomenon, which is heavily value-laden and a contested subject in the public as well as in research into divorce. There are two opposing positions in the field of research on divorce, and the aim is not to evaluate which of these approaches best reflect the reality of children experiencing parental separation, but to analyse what strands of knowledge become used as argumentation for the intervention program and how knowledge from the scientific realm filter into the universe of common sense in general. We call the two dominant approaches the 'normalizing approach' and the 'problematizing approach' and find that both are present in the public debate in Denmark today (cognitive polyphasia). However, the problematizing approach is increasingly becoming dominating in SR of children of divorced parents. Even though the two approaches coexist as scientific knowledge, the problematizing approach serves as an underlying normative frame of understanding in the public debate and it is re-enforced by NGO's, professionals and public media, arguing that children from divorced families suffer, experience grief and are exposed to lifelong effects of the crisis (Mødrehjælpen, 2021; Familieretshuset, 2021; Politiken, 2020; Berlingske, 2014). The problematizing approach shows long-lasting and abundant negative

implications for children with divorced parents compared to children with parents living together as partners. Statistically, children from 'broken homes' are exposed to increased risk of poor functioning in social relations, academic performance, and lower levels of psychological well-being (Amato, 2000, 2010; Wallerstein & al., 2000; Thuen & al., 2015; Frisco & al., 2007; Hango & Houseknecht, 2005). According to the normalizing approach, these identified risks for children of divorced parents are deemed one-sided, and it is argued that they are un-proportionally represented and exaggerated. Instead, it is argued that the differences between children of divorced parents and children who live with both their biological parents are, in fact, small (Kelly, 2003; Hetherington, 1999). Thus, the normalizing approach proposes a different understanding of the implications of divorce, advocating for a shift in perspective from exclusively reporting risks associated with divorce, to examining short- and long-term adjustments, and the interplay of both risk and protective factors as consequential for children of divorced parents (Kelly, 2003). It is interesting to see how this diversity in the research field of divorce translates into SR of children of divorced parents among professionals and how the field is reflected in the general perception informing conversation groups in schools.

SR DEFENSIVE MECHANISM MODEL

The roots of knowledge are social, as people's rationales are rooted in the social world of interaction (Piaget, 1932). Therefore, knowledge is also conflictual and socially organised and distributed among different groups in a given society, across time. Moscovici's aim in developing TSR was to conceptualize empirical findings from studies that revealed that scientific knowledge transforms and becomes part of the reified 'common sense' universe of knowledge in different ways in different groups (Moscovici, 2000). Moscovici realised that different groups with different interests and worldviews (such as priests and communists) produce different SR of the same subject (in his case psychoanalysis) and that scientific knowledge is reconfigured as it becomes part of our common-sense-based rationales (Moscovici, 1961). The way people make sense of their world and organise knowledge thus take the form of SR that become solidified and eventually change across time. SR consist thus of every-day knowing, appearing in convictions and basic assumptions and they become evident in conversations, especially in arguments that aim to convince others of the superiority of one conviction over another (Gillespie, 2020). When people argue and discuss their own

perspectives, they also identify other's positions as counter-positions (Gillespie, 2020). The disruptive processes that either threaten or counter already-presumed SR must be reinterpreted when they are negotiated, before they can lead to new, alternative representations (Gillespie, 2008). *"Alternative representations only exists as dialogical shadows within polemical or emancipated representations"* (Gillespie, 2008, p. 381). In comparison, hegemonic representations seem to be uniform and coercive once they are accepted by all members of the group (Moscovici, 1988). These theoretical perspectives are fruitful in analysing and comparing the course material and the group leaders SR. Defensive tactics are strategies to neutralize disruptive meanings where hegemonic representations are challenged (Gillespie, 2020). These are thus likely at play in NGO course material aimed at convincing readers to establish conversation groups. Gillespie proposes a metaphor based on the human immune system to explain the semantic structures involved in defending positions against possible counter-positions and thus this theoretical framework provides interesting tracks for analysing the way conversation groups are legitimized and defended in the current Danish context. Gillespie identifies three widespread defensive tactics of avoiding, delegitimizing, and limiting and he finds that they appear in a layered order (Gillespie, 2020)[2]. Avoidance restricts people from confronting a potential or actual disruptive meaning and is the most common defensive tactic. If a disruption understood as a critique of status quo or a critique of a particular practice is neutralized by the tactic of avoidance, then there is no need to go deeper into the other layers of defensiveness. However, if the defensive tactic of avoidance is not accepted by the audience and thus convinces the other, then the tactic failed to prevent the disturbance and the second layer becomes relevant. In the second layer, disruptive meanings are *swept aside* by establishing distrust and discrediting the counter-position, rather than focusing on the disturbing voice of criticism as such. The possible consequence of this defensiveness is stigmatization, of the others' disruptive meaning. Limiting tactics are the last layer that focuses on the disturbance of meaning and the tactic provides the opportunity to individualize the problem or to quiet the countering voice. The limiting defensiveness appear as rhetoric that involve persuasiveness when it comes to specific ideas and SR (Gillespie, 2020). It is possible for the various semantic discrepancies among SR to coexist and at the same time, oppose their consequences for instance

