A study of coordinator positionings in family group conferences

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Abstract

Although the coordinator's role is essential in mobilizing and remobilizing the social network of individual participants during the family group conference process, we lack knowledge on the coordinators' meaning and their interaction with various FGC actors. The data come from nine interviews with FGC coordinators conducted as a part of a randomized controlled study in which FGCs were implemented in two Norwegian municipalities: Oslo and Bergen. Positioning theory is used as an analytical tool for analysing and interpreting the findings. The results indicate that a challenge for the coordinators is to maintain the ideal of the 'neutral' coordinator while building trusting relationships with participants. Coordinators strategies for managing these challenges are interpreted as positionings in a way that enables communication, trust and participation, thus potentially securing FGC as an empowering process for the participant. The results indicate how coordinators are crucial actors in carrying out the FGC process.

Keywords: family group conference; coordinator; facilitator; neutrality; positioning

Introduction

A family group conference (FGC) is a meeting in which the individual and his or her expanded social network establish a plan that addresses questions the individual wants to discuss. The FGC meeting is a structured intervention including an introductory phase, a meeting between the participant and the network and a concluding phase. The process is handled by a neutral coordinator (Lupton 1998). FGCs were developed from the Maori culture in New Zeeland where child welfare services adopted traditional ways of decision making involving the extended family (Holland and O'Neill 2006). After its origin in New Zeeland, the model has been implemented in several other countries, e.g. Australia, South Africa, USA, Canada, UK, Netherlands and the Nordic countries (Horverak 2006). In Norway, the implementation of family group conferences started in 1995 through various projects within child welfare (Horverak 2009; Falck 2006). From year 2007 the responsibility for FGCs has been at the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, which has enabled a longer-term and nationwide approach to the implementation of FGCs. Besides in child welfare services, the FGC model has to some extent been used in other settings, including: centres to combat domestic violence, social- and mental health services, services for the aged, end-of-life care, services for homeless people, and programmes for adolescents with behavioural problems and for juvenile offenders (Hayden 2009; Sundell and Vinnerljung 2004; McGarrell and Hipple 2007; Crampton 2007; Malmberg-Heimonen 2011; Wright 2008; Jensen et al. 2005; Dalby and Løfsnæs 2008; Curtis et al. 2001).

FGCs are used to mobilize individual social networks to find solutions to social, emotional, and practical challenges, and to improve communication within the social network of the participant who needs support (Johansen 2011). Some scholars argue that the FGC is an

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empowering process for the participants (Horverak 2009), whereas other argues that it is the relational aspects of the process that are most important (Johansen 2012). Although FGCs are increasingly being used in various areas of social work, little is known of any longer-term effects of the intervention, and the existing findings are inconsistent (Crampton 2007, Holland and Rivett 2008; Weigensberg et al. 2009, Malmberg-Heimonen 2011). During all phases of the FGC, the role of the coordinator is essential. There is, however, a lack of research into how the coordinator experiences his or her work and the cooperation with other actors in the FGC process (Rødland and Horverak 2009). Additionally, there is a lack of knowledge of in *what ways* the coordinator is essential, for example regarding the coordinator as crucial for understanding structures of participation, i.e. how the coordinator interacts in ways that secures participation and empowerment during the FGC process. Increasing knowledge of these processes is important in order to support a high quality implementation of FGCs, but also for understanding the potential FGCs can have. This study presents findings from a project in which FGCs were implemented for longer-term social assistance recipients in the social service sector in two large Norwegian municipalities: Oslo and Bergen (Johansen 2012; Malmberg-Heimonen 2011; Natland 2011). The results are based on nine semi-structured interviews with FGC coordinators. This research seeks to answer the following questions:

How do coordinators negotiate their role as neutral coordinators in interaction with participants, social workers and social networks?

What meaning can the negotiations have as regards their ability to forge productive cooperation and communication in the various phases of the FGC process?

The coordinator in the FGC process

In the FGC process, the coordinator should concentrate on arranging the practicalities and follow the given structure of the model. The coordinator maps and analyses the network with the participant during the course of several meetings, and meets and prepares the social network, informants, and social workers. It is also the coordinator who handles all practicalities related to the meeting, such as sees that the invitations are sent, food is served, and meeting rooms are booked. Furthermore, the coordinator supports all participants during the meeting, facilitating the process (Lupton 1998).

