

The background of the cover is an abstract painting with a rich, textured appearance. It features a central, somewhat circular, light-colored area that resembles a face or a map, surrounded by vibrant, layered colors of red, orange, yellow, and purple. The brushstrokes are visible, giving it a sense of movement and depth.

SABINE VERMEIRE

ROUTLEDGE

**UNRAVELLING TRAUMA
AND WEAVING RESILIENCE
WITH SYSTEMIC AND
NARRATIVE THERAPY**

**Playful Collaborations with Children,
Families and Networks**

THE SYSTEMIC THINKING AND PRACTICE SERIES

Routledge.

This excerpt cannot be shared or used for anything other than personal use

Chapter 5 (Excerpt)

Performing new relational narratives

Sabine Vermeire

Contexts of childhood adversities are often characterised by relational trauma. Important people in their life have hurt the child or were not experienced as present and supportive when needed. This means that feelings of suspicion, insecurity and painful memories got nestled in their relationships. Some children are not inclined to search for emotional support from people that are important to them as they can experience them as threatening and develop decidedly negative ideas about them. Other children cling desperately to adults, while still others are caught in all kinds of ambivalence. Therapeutically it is important to notice and acknowledge the pain of injured relationships and the many struggles that accompany them. We also need to focus on dealing with what have been called the ripple effects through relational networks (Walsh, 2007).

This chapter has one main focus: I hope to show how to make visible again that people still matter to each other and contribute in meaningful ways to the lives of others, increases *a sense of relational agency*, and paves the way for *the performance of new relational narratives*, on the spot. By widening our scope and engaging in conversations with peer groups and communities we can enhance *a sense of belonging* and strengthen processes of resilience within families and carers.

Entangled relationships

Since the age of nine Mauro (11) lives with his maternal grandparents in a small town. His father is in prison as he was involved in all kinds of drug trafficking. His mum became mentally challenged after an overdose three years ago and resides in a secure unit. For years there was domestic violence as well as social and financial problems. His older brother Rico (15) was also placed in kinship care with his grandparents but as he became more and more rebellious his grandparents couldn't handle him any longer. For the last few months he has lived in a youngsters' home. Grandparents blame father for mother's situation and feel very guilty themselves that they couldn't keep Rico at their home. Rico refuses to see them any longer. At the moment they are very worried about Mauro who developed several tics and makes uncontrolled face grimaces. He regularly hides food in his room and he persistently lies about seemingly trivial things. They are convinced he does this intentionally because he is angry at them. In an attempt to have some control, they check all his assets on a daily basis. A few weeks ago it came to a physical pushing and pulling between grandfather and Mauro. Many subjects seem to be off-limits for discussion. Nobody trusts each other anymore. They come for conversations in the hope they can prevent Mauro also having to leave their home.

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

As discussed in Chapter 1, children, youngsters and their parents or carers can become entangled in all kinds of unhelpful relational dances, and other life domains and social relations can get infected by the problems. Rutter (1999) stresses that the reduction of negative chain reactions or an increase of positive chain reactions influences the extent to which the effects of adversity persist over time. He offered some interesting stepping stones for family therapists to enhance resilience processes as resilience may be strongly influenced by people's patterns of interpersonal relationships. Children with a background of violence, abuse or neglect often live in a world that they experience as threatening. Other people are perceived as fundamentally dangerous (Barrett et al., 1996), and relationships are not to be trusted. The steps they take evoke (re)actions from the people around them that only seem to make things worse. Parents and other carers experience a loss of control (Vermeire, 2020). Losing a 'sense of relational agency' often boils down to resorting to coercive acts of influence, with parents, carers as well as children trying to control each other. These acts of control often have unintended alienating consequences within significant relationships (De Mol et al., 2018; Omer, 2004; Alon & Omer, 2006). As the grandparents start to check Mauro's bedroom, interrogate him, etc., and Mauro keeps his mouth shut more and more, hides all kinds of things, they become more and more stuck with each other. In their relational dances and interaction patterns they continuously construct meanings about each other, themselves, the problems and their lives that seem to go in a negative direction. The way each one involved will name or label the difficulties can evoke and reinforce a whole range of images, ideas and perspectives of the child as well as of their (grand)parents, carers and significant others (Vermeire, 2020). This also goes for the possibilities and impossibilities of their relationships with each other and with the outside world (Weingarten, 2003; Dallos, 2006). Children and their network risk getting stuck in 'negative identity and relationship conclusions', which consequently also limit their sense of agency (De Mol et al., 2018).

