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Accompanying parents through early childhood: The pastoral work of Mothers' and Fathers' Advisors

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Abstract

This paper explores expert guidance of parenting in Switzerland and discusses the work of the mothers' and fathers' advisors (MVBs), a state-funded service providing counselling to parents of preschool children. The data presented here draws upon ethnographic research which investigates parenting as a site of 'governance'. Based on semi-structured interviews as well as participant observation with MVBs and parents, this paper examines (power) relationships between early childhood experts and parents. The findings demonstrate that the practices deemed appropriate for the surveillance and guidance of parenting today are a clear example of what Michel Foucault dubbed 'pastoral power' and include the gathering and archiving of information, as well as hierarchical observation. Reconnecting insecure or overly intellectual mothers with their 'maternal instincts', which some advisors felt were at risk of being lost, involves the facilitation of technologies of self. The paper also explores 'resistance' against pastoral care, which is not necessarily perceived as well-intentioned or helpful by parents, who may strive not to implement advice or completely reject 'accompaniment' by advisors.

Keywords: parenting; early childhood; pastoral power; governmentality; advising

1 Introduction

> I am not exactly a friend, but I am friendly, nice, just as we should treat children. It does not mean that we don't set boundaries, we do set boundaries, but more in a nice tone, just being friendly. Kind of like: 'Did you notice that you feel better now?' Just saying in a reassuring manner, that she [the mother] is doing it well, and what she could do on top of that, so that things will go even better. (MVB Nina, recorded interview)

In the quote above, a *Mütter- und Väterberaterin* (mothers' and fathers' advisor, 'MVB') describes the way she converses with clients. She stresses her gentle, encouraging way of speaking to parents, which she compares to the ideal handling of children by adults. Her counsel, she claims, aims to improve the childrearing skills of a mother, whom she asks – at least in her example – to reflect on whether she is feeling better having implemented her advice. The *Mütter- und Väterberatung* (Mothers' and Fathers' Counselling, 'the MVB') oper-

ates as a state-funded service in the field of parental education and preventative healthcare in Switzerland and provides counselling to parents of young children free of charge. MVBs often describe their work as 'accompanying and supporting families on their paths', while being able to offer individualised expert guidance. 'Getting into families' before problems arise is a major concern of many MVBs.

This paper explores expert guidance of parenting in Switzerland in early childhood and discusses the work of the MVB, whose publicly-stated mission is to counsel parents with different childrearing related issues, while providing them with 'security' as well as childrearing skills (MVB Leimental, n.d.; MVB Region Brugg, n.d.). By describing the range of tasks that MVBs engage in as well as their perception of their role as advisors and their interactions with parents, this paper gives insights into the technologies of power at work in the landscape of early childhood programmes. Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' – through which populations can be governed – and his concept of 'pastoral power' (Foucault, 2009) represent the main focus of this analysis.

Practices developed within the Christian pastorate, such as confessing, serve as 'templates for governing conduct in other spheres' today (Mutch, 2016, p. 268). Modern modes of pastoral power are orientated towards 'salvation', such as wellbeing, longevity, economic security, or safety in the mortal world. In a secularized state, pastoral power 'officials' take the shape of, for example, social workers, who act as guiding 'pastors' and embrace as well as define the proper concerns of individual clients for the benefit of the whole community (Foucault, 1982, p. 784; 2009, p. 126; Nadesan, 2008, p. 24). The normalization and stimulation of the voluntary use of the MVB aims to avoid coercive child protection interventions, such as mandatory home visits by MVBs or – as a last resort – removing children from their families. Thus, it represents a 'preventive' approach to child protection (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011, p. 69), through the development of the MVB service, whose advisors offer long-term support to families with young children and which assumes that the wellbeing of children is an aim shared by the state and its citizens who are parents.[1]

2 Methods

The paper is based on a PhD research project exploring parenting in Switzerland. The data was collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Switzerland between March 2019 and March 2021. Eighteen MVB participants from different cantons were recruited via email and then interviewed in advice centres, after having given their written informed consent. The interviews were semi-structured, with 12 guiding questions that revolved around the tasks of MVBs and their relationships to parents. Two MVBs were accompanied throughout their working day for participant observation during consultations and a home visit. Furthermore, MVB reports, leaflets, websites, and job advertisements were reviewed to gain a thorough understanding of the organisation's aims, approaches, and services. In addition, a semi-structured interview was carried out with 24 mothers and two fathers who had at least one

[1] This paper does not aim to undermine the importance of public childcare services, which can prove invaluable to parents and children in need of assistance. The MVB also has the important function to prevent or disclose cases of child neglect or abuse.

child under the age of five, who were recruited through different channels, such as flyers distributed through MVBs as well as parenting online fora. Most of these parents were also interviewed for a second time online during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021.