It is emphasized that the coordinator should remain neutral throughout the process; he or she should not be a social service employee and should not take the role of a social worker or therapist. This neutrality will help the participant and family to focus on tasks related to the FGC, rather than on other aspects of the participant's psycho–social situation (Pennell 2004). Neutrality also means that the coordinator does not know the 'history' of the participant. Accordingly, the coordinator meets with the participant and his or her family only until the FGC has taken place. At that point the coordinator's tasks related to the FGC are finished, as is also the cooperation between the coordinator and the participant (Hyrve 2006; de Jong and Shout 2011).

One of the few existing studies focusing on the coordinator role demonstrates that coordinators' positive experiences concerned their opportunity to work closely with families and to participate in a meaningful process. Nevertheless, the coordinators also felt that they were outsiders with limited opportunities to influence organizational issues. Coordinators

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also had limited opportunities to follow up on action plans, and they felt that the FGC follow-ups were often insufficient (Connolly 2006a). Another study by Connolly (2006b) demonstrated that it was the coordinator's responsibility to be straightforward with families, which required skilled facilitation and in-depth knowledge of family dynamics. The study also demonstrated that the FGC processes sometimes created tension between conflicting interests when the needs of the families conflicted with the needs of the child. Holland and O'Neill (2006) demonstrated that the coordinators' most important goals were to improve communication within the family, improve housing conditions, and mobilize practical help for families. Accordingly, Marsh and Crow (1998) pinpoint personal suitability and communicative competence as essential qualities for coordinators.

Walton et al. (2003) demonstrated the importance of the coordinator being a neutral party and not part of the child welfare practice. This was also found by Hayden (2009) in a study of FGC in schools: It was a relief for the family to have a neutral coordinator communicating between the family and the school. In addition, Holland and Rivett (2008) demonstrated that FGCs enabled beneficial change, in which the coordinator played an important role. Based on interviews with participants, Johansen (2012) demonstrated that the coordinators were crucial in creating a supportive and safe environment that enabled a positive process both in preparations for and during the FGC.

There is however, a need for more analytic and interpretative studies of coordinators in FGCs. To understand the coordinator's meaning within the FGC process, it is important to interpret their experiences and reflections within a theoretical framework that opens up for a deeper and more complex investigation, thus leading to insight into what might be important knowledge also for understanding outcomes of FGC processes.

From role to *positioning* – theoretical approach

In FGCs, participants are asked to assume one particular role and, as such, the FGC process may be interpreted as a form of dramaturgy in which the various participants are constructed as actors and their roles determined by the FGC frame. We may speak of 'the role of the coordinator', but the concept of role can serve to highlight "static, formal and ritualistic aspects" (Davies and Harré 1990:43). Role is more attached to sociocultural expectations, closer to our knowledge schemata (Ribeiro 2006:50). Role as a determined factor may also imply an acceptance of the present social structure. However, in everyday conversation and interaction, people continuously negotiate what they say and do; how they define situations and construct meanings to what is being said. Included in this process is also how they are defined by others.

Positioning theory focuses on the normative frames within which people carry on their lives, and as such, looks at what a person may or may not do: "Positions are clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are distributed in the course of an episode of personal interaction and taken-for-granted practices in which most of these beliefs are concretely realized" (Harré et al. 2009:9).

Positioning theory was initially developed as a tool for research on dynamic inter-personal relations in which selves were given content, after which the theory has been extended to intra-personal and inter-group levels of analysis (Harré et al. 2009:25-26). The concept *positioning* captures how the person locates her-/himself. Positioning characterizes the

participants' most prominent stances in interaction, the ones that they will be identified with or they will use to identify the other (Ribeiro 2006:73-74). The term positioning in itself suggests flexibility and is a spatial metaphor whereas 'role' has theatrical connotations: one's *position* in space is ever-changing, even if only by degrees. The concept of positioning helps focus attention on dynamic aspects of encounters (Davies and Harré 1990:43; Tan and Moghaddam 1995). As a theoretical and analytical concept, positioning implies that individuals are seen as active subjects, who create themselves in relation to significant others. As such, positioning is a discursive process where people undertake positioning acts where they are or claim to be positioned in certain ways, endowing them with the right and/or duty to assign or ascribe positions (Harré et al. 2009:10).