[2] Gillespie's (2020) concept of defensive tactics must not be confused with the Freudian understanding of unconscious defence mechanisms in the psychanalytical sense (Freud & Bauer, 1895/1974). Gillespie (2008) draws on social psychology and particularly Moscovici's TSR, where defensiveness is tactical, i.e. system logics that protect a viewpoint, rationale, or system of knowledge i.e. SR (Moscovici, 1961, 2000).

in cognitive polyphasia[3] (Provencher, 2011b). These semantic processes may lead to alternative representations of meaning and it is possible to expand and even change one's own beliefs and expand one's knowledge owing to these conflicts of meaning (Gillespie, 2008). However, if the SR is fixated on a specific defensive tactic, change and potential learning is effectively avoided.

METHODOLOGY - APPLYING THE ANALYTICAL MODEL

The analytical model of defensiveness provides a framework for analysing how different perceptions of children of divorced parents are framed in a SR that serve as defending the new practice of conversation groups. Thus, we use the different layers in the model of defensive tactics to analyze particular moves and turns in the argumentation, as it is presented in course material and negotiated in focus groups. To illustrate how the NGO construct meaningful ways of arguing for the advantages of their course material, we analyse the SR of children of divorced parents, which legitimize this service. The role of defensiveness is helpful for illustrating the interplay of the various SR of the professionals working in conversation groups and the connection to the course material and intervention program they have been trained in. Defensive tactics are part of the constructive process of ascribing meaning to the service, and they materialize through the professional's experience of the course material, and the actual practice they become part of as group leaders. It shows in the dialogues and argumentation about children of divorced parents, who participate in this intervention.

We propose to analyse the diversity of the defensive tactics of group leaders, because these reveal the basic assumptions of the interventions, which materialize in the conversation groups (Moscovici, 2000). Besides of identifying the SR expressed by seven group leaders at four schools in Denmark – material obtained during focus-group interviews – we also analyse the course material for coming professionals.

Empirical Material

The empirical material analysed in this article is part of a larger research project conducted by the first author (Rose, 2020). This material consists of 6 months of empirical fieldwork

[3] Provencher propose a conceptual model to understand the process of cognitive polyphasia – where people´s thinking is a product of core background beliefs, individual circumstances and modus operandi (further introduction see Provencher, 2011b).

(including observation of group sessions, 23 children´s interviews, three focus-group interviews and document analysis of training material for teachers working in conversation groups). The NGO (CFF) provides different materials as part of the training program and these documents are analysed for thematic content (see Flick, 2014; Attride-Stirling, 2001). The course material from CFF, which is used in this case for thematic content analysis, is a training manual for new group leaders, especially the chapters *Introduction to the divorce field* and *The intervention – theory and concepts* (our translation) (CFF, 2014). Through document analysis, it is possible to track how representations become established, change and interact with one another (Flick & al., 2015). The analysis systematically identifies explicit claims about the lives of children of divorced parents (What is claimed about these children? What needs are they believed to have? How is the construction of the social category of children connected to the intervention program provided? How do they interact with one another?) These are the guiding research questions in conducting the thematic content analysis and this links back to the more general research question for the focus-group interviews: how are children of divorced parents perceived according to teachers leading conversation groups?

In addition to the document analysis of course material, the first author conducted three focus-group interviews with seven group leaders (five teachers and two social educators, one male and six female) from four different schools. The two interviews were done prior to an ethnographic fieldwork in the conversation groups led by the teachers in question, for a period of six months and the third interview was performed after completing the fieldwork. The goal of the first two focus-group interviews was to identify the group leaders emerging SR about children of divorce and why conversation groups are needed for this group of children. The discussion was organized by the first author and led by four overall questions[4]. The third and final focus-group interview with the same group was conducted at the final stage of the fieldwork, thus incorporating examples and dilemmas taken from the actual practice as experienced by the researcher. Thus, this final interview reflected different dilemmas and opposing experiences from conversation groups, making apparent how SR are "evoked and discussed at the interactional level, i.e. between individuals within a social group" (Flick & al., 2015, p. 65). By conducting, a thematic content analysis of the three focus group interviews a

[4]
1. What do you think can be said about the lives of children of divorce?
2. Do children of divorce have special needs?
3. How do interventions like conversation groups help children of divorce?
4. Which thoughts, ideas and reflections do you have about conversation groups for children in divorce in schools?

different picture emerges from the analysis of the NGO material: Two main claims appear: Children of divorce is a manifold group but they need help and support in conversation groups anyway.