Mauro has been diagnosed with a 'reactive attachment disorder'. School and grandparents also want a diagnostic investigation into possible autism in the hope this will help them in finding solutions for the problems. The fear of the grandparents is that the genetic predetermination of his father and mother will cause him to evolve in the same direction, especially now that this has already happened to his older brother. Mauro is increasingly seen as destined to go wrong. Grandparents feel completely desperate and incapable. Mauro himself gets more and more disconnected from his grandparents, family, schoolfriends and experiences himself as a burden to everyone. He no longer experiences any grip on the problems and a sense of mattering seems completely lost.

Each one, in their efforts to cope, becomes increasingly entangled in patterns with often rejecting or ignoring effects that tend to separate them from each other. Their focus becomes mostly on 'what' and 'who' is the problem and in line with this 'what' and 'who' has to change. Mauro has to change, has to be treated and helped to change. Each step each one takes as efforts to change for the better, is informed by previous experiences, interpersonal understandings and many social and cultural instructions on how to be a good (grand)parent or (grand)child in these situations, how to deal with trauma and these painful family issues, etc. (Madsen, 2007). Once they get caught in these destructive spirals, the concerns, relational

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

involvements and constructive contributions to each other's lives are obscured. So an important step in our therapeutic process is finding ways to stop these negative chain reactions and enhance their sense of agency and mattering by making them visible and tangible again.

Looking for common ground

During the first half hour, the conversation does not seem to go anywhere. Mauro refuses to sit down and keeps leaning against the wall, staring at the ceiling, half listening to the torrent of discomforts and complaints from his grandparents. The social worker from the foster care service desperately tries to soothe the grandparents and to bring out a few positive things about Mauro. Although sentences such as 'This ranting must stop' and 'This is not helpful' race through my head, I cannot find a starting point that will get another conversation going. Before I know it, I am part of this useless dance.

What (grand)parents or carers put on the table is an endless list of problems in relation to the child or youngster and of how hard they tried already to change the child's mind. This list is interspersed at length with massive examples. The traumatic past or attachment problems seem to have become the explanation par excellence for the difficulties and lead to the compelling conclusion that 'this problematic behaviour has to stop'. Often they hope I can make clear to the child that it cannot go on like this and that I can change the child or stop the problems. They no longer notice that their tirade makes the child cringe and drop out of the conversation. Just as the child no longer notices how frenetically their carers try to keep connection. Besides a child in need, I also meet (grand)parents/carers in need.

When I just try to stop these grandparents' 'ranting', this can easily be understood as calling them to order and in its effect it can be felt as not taking them seriously or not believing them. Before we know it we can end up in a dismissive struggle. To them, it may seem that I am putting the best interests of the child first. When I give (grand)parents all the space they need to express their worries and to explain what the child does wrong, I risk losing the child and the impression may arise that I am taking sides with them. So, instead of focusing on the often dramatic and problematic content of what grandparents bring to the conversations, I try to pick up their relational involvements and worries in this list of complaints (Rober, 2017; Vermeire, 2020).

Dear grandparents, may I interrupt you for a moment? All these examples and all these frustrations are these expressing how extremely concerned you both are in relation to Mauro? Do they also express something about how important he is to both of you and how hard you wish things to go well and differently between you all?

Both grandmother and grandfather sit back a little and take a deep breath. They nod in agreement. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that Mauro, for the first time, curiously turns towards us.

Mauro, can I ask you, can you somewhat understand that your grandparents are concerned? Are their worries justified? Are there also some worries occupying your mind?

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks.* p128-145. Routledge.

M (a bit acrid): Of course but they have to stop being on top of me.

In my questioning I am hoping to find some common ground from which we can start to talk and reflect together instead of being locked up in single monologues and just focusing on 'how to stop the problematic behaviour'. Instead of losing each other in different perspectives, stories and actions we are on the lookout for shared understandings. By bringing their mutual relational involvements and connected stories to the foreground we can maybe start an exploration of what is bothering each of them. In this exploration we may also find commonalities in the difficulties or problem definitions. Hopefully this can also invite (grand)parents or carers into a collective, alternative investigation of the perspective of the child and create new or alternative understandings. Recent scientific research shows how 'not understood behaviour' of (foster) children forms a big challenge to carers. It appears crucial when fostering traumatised children that carers have the ability to understand the child's experiences and emotions (Carolien Konijn, 2021).

In conversations we very quickly lose these common grounds and the focus goes easily to an examination of the individual person who seems to carry all the problems. Without interrupting our conversation, I write 'Shared Concerns' in large letters on the flipchart.

A collective investigation of relationships and social worlds

When one becomes an isolated agent in the family or in another close relationship, the estrangement from one's wishes, intentions, emotions and thoughts increases while the sense of relational agency decreases (De Mol et al., 2018). Although they are depending on the support that carers offer, children can still learn to give meaning to their own feelings and those of others, and generate stories from this (Dallos, 2006). That is why we, together with the significant people of their network, try to find and create a shared language, a common ground to reflect upon and to make sense of what happens or happened in their life.

