

Going along and saying no

Key note speech conference Social Work under Pressure, Leeuwarden, February 5, 2016

Margo Trappenburg

On September 26th 2015 the Dutch daily NRC Handelsblad published an article on a family tragedy in Zoetermeer, a medium sized municipality in the West of the country. Both parents in the household were mentally retarded although not officially diagnosed as such (somewhere between 50 and 80 IQ points was the rough estimate). There were five children; the youngest was ten and the eldest 22. The children were officially diagnosed as mentally retarded: suffering from Down syndrome, brain injury or a low IQ in general. The eldest son was the only one who did not have a mental disorder although he was severely obese, unemployed, sitting in his room most of the time and probably depressed. The family had received help from Mariska, who was employed by the municipality to assist them in their household duties. After two months - despite Mariska's plea to continue assistance because this family would never be able to function independently - the municipality decided to stop Mariska's help. The family should now be able to take care of their household duties themselves. Similarly the social worker who had been helping the family for a couple of months for a few hours per week was deemed no longer necessary. Following the reigning ideology - one should ask vulnerable people what they need rather than have professionals do a needs assessment - the parents were asked how they could be helped. Mother said she could sure use a vacation and that she would like to have her little niece come by for a sleep over. She said she didn't need help to clean the house, take care of the children or manage her debts. She was fine. Everything was fine. The fact that she lay in bed for most of the time because of severe back pain did not bother her. She took care of numerous rabbits that she acquired through the internet. The animals were all over the place making it smell like a zoo but that did not bother her either.

The eldest son, 22 year old Christian, did not want to be helped for a number of reasons. He did not buy health insurance and he didn't have money. He used his mother's medication, ate all day long and sat in his room watching television. On April 21st 2015 he was found dead in his room. An untreated infection had become fatal. He had been unconscious for a while but his parents did not dare to call an ambulance because he did not have health insurance.

Of course, after the tragedy everybody realized that this family should have been helped and monitored much more closely. Even the Zoetermeer alderman who did not like helping professionals in general because they sometimes overruled parents who, in her opinion - and she was a parent herself - usually knew best; or at least knew what they were talking about.

In the past couple of months I have been interviewing experienced social workers about their careers. I have asked them about their training, about their previous and present employment ending with their thoughts on the present policy changes in the Netherlands: the move away from paid professional help toward self-help, empowerment, network assistance, family help and volunteering.

One of my respondents had a client with severe learning disabilities, a bit like the parents in the Zoetermeer story. She had had to transfer her help to a volunteer but she worried because the volunteer might prove unreliable. Volunteers sometimes simply stayed away

because they had found paid employment. At other times they were people with a psychiatric background who could not hold a regular job. This might be fine for some time but any time their psychiatric illness might come back and might take hold of them. They might forget about her client.

Another respondent had a client who needed help with bills, forms and debts. In her municipality she would have to find a volunteer to help her client with his administration. The client felt ashamed about needing help. He disliked the idea of having a total stranger going through his stuff and it felt even worse if this stranger would be a volunteer who would apparently do this for pleasure out of the goodness of his heart. My respondent wondered if she could spare her client this embarrassment under the present rules.

Several respondents expressed doubts about referring clients to their own family for help. One of the reasons people sought professional help in the first place was that they had very complicated or unhappy family backgrounds. Should they be forced to reconnect all the same?

There is a classic study on social work, entitled *The Client Speaks* (published in 1970). Social work clients were asked why they had sought professional help rather than turn to their family, friends or neighbors. The researchers, John Mayer and Noel Timms, found that there were all sorts of reasons. Some clients wanted to spare their family additional burdens because their family had enough on their plate as it was. Others were afraid that family or friends and acquaintances would tell about their woes to everybody. Some were sure that their family members would not understand their marital problems because they had too good a marriage themselves. Yet others had family members who would always advise them to toughen up and they simply could not do that anymore. Or family members who would always take their side unquestionably whereas they felt they needed objective advice to see their spouse's point of view. *The Client Speaks* is 45 years old but all of these reasons made sense to me and I could hear their echoes in the stories of the social workers I interviewed.