By triangulating empirical material from these two sources of knowledge, a comprehensive reflection of the 'conversation' becomes apparent, from both organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal positions (Gillespie, 2020). We find it is possible to examine both the interpersonal and intrapersonal positions through analysing focus-group interviews, because these are intertwined, coexist, and are expressed in conversations among the professionals, although more intrapersonal information would probably become apparent in a one-on-one interview (Barbour, 2008; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS: THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

To illustrate how various knowledge sources (both scientifically based and more common sensical understandings) provide the basis for establishing conversation groups, we analyse the SR expressed in the CFF course material and by the professionals participating in focus-groups around the subject of conversation groups for these children, presenting characteristic empirical examples. The ambition is to illuminate the process of negotiations including defensive strategies, which are relevant at the organization level through a thematically content analysis of CFF course material, followed by analysing its implications among the group leaders running the intervention programs.

Avoiding Tactics for Preventing Disruptive Meaning

The course material presents itself as based on research and scientific knowledge; the CFF repeatedly states that based on this knowledge all children are negatively affected by their parents' separation, in one way or other. Children who experience parental divorce experience a form of grief as a necessary consequence of the situation of separation. This univocal position is expressed in various ways, including statements like: "in recent years several experts have highlighted divorce as an overlooked and unrecognized grief" (CFF, 2014, p. 13, our translation). CFF draws on research findings and rhetoric's from the research strand to children of divorced parents identified as the problematizing approach. Different experts from this approach argue that children of divorced parents are living through a loss comparable to

grieving. Thus, CFF does not reflect or seem to recognize that there is disagreement within the research field, and that other researchers – who also base their views on empirical scientific studies, are not in alignment with the problematizing approach. Rather, there are many other examples supporting this dominant SR of divorce as a mournful life crisis: "Divorce can be experienced as a crisis, a sorrow and a life change" (CFF, 2014, p. 15, our translation); "Divorce has perhaps developed into a tabooed life crisis in our society, which potentially can have painful consequences for our children" (CFF, 2014, p. 14, our translation). Children of divorced parents are thus socially categorised through an explicit problem focus. Even though CFF use the qualifiers (the adverb of *perhaps* and the verb of *can*) in their material, their basic assumptions are conspicuous. The circumstances of children living with the effects of divorce are characterized as painful, difficult, and emotionally challenging, and draw on understandings of specific distinctions in particular areas of the research field. This SR establishes all children with parents of divorce as a group in risk and in need of help in order to cope with a serious life-crisis, comparable to bereavement.

The CFF course material claims to be knowledge-based, however it evidently excludes counter-interpretations of what it means to be a child of divorced parents, in a way so research that does not support the dominant SR is omitted and ignored. In this case, CFF are *"not giving the source or disruptive meaning a space to speak or be heard"* which characterize the avoidance tactic Gillespie identifies as exclusion (Gillespie, 2020, p. 10). Thus, CFF excludes – through avoidance – alternative SR of divorce, to protect themselves from disruptive meanings, and to legitimize the intervention program that they are promoting (Gillespie, 2020). Generally, the possibility of considering this group of children from a more emancipated standpoint does not occur (Moscovici, 1988). The cognitive monophasia communicated and argued for in the written course material resonates with only certain parts of the scientific knowledge base (the problematizing approach) and ignores the full picture the normalizing approach. No distinctions are therefore made between short-term and longer-term effects of divorce, or attention paid to the possible presence of an interplay with protective factors although such are well established as equally important to take into account when assessing how divorce affect children in what we call the normalizing approach (Kelly, 2003; Fabricius, 2003; Hetherington, 1999).

Cracks of Inbuilt Counter-argumentation – Some Children Adjust Well Afterall

In the CFF course material, there are a few exceptions to the rule just identified. Some examples present minor variations on the dominant SR of the implications for children living with divorce. CFF in other parts of the material also argues that most children of divorced parents will do well, despite the parents' separation. Hence, the hegemonic SR (Moscovici, 1988) that generally characterizes CFF is challenged from within, but only as a counter-argument, probably to appear nuanced and balanced on the matter. This acknowledges that some children may even feel relieved if their highly conflicted parents separate, however as the quote indicates; the overall situation is still one of difficulty and pain.