The act of positioning is a two-phase procedure. In the first phase the character and/or competence of the one who is being positioned or is positioning him- or herself is established. This can be distinguished as an act of *prepositioning* or *first-order status* (Harré et al. 2009:10-16; Moghaddam, Harré and Langenhove 2008). Prepositioning involves listing for example attribution of skills, character traits and biographical facts deemed relevant to the positioning that is going forward. Prepositioning is a positioning act that may both assign or delete someone's rights and duties (Harré et al. 2009:10). The *second-order status* is to have an acknowledged position, implicit or explicit. If the participant is able to respond to or even resist an attempt to be positioned, he/she will be engaged in *second-order positioning*, which occurs when the first-order positioning is not taken for granted by one of the persons involved. It is through these positionings and repositionings that social relationships are negotiated: Positions accepted determine the rules and moral space in which one will

operate; positions refused/disputed may be resolved into new arrangements, or, if one party possesses a superior position within that social context, positions may be imposed.[1]

As interactional concepts, they provide ways of capturing *identity work* in everyday conversation and interaction, by which they tune and reinterpret the concept of role (Ribeiro 2006:50). In our study, we will investigate how the interviewed coordinators engage in what we interpret as procedures of (pre)positioning acts, negotiating a coordinator's identity, which they find crucial in order to proceed and succeed as coordinators.

Goffman's concept of "frame" (Goffman 1986; Harré et al. 2009; Ribeiro 2006) is often used within positioning theory to refer to different story lines for example in a conversation. The story line in a conversation between social worker and service user could for example be within a formal legal frame, a health frame or an empowering frame – where each of frames may elicit different responses from the user. A focus on "frame" also underpins the different contexts that the FGC coordinators' work take place in: coordinator-main participant, coordinator-social worker, coordinator-participant's network. Each framework may entail different positionings and participation structures, pointing to the complexity of multi-layered discourses. Ribeiro underlines how conversation can reveal negotiation: If we pose the question "Who stands as the expert here?, the concept of positioning can be helpful since it requires actors to look at the schemas that are most salient for that interaction (Ribeiro 2006:73). An interesting question is then if the coordinators' positionings influence

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[1] Harré et al. (2009:12) also regards the concept "footing" (Goffman 1986) as potential to capture and examine participants' subtle shifts of alignment, and argues that in the terms of their analysis of positioning as occupying first- and second-order statuses, "footing" can be analysed as the third-order status which a person can occupy. We do not apply this concept in our analysis, since we find that it requires data sources more suitable for conducting conversation analysis than our data enables us to.

participation structures when it comes to the active involvement / empowering process for the main participant in a FGC process.

Data, methods, and analyses

The data originate from a research project using a randomized experimental design to evaluate the effects of FGCs. A total of 41 FGCs were conducted during the project. The data were collected between years 2007 and 2010 from social service offices in two large Norwegian municipalities, Oslo and Bergen. During the project, social workers and coordinators were educated, FGCs were implemented and two follow-up studies were carried out. The randomized data demonstrated that adult FGCs had substantial short-term effects (Malmberg-Heimonen 2011). Qualitative data were collected from social workers, FGC coordinators, and FGC participants.[2] The data in this study derive from nine qualitative interviews with FGC coordinators. Six are women and three are men and the age range is 35 to 70 years. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed. The interviews focused on how the coordinators experienced their role, tasks, and cooperation with various actors during the FGC process.

The analysis is based on a phenomenological–hermeneutical approach, suitable for exploring individuals' subjective experiences and self-understandings. The approach requires that the researcher is sensitive to the concepts used by the interviewees (Kvale 1996; Smith et al.

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[2] Nine coordinators, three municipal project workers, and nine social workers were interviewed (Natland 2011). In addition, the study by Johansen (2012) based on interviews with participants focuses on the experiences and mechanisms of FGCs.

2011). The analytical procedure consists of an in-depth reading of the interview transcripts where the identification of patterns that appear to be typical of the data is of special interest for the ensuing analysis and interpretation.[3] In this study, the coordinators' reflections on needed skills and personality and their strategies on how to perform their role and tackle their duties were central outcomes of the analysis. Coordinators' views and reflections are analysed as negotiations on a coordinator identity, on the basis of concepts like prepositioning, self-positioning and first- and second-order status. To capture the different contexts of coordinators' work, the analysis is structured around the various actors coordinators collaborate with during a FGC process – main participant, social worker and the social network. The last part of the analyses focuses on the FGC meeting where all actors are present.