3 Policy and early childhood

In *Governing the Soul*, Nikolas Rose characterizes childhood as the 'most intensively governed sector' of a person's life (Rose, 1999, p. 124). Childrearing, according to Rose, is linked to the 'destiny of the nation and the responsibilities of the state' (Rose, 1999, p. 123). This statement still holds true today. Schooling has been compulsory in Western states since the 19th century and, more recently, certain paediatric check-ups have become obligatory in several German states. In Switzerland, free services such as the MVB or home-visiting midwives providing postnatal care, offer new parents support as soon as their baby is born.[2]

Early childhood became a focal point of Swiss family policy in 2019 and is the subject of several recent parliamentary initiatives to expand early childhood programmes in order to ensure children's rights and protection from the moment of birth (Aebischer, 2019; Wasserfallen, 2019). In 2019, the Swiss UNESCO Commission published a report on early childhood, which they defined as a time in which the 'groundwork for the future of an individual is laid' (Stern et al., 2019, p. 13, my translation). This kind of phrasing is ubiquitous in early childhood policy documents and writings on parental education. Adequate early childhood education and care, argues the Commission, are an investment (by the state) in the future: children benefiting from early childhood programmes will achieve a higher level of education and will therefore not only be healthier, but also engage in fewer criminal activities. Thus, as adults they will be less of a burden on the health, social, and penal system and will contribute a higher tax revenue. Another stated benefit of early childhood programmes is the boosting of 'parental competences', which have a 'long-term and positive influence on the emotional and cognitive development of children' (Stern et al., 2019, p. 14, my translation). Thus, it is not only childhood that is governed, but also – and necessarily – parenting.

Studies of social work services argue that, since the end of the 20th century, policy makers in European states have abandoned a 'controlling' and 'repressive' child protection discourse[3] and moved towards a child welfare discourse. This approach is framed as taking a 'supportive' and 'empowering' approach towards families, in which social workers play a major role (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011, p. 69). In contrast to earlier 'coercive' measures, social workers are viewed as cooperating with parents in a partnership to ensure children's well-being (ibid.). Primary prevention in order to avoid child protection measures and state involvement in the first place are a central concern of the welfare discourse (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011, p. 71).

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[2] The support by the MVB is not only provided for first-time parents, but also after the birth of all subsequent children.

[3] In Switzerland, the now widely condemned project *Kinder der Landstrasse*, 'Children of the Country Road' comes to mind. Between 1926 and 1973, supported by government institutions, *Pro Juventute*, a private youth foundation, forcibly removed approximately 900 children from Yenish families and placed them in foster homes, reform schools, or psychiatric institutions, aiming to assimilate them into a sedentary lifestyle (Furrer et al., 2014, p. 15). Today, 30.000 Yenish live in Switzerland, where they are a recognized cultural minority. About 2000–3000 Yenish maintain a nomadic lifestyle, which the government attempted to eradicate until the 1970's (BAK, 2019).

While families do become subject to government intervention when childrearing in the home fails, the governing of parents is not generally 'imposed under threat by courts and social workers' (Rose, 1999, p. 213). Rose, inspired by Foucault's notions of governmentality and technologies of the self, suggests that experts have gained access to the home not only via various media, but also by providing subjects with self-monitoring routines:

> No longer do experts have to reach the family by way of law or the coercive intrusion of social work. They interpellate us through the radio call-in, through the weekly magazine column, through gentle advice of the health visitor, teacher or neighbour, and through the unceasing reflexive gaze of our own psychological educated self-scrutiny. (Ibid.)

4 Governmentality and pastoral power

The notion of 'governance' allows for fruitful strands of investigation into the exercise of power in neoliberal states (Shin, 2016, p. 304). Michel Foucault's engagement with forms of power in modern states gave rise to his concept of governmentality, which provided novel perspectives on how states govern populations with certain aims in mind, such as the 'welfare of the population' (Foucault, 1991, p. 100).