In the family therapy room, there are some toys and on the wall are some drawings of other children, sometimes with messages to other therapy visitors. One protest poster grabs Mauro's attention. 'Parents have to stop quarrelling in the presence of a child', written by Chelsea, nine years old, whose parents are involved in a divorce with high conflict. While the tics are all around and he is still grimacing, Mauro asks who made it and why. Also grandparents' attention now goes to the drawing. After shortly giving some explanation about the drawing and Chelsea's intentions the following conversation starts:

S: Are there some things, just like Chelsea, you would like to stop, if you could? Some things that seem to ruin things? For Chelsea the quarrels evoked a lot of stress and it made people who are important to her become further away. Is there something that removes you from beloved people?

M (looking to the ground he mumbles): The question marks.

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

S: What do you mean by question marks? ... How should we imagine them? Big question marks? Various question marks? Dark question marks? Unresolvable question marks?

M (lifting his head, and throwing in verbal tics): Fire-red question marks, Argh! Orange question marks, Argh! Poisonous green question marks, Argh! Even exploding question marks!

S: How long are these question marks already present?

M: Since mum is in hospital, but also since dad is in prison and they became enormous when Rico left the house.

S: Where have they nestled themselves?

M: Mostly in my head but sometimes they are everywhere. No one can control them. They jump around all the time.

S (addressing grandparents): Did you have any clue Mauro had question marks occupying his head and life?

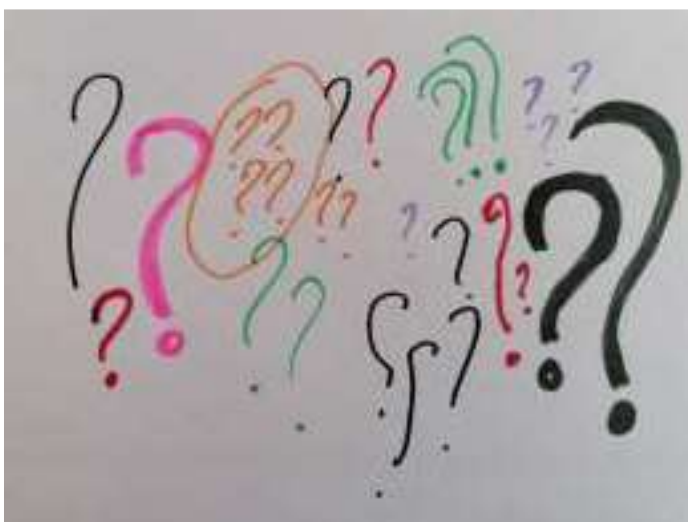
GF (grandfather): No, I didn't know but honestly, I am not surprised.

S: Oh, do you also have some question marks in your life as you say you aren't surprised.

GF: Of course. Doesn't everyone have question marks?

noindent

While further talking with grandfather, I ask Mauro to draw his question marks on the flip chart in the right colours. Did he know grandfather also had question marks? And what about grandmother and the foster care worker? Can we first start an investigation about Mauro's question marks?



Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

Language creates personal and relational realities, and by giving words to the clients' 'insides' they acquire the right to exist within their social and relational world (Madsen, 2007). By collaborative searching and finding words for a person's worries, emotions, thoughts, etc., persons can feel what they feel. By exploring and developing collective language as co-researchers social sharing of experiences can take place with the significant people in their life (De Mol & Rimé, 2017; Freedman & Combs, 2002).

Together we explore the question marks. What is good food for the question marks? When are they more or less present? Are some question marks more compelling than others? On the flip chart we add some more question marks that have a grip on Mauro and grandfather suggests to cluster them. Some question marks are about his brother, some about his mum, some about his dad, grandparents ... but some are also about the future in relation to himself: 'Will I also be sent away?', 'Am I abnormal?', 'Will this ever stop?', 'Am I so bad that nobody wants me?' At this very moment these last question marks hurt the most and we discover these make him very nervous and anxious.

Suddenly Mauro asks what the question marks of grandmother are about and what they look like.

GM: I am so worried about how we can make things better. What can we do to help you feel better is a big question mark! Day and night it fills my stomach.

S: Is this question mark also accompanied by nervousness and fear?

Click here to enter text.

A recognition of feelings of being disadvantaged is facilitated between the child-(grand)parents-carers. By collective externalising, the hierarchies of worries and disadvantages can become visible but also the different ambivalences and dilemmas between family members as well as some common difficulties. It even makes it possible to explore whether some of the 'question marks' are linked with each other.