The Dutch government has decided to roll back the welfare state. We are in the midst of a transition to what is called a participation society. The traditional welfare state was based on passive solidarity. Healthy able bodied citizens paid taxes. In return vulnerable citizens were taken care of. People with a mental disability were often institutionalized. There were large scale institutions for the mentally retarded. People with a psychiatric condition were taken to asylums. Fragile elderly citizens were transferred to a nursing home. So were the chronically ill. Vulnerable citizens did not have to search for a proper job. There were all kinds of sheltered employment. Children with severe learning disabilities went to special schools with smaller classes and specially trained teaching staff. Homeless people, juvenile delinquents and problematic families went to social workers who tried to help them get their lives back on track. The welfare state has been hailed as a safety net for the unlucky and the untalented but it was probably just as attractive for the lucky and talented citizens who merely paid their dues and in return did not have to worry about the vulnerable citizens in their midst. Nobody would have to be a beggar in a welfare state. Hence there was no need for the rest of us to get into a conversation with beggars approaching us in the train station asking for a euro or so to buy a cup of coffee. One could just refer the beggar to social services. Another great advantage of the welfare state was that vulnerable citizens and their families did not have to feel guilty for needing help. They were entitled to help. The professional carers and

social workers who helped them were paid employees who did their job and had probably chosen this type of work because they liked it and because it suited them.

Those were the days but they are gone if the government gets its way. The participation society in the making is based on active solidarity. There will be less taxes and fewer professional carers. Instead vulnerable citizens will have to take care of themselves and if they are unable to do that they should preferably be helped by their nearest and dearest: their families, friends and neighbors. If these are unable to help or overburdened one should look for volunteers: people who are willing to help other people without pay.

The Dutch government is not alone in this policy of welfare state retrenchment. The UK preceded the Netherlands with the concept of the Big Society. The Belgians have something called responsabilization which appears to come down to roughly the same thing as the Dutch participation society. Andrea Muehlebach describes the transformation of the Italian welfare state in her beautiful book *The Moral Neoliberal*. She discusses the fate of elderly employees who lost their job and now try to find a new meaning in life by volunteering for fragile elderly Italians. She also describes the social workers at social services departments who cannot do much more than sending people back to their family or to the local parish for help.

Janet Newman and Evelien Tonkens edited a volume on active citizenship in several European countries showing that the trend toward active solidarity is widespread although it takes different shapes in different countries.

In this talk I want to reflect on how professional care workers (social workers but also home carers like Mariska in my Zoetermeer example) should relate to this policy change. I will first show you that there is an overwhelming urge to go along with the government and try to analyze where it comes from. Subsequently I will try to find ways to control this tendency, to say no on occasion. And I emphasize: on occasion. For those of you who were trained in the sixties and seventies and who secretly long for the Marxist revolutionary spirit of those days this may be somewhat disappointing; so I am warning you beforehand. I am not going to ask all of us to join hands and climb the barricades.

The urge to think along with the government. Where does it come from? This may be explained by the following figure which I have called the circle of going along. In the outer ring we find the general cultural mood of the day in current society. In the second ring we find the logic of economics and self-interest or self-preservation. In the inner circle we find social workers' own ideology. All three rings contribute to the urge to go along.

1

Let's start in the outer ring. Did anybody happen to read a beautiful article by Christopher Grey entitled "The Fetish of Change"? Did anybody read *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw*, by Dutch-American historian James Kennedy, presently employed at Utrecht University? Or the last chapters of *The Rhetoric of Reaction* by Albert Hirschman? What I am going to say about the outer ring is derived from these studies. I can't recommend them enough.

It is quite common these days to start a scientific article by observing that the world is changing at an ever faster pace. It is so common that nobody is ever asked to back that up by, say, comparing the impact of world war I or the introduction of the steam engine with the advent of the internet or the computer. You just mention the Iphone, robots, DNA

technology, globalization and mass immigration and you have convinced your audience. Yes, the world is changing ever faster.

Next you argue that, obviously, organizations need to adapt. They have to change along with society. If not they will become obsolete. Since many organizations buy into this argument and adapt to perceived changes **these organizations thereby make the observation of an ever changing world come true**. Organizations are surrounded by other organizations and if these other organizations are constantly changing they thereby create the necessity for others to change as well. Brilliant idea of Christopher Grey.

Clever politicians make use of the generally accepted idea that we live in a fast changing world and have to adjust accordingly. They like to present their own policy plans either as necessary adjustments to the changing world or they simply reframe their policy plans as part of the changing times. Thus two decades ago marketization was presented as a trend that politicians facilitate rather than a political choice that they make. At present Dutch politicians like to present welfare state retrenchment as a bottom up change willed by citizens rather than chosen by politicians. Politicians say they simply adapt the laws in accordance with citizens' changing preferences.

James Kennedy found that the Netherlands is especially prone to the change is all around us idea. Dutch elites - politicians but other leaders - church leaders, organizational leaders, university elites - tend to observe trends and then immediately want to accommodate those trends. According to Kennedy in America elites on occasion oppose a trend that they don't approve. In the Netherlands every trend has to be accommodated. Might have something to do with a large part of the country being below sea level. It is no use to criticize the rising waters and take a firm stand. You simply have to accommodate by building dikes. Of course adapting to a changing world can be very good at times but it would be much better if it were not the only available automatic response.