> As we approach the difficulties and painful experiences of divorce, we must also keep in mind that many children and adolescents will progress well, even though their parents separate. For some, the break-up may even be a relief, if there were many conflicts or disagreements between the parents before the divorce.
>
> (CFF, 2014, p. 2, our translation)

The above reasoning admits that some children adjust well in life, although a divorce is a major disruption for them. For some, it may even be experienced as a relief to be freed from confrontations with daily conflicts or an unpleasant family atmosphere. In this paragraph the problematizing SR of being a child of divorce, are, to a certain extent, nuanced. In this example, the course participants are offered alternative social categories for children of divorce. However, these understandings are presented as counter-arguments that do not challenge the main and more pervasive SR – which remains that these children are in difficulties – because this SR is coupled closely to the particular service that this group needs: the conversation group. CFF presents another assumption about living with divorce, as a question of normality (Stokkebekk & al., 2019).

> And they are all just as 'normal' and diverse as all their peers. They are not 'children of divorced parents', but are first and foremost children and adolescents with their own lives and histories.
>
> (CFF, 2014, p. 7, our translation)

The CFF argues that children of divorced parents should not be placed uniquely in a single problem category and treated as a homogeneous group. They should be seen as children – like all other children – living diverse and multifaceted lives. In this paragraph the alternative representations broaden and offer an opportunity for renegotiating and reinterpreting the

hegemony that otherwise characterize the course material. However, it is a bit ironic, since the conversation groups are exactly singling these children out from the rest of the children in school – as the conversation groups are not for all and in daily speech they are referred to as "divorce-group". The alternative representations are both literally and symbolically subordinated the already dominant, problem-focused SR and the intervention program is still necessary for all children of divorce, despite the fact that they are not entirely a homogeneous group (but children with particular lives and histories). The argument remains implicit: they all need help anyway, because these children nevertheless will benefit from attending the program. Therefore, the more differentiated view on children of divorce remains underrepresented and does not seriously challenge the problematizing gaze on these children. Hence, it is interesting to look into the duality that emerge throughout the course material, which we have identified as a prevailing pattern. Although it is correct to conclude that CFF to some extent recognizes, disruptive meanings of divorce, these alternative representations are vague, and their possible implications are not investigated (e.g., maybe not all children with parents who divorce need a conversation group). This is thus an example of a rationalizing in the third layer in Gillespie's model. It may be argued that this duality is part of the defensive tactics, as the disruptive meanings are not avoided or delegitimized, but instead weakened by an in-build counter-argumentation as a limiting tactic. Rationalizing is identified, as "arguing the issue is secondary or tangential" (Gillespie, 2020, p. 13). Here, the tactic is to suppress potential criticism and – at the same time – argue for one's own rationales. Thus, it is adjacent to analyse the counter-arguments as a neutralizing defensive tactic, characterized by superficial conforming in Gillespie's suggested terms (Gillespie, 2020). The construct allows for a conclusion: experiencing parental separation is disturbing, a life crisis resembling grief and although children may cope with it differently, they all benefit from support in the conversation groups.

Arguing for the Necessity and Goodness of the Service

At CFF, the understanding emerges that conversation groups are needed in order to help children to learn how to cope with difficult live changes as the result of parental divorce. The one follows logically from the other: "That it (the intervention program) can help children who experience different types of life crises" (CFF, 2014, p. 52, our translation). The SR that describes children of divorced parents as a particular social category – challenged in similar

ways by similar stressors also indicate that these children need the same type of help and support to understand and manage their thoughts and feelings in this difficult situation.

> Of course, there will often be uncertainties and problematic aspects of the divorce for a long time after the break-up, no matter how you express it, and no matter how you handle it. (CFF, 2014, p. 40, our translation).

In addition to seeing divorce as a disturbance that necessarily have negative effects on children's lives, the CFF's underlying SR implies that life ought not be problematic or painful for children and when they do encounter difficulties - it helps talking about it and bring it out in the open. This SR thus links to another SR that has had much more time to solidify in common sense understandings. Stemming back to the Freudian 'talking cure'.