Foucault examined the (incomplete) dissolution of sovereign power relations in the 18th century and the rise of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power relations, according to Foucault, are oriented towards regulating and managing citizens of modern states more effectively. Here, the generation of knowledge through 'hierarchical observation' (Foucault, 1995, p. 170) of subjects as well as their 'examination' (Foucault, 1995, pp. 20, 184) plays a crucial role. 'Normalizing judgement' (Foucault, 1995, pp. 177, 184) in the sense of creating norms is another instrument through which, Foucault asserts, discipline is exercised (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). In the context of early childhood and norms, WHO child growth standards or detailed milestones for child development come to mind that can have a disciplinary effect.

Governmentality is the contact point of technologies of power – 'which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject' and technologies of self – 'which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault, 1988, para. 9).

While Foucault's writings include action-theoretical concepts of power in the sense that power is 'understood in terms of power-over relations' (Allen, 2016, para. 2), I am more interested in his writings that explore power as a set of relationships (Foucault, 1978; Vandenbroeck et al., 2011) which 'emerge from every social interaction and thus pervade the social body' (Allen, 2016, para. 33). While Foucault acknowledges that power can be repressive, he argues that it is mainly productive, especially when it comes to the production of subjects: 'the individual is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects' (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

A significant concept introduced by Foucault that is particularly relevant when thinking about how early childhood programmes aim to monitor and shape parenting practices is that of pastoral power, or pastoral care, to use the original church term. It is through the concept of pastoral power that Foucault joins the centralizing state with the individual (Carrette, 2013, p. 41).

The Hebraic/Christian idea of the pastor, a 'shepherd' who guides his 'flock' towards salvation, constitutes the cornerstone of pastoral power. It is both totalizing and individualizing, as the pastor not only looks after the flock as a whole, but also possesses specific knowledge about every single 'sheep' (Foucault, 2009, pp. 126–127). This is achieved by observation of 'behaviour and conduct', as well as the instruments of confession and self-examination. The Christian pastor acquires 'knowledge of conscience' and has the 'ability to direct it' (Foucault, 1982, p. 783). In this context, pastoral power links up to technologies of self, as the confessant, after a close self-examination of their conscience, must tell a truth that can only be found within him/herself (Foucault, 1985, p. 60).

In the modern state, pastoral power has been transformed and secularized in order to fit different purposes, such as the assurance of economic securitization, health, and wellbeing. In contrast to the Christian pastorate, salvation is sought after during this life, rather than after death (Foucault, 1982, p. 784). Today pastoral power practices can be found in public institutions like police, schools, and social welfare departments. Social workers and health visitors can be understood as 'officials' of pastoral power when they interact with clients in the context of home visits or counselling services (Nadesan, 2008, p. 24). Like Rose, who rejects a 'state-centred approach' (Rose, 1999, p. xxi) to political power, this paper does not understand officials of pastoral power as 'merely servants of power', but as agents who 'actively shape and transform objects, techniques and ends of power' (ibid).

Moreover, Foucault noted that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978, pp. 95–96). Power is not unidirectional, and individuals embedded in power relations can resist by trying to escape, undermine or shape disciplinary practices (Foucault, 2009, pp. 204–214).

The power of pastoral officials is not founded on repressive measures and not intended to be coercive, but is founded on their devotedness to do individual clients (and society as a whole) good by guiding them towards a state of wellbeing. While Nadesan argues that only individuals failing to take responsibility for self-governance are subject to management from experts (Nadesan, 2008, p. 34), the MVB's mission is to reach every family. Being counselled and supported by an MVB advisor on a regular basis is not generally designed for 'unruly participants' (Peters, 2012, p. 418), but extends to all parents. While not every parent uses the MVB, it is not conceptualized as a place for 'problem families' to go, but a 'normal' part of early childhood activities.[4]

The following sections discuss the fieldwork findings in more detail and argue that the idea of a 'guiding pastor' is reflected in the MVB's position.