An ethical challenge is that research interviews often deal with people other than the informant and his or her experiences of the studied phenomena. When coordinators are asked to reflect on the FGC process, it is almost inevitable that their stories and reports will include concrete experiences with participants, their social networks, and the involved social workers. As such, these interviews touch on what research ethics calls 'the challenge of the third person'. These third parties did not consent to participate in the study, so they do not know whether and how they are mentioned in the interviews. To ensure anonymity of all parties in this study, interviews have been anonymized by omitting any recognisable personal information in the quotations, such as names of places or people (Alver and Øyen 1997:122).

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[3] The focus on empirical findings, however, does not imply that the researcher can enter the field and gather the data without an adequate theoretical pre-understanding. A certain degree of theoretical pre-understanding is necessary for developing interview guides relevant to the research area (Repstad 1987). In the present project, documentation of the role of the FGC coordinator was the premise for the interviews conducted.

Positioning analysis of the coordinator in family group conferences

Prepositioning: Background, key coordinator qualities, and motivations

The interviewed coordinators have varying employment and educational backgrounds. Some have worked in administration, while others have worked with children and young people and/or have a background in foster home care. Most coordinators have a part- or full-time work besides their coordinator tasks. They have varying reasons for becoming coordinators and for some of them, the choice was fairly random. One interviewee said that she volunteered as coordinator because she felt she had time to fill and wanted 'something more to do'. Others heard about the opportunity to become a coordinator through family or friends. One coordinator said that a friend who worked as a coordinator told her about it, and she describes that she was 'struck by the philosophy' – and joined her friend on a course to learn more.

This prepositioning of themselves as quite randomly recruited, changes when they are asked about what they regard as important qualities in coordinators. 'Enjoying work' and the feeling of 'being helpful' are emphasized. 'Life experience' is also regarded as an important quality: one should not be 'too young'. It is also pinpointed that a coordinator should have an 'open mind', meaning not being prejudiced when it comes to the participant's life history. By underscoring such qualities, the interviewed coordinators start to preposition themselves as able to fulfil the duties that (in their view) the position of a FGC coordinator demands.

Factors that motivate the coordinators are the opportunity to work with people and to feel that one can help. They also emphasize the positive feedback from participants, indicating that they are perceived as important in the FGC process and that they are being positioned as helpful and significant by the participants and their social network. These positionings are important for their motivation to carry on, as it shows that they have succeed in their duties as a FGC coordinator. They also relate to their unique neutral position, naming it the 'outsider' or the 'layperson'. One coordinator expresses it like this:

> Without glorifying ourselves ... I think it can be an advantage for a neutral person outside the system to come in and carry it through. ... You might call it a layperson's approach. And I do have blind faith in that.

In this quote the coordinator shifts from using "ourselves" and "I" to "you" when he underscores the importance of the neutral position. By this he communicates a positioning of himself as reflective and dedicated to the work. He also shows that he understands the main principles of being a coordinator. Interpreted as prepositioning acts, the mentioned qualities above reflect the coordinators' opinions on their first-order status.

The coordinators' positionings through the FGC process

The coordinator and the participant

The most pragmatic way for coordinators to position themselves is captured by the coordinators' description as *organizers.* They arrange the practicalities related to the FGCs, especially when it comes to the activation of the participant's social network. As organizers, they may be crucial in supporting the participant's opportunities to get help. Nevertheless, the position as organizer is more complex than it might seem like on the surface, as marked

in the interviews when the coordinators elaborates on their position by introducing other concepts, like "encourager" and "helper", and as one interviewee express:

'They need a coordinator or somebody who can do it for them'. By this expression, the coordinator is positioning the participant as someone in need for support. With respect to coordinators neutrality, there may be a delicate line between self-positionings ranging from organizer to helper.

An important part of coordinators' *neutrality* is that it can be understood as a professional neutrality in the sense of that the coordinator is not employed by social services. As a user of social services the participant has a formal relation to the social worker, which positions him/her within a specific frame and adjacent power relations, however no such bond exists between the coordinator and the participant. As they haven't met before the FGC process starts, the interviewed coordinators emphasize the importance of succeeding in establishing 'trust' early in the FGC process. Trust can be established already at the first meeting (contract meeting).