> The children's group is a *conversation group*, and therefore conversation is a central tool that one uses as a group leader, in the work of supporting children and adolescents to cope better. Again, the goal is for the children to use conversation, to develop a greater experience of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness with regard to their parents' divorce. (CFF, 2014, p. 42, our translation)

Moscovici long ago noticed how ideas from the scientific community travel and become part of the common-sensical understandings of the world. It is taken for granted that in order to achieve greater well-being it is necessary to talk about one's emotions and difficulties, and even when it is not strictly necessary it is certainly always helpful and beneficial. The SR of the 'talking cure' is increasingly disputed (alongside its complete anchoring in common sense understandings) – one line of dispute refers to what is also called the therapeutization culture (Brinkmann, 2010) and a most recent line of critique stems from research that finds that conversation and excessive talking about one's problems can indeed induce negative side-effects (Ottesen Kennair & Flor, 2019). However, in CFF material the hegemony of this dominant SR of the 'talking cure' spills into this other established SR regarding the therapeutic effect of talking about problems with others, and it becomes an unquestioned truth. In that way disruptive meanings are avoided or excluded (Gillespie, 2020). CFF emphasizes that all schoolchildren with divorced parents will benefit from participating in a conversation group at their local school (CFF, 2014). The exchange of shared feelings among the children is regarded as an essential condition for ensuring children's well-being, and therefore is the trademark of the intervention program itself.

Thus, the intervention becomes an arena for sharing emotions in conversations about presumably shared problems. The SR that appears in the course material indicate that talking about the child's difficult feelings is necessary for the healing process as it relieves the pain associated with parental divorce (Gulløv, 2016). These are fixed meanings, or underlying beliefs that renders the service necessary and legitimate. From this document analysis, it is argued that all three layers of defensive tactics are used in the course of argumentation and legitimizing the new intervention program (avoiding, delegitimizing and limiting). It is possible to identify defensiveness in the course material, where avoiding tactics, as excluding critical voices, disruptive ideas and meanings are identified as the first layer of defensiveness. Various defensive tactics are brought into play in the attempt to convince, or to argue for offering conversation groups in all schools. Children of divorced parents are presented as a homogeneous group of victims of divorce, who experience identical feelings and life conditions, in the second layer of delegitimizing tactics. Here the benefits of the intervention are presented as equally important and equally necessary for all, despite some differences in circumstances. There may even be third-layer limiting tactics at play also, when disruptive meanings are avoided by idealizing a particular solution to the problem (Gillespie, 2020). Summing up, the result of the document analysis is that two dominant and interconnected SRs are manifest. The first is that all children of divorced parents are experiencing a serious life-crisis comparable to grief and therefore they all are in need of help. The second is that the new service is the right intervention for every child with divorced parents, because talking about one's problems are healing and helpful (in any case).

ANALYSING THE SR OF THE GROUP LEADERS

We now turn to the analysis of the focus-group interviews among the group leaders, to see how the dominant SR from the course material at the organisational level filters into their conceptions and understandings of the intervention program and its value for children of divorced parents. To exemplify the various defensive tactics that appear at the inter- and intrapersonal levels (Gillespie, 2020), we analyse the negotiations of seven group leaders from 4 different schools, as they discuss their experiences with leading the conversation groups for

children with divorced parents[5] (Moscovici, 1961). Interestingly, it becomes apparent that the teachers studied here operate with much more flexible and emancipated SR of children with divorced parents, than the NGO material suggests.

Focus-Group Material

There is an evident link between the SR of CFF's documents and the understandings of divorce and children's needs among the group leaders. In the following example, the discussion in the focus-group interview reflects the group leaders' SR of divorce as a problem for children. In the conversation, they negotiate and discuss what it means for children to live with divorced parents, and they use words such as *shock* and *grief*. Alternative perspectives on how children may feel when parents choose to separate are not discussed in this situation, hence there are seemingly no re-negotiations regarding the SR expressed by the group leaders. Other possible emotions, such as relief, fatigue, anger, longing, or something else, are not mentioned, which possibly suggest that group leaders repeat the avoiding tactics of the first layer of defensiveness (Gillespie, 2020). The hegemonic SR is also reflected in the following negotiation amongst the participants in the focus-group interview. Sarah, a group leader, states that she finds that divorce may be compared to other overwhelming experiences in the immediate family, such as death and serious illness. The other group leaders agree with her.