5 General information about the MVB

The MVB evolved out of private associations which aimed to curb Switzerland's high infant mortality rate in the early 20th century. Today, it is a nationwide service which is readily accepted by parents (Riedi, 2003, p. 12). Most MVBs train as paediatric nurses and then com-

[4] The MVB's trade association estimated that, in 2017, 58 per cent of parents had used the MVB at least once. The use varied according to region, as for example some providers – mostly in rural areas – counselled almost 100 per cent of all families with children under one at least once (FVMBV, 2017, p. 1).

plete an MVB post-graduate diploma. All the advisors are female, and the great majority of clients are mothers (FVMVB, 2018)[5]. There are different regional MVB providers, who are independent of each other. In 2016, there were 74 regional MVB providers in Switzerland, each of which operated a network of between one and 270 advice centres. According to an MVB report, on average, there are 2.5 advice centres per 100 new-born babies (FVMVB, 2017). The MVB is financed almost exclusively by the public sector. Any parent with a child under five can consult the MVB via telephone or email, or visit the advice centres, and can also request home visits. The MVB centres are usually equipped with a waiting area and a private room in which the counselling takes place. The counselling rooms are furnished with a changing table, a scale for weighing children, a desk with a computer which contains client data, and toys for babies and toddlers. The main topics addressed during consultations are breastfeeding, diet, nutrition, sleep, and child development.

First contact between parents and the MVB is made after a child is born: many advisors contact parents via telephone in order to arrange a first meeting. The MVB learns about the birth of a child in their local commune via two channels: Both the hospital in which the child was born as well as the commune in which the child's parents reside, sent parents' contact details to the local MVB centre.

MVBs are also charged with preventing or disclosing child abuse. Like doctors, MVBs have an obligation to maintain confidentiality, but also the duty to report parents to child protection services when a child's physical or psychological wellbeing is at risk because of abuse or neglect.

6 Accompanying parents

The MVB's service is framed in terms of *Begleitung*, an 'accompaniment' to families' efforts to raise a child. Mothers receive a leaflet informing them about the MVB's services during their stay on a maternity ward. Many of these, as well as MVB webpages, frame early parenthood as a time when guidance by an expert is needed, suggesting that, while it is 'lovely' and 'exciting', it can also be an 'exhausting' and 'challenging' time, prompting feelings of 'overload' as well as triggering many questions, which the local MVB is ready to answer. The MVB's monitoring of paediatric development is advertised as being preventative and health promoting (Spitex Höfe, n.d., my translation).

The idea is that parents should visit their local MVB with their children before any deep-seated 'problems' arise, such as parental exhaustion or developmental disorders. While some MVBs stated that the issues discussed during consultations are determined by the parents, others addressed certain unsolicited topics in order to comply with their prevention

[5] The fact that in the case of the MVB, women guide (mostly) other women reflects that both 'professional' care work, like nursing, and care work at 'home', is highly gendered; childrearing in Switzerland primarily remains mothers' work (BFS, 2019, p. 13). Further, the MVBs strongly focus on the mother-child relationship and maternal 'skills', such as breastfeeding. In her study on the Sure Start Programme in the UK, Clarke discusses similar findings and comments that 'despite the language of "parenting", and the acknowledgement of the role of fathers or other family members, the infant is seen primarily in the context of the mother–infant dyad […]' (Clarke, 2006, p. 718).

mandate. A field notes excerpt describes a consultation 'scene' during which MVB Beatrix[6] gives a mother hints about her child's future developmental steps and stresses which things she needs to consider:

> Beatrix asks the mother whether she can have a look at the baby, which is then placed on the changing table. After examining whether the baby can follow her head movements with his eyes, Beatrix tells the mother that her infant son will soon start to grab his feet with his hands and then begin to roll to the side, onto his belly. She then turns the baby from its back onto its stomach in order to demonstrate the movement. The baby starts protesting. Beatrix warns the mother that she must not leave him lying on the sofa on his own anymore. The mother affirms this. (Field notes, 24.07.19.)

Many MVBs said they sought and enjoyed having a close relationship with clients. MVB Fiona strongly emphasized her dedication to her clients, emphasizing that parents could 'count on her' for five years and that she carried out her work with a lot of *Herzblut*, 'the blood of her heart'. Many MVBs stressed that parents could come to them with 'everything', pose 'any question', and that they took every issue a parent brought up very 'seriously': 'This is the beautiful thing [...] when they [the clients] have the trust, when they know that they are being accompanied, are taken seriously, and can ask whatever they want' (recorded interview, 12.04.19). Accordingly, gaining the trust of clients played a major role in MVB-parent relationships, especially in sustaining the accompaniment for up to five years. A large majority of MVBs said they had chosen the profession not only because they had a fascination for counselling, but also because it allowed them to gain a durable relationship with their clients, in contrast to the brief contact they had with patients when working as paediatric nurses. This way, they could 'work on' issues with parents and 'really keep at it', as MVB Isabelle explained:

> Usually, you are in a relationship over a longer period, and I think that this has a lot of advantages, in order to work on something [...] when they come with many different topics and you can accompany the process, the developments, and strengthen and encourage parents with all their questions. (Recorded interview, 12.04.19)

This long-term accompanying was framed not only as safeguarding and promoting children's health by keeping track of their growth and developmental milestones, but also as a way to enable parents to reach a satisfactory state of autonomy. Here, the idea of the 'guiding pastor' is reflected in the MVB's position, providing 'salvation' by assisting parents to gain skills and confidence in childrearing. Like her colleagues, MVB Fiona considered it her job to ensure that parents achieved 'self-dependence' by mastering the issues that triggered a lot of conversations during consultations themselves (interview notes, 15.04.19). After what MVB Olivia called a 'transition phase', during which parents could contact her, she believed they would reach a sufficient level of competency so 'they can do it on their own' (recorded interview, 05.12.19). Thus, the accompaniment of families is supposed to come to an end, when parents are able to manage childrearing themselves. In this context, the MVB's approach to advising, which is individualized and facilitates technologies of self, plays a role, which the next section discusses.

[6] All research participants have been anonymized.

7 Individualized advice and facilitating self-reflection

The MVBs interviewed described their approach to counselling as individualized – they did not give the same answers to all parents seeking advice regarding, for example, how to deal with temper tantrums, but 'tailored' their counselling to the characters, wishes, needs, and resources of the parents.

To successfully accompany, MVB Hannah stated, 'you must find out where do the parents stand? What background do they have? And based on that, what [do] they need and what they themselves say they want from me' (recorded interview, 17.05.19). MVB Tina noted that the wide range of attitudes towards childrearing today made counselling especially challenging, as it meant always needing to figure out what attitude the parents had in order to provide suitable advice. For example, she could not advise a mother to let her child sleep in her bed if the mother believed this was unacceptable (recorded interview, 05.11.19). When counselling parents in order to solve a specific issue, such as helping parents who did not know how to calm a crying baby, many MVBs described asking parents what felt right for them, what they had already tried to address the issue, and what thoughts or feelings the applied practices had triggered in them. Often MVBs were consulted by parents who had been unsettled by conversations with older relatives who had different views on how to properly care for a baby. Intergenerational discussions, for example, revolved around the idea that babies might be spoiled if they were picked up too quickly when crying. MVB Anna noted:

> I usually ask them what they feel what is right for them and it is usually not the way that the [parent's] grandmother or mother wanted it to be. And usually, it is sufficient that they come here and talk about it and the MVB says that the way they want to do it is right. (Recorded interview, 17.05.19.)

MVB Zoe was convinced that 'the solution and the approach to a solution is within the client' (recorded interview, 23.12.19). Finding out what resources the client could draw on – for example, whether a parent who was exhausted could fall back on the support of relatives – was only possible through the clients themselves.

Self-reflection and, even more so, 'trust in yourself' also played a role when it came to notions of parental 'intuition', 'instinct' or 'gut feeling'.[7] Many MVBs believed that most parents know 'instinctively' or 'intuitively' 'what to do', that many parents would instinctively 'do the right thing', and that this was an innate ability. While some did not specify further what they meant by these terms, others referred to *Feingefühl,* literally a 'fine-tuned sensitivity'[8] that allows a mother to 'read' her child's needs. A recurring theme during conversations with MVBs was that this innate ability was at the risk of being lost because parents were attempting to become well-informed, and so were confronted with contradictory information

[7] Many MVBs used these terms interchangeably. There are many different concepts of 'instincts' but discussing this here would go beyond the constraints of this paper.

[8] None of the MVB interlocutors specifically referred to the psychological concept of 'maternal sensitivity' (translated as *Feinfühligkeit* in German), coined by Mary Ainsworth. Their elaborations on *Feingefühl,* however, came very close to Ainsworth's ideas about 'maternal sensitivity' and how it shapes the mother-child relationship and children's attachment 'style' (Ainsworth, 1969).

which could lead to feelings of insecurity. MVB Isabella described the contemporary approach to childrearing as overly intellectual, and defined the restoration of parents' trust in their own instinct or gut feeling as an important part of her work:

> Sometimes you need to lead the parents back to this instinct, because the way is so cognitive, the parents are so busy thinking and do not trust their gut feeling anymore, and sometimes the connection must be re-made or you can ensure them that no, they do not have to plug in a device so they can hear the child in the next room in the night, they will hear it, they may even be awake before [the child wakes up]. (Recorded interview, 12.04.19.)