This collective naming creates a larger common ground between them. Acknowledgement of each other's feelings and thoughts from this common ground becomes possible while differences can be listened to and explored. At the same time it allows them to have a dialogue about the possible effects the difficulties have on each other, themselves and their lives (De Mol et al., 2018). Circular questioning in an externalised way can bring an order but also open new perspectives on the problems and their relational effects (Tomm, 1987, 1988).

S: What happens when Mauro's question marks meet the question marks of grandfather or grandmother?

Mauro looks at his grandparents but grandfather insists asking what Mauro thinks.

M: Quarrels? Doing stupid things? You become angry. ... Sometimes I would like to disappear.

GF: I think we become a 'pain in the ass' for each other.

GM (looks scathingly at grandfather): 'Don't say it like that'.

GF: I think it's true.

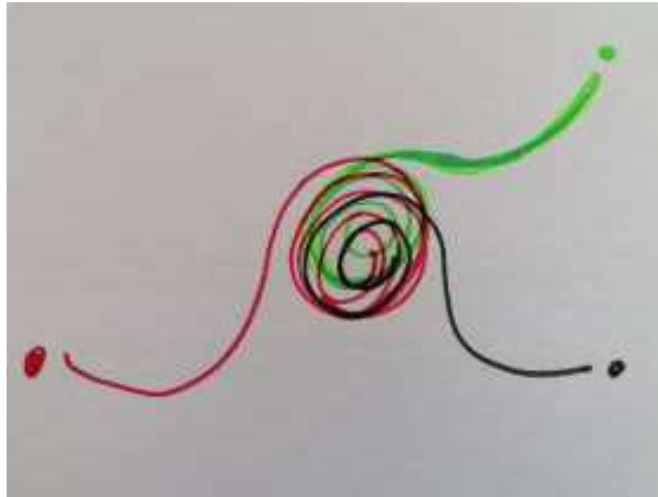
Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

M: The question marks get entangled.

Click here to enter text.

And while drawing he proceeds:

M: It is like in Minecraft when the night comes. The night is full of zombies, witches, Endermen, skeletons, spiders and creepers. You have to make sure you are safe so nothing can happen to you. Sometimes I am afraid we will all change into zombies.



Click here to enter text.

Everybody looks surprised. We all agree this is a scary idea and none of us want this to happen.

S: What kind of efforts have you done until now to deal with all these question marks or to keep the zombies, witches, etc. and fear at a distance?

Mauro explains that he created a special house under the ground in Minecraft that is perfectly safe and no one can destroy. A special friend from a previous school helped him to create this house. Grandfather remarks he has never seen this house. Proudly Mauro shows on his smartphone some pictures and explains the characteristics of the different rooms.

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*



This kind of collaborative research invites them to talk and relate with each other differently. It unfolds small shifts in either images, beliefs and actions of one another, that create new foundations for different ways of relating to each other (Vermeire, 2020).

Is there anything you already discovered that is helpful or makes the question marks smaller? Are there special shared moments that can be an antidote to the question marks?

New ways of mutual understanding can also open possibilities for more collective agency while new relational dances can emerge.

As we find out that playing Minecraft and his hiding place are all about 'finding rest', mainly 'rest in his head', grandfather asks if he can help improve his hiding place in Minecraft. Mauro seems very pleased with this proposal and together we think a bit further about what else could bring some calmness and rest. Grandmother replies that in moments they were jointly making apple pie the question marks seemed to disappear to the background and that she earlier really enjoyed having Mauro around in the kitchen.

Small sparkles of how to make more constructive contributions to one's life become visible. Having a sense of relational agency means that a person has a feeling and an awareness of making a difference in the relationship (De Mol et al., 2018). That one as an agent can add something that is meaningful for the other, for oneself and for the relationship (Bertrando & Arcelloni, 2014; De Mol & Buysse, 2008).

From immobilising verbs towards new actions

Children, families, communities, cultures have taken-for-granted customs or ideas on how to deal with problems, difficult (negative) emotions, stagnant thoughts or painful questions. One way to scrutinise such actions is to have a closer look at the verbs people use in relation to these problems. The Dutch word for 'verb' is 'werk-woord' which could be literally translated as 'work-word'. This suggests that we can conceive of verbs as being at work. Unaware they

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

could take us in a certain direction. So we can try to find out what kind of work they are doing, and what kind of effects (limitations as well as possibilities) they are bringing about.

S: Mauro, when you are in your house in Minecraft what do you try to do with these question marks? Or what is your ambition with this house and the question marks?

M: I try to hide from the question marks. In my secret room I stick my tongue out at them because they can't bother me any longer.

S: Hiding and sticking your tongue out, can you demonstrate this to all of us, how does this look like?