> Sarah: But it is a life crisis after all.
>
> Lily: Yes.
>
> Sarah: It is during a crisis that something special is needed. Well, it's like when someone dies or there is [..] illness in the family.
>
> Louise: Yes.
>
> Sarah: After all, during that kind of crisis [...] there is a huge need for help.
>
> (Our translation)

The consensual process of agreeing to understand divorce as similar to grief and illness makes no opportunity to draw on other sources of knowledge and thereby expand the group leaders' SR (Provencher, 2011b). Similar rationales about the lives of children of divorce emerge, echoing CFF course material. Thus, it is possible to trace the SR of children of divorce

[5] The participants in the focus-group interviews are the same teachers who run the groups studied during the fieldwork conducted by the first author– in three primary schools and one private school – in Zealand, Denmark (Rose, 2021b).

expressed in the CFF material in the professionals' language and meaning-making as they discuss the children's situation. The same defensive tactics seem to emerge in both systems, where excluding alternative representations is an effective strategy. The group leaders persuasively argue that all children of divorced parents are grieving in some way and therefore need this kind of help. This is an example of a third-layer defensive tactic, which "minimize disruption of the semantic universe" (Gillespie, 2020, p. 11). However, and interestingly, the group leaders include other understandings of children with divorced parents when they discuss their concrete experiences with specific children in their groups. There is thus a shift in the way children of divorce are described, when they discuss specific children, their understandings are more versatile and nuanced. The group leaders draw on various sources of knowledge about the children when they discuss specific cases (how they know them from classroom teaching, as well as how they know them in the intervention group). These different sources of knowledge expand the possibility of alternate understandings of children of divorce, and thus potentially could result in a more inclusive and differentiated SR of children of divorce among the practitioners. Moreover, various understandings are expressed, which characterize an emancipated representation that is complementary and juxtaposed (Moscovici, 1988). It seems like the group leaders when actually managing group sessions, operate with a much more emancipated SR of children with divorced parents, than the NGO program suggests.

SR of Divorce as a Potential Resource for Children

This more nuanced understanding emerges, as one of the group leaders reveals that she applies the intervention program differently from the others. During a discussion among the group leaders, where their different SR of children of divorce are unfolded, their various understandings become clearer, and Lily describes how, at her school, they try to challenge the assumption that divorce is only a source of grief and a crisis for children.

> Lily: […] there are these specific themes you should complete (from the course material). What are your resources – you, as a child of divorced parents? I think it is really important to have this perspective, too. What resources did you gain from being a child of divorce? It could be adaptability, or it could be some other thing – being able to commuting between two households
>
> Sarah: Are these questions you present to the children in your group?

Lily: Yes. Yes.

Sarah: Those are some very good questions.

Lily: Ohh, God, it is because I do not have the training (CFF group leader course), so I thought it belonged to the program package. We use these questions every time. What kind of benefits or good things about being a child of divorce can you see? What experiences and competences can you bring with you? So they can see that there are some good things about being a child of divorced parents.

(Our translation)

Lily´s statement revealing that she manages the program differently provides a disruptive meaning to the rest of the group leaders who all have the certified training from CFF. She is an experienced group leader, and one of the very few, who are not certified from the course training material provided by CFF. This disruptive meaning is explored rather than ignored by the group leaders attending the focus-group interview. Here is an opening, an opportunity to explore the group leaders' alternative opinions, which creates a space for renegotiations and reinterpretations – potentially resulting in a more nuanced SR of children of divorced parents and a change in practicing the intervention program (Gillespie, 2008; Moscovici, 1961).

A negotiation occurs in the conversation among the group leaders and creates a situation "where the reinterpretation of knowledge is reconstructed" (Gillespie, 2008, p. 376). This example captures Sarah's process of intrapersonal reflection, which may lead to a change of view in the other teachers' meaning-making at the interpersonal level. Lily's SR are based on what she thinks is part of the course material and she - without knowing it - surprises everyone and is herself surprised to learn that she is not representing a common understanding among the other group leaders. Sarah engages with Lily's proposal and therefore wants to explore this new understanding. This establishes new possibilities for changing the governing SR and creates an opportunity for disruptive meanings to interfere with and possibly change matters. When other explanations of the implications of divorce emerge, the children may be socially categorised less uniformly and thus allowed to display more different emotions, experiences and life stories in the group (Jodelet, 1991).

Social Representations that Justify Conversation Groups

The purpose of the conversation groups is for children to express and share their innermost thoughts and discuss their feelings with post-divorce life with each other. This gives the children the opportunity to reveal painful memories and to discover that they are not alone, but instead mirror each other. Mirroring is stressed as an important healing quality of the program, both in CFF and the group leaders discussions. Recognition and reflection are important components of this mirroring: 'It can be hard to express who I am and what I am. And am I the only one who feels this way'? (Our translation)

As a child adjusting to new living circumstances, it is found to be important to discover oneself within the framework of conversation groups. Thus, these groups are recognised as a necessary tool for achieving normalcy, in a situation where pathologizing is a risk. Despite these nuances, the main argument is that children's participation in these groups have a positive effect when their sharing mirrors similar experiences in others.