In order to be able to, as MVB Hannah phrased it, 'draw on your intuition', the advisors stated that their clients needed to introspect what felt good, what felt right. The 'solution' again was conceived to be inherent within the clients themselves, while the MVBs' essential task was to assist in self-searching and subsequently provide 'reassurance' that the parents' realizations were 'right'. In this constellation, '"the expert" refuses to say what is "good", but facilitates the self-examination' (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011, p. 72). Ostensibly, this practice accentuates the cooperation between parent and advisors and installs the parent as expert in his or her own right. Nonetheless, the process of self-reflection is initiated and guided by the expert who subsequently gives her 'blessing' (or not) to the client's realizations. Inviting the parent to self-reflect also assists in the knowledge production about families, as it entails facilitating him or her to speak a kind of inner truth (Foucault, 1985, p. 60) and thereby puts the client 'in a submissive position within power relations' (Hennum, 2011, p. 539).

Although the counselling approach described above was depicted by many MVBs as common practice, more instructive advice-giving was also noted during participant observation, especially in consultations involving families enrolled in the MVB early intervention programme (*Frühförderung*, FF). The families enrolled in FF were believed to be in need of 'closer accompaniment' and consultations took place more regularly. Several MVBs stated that it was mostly migrants who were included in FF, whose parenting practices some advisors seemed to view more critically. In the context of FF, MVB Lisa, for example, noted that some migrant families from African countries needed to be instructed how to 'sit down and play with their children' (recorded interview, 03.05.19). Further, their ways of handling babies needed improvement:

> An African woman pulls up her child on one arm and I can hardly watch. And then I think – 'okay, you have learnt it this way' – and then they quickly throw it on their backs and tie it up. Or they can hardly put the baby on the floor, because the floor is dirty and then one can also just say 'it must learn to roll over' – that it is better to put it on the floor, than leaving the baby on the sofa. (ibid.)

In the context of cultural differences and childrearing, Riedi, who carried out a small-scale study of the MVB in Winterthur speaks of 'normalization work' The term refers to professional standards, which are, for example, mediated in MVB training courses, or child rearing practices specific to Switzerland, which the MVBs may impose on parents from different ethnic backgrounds (Riedi, 2003, p. 89). From a Foucauldian perspective, normalization work can be understood as 'normalizing judgement'. MVB guidance shifts from cooperation to a constellation in which the advisor clearly states what is 'right' and 'wrong' and attempts to correct practices perceived as harmful, exposing the MVB's position of authority.

The next section turns to another aspect of pastoral care: the observation of 'behaviour and conduct'.

8 Gathering knowledge and making observations

MVBs, like doctors, keep a file on every client family and document each consultation. An infant's weight, length, and head circumference are entered into a growth chart, while the questions asked by parents, and observations made by the MVB are noted down. Monitoring the development of children was usually done incidentally by MVBs and it was often not clearly communicated to the parents that it was taking place. The supervision of biological processes by gathering and storing data about children's physical and mental development allow bio- and anatomo-political interventions (Foucault, 1978). Their analysis of the child's growth curve enables the MVBs to exercise a normalizing gaze (Foucault, 1995) that supports the parents' (and the state's) efforts to produce a 'normal' child.

Even if MVBs left what was discussed during consultations up to the parents, they still observed and documented children's behaviour. MVB Fiona prepared her consultation room before every family arrived by arranging toys on the floor which she believed were appropriate for the age of that particular child, so that she could observe whether the child was playing 'properly'.

Many MVBs also observed mother-child interactions, especially when it came to 'attachment behaviour'. John Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which stresses the utmost importance of a child's secure attachment to its mother as the basis of healthy development, was very prominent in the MVBs' work, with 'making' 'sensitive mothers' being a major concern[9]. The MVBs' notions of attachment were directly connected to those of 'instincts' described in the previous section, as some MVBs explained that intuitive competences enabled mothers to promote their child's secure attachment by displaying sensitivity. MVBs primarily defined maternal sensitivity as being able to recognize and cater to the needs of their child. Some MVBs described evaluating mothers' sensitivity when mothers undressed their babies on the changing table, explaining that they expected mothers to talk to their babies and make eye contact with them during this activity. Some MVBs described trying to motivate mothers who, in their view, were lacking *Feingefühl*, to display such desirable behaviour. By making parents aware of their child's behaviour, they hoped to trigger a reaction: 'I show them the perspective of the child, I say aha, look, he is looking at you, he likes your face so much. Informing parents what their child likes, what does their child good' (MVB Sophia, recorded interview, 22.05.19).