The coordinator meets the participant for the first time together with the social worker, often in the social worker's office. At this time, the participant has decided to take part in the FGC, he or she has formulated questions for the meeting and the coordinator has been chosen by the social services. In these meetings, the coordinators actively position themselves, mainly in relation to the participant. For instance, when addressing the participant, coordinators find it important to use everyday language. Such shifts in communication styles may be interpreted as self-positionings that involves building down hierarchies by demonstrating that their perspective is different and that they do not 'speak the language of social workers'. In the interviews, 'team playing' and 'playing on the same

side' are used as metaphors for these efforts in achieving trust. Further, the coordinator 'tune in' to what the participant is like, by being a 'good listener' and showing empathy with the participant's background and the challenges he/she faces. Some coordinators emphasize that it is important to 'give something of oneself' in order to build a trusting relationship. This means talking about oneself and using one's own personal life experiences as examples. The expressions 'tuning in', 'listening', 'give something of oneself' illustrates the coordinators' self-positioning, by which the goal is to secure an equal relation to and collaboration with the participant. These positionings aim at securing the coordinators' acknowledged position, the second-order status.

During this process, it is a challenge to find the right balance between being a neutral organizer and a fellow human. If a coordinator goes too far by talking about him-/herself, he or she may become too psychologically intimate. If the coordinator goes too far in positioning him- or herself as a helper, the participant may respond by positioning the coordinator as a therapist. One coordinator experienced this and felt she didn't succeed in achieving the ideal of neutrality:

> I really wanted to help him [i.e., a participant]! And to give him a lot of advices, and
> so on. And then you have to say "stop" to yourself. Because that was not the
> purpose.

By the shifting from "I" to "you", the coordinator marks the shift in positioning from reflections on personal experiences, transferring them to the joint qualifications needed for the positioning as professional coordinators. Another coordinator elaborates on the challenge of neutrality in the interaction with the participant:

Yes, it becomes such a close relationship. Challenging, because you should be close. At the same time you should be professional. You have to consider your role. We should not intervene too much. Because that is what you can easily do.

This coordinator reflects on the challenges in a distanced way by talking about the coordinator as "you" and "we". Another coordinator actively positions herself as a person with personal qualities that are relevant to the prepositioning as a coordinator: 'I will always be a human fellow' and 'it is clear that I want to help', however related to FGC frames, she shifts to underscore that 'not in a sense that I cross the line of my role as a coordinator'. Another coordinator shared more concrete strategies on how to cope with the neutrality challenge:

I think I leave something on the outside, to be honest. That is, you learn techniques. Even though you really pity them, of course. At the beginning [author's note: when you are yet not so experienced as coordinator] you *listen*. And then you start, in a way, to distance yourself a bit and *think:* When they are talking, you *think*; about how to lead them further on the issue.

By the shift from "listening" to "thinking", the coordinator marks a shift from positioning herself as being a sympathetic coordinator who can be nearly absorbed by the participant's story, to a coordinator that is the strategic and professional listener. The last position is more in accordance to the prepositioning as a neutral coordinator. It has to do with balancing proximity and distance in carrying out the coordinator's tasks and duties, something which the coordinator thinks grows out of experience.

Positioned as a 'snooper'

Even if neutrality is generally valued positively by the participants and their social networks, also other responses are possible. In a meeting with the participant, one coordinator emphasized that she was neutral, thinking it would create a positive attitude and response. The reaction she got was a surprise, as the participant said: 'Yes, then what makes *you* able to come around and snoop in other people's lives?' Reflecting on this, she says:

> And when I heard his comment I became speechless. And then I thought that it was in order, of course. Because here you come as a stranger, an outsider, and ask sensitive questions that have an impact on people's lives. You have to be careful. It is extremely difficult.