Mauro jumps under the table in the corner of the therapy room and sticks out his tongue while saying 'Blargh'.

S: Do you have any idea how grandmother and grandfather try to deal with painful question marks?

M (still sitting under the table): She tries to knit them away.

noindent

Grandma has to laugh and again I ask if he can demonstrate to us how grandma is knitting the question marks away. He enthusiastically sits on a chair pretending to knit and constantly shakes his head, muttering to himself.

GM: 'Yes, this is exactly what happens'.

Together we explore how grandfather deals with difficult question marks. 'I try to kick them out. No one should interfere with our life'.

...

S: Besides hiding, knitting away, kicking them ... what are we supposed to do normally with questions and queries? In the classroom, for example?

M: Raise your finger and give the right answer!

Click here to enter text.

Together, we discover that answering correctly is rewarded but that the questions everyone struggles with do not have correct answers. On the contrary. They all agree that each one of them is struggling on their own and that their responses sometimes are helpful for a while but not in the long term. I wonder aloud what would happen if we would 'share the question marks' (as we are already doing 😊). A bit later we also try to find out what 'searching for answers', 'puzzling answers' or maybe even more 'knitting answers' would look like. Or are there some verbs that feel more appropriate?

Before we know it Mauro makes a new drawing on the flip chart.

Vermeire, S. (2022). Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.



In our therapeutic work we conceive of language as deeply metaphorical. Metaphors can make themselves felt physically as they are rooted in physical experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Rucińska et al., 2021). Words can give us something to hold on to, but at the same time they can push or lure us in certain directions. Language and communication is an activity. Verbs in combination with problem names can be seen as actions that open up a onidententspace, but sometimes also close off certain routes and can make us feel trapped (Vermeire & Van den Berge, 2021). It can even become ‘fun’ but also meaningful in doing these verbs together as embodied actions, like I asked Mauro to demonstrate grandma knitting.

The verbs associated with problems offer a gateway to approach experiences differently and provoke new embodied experiences. Instead of seeing metaphors as linguistic ‘comparisons’ in which the meaning of the metaphor is sought or found in the comparison itself, we embrace an embodied and enactive perspective that holds that the meaning of metaphors is always situated in unique interactions and contexts (cf. Rucińska & Reijmers, 2014; Rucińska et al., 2021). Metaphors arise where people are connected and can be seen as tools that people use in their interactions and communication with each other. They can become invitations for ‘language in action’ (Wilson, 2005) and ‘pretend play’ (Holzman, 2009). We create a context in which the child, the (grand)parents and the carers can explore, experiment, share and find new perspectives or try out new possibilities for action and connection, strengthening a sense of relational agency. Talking and acting together around and from these metaphors is a form of participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) that lets them experience that they matter.

Question marks do not fall out of the sky

Sometimes the questions, worries, emotions and thoughts run in circles. They are constantly racing through their bodies and heads and infiltrate their relationships (De Mol & Rimé, 2017). Children (and families) can no longer contextualise their emotions and bodily (re)actions. The instruction often becomes that they have to regulate their emotions. In a predominant sense this boils down to the idea of controlling emotions. We prefer to look at emotion regulation as relational and social and we try to understand emotions as both interpersonal and contextual. Rimé (2009) points out that emotions are social as we are **Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks.* p128-145. Routledge.**

strongly inclined to share our stories, our emotions, whenever we are moved or touched personally by events. Therapeutically we thus need to involve significant people, such as (grand)parents or carers in this process and try to understand this in their social-cultural contexts. Rimé (2009) emphasises in his social sharing of emotion (SSE) theory it isn't sufficient that emotions are recognised, understood and validated by others but also that they can be understood and linked with the broader social context. Denborough (2008) emphasises the importance of broadening the horizon of the origins of the problems and emotions by taking broader material conditions, discourses and social issues under consideration.

Next time, grandparents and Mauro come for conversations I remark that probably each one of their question marks do not fall out of the sky. Which questions that trouble them or they have no answers for are actually asked by whom? Are there questions that they see in the eyes of others, but may not be asked out loud? Do they sometimes get remarks or receive tacit comments that upset them?

Almost immediately Mauro tells us he hates 'Mother's Day'. In school every child is expected to make a present and to share stories of how their mother cares for them. He always freezes in his seat, anxiously waiting for the teacher to ask him this question. He adds: 'I just want an ordinary family. I want to be normal'.

Children and young people very quickly feel that theirs is an exceptional family. Any statement or question, implicit or explicit, about families, about their family or about a particular family member can be heard as a statement about themselves.