The MVBs did not directly communicate their evaluation of attachment to clients, especially if they perceived it as appropriate. Thus, the MVBs' mission in this context was not presented in a transparent manner, and these observations transpired in a highly hierarchical way. Furthermore, the question arises to what extent advisors are really capable to assess the relationship between mother and child within a 20 or 30-minute consultation.

[9] Ainsworth defined maternal sensitivity as a central determinant of the quality of attachment: Sensitive mothers' capability to accurately interpret and respond to their children's 'signals', according to Ainsworth (1969), results in the secure attachment of the child to its mother.

Many MVBs understood attachment behaviour to be an 'innate instinct', and usually referred to mothers. While to some extent this may be connected to gendered ideas regarding childrearing, in the sense that they thought mothers are 'naturally good' at it, it was probably also because the MVBs mostly dealt with women. Mothers who were perceived as being unable to display *Feingefühl* were believed to be suffering from a psychological illness, such as postnatal depression or trauma. In these cases, as MVB Rebecca phrased it, the woman's *Feingefühl* was 'submerged'. Lee et al. suggest that childcare advice today problematizes instinctive parenting:

> [P]erhaps the single most distinctive feature of expert commentaries and statements about today's parents is the tendency to reposition 'instinct' as either mythical or problematic. The transformation in expert discourse of the relationship between parents and a child into a set of skills that has to be learned and acquired, and for which instinct provides no satisfactory guide, stands out as a defining feature of today. (Lee et al., 2014, p. 53)

Lee et al.'s observations do not hold in Switzerland, where notions of 'instincts' played a prevalent role in the MVBs' counselling work. Many MVBs were in favour of mothers listening to their instincts when handling children, which may be connected to the fact that they seemed to be highly influenced by Bowlby (1969), who argued that attachment behaviour was instinctive. The idea that mothers can rely on their 'instincts', but still require the MVB for guidance, seemingly presents a glaring paradox. Nevertheless, the MVB's focus to reinstall trust in 'instincts' or assist those who struggle to 'access' them was underlined by several advisors. While offering (some) mothers reassurance that they intuitively know what is 'good' for their children may be experienced as empowering by (some) women, notions of maternal 'instincts' may present an even 'harsher task master for women than discipline and study had ever been' (Ehrenreich & English, 2005, p. 242) – especially if the women who do not fit into the scheme of proper attachment behaviour are pathologized. Ideas about 'innate instincts' promote highly essentialist views about women, as well as normative thinking about childrearing.[10]

9 Resisting pastoral care

MVBs were aware of the fact that their accompaniment was not welcomed by every family. This was reflected in their dealings with families who they felt may want to reject their *Begleitung*, especially families who had been ordered by child protection services to consult

[10] This is not to infer that Bowlby was wrong, in fact, this article agrees with Hrdy, an evolutionary anthropologist who rates Bowlby's theory as 'among the greatest contributions made by evolutionary-minded psychologists to human well-being' (Hrdy, 1999, p. xiii). However, Hrdy concludes in her book *Mother Nature* that parental emotions in humans can be highly 'flexible' (Hrdy, 1999, p. xvi). She argues that humans are what she calls 'cooperative breeders', as the 13 million calories needed to rear a child to maturity cannot be provided by one caretaker alone (Hrdy, 2009, p. 101–102). Thus, a mother's emotional and material investment in a child is dependent on the social support and material resources she herself can acquire '[…] a mother's love is contingent on her circumstances' (Hrdy, 2001, February 27–28, p. 97). In other words, mothers are not naturally hard-wired to love and nurture their children no matter what but, due to the great 'expense' that caring for children requires, they are also compelled to look after themselves. Thus, a lack of attachment behaviour is not necessarily caused by mental illness.

with the MVB regularly. Some MVBs pondered whether clients may want to resist their guidance by portraying a false picture of the situation in their homes. Often 'gaining the families' trust' or 'building a good relationship' was seen as an effective way to make the clients who had been ordered to work with them more cooperative.