Sometimes there is internal conflict in a position, which can bring on a phase of second-order positioning (Harré et al. 2009:11). In this example, the coordinator's positive attitude to the self-positioning as a neutral part was challenged by the participant's reaction. The participant gave a signal of that within the frames of the social services, she expects and to some degree accepts the positioning as someone who can be controlled for. This is not what she expects from a "neutral outsider", thus positioning the coordinator as a "snooper". By occupying a second-order positioning the participant refused the legitimacy of the coordinator's first-order position (Harré et al. 2009:18). The coordinator also re-positions herself as a "stranger" and "outsider", underscoring an important lesson to be learned about positioning acts. Coordinators need to be prepared on the fact that participants may position them in regard to subtle power relations that are actualised during the FGC process, such as the legitimacy to intervene in private life and relations. The example illustrates that the positionings of the coordinator takes place within a framing that can be interpreted as a power hierarchy, no matter what the good intentions of neutrality might be.

Ephemeral position as a social worker?

Another example of potential internal conflicts in the coordinator positioning, is captured by a theme repeatedly mentioned in connection with the ideal of neutrality, namely that of *persuasion*. The coordinators respond that it is important 'not to push' too hard with respect to participation, achievement, and inviting specific participants from the social network, as they then run a risk of overruling and thereby breaking the trustful relationship with the participant.

One coordinator describes a FGC where she used 'quite harsh means'. The participant was a young man with drug problems. His social network required that he should begin treatment before they would agree to participate in the FGC. As the participant repeatedly dropped out of treatment, the FGC was postponed several times. The coordinator had to contact the social network again and again. The social network saw no point in an FGC, as the questions the young man had raised required that he should be clean from drugs (taking a course or getting an education). After discussion, the coordinator and the social worker decided to change the questions so that they would deal with getting the young man into treatment. To persuade the social network to participate, the coordinator also told them that the FGC might be a matter of 'life or death'.

In retrospect, the coordinator stated: 'My role as a coordinator was blurred; I also became a bit of a social worker'. She did 'some tasks that she should not have done' - initiated the redefinition of the questions and persuaded the social network to become involved. When the coordinator undertook tasks that she should not have done according to the FGC frame,

she identified herself with another discursive position, the position of the social worker, which is diverging from the ideal of coordinator's neutrality.

Her self-criticism can be understood by that she interprets the positioning as a social worker hierarchical in relation to the participant and the social network. This positioning runs counter with the coordinator's neutrality and can be defined as "ephemeral" in the sense that she invented it then and there to enable action. In suddenly claiming the right to decide and take control on the behalf of the participant and the social network, she also understands that the positioning may be harmful to the trustful relation. This sheds light on Harré et al.'s (2009) underscoring of the point that positions are "features of the local moral landscape":

> People are assigned positions or aquire or even seize positions via a variety of prior implicit and explicit acts which, in the most overtly "rational" positioning acts, are based on personal characteristics (…). The upshot could be positive or negative, supporting or denying to claim a right, demanding or refusing the assignment of a duty. (Harré et al. 2009:9)

This moral landscape consists of practices, and from this practice a position is extracted. In this case, the practice was to make a decision on behalf of the participant. Occasionally, the coordinators are open to 'divergences in relation to the manual'. For example, regarding this incident, the coordinator says:

> When we have a method on which we base our work, we should be as true to it as we possibly can. However, we cannot be so true to it that things don't get done based on who should do or initiate what, or what should be said. We should not be so locked up in structures that we forget what we are doing.

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The coordinator shifts from talking about herself in 1st person, confessing her positioning as overruling the first-order status of a coordinator, to talking about what constitutes good coordinator practices. When she uses "we", she marks a shift that reposition and justify her actions. In this framing, her action is no longer seen as wrong or a delicate dilemma, but as a repositioning of the coordinator as a critical and reflexive actor. What she communicates is her understanding of that the prepositioning of the coordinator not only takes place within the frames of the manual guiding the FGC process, but also as an agency and right to intervene in situations where the manual is an obstacle for being a good coordinator. This can be interpreted as the coordinator laying grounds for a new moral order of her coordinator practices. However, by the repositioning as a critical and reflexive actor, the coordinator may also be interpreted as positioning him/herself as an expert in relation to both the participant and the social network (Ribeiro 2006:73).