S: Could we collect some more of these questions or remarks that are bothering you and maybe are good food for the feeling of not being normal?

noindent

On the table we put all the people who are part of these dialogues. We write the questions on post-its and stick them next to them. They can be questions from classmates, or children from the neighbourhood, or from involved adults. Some questions are actually asked of them, others might just not be asked of them. (Where has your brother gone? Why don't you live with your parents? Is your father a real criminal? Did he have guns? Why isn't your mum coming to your birthday party? ...).

People are constantly preoccupied with who they are to each other and constantly make statements about each other, often unintentionally and without being aware of it. Laing et al. (1966) referred to this as interpersonal perceptions. Children and their family constantly receive impressions of who they are in the eyes of others, their family and their community. Their self-perception is a temporary synthesis of their view of themselves with the view others and society have of them, which arises in an ongoing social dialogue in which they participate in active and meaningful ways (Gergen, 2009; Faes, 2005; Vermeire & van Hennik, 2017). Children and families in such contexts often reach conclusions about themselves and their families as failing, abnormal or wrong.

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

GF (pointing to what appears on the table): That's why I try to kick the question marks out. I want to protect Mauro from all these questions and painful remarks. I, too, have a hard time accepting that his father is in prison. I am still furious about what he did to our daughter. I wish he could disappear from this globe. How could it go so wrong? What have we done wrong? I agree with Mauro: I wished we were a 'normal family'. Sometimes I really get angry when the neighbour shows off holiday pictures of her grandchildren at some exotic travel destination.

[Click here to enter text.](#)

As several family therapists (De Mol & Rimé 2017; Walsh, 2006) emphasise, it can be useful to explore with children, parents, carers the complexities of their social relationships not only inside the family but also outside the family and ask if there is someone in that context who can recognise something of these complexities (De Mol & Rimé 2017; Walsh, 2006). By exploring together with the family the relational complexities that exist for each family member, the family is approached as a resource and not as the problem, which facilitates processes of recognition and responsiveness.

While doing so we are contextualising the question marks and feelings of the child and the parents or carers within the many relationships, social representations and broader social discourses. Just like 'pushing and pulling' beliefs and norms about 'good families', 'family relationships', 'motherhood', 'fatherhood', 'being a good son or daughter', etc. become more and more visible. Together they can reflect on alternative positioning or new ways of relating and even rehearse alternative responses.

Re-membering the body

Not only can feelings become contextualised but also bodily (re)actions not understood like bedwetting, tics, panic attacks, etc., can be collectively explored. Not as an ultimate explanation but more as part of our participatory sense-making process and becoming a solid team.

I ask grandparents and Mauro if they sometimes notice a connection between the many annoying questions, the feelings of not being 'normal' and the tics and grimaces. Are there moments the grimaces are definitely present and don't let themselves be controlled? Together we find out that class moments when he has to perform or present something, but also moments on the school bus or unknown visitors at grandparents place are ideal contexts for the tics and grimaces to appear. Grandfather remarks that he noticed that when Mauro fears that the subject of his mum or dad will come up, this is also a good breeding ground. Grandmother continues: 'And for sure, the weeks and days before we are going to visit his mum in hospital'.

Children's felt connection with their bodies can be under pressure or lost altogether after radical or traumatic experiences or in contexts of distress. The body starts reacting uninvitedly and seems to go its own way completely autonomously. They experience the various body reactions as uncontrollable and incomprehensible while they often get understood by others as

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

‘residual symptoms’ of the trauma or typical aspects of diagnoses (Fisher, 2005). The idea that they can control their bodies if they really want to and try hard enough sometimes puts extra pressure on children in these contexts. Here, not only alienation from the people around them, but also from their bodies may arise.

Mauro tells us he hates the moments classmates ask why he is blinking his eyes or making these strange faces. That’s the moment it becomes even worse although he does his best to stop it. Also, grandmother sometimes gets nervous of the grimaces and makes unhelpful remarks while asking him to stop. Step by step they realise they get in similar entanglements as with the question marks.

These children sometimes start to ‘mistrust’ and even ‘hate’ their own bodies. Their body becomes like an enemy. A sense of failure or worthlessness comes to the fore. Engaging everyone in a collective exploration of the bodily (re)actions in contexts and relations can open opportunities to reconnect children with their bodies. Tom Andersen (in Shotter, 2010) invites family members to question the body as a valuable partner in our conversations and asks, ‘What is the body saying if it could speak?’ We are not searching for ‘underlying emotions’ or ‘the right deeper meaning’ since we cannot know from the outside what the body is saying. We rather hope to unfold new felt perspectives.

After inventorying the bodily reactions, I ask if we could listen very carefully what the body maybe would report about the situation Mauro is in at that moment.

M: Watch out! Danger!

GM: Does it warn of the annoying questions?

GF: Maybe it is more that you don’t know what is going to come?