In the words of Albert Hirschman: Dutch politicians like to argue in a somewhat Marxian fashion **that they have history on their side**. History is moving in a certain direction; they just help it move on.

Giving this general preference for adapting to a changing world it is understandable that social services departments and social professionals who are working there feel that they have to change as well.

2

I get to the second ring: our jobs depend on going along. Economic interest and self-preservation. In the Netherlands the transition from welfare state to participation society entails a decentralization of social work to municipalities. Municipalities have to distribute a shrinking budget among vulnerable citizens trying to weigh the interests of fragile elderly who could do with home help, psychiatric patients who are struggling with life, juvenile delinquents who might be forced or enticed to revise their life plans, people with mental disabilities for whom life is tremendously complicated and poor people who are struggling with financial debts. To do this most of them have installed neighborhood teams. Those of you who know the British history of social work: the operation resembles the report of the Seebohm committee published in 1968, which was followed by the introduction of generic social services departments. In the Netherlands some neighborhood teams answer directly to the local government, thus turning social professionals into civil servants. At other times social services and welfare organizations have to compete with each other to have their

employees participate in the neighborhood teams. Sometimes there is a tender system, that makes this procedure a yearly or bi-annual operation. The professionals who are enrolled in the neighborhood teams are usually optimistic cheerful people who believe in the new participation society or who do their utmost to appear as true believers. Organizations that want to survive cannot afford to be critical either.

One of my respondents said:

I have seen a lot of competition among different organizations. Everybody wants to get hold of the money. They all have paid employees and everybody is afraid to be sacked. (...) One colleague after another on the verge of tears. When is the next round of dismissals? That's what's happening. Next year we will have new cutbacks.

Another observed:

You are dismissed very easily. People all had to re-apply for their job. I have seen social workers with 25 years of experience who did not get hired for the new teams. That's what's happening.

It is obvious that the felt need to survive as a social worker or as a social services organization contributes to the move to go along with the government.

3

I get to the inner ring. The move from government to self-help, empowerment, family conferences, family help and neighborhood help concurs with traditional social work ideology. Many social workers told me that this was the first thing they learned during vocational training: you have to make yourself superfluous. Your client needs to stand on his or her own feet again.

Social work researcher Marcel Spierts wrote a history of social work in the Netherlands. In his book this seems to be the central thought. As much as social work has changed over the years this central idea stayed in place. Social workers were committed to help their clients to stand on their own feet. David Burnham studied social workers in the UK for the whole of the twentieth century. The first half of the research - before the second World War - was based on diaries and novels. The second half is largely based on interviews with social workers.

Burnham describes how in the first decade after the second World War social workers organized self-help groups and did everything they could to let these groups be run by the members themselves. Social workers also tried to recruit volunteers who could visit old people who did not want to live in an old people's home. Apparently this practice got into disarray during the seventies when social workers, in the words of one of Burnham's respondents "had an exaggerated sense of their own professionalism" and ignored a lot of voluntary effort in the process. Another respondent of Burnham began to wonder "if family therapy had got overcomplicated. Sometimes professionals overcomplicate things to sustain their status. Perhaps we over-professionalized it and people got the balance wrong." Perhaps in the UK - and I suspect in the Netherlands as well, though perhaps before the years when my respondents started working - there has been a time when social workers forgot the ideal of empowerment and self-help because they were too busy professionalizing their own work or changing society according to Marxist principles. But deep down the commitment to empowerment has probably always been there.

Hence the new policy emphasis on self-help and empowerment seems right. In the words of some of my respondents: “This is what we have been doing throughout my career. I don’t see what’s new in that.” Or in the words of another respondent:

During the intake I always tried to work out people’s network. That was customary. What are your resources? Who can help you? It was part of the intake at that was clear right away. I have had conversations with neighbors to see if they could help one another. (...) Today there was a story in our professional journal all about the new social work with neighborhood teams empowering people, searching for their strength. Such a load of crap I think. I get mad about it. It’s like we didn’t do that. I did that all the time: giving people strength and insight in their own problems.

So there we are: trapped in the circle of going along. Going along because the new plans seem to embody an ideal to which social workers have been committed all along. Going along because that is in our own self-interest as professionals or as organizations. And going along because of the rhetoric of change: it’s all around us. It’s inevitable and we have to adjust.