The coordinator and the social worker

The coordinators also position themselves in various ways in interaction with social workers: they alternate between positioning themselves as 'discussion partners', 'prime movers', and 'relievers'. Some coordinators experience social workers as distant, which could be interpreted as social workers being uninterested in the FGC process. However, the coordinators mostly understand the distance as a sign of that social workers trust their competence and accept the division of responsibilities. As such, the social workers accept their first-order status as coordinators and position them as professionals. One coordinator emphasized that he was trusted by social workers, as he knew more about FGCs. He was

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satisfied with the cooperation, although they had different views on the potentials of FGCs. In these situations, he meant that social workers need to be supervised in relation to what the FGC process is really about. This self-positioning as a *supervisor* can also be interpreted as an expert positioning in relation to the social worker.

Taking into account that positioning includes the discursive production of both selves and groups, it can also be explored at the inter-group level. The harmony in the collaboration between the coordinator and the social worker may be interpreted as a result of the coordinators' positioning of themselves as not being in competition with social workers regarding tasks and duties (Harré et al. 2009:26-27). Positive changes for participants as a result of successful FGC processes may also explain the harmony between them.

One significant challenge of being a coordinator is the level of detail in which you should discuss the participant's issues with the social worker. A coordinator explains why:

> Because as a coordinator you have gained a lot of information, both through talking with the social network of the participant … [Author's note: as well as with the participant] Sometimes the result is that you know even more than the social workers do about the user [i.e., participant] and the network, as you have been so close to them in another context.

In these situations coordinators are walking a fine line between information sharing in the participant's interest, and not betraying confidentiality. The citation also illustrates how the relationship between the participant and the coordinator are framed in a way that make it different from the relationship between the participant and the social worker. One coordinator emphasizes her delicate position in dealing with these two relationships: A participant can entrust confidential issues to the coordinator, because he or she has been

assured that they will not be communicated further. However, regarding some information the coordinator may think that it would be beneficial for the participant if the social worker knew. The coordinator describes how she resolves these dilemmas when they occur:

> Tell the participant during the FGC process that 'I think it is important that your social worker knows about this. Can we have a dialog about this to find out if you are comfortable with it?' It is the easiest way to resolve the dilemma. But you have to remember it. You have to remember to ask first.

The coordinator stress the importance of being clear about the information exchange that may take place between the coordinator and the social worker, and that the social worker under no circumstances will get any information from the coordinator without the participant's consent.

These examples are interesting as illustrations on how the coordinator is positioned as a potential gate-keeper between the participant and the social worker. On one hand, the information the coordinator get access to, positions him/her as an "expert" compared with the social worker. On the other hand, and as a result of the "expert" positioning, the coordinator may end up in dilemmas related to whether some information should be transferred or not. The solving of such dilemmas, inevitable challenges the ideal of neutrality, as both positionings may place the coordinator in an expert role where the division between the coordinator and social services becomes blurred.

The coordinator and the social network

When the participant has decided on who he/she would like to invite to the meeting, the coordinator contacts these people. How coordinators first establish this contact in order to inform about the FGC and invite to it, varies. Some use the telephone, whereas others meet the members of the social network 'face to face' in their homes, a café, or some other 'neutral' place. One coordinator has drafted what he calls a 'standard letter' including basic information about the FGC process. Coordinators emphasise that the social network may have various needs in terms of how much and what kind of contact they need to have with the coordinator, arguing that the contact with the social network should be planned independently for each FGC.

 The coordinator also clarifies to the social network what participation in the meeting entails. In the first meeting with the social network, the coordinator stress that they should focus on the *relationship* between the participant and the social network. This is done to prevent the social network from asking for sensitive information about the participant and further emphasized by the coordinators' refusal to respond if anybody asks such questions. These principles must also be seen in relation to the coordinator's emphasis on building a trusting relationship with the participant. It builds trust when the participant is ensured that the coordinator does not share sensitive information with the social network, and therefore, this self-positioning is of particular importance.

The interaction with the social network is not so much elaborated upon in the interviews, as the coordinators experiences reflect that their positioning secures the maintaining of inter-group harmony. This is done when the coordinator position him/herself as not being in alliance with the social services (Harré et al. 2009:27). The coordinator is rather positioned

as the participant's allied in the constant refusal to answer questions about him/her to the social network.

Positionings during and after the FGC meeting

At the FGC meeting, all the actors with whom the coordinators have worked independently with meet in the same place at the same time. At the beginning of the meeting, coordinators emphasize that the FGC template should be followed, positioning themselves as professional FGC coordinators. This positioning is stressed by actions like formally shaking hands with everyone and paying special attention to people they have not previously met face to face. The coordinators announce that 'now the meeting has started'. The various actors involved in the meeting are also positioned: the participant in the centre of the meeting, the members of the social network as possible helpers, and the professionals as informants. As informants, the professionals provide information on the current situation of the participant, after which they leave the meeting. This also underscores that the FGC meeting is framed within the private sphere.