S: At such moments are you listening to your body or just getting into a fight with it?

M: Don’t know??? I just try to stop it! I only wish I could disappear!

[Click here to enter text.](#)

Listening carefully and ‘understanding’ what the body might say is an active process between the child, the therapist and many people involved in which new meanings can arise that are different from the original meanings of the child and loved ones. In doing so, we become a mutually supportive team.

Scientific research found that children in war zones hiding in bomb shelters often make all kinds of movements while adults cramp up and make themselves small. Children who make these movements seem to have less post-traumatic stress and move on quicker with daily living (Berceli, 2008).

Inspired by this research I ask if these bodily reactions can have the ambition to blow away the tension in order to keep going on. In saying this I ask grandmother what her body does when pressure comes in and what her bodily ways of responding are. It seems she used to bite her lip, sometimes to the point of bleeding, but now she sometimes picks at her fingers in an unconscious way.

...

I tell them that I have a colleague who sometimes asks people to move their bodies as ‘a double duvet flapping in the wind’ when distress comes in (thanks to Renild for this wonderful idea). Or would the idea of another colleague, Els, be more helpful as she asks to do ‘The

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

shake your body’? I wonder how this would look for them? How can they collaborate in this with each other and their body?

I am the only one on this planet ...

Children and youngsters feel isolated and alienated from the circles they live in and the conviction that nobody can understand what they feel, think or do, can get deeply nestled inside them (Vermeire, 2017). They often feel questioning eyes poking in their direction or are actually asked all sorts of questions about their situation, to which they are unable to give an answer. Although these children themselves have questions about what happened to them in their lives, mostly they don't ask these questions freely, or they even stop asking questions out of fear of receiving answers that may be too painful (Vermeire, 2020). Sometimes they became quite sure of their own negative conclusions.

Mauro can't believe that there are other children struggling with all these family complexities and not knowing how to deal with these questions. He is surprised and looks at me unbelievably when I tell him that I know several other children living away from home and struggling with 'family difficulties'. I ask if he is interested in questioning these children or youngsters. He immediately replies: 'Do you also know children whose parents stay in prison or in hospital?' We prepare a questionnaire based on what occupies his mind and what we already explored and discussed together with his grandparents. We come up with the following questions: Do you sometimes have other people asking annoying questions or looking in your direction in a strange way? Do you sometimes have question marks that make you worry? Do you know good tricks to stop this worrying? Do you sometimes do weird things when the question marks are around? Do you miss you mum or dad? Or your siblings? Do you sometimes think it's all your fault? The moment grandparents get to know we are preparing a questionnaire, they are happy to add some questions that concern them. Are your carers sometimes worried and how do they express these worries? Do you know what helps to feel okay with your carers or the people you stay with?

Over the years, I have compiled a list of possible interviewees for such surveys. At the end of each therapeutic process I ask children or families if I can contact them later on to interview them about their experiences in order to help other children. They often feel honoured when they are actually invited for such an interview. The way they want to contribute is thoroughly negotiated. Sometimes I also ask trainees of mine to anonymously interview children they meet and bring back the answers to such questions.

Mauro and I interview several children and youngsters 'live' as well as by video call and e-mail. Mauro is impressed to learn that a lot of children live in comparable situations. Discovering that other children and young people are prepared to answer his questions surprises him even more. He finds recognition for the worries and suffering, reassurance for not being 'too abnormal' and inspiration in the actions of several children that help them to persist (Vermeire, 2020).

I meet Rayan (17) via video calling. The conversation is recorded so that I can watch it later with Mauro. Rayan's mother works as a prostitute (his word) and lives on the other side of

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

the country. He has not met her for years. He says he is often nervous when his mother is mentioned. Especially when a Facebook post of hers appears. Recently, he saw a picture of her in a restaurant together with his stepbrothers. This felt like a dagger through his heart. His foster parents feel like his 'real parents' to him, even though there was a period in which he did 'crazy things' like cutting up his clothes and distributing absurd photos. This made things very difficult between them. Rayan has been writing rap songs for a year now. This helps him a lot to sort out his thoughts and share his anger. His friends now know that he sometimes has hard times. They give him a pat on the back and that helps.

Through the other children's stories, local knowledges and life-acquired skills, Mauro's experiences become recognised and acknowledged. One of the aims of such work is that Mauro can feel a sense of belonging with important peer groups and the broader community. This aligns with the ideas of Reynolds (2012, p. 23) to create a 'community of solidarity' so people become 'allies'.

Two weeks later Mauro receives a special rap song written and recorded by Rayan. He cherishes the text and listens several times a day to the recorded version. Together, we will explore what resonates most with him and what gives him something to hold on to.