In the last part of this talk I would like think about occasional resistance. Drawing boundaries, saying no from time to time. Not because the present policy plans are completely misguided. Not because I think a revolution is needed to oppose them. But because I hear and see that the new policies have serious drawbacks - like any other policy for that matter. And because I think that these disadvantages need to be addressed and that social workers should play a part in that, despite the circle of going along.

Hence three lines of resistance in the opposite order. I start with the ideology of social work in the inner ring.

Against 3

It may be true that empowerment is a prime element of the philosophy of social work but there is more to social work than just empowerment. My respondents told me about these other aspects. Some of them explained that these days many chronic psychiatric patients and people with mental disabilities live in ordinary neighborhoods. This policy of deinstitutionalization may have been a good idea but it has consequences. In the words of a respondent:

There is a whole group of people with severe psychiatric ailments or mental retardation and that will never go away. Of course you can find out what they can do themselves and I think that’s always good to try. But we should realize that this is a group of people that will always need help. It is an illusion to think that we can these people back on track with a short nice therapeutic intervention. That is simply not true.

Another social worker pointed at the limits of family help. He said:

The good thing of this development is that you get to look broader. Who can step in? It is not self-evident that a social worker steps in because you are temporary. You should always realize that. So if there is family help available that’s a good thing. But you should take a long and hard look at the family because they must be able and willing. You can’t force them. I think it’s dangerous to ask people to support their brother or sister when they basically fight all the time. (...) You can’t build a society

on volunteers who do not help voluntarily. It's quicksand. People who do not help voluntarily will not hold on and can do damage.

Other respondents pondered about their own expertise; competences they had that family helpers, volunteers and civil servants did not have. Respondents said that their core expertise consisted in not being judgmental. Stand in the client's shoes and start from there. This was something that they felt was crucial to social work. Of course many clients are partly to blame for their misfortune but it does not help to point that out and non-professional helpers would probably not be able to resist a tendency to pass blame. One respondent explained that people who are victims of domestic violence feel ashamed. She said:

Social workers know that and they take the time and space to help people to face what's happened and to acknowledge the shame. Rather than just say: well, yes, you don't have to be ashamed of it. You don't help people that way, because they are ashamed.

Another respondent had worked with Muslim families where violence was related to the family honor and the chastity of female family members, a topic that many Dutch citizens feel very strongly about. My respondent said:

There are many things that we don't understand; honor related violence for example. I have seen it often. You have to understand the perpetrators. You have to look with an open mind. That isn't easy. Victims are very frightened and feel threatened. It's a very harsh culture for people. Still you have to look with an open mind. Because you have to deal with both the perpetrators and the victims.

A male social worker pointed out that if you leave vulnerable citizens to their own devices some of them will become a nuisance to other people. He said:

They will turn away from society and say: to hell with it. If you don't want to help me I'll look after myself. Like in the US where they have thrice as many people in jail. Or they will join a motor rider gang.

It seems a good idea for social workers to reflect upon the other elements of their philosophy, the parts that go beyond empowerment.

Against 2

I get to the second ring. How do we counter the tendency to go along with the government because of a totally understandable wish to hold on to one's job? I think there's a special responsibility here for elderly social workers. My respondents - most of whom were over forty - had a lot to say about this issue. Some of them gave examples of moments when they had bent the system to make it work for their client. Like this social worker who gave help to psychiatric patients. She said:

A couple of years ago they changed the law for psychiatric patients. Everybody had to buy health insurance, including psychiatric patients. So I found out what would happen. I realized that many of my patients would not buy health insurance because of their illness. I said we should pay attention to that. I wrote a proposal. I proposed that we check their insurance status the moment we admitted them and buy them insurance if they didn't have it. We adapted our organization to support the patients.

(...) When people fall out of the system ... whenever I see that happening I turn to my boss so he can send a signal to health insurers. I turn to colleagues in other organizations. Or I write to the ombudsman. It's up to us to show who can't manage.

My respondents who were over forty remembered how they had learned to be critical. One of them said:

It was very important that you were made critical. You started out as just a student but you were forced to think about societal developments.

Another critical social worker fondly remembered her teacher. She said:

I just keep being critical until I am sacked or till I have another job. That's what I was taught. I remember my teacher who said in class: we are not there to follow the rules, we have to make sure the rules are bent so they become workable. I can still see her stand there and say that.

One respondent observed generational differences. He said:

These days, when I have interns, I notice that I have to say to them: Do you ever read a newspaper? Do you know what's going on? I have an intern who doesn't have a clue about the whole transition. They say: we don't learn that at school. But they don't learn it spontaneously either. I have to teach them. Say to them: this is important; you should know what's going on and how it relates to your work.

Another social worker said:

I think social workers sometimes have to do politics. Do things in organizations, let their voice be heard. Why don't I feel I am forced into a system? Because I never stopped saying why I do things.