Madeline: Yeah. But it's not because it has to become some sort of ….

Michael: No, no.

Madeline: Illness… or…

Michael: Exactly.

Madeline: … that it is problematic in itself that one's parents are divorced. It may just be necessary to create a space for sharing your experiences with others.

(Our translation)

Thus, the reasoning echoes the NGO argument, that sharing can be necessary for some, and good/beneficial for all. This dominant SR draws on the understanding that all children of divorce face similar challenges share the same thoughts, feelings, and life conditions. The intervention is thus built on the assumption that the children are in fact quite similar and therefore are able to mirror each other. The first layer of avoiding tactics show in the pattern identified as idealizing, because the intervention program is viewed as a help to all children who can mirror each other in the group. This idealization of the program work as a buffer against disruptive meanings (like what if the parents divorced years ago and the child adjusted a long time ago? Or what if the parents get along better after they separated? Or what if the parents never planned to live together in the first place? Instead, through the CFF material a consensus is created around the heterosexual nuclear family and according to which every child needs professional help to heal if the parents split up. The group leaders incorporate the dominant SR of children's need to talk about and share their feelings with other like-minded

group members. Thus, it is possible to see a direct replication from the CFF's SR among the group leaders' that all children benefit from conversation group intervention. However, there is a crack in the hegemony when it comes to working with concrete children, and a door is kept open for exploring possible benefits and competences of children of divorced parents, due to Lily´s alternative practice of the intervention program. Alongside the shared SR about children needing the program, there is an equally strong consensual idea that it is important that the children feel comfortable with having their own feelings and they ought not to be brought into a position where they feel stigmatized or singled out when expressing themselves or are pressured to mirror each other.

> Louise: I think it´s really important to frame the context from the outset and to be very careful about this framing. So that you do not have a situation where a child sits and suddenly have the experience: *God, I also have to sit and be sad.*
>
> Anna: Yeees (in acknowledgement).
>
> Louise: *I do not recognize the thing we are talking about, at all.* So I think that our position as group leaders requires us to really establish the open framework from the beginning, right? Moreover, to tell what this is all about.
>
> Sarah: Ummh.
>
> Lily: Yes, and also, like you said, there is no right or wrong feelings here?
>
> (Our translation)

When analysing the SR of CFF and the group leaders, they are found to share the perspective that all children of divorce will recover while participating in conversation groups. However, various nuances emerge when they argue that children should not have any experiences of feeling wrong. Thus, the premise of the intervention is not just taken for granted among the group leaders who seem to find that a successful intervention requires a structure for the constraints and norms of expression within the group work from the outset. Thereafter, various defensive tactics materialize. Even though the group leaders demonstrate more emancipated perspectives on the differences in children's experiences of parental divorce, they still argue that all children benefit from this intervention, so the service and its method is fully supported.

DISCUSSION

In welfare societies there is a growing industry for all kinds of services aimed at increased well-being, increased health and care for various groups in society. In each case a new group needs for care (some service or other) has to be argued and justified to legitimize the investment. NGO's such as CFFs and institutions like public schools join forces in offering new services like conversation groups for various "vulnerable" groups. However, the services need to be developed, decided upon and then legitimized (why this solution over other potential ones?). TSR and Gillespie´s suggested terminology of defensive tactics offers a rich conceptual track to analysing how these processes take form and new SR come into play in connection with these new practices. Thus, we suggest this methodological framework for understanding the formation of professionals' SR of children of divorce as part of the general goal of increasing conversation groups for children of divorce in Danish schools. There is a strong economical incitement to promote continued investments in upholding these groups in the primary school system by NGO's and for schools a strong incitement to act responsibly according to legislation. Even though there is no current threat to the conversation groups, there is still a long way to make the service a national resource in all public schools in Denmark, and also still many potential customers for CFF.