Lisa (19) says in response to the questionnaire that there was a time when she was constantly in a kind of struggle with her foster parents. As soon as they started to trust each other a bit more and she felt she had 'some breathing space', they settled down a bit. She remembers how things really changed when her foster parents stopped warning her not to become like her mother, and they started to appreciate some aspects of her mother.

Lisa's stories and inspirations help Mauro's grandma to talk differently. She asks new, more connecting questions about his father. 'What does having a dad in prison really mean to him? Can he still handle the situation in his mind?'

These 'research projects and interviews' not only help people to develop new or alternative perspectives on the difficulties and their responses but it also enhances, in multiple ways, a sense of connectedness and a sense of belonging. The position of 'investigator', 'interviewer' or 'videographer' offers the child and its family a safe place in which to stand and ask the questions that occupy their mind. At the same time this position opens up the possibility of hearing different or even new stories. Other children may prefer to construct a questionnaire for a glossy magazine and do the interviews from the position of a reporter. It is important to let at least three voices speak and be heard to prevent the given answers from becoming truths. Inviting different people brings in multiple realities and perspectives. This creates freedom of choice and activates reflection (Fredman, 2014). Knowledge is always situated. We can bring in different kinds of knowledge to produce a many-voiced, polyphonic conversation (Gergen, 1999; Vermeire, 2017). Expert knowledge as well as local knowledge can be voiced.

We need to discuss thoroughly whose voice and knowledge we want to invite into the room. We will ask the child (and family members) whose ideas they're most interested in, or whose

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

voices they would love to hear. Each voice has a different weight, a different value and a different meaning for the child. We can listen to real or imaginary voices. We can invite them 'live' in the therapy room, we can go out on the street, or we can make questionnaires and send them around through the internet. We can question persons closely involved (family, friends) or complete strangers; peers or buddies, cuddly toys or idols, or people in specific positions such as police, judges or psychiatrists (Vermeire, 2017).

- *Xander (Chapter 1) had a lot of questions about 'borderline', the medicines that his mum had to take and if there were some tricks not to get borderline yourself. He didn't want to question his mum's doctor because he didn't trust her. She would give answers just to reassure him. Together we interviewed a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and the sister of a person diagnosed with borderline. We discovered through the responses that he knew already a lot of tricks to stay on track.*
- *Lisa was struggling with diabetes (Vermeire & Van den Berge, 2021) and together we interviewed some people about diabetes, the fear of needles, how to co-operate with your body and how parents or carers respond to such medical issues in some helpful but also unhelpful ways.*
- *John whose father stepped out of life, interviewed people about all kinds of emotions in these contexts and how to save memories of someone who died. As one of his aims was to become a policeman, we even interviewed two policemen on these subjects. It helped him to develop a new kind of emotion theory.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-EgBNofpu0>, Vermeire, 2017)

...

Ever widening circles

By collecting all these ideas, listening to them and thinking about them, new actions become conceivable and can be undertaken.

A few weeks later, Mauro surprises us all by telling he wrote a letter to his two best school mates (inspired by what Rayan had said). He explained to them why he hates birthday parties or talking about family holidays and how his body sometimes is protesting to 'family talk'. Although it makes him sad he doesn't want them to stop sharing stories about their mum and dad because then he would feel even more pitiful.

At the end of his letter, he asked: Do you want to stay my friend forever?

Yes No

Please, cross out what is not correct!

As soon as new ways of relating start to appear and relational meanings are expanded we invite Mauro and his grandparents to widen the circles of important others who get to know about their worries, challenges. As such we encourage them to regain even more relational and collective agency.

Grandfather and Mauro have a conversation with the football coach about how he can feel more part of the team. Mauro explains to the coach how difficult it is to hear all those other

Vermeire, S. (2022). *Unravelling Trauma and weaving resilience with systemic and narrative therapy. Playful collaborations with children, families and networks. p128-145. Routledge.*

fathers encouraging their child from the side line on Saturday morning matches. Together they agree on a secret code language as special support during the match. They also agree that the coach will inform Mauro's father in prison about his progress in football.

By letting the stories and ideas circulate amongst other people involved it then becomes a performance of meaning (Freeman et al., 1997).

Mauro leaves a message in the therapy room for other children and youngsters. On the board he writes in big letters 'Never give up! When you are sad, tell a friend'. He also adds that anyone can contact him when they have questions.

At this stage Mauro is no longer positioned as a child in need but as someone who can make valuable contributions to the lives of other children or families. He has knowledge to share that can be helpful to others. This is also in line with the ideas of Myerhoff (2007): the suffering wasn't for nothing; it can be meaningful to others. This holds true for grandparents too who re-found a sense of mattering. Together, step by step, they create a network of resilience.