One respondent tried to define her own boundaries. She said:

I don't let myself be put in a strait jacket. I think it's good to say: well I get paid for 45 minutes and my conversations with clients usually take an hour. So let's see if I can speed up a little. That's a positive incentive. But I am not going to work in accordance with the system of payment. I look at what the client needs. If the system doesn't fit we need to change it. That's my way of working.

One of my respondents was 63. He thought that his age gave him a lot of latitude. He said:

It's easy for me because I have a couple more years to go. Even if they fire me: no harm done. That's a very privileged position. (...) I think we are facing a challenge. The other day I said this at an internal meeting. I said, we have to oppose our management on occasion because they are blindly following the municipality. They are scared not to get the assignment and they are bossing us around in their turn. We have to stand up and say: this is what our profession can contribute. This is not right manager. Or: this is not right, local government.

I think it would be good to organize forums and opportunities where people can raise doubts about the present policy. Where social workers can meet each other to discuss cases. Where younger social workers can meet older colleagues who usually have a more

secure contract, and who have had more training in being critical. If management turns a blind eye to potentially harmful developments, if municipalities do not want to see the dark sides of their policy decisions one might decide to write an article for a website or a national newspaper and decide who can afford to put his or her name on that.

This is a mission for the profession at large but more especially also for vocational training schools where new social workers are formed who have to learn how to stand up for clients while simultaneously trying to find employment.

Against 1

And then I get to the outer ring. Is there anything we can do to change the reigning paradigm that change is all around us and that organizations have to adapt in order to survive? This is tough, I can tell you that from experience. A couple of times per year I have to teach managers for a couple of days and this is always my message for the first day: there are other things to do when things are changing besides adapting or proactively anticipating the change. You can ignore the changes, stay put, be a beacon of stability or even oppose ongoing developments. I vividly remember one manager who looked at me desperately begging me to stop talking because this shook the foundations of his managerial existence.

So what can we do? I think there are a few things. We can give examples of organizations that adapted to changing circumstances and later had to change back, because the change turned out to be ill advised in the end. High school education in the Netherlands is a case in point. In the nineties of the twentieth century educational experts in the Netherlands decided that schools should offer new ways of learning to accommodate new types of students in a new society. Henceforth teenagers would no longer sit in traditional classrooms taught by traditional teachers in traditional ways. They could decide about their own learning goals and learning methods, work in their own pace and sit in large areas (walls between classrooms were removed). In very extreme cases students met their teacher in September for a brief meeting. The teacher would then tell them: okay boys and girls, this is roughly what you are supposed to learn from the book. You can do it any way you like. I'll see you again before Christmas. Ten years later a parliamentary inquiry revealed huge problems in high school education. The unfortunate schools that had been led by proactive managers who had thought along with governmental plans now were put to shame because - as many school teachers had predicted - most teenagers do not have an innate thirst for knowledge. They are fourteen, they are busy making friends, falling in love, they worry about their appearances and to most of them schoolbooks are things they only open under duress. Educational experts and politicians now found that society needed people who could read and write and do sums and a huge effort was made to re-install traditional teaching. Lucky were the schools that had never bothered to go with the tide, who had just stuck to their own common sense.

Marketization might be another good example. In the nineties this was seen as the cure all for everything. Housing corporations, electricity providers, water providers, the railways and all kind of other public organizations were privatized because of the changing tide. At present our politicians have quite a lot to do to rectify this development; convincing privatized companies that they have to deliver public goods at a reasonable price rather than engage in foreign adventures investing in or buying companies abroad. Also it takes quite a lot of effort to convince the leaders of the privatized public goods companies that they should not earn more than the Dutch prime minister. Many of them had started their

privatized existence with a huge increase of salary. Imagine that public goods providers in the nineties had opposed the then prevailing trend. It would have spared us quite a lot of trouble!

Giving examples of changes that we regretted later on might help us see that accommodating change is not the only choice on the menu. Change may also be ignored, criticized and on occasion opposed. The most important thing to say and to repeat over and over and over again is that many changes are not forces of nature coming upon us. Most changes are man-made. Most changes are choices. Political choices. They have advantages and disadvantages and citizens should be offered a choice. They should not be assured that there are no alternatives because most of the time there are alternatives worthy of consideration. With regard to welfare state retrenchment social workers are the ones who can see the advantages and disadvantages of change most clearly. The rest of us should be able to rely on social workers to show us where policy changes are good and where they go too far, backfire or prove too hard for vulnerable groups. I wish the social workers present here and those who teach them much wisdom, courage and strength to live up to this task.