Defensiveness most clearly break out when CFF and the group leaders negotiate and communicate their SR. Aligned, contrasting and divergent SR are identifiable in CFF course material and among the group leaders. Moreover, it seems as though all three layers of defensiveness – avoiding, delegitimizing, and limiting – are present and actively used in the ongoing process of legitimization. It is argued that CFF's hegemonic SR of children of divorce mainly draws upon research findings produced by the 'problematizing approach' to divorce. In another study on children´s meaning-making on divorce the first author found that the 'problematizing approach' tend to alienate those children who do not recognise themselves as living with the difficulties that the conversation groups and the manual suggest (Rose, 2021a). Here, it is argued that CFF employ various tactics, such as idealizing, stereotyping, and rationalizing, when advocating for their SR in the course material. Hence, CFF communicative strategies may more closely resemble a persuasive tactic that argues that all children of divorced parents are grieving and need the right kind of help. From a solely crisis-oriented approach, divorce may easily be used to explain these children's well-being and future success – or lack thereof – regardless of other mitigating factors in their lives (Fabricius, 2003). The implication to consider is that CFF are also motivated by considerable commercial interests, - because they

sell courses for forthcoming group leaders, a source of income that will increase if all Danish schools make it compulsory to offer this service. It maximises their sale, if CFF succeeds in persuading potential customers/end-users that all children in the target group (children from divorced families) need attending groups and can benefit from the same course material. Already now course-activity is a large part of the financial sustainability and livelihood of CFF as a for-profit NGO. Many motives thus join forces and strengthen the incitement of convincing strategies when these are also opportunities for the organization to stabilize itself and grow financially. This observation corresponds well with the analytical finding that it is among the practitioners, the group leaders' that we find the most nuanced and emancipated SR of children of divorce (Moscovici, 1988). The group leaders argue that children of divorce may experience grief and a life crisis, but not all children are viewed as identical with regards to problem intensity and resources available. Also, it seems like the group leaders genuinely struggle in order to make the service one that is indeed helpful for all the individual children attending the group and that they are willing to bend and deviate from the session-manual when reality asks for it. The ethos of the child's right to freely express him/herself as may be different from the others in the group, as unable to recognise the suggested metaphors etc. is thus present among the practitioners, even though they also continue to promote the system and the service. This attempt to identify a broader SR of what characterise the children with divorced parents than CFF course material indicates probably reflect a motive of providing the most successful support to the children attending the groups. Despite these differences, there is a quite univocal consensus in the field at this historical time, where the service is still new and in the process of expansion. Why is it important to discuss these services critically? Are they not just good and in the service of children at risk? As research on TSR has accumulated over the years, it is evident that SR matter in real life and that people steer by them and act according to them in social interaction. Jodelet reminds us that the dominant representations in our society – in this case, among professionals – inform and affect each individual's way *"of acting, of behaving, of feeling*", thus these intervention programs provide an opportunity to identify and also change specific representations of children of divorced parents (Jodelet, 1991, p. 281). Paying attention to possible limitations and negative implications of particular SR of particular children before they become widespread is therefore part of an ethical quest for both researchers and educational practitioners (Gulbrandsen & al., 2014). As it is presently schools are under a certain pressure to establish these conversation groups as it is hard to resist the power of

goodness. Unreflected hegemonic SR may stigmatize children of divorced parents and make narrow social identities available for them (victims or children at risk), rather than creating possibilities for counter-positions and opening for alternative understandings (Gunaratnam, 2003). These categorizations may be both a prerequisite to, and a result of children's opportunities for participation. This leads to reflections on whether or not it is fair to categorise all children with parents who do not live together within the same category? Is it possible to imagine that children facing difficulties due to parental separation can be helped in schools in other ways than through conversation groups? Are there legitimate positions for schools choosing not to establish conversation groups as part of their learning and caring environment for children?

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to demonstrate how new services that are targeted children's well-being is being legitimized and promoted in Danish schools. For this process of legitimization and expansion to happen, the providers (often for-profit NGOs) are powerful voices in changing and forming SR of particular target groups. We find the SR of children of divorce promoted by CFF as a hegemonic SR defining a uniform group, at risk, facing similar challenges and in need of conversation groups. The group leaders offer a more elaborated interpretation of the SR of children of divorce, due to their concrete hands-on experience with children and the conversation groups. Thus, the professional's understandings include both hegemonic and more emancipated representations (Moscovici, 1988). We find the terminology suggested by Gillespie helpful in analysing the material as layers of defensiveness (Gillespie, 2020). We argue that professionals' SR inform and influence the way these children are met in conversation groups in practice (Jodelet, 1991; Gulbrandsen & al., 2014). Social Representations of a social category to which one belongs, are important constraints on scope and direction of social identities and possible self-understandings. In the context of this particular intervention, the hegemonic SR create a 'new' social category of children with parents who are divorced as a unified group, but it also creates a whole new social category and professional role for the teachers trained as group leaders. These special teachers also enter the general group of colleagues from a new and maybe more attractive professional identity within

the teaching profession. In short, there is much more to it than just helping children who experience the hardships of parental divorce.

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