Coordinators emphasize that the meeting should 'not be too formal', though there should be no doubt of that it has a fixed frame, goal, and purpose:

> I try to do it a bit informally. It is important to me. I don't like a formal tone. I'm preoccupied with greeting everybody and making eye contact. And I have bought food in advance and tried to make things cosy. I brought tea candles and flowers. At the same time, the frames... I am also preoccupied with the frames, that we follow the procedures that should be followed.

By using the "I"-form extensively, the coordinator positions herself as an important actor in carrying out the meeting. Personal preferences (I like; I do not like) seems to impact the setting of the meeting when it comes to both balancing the formal situation and what is regarded as "cosy", although decisions are made according to the participant's wishes. If any problems would arise during the private deliberation phase, coordinators are available and they 'pop in' during the meeting in order to ensure that everything is all right. The interesting question yet to be explored, is if their interaction throughout the meeting also positions them more as a support person for the main participant than for the social network?

The coordinators know that when the FGC process is over, also their contact with the participant and the social network is over. Although the interviewed coordinators generally emphasize that the FGC structures works well, it is the matter of follow-up that they would like to change. They are simply curious of how 'their' FGC participants have managed, although they understand that 'wanting to know' breaks the principles of the coordinator's role. Still, they explain why this information would be important: Knowing what happens to their participants would strengthen their own motivation to continue working as coordinators. Nevertheless, the main problem with the coordinator gaining access to information on how 'their' FGC participants have succeeded is that it would entail access to confidential information from social services. As a consequence, the coordinator's unique position in the FGC as an external and neutral 'outsider' might be displaced, and coordinators might come to be (re)positioned by the participant and social network as a part of social services.

Conclusion

The results of this study have demonstrated that the tasks of FGC coordinators are clear and feasible, probably due to well-organized training and meetings where coordinators reflect on their practices. This leads to a quite clear prepositioning of the neutral coordinator. The main finding is that within this FGC frame, coordinators define their own practices, adjusting them according to the needs and wishes of participants, the social networks and different situations. The data reveal various concepts that coordinators use when they identify themselves and their tasks in cooperation with other actors, i.e. 'organizer', 'team player', 'encourager', 'reliever', and 'discussion partner'. The interaction between coordinator and participant is subject of most negotiations. Each concept illustrates a discursive position which enables different ways of communication and secure participation and activation of the various actors.

Our findings show that the coordinators position themselves mainly within two contextualizations throughout the FGC process. The first is regard to the participant and the social network, where coordinators position themselves and are positioned mainly as team players, encouragers, or helpers. The second is regard to social workers and other professionals, where coordinators position themselves and are positioned in terms of organizers, facilitators or relievers. These contextualisations can be interpreted as the coordinators are framing the FGC process in different ways; reflexively balancing and shifting between a *person-focused* and a *system-oriented approach*.

The ideal of the neutral position is considered as a challenge in carrying out the coordinators' work, and therefore is a subject for negotiation. Positioning theory as a framework for the analyses enabled us to interpret the coordinators' various concepts as

discursive positionings, which help them deal with the ideals of neutrality in their interaction with different participants and within different contexts. Positioning theory also enabled us to understand that there may be negative responses to coordinators positioning, forcing them to take part in second-order positioning acts in order to ensure new trust and equal cooperation. Marsh and Crow (1998) have generally emphasized that communicative competence is an important quality for coordinators, whereas the findings of this study have shown how these communicative competences can be understood in practice.

The study also demonstrates the importance of being aware of how different positionings may enable various degrees of power and agency, and in turn affect participants' experiences and outcomes of FGCs. The results underscore coordinators' potential in understanding participants as protagonists in their own lives, which may have a significant role in the *empowering process* that FGCs can constitute (Johansen 2012; Horverak 2009). Generally, coordinators' meaning is an under-researched topic. Also this study is based on a limited source of interviews and must be regarded as an explorative study, with a goal to explore new perspectives and theoretical approaches that might be fruitful to elaborate in future studies.

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