The notion that parents may have a 'defensive attitude' towards the MVB was prevalent in interview responses around the context of the voluntary use of the service as well. Here, contemplating why parents do not use the MVB in the first place played a role, along with concerns that clients may stop using the service because they disagree with the advice they receive. Several MVBs lamented the fact that some parents had the wrong idea about the agenda of the MVB as an organisation, explaining that – instead of seeing the MVB as a paragon of prevention that primarily sought to enable parents – some people perceived the MVB as an organ of control and therefore avoided any contact with advisors. At least in the context of voluntary use of the MVB, the position of the pastor and her ability to acquire knowledge of conscience in order to guide, is highly dependent on her relationship with the clients. If parents do not like a particular MVB or disagree with her counselling, they may start following another advisor's guidance or cease using the service altogether.

Nicole, for example, a toddler's mother who I met during the course of my fieldwork, ceased consulting the MVB after she had gained the impression that the advisor was incompetent and wanted her to ignore her 'instinct'. Nicole had consulted the MVB when her son was four months old, because it took her a long time to get him to sleep at night. After learning that Nicole always breastfed her son in order to make him fall asleep more easily, the MVB advised Nicole to stop this, as it would prevent her son from ever learning to fall asleep by himself. Nicole then thought about this at home and came to the conclusion that breastfeeding her son to sleep was 'beautiful and nourishing for everyone', so she continued to do so until he was 18 months old (recorded interview, 24.06.19).

Other examples of parents resisting guidance, were observed at a rural MVB centre, when MVB Fiona counselled two families who were part of her regional MVB's FF programme.

The first family – Mandy with two (of her three) children – came to the centre to discuss several questions about her newborn baby. Fiona used to make home visits to this family, but Mandy's partner did not want her in the house. He allowed Fiona to support Mandy, but he wanted nothing to do with the MVB himself. When Fiona visited the family's home for the first time, the father had reacted negatively to her counselling. Whenever she commented on his children's behaviour or gave advice on a specific topic, the father had countered it by saying, 'ah, now you are referring to this theory', and began elaborating on it. While Mandy was still under Fiona's care and consulted her on a frequent basis, this had transformed the way the accompaniment was designed, as Fiona ceased to visit the family's home. This was a consequence of Mandy's partner, her children's father, having rejected Fiona's support and denigrated her observations and advice.

Later in the afternoon, at the home of Amal, a mother of six, while in the living room chatting about Amal's children, a loud howling resounded from the boys' rooms. Her son Alan ran to Amal, his face awash with tears, and told her that his older brother Jiro had kicked him in the nose. Fiona started instructing Amal on how to handle the situation, advising her to ask Jiro to come out of his room, to tell him explicitly that she did not want him to hit others and that he had to apologize to his brother. Amal smiled calmly and explained that she did not see the point in this, as the boys would just start blaming each other. Fiona,

however, argued that Amal should counter that by saying that she was not a judge. Fiona asked Amal to call Jiro again, which she did, but rather quietly. She grinned while calling him and did not appear to take the situation as seriously as Fiona, who seemed to be upset. After a while, Jiro emerged from his room and immediately started defending himself. Fiona reminded Amal to say that she was not a judge. Jiro then apologized to Alan in a mocking way, which resulted in Fiona asking him to repeat the apology. When the boys continued playing, Fiona appealed to Amal to try out the approach she had described to her next time. Amal replied that she was already shouting at them a lot because of the hitting. Fiona, however, stayed adamant, which Amal countered with a laugh, exclaiming in a surrendering manner: 'yes, I am trying everything!' (field notes, 16.07.19).

One thing that was striking about the counselling of Amal, especially when contrasted to parents who were not enrolled in FF, was Fiona's style of advice giving, which was directive and problematizing and did not invite any self-reflection on the side of Amal. Fiona even took over Amal's position at one point and requested a second, more sincere apology from Jiro herself. Amal remained rather inactive and did not put much effort into implementing Fiona's instructions. While Fiona rendered Jiro's behaviour as something that needed to be managed urgently and appropriately, Amal visibly did not share Fiona's concerns, which represented a resistance to Fiona's guidance in this matter.

These examples show that the MVB's (pastoral) care is not necessarily perceived as 'redemptive' by parents. The pastor's stand is somewhat volatile, so getting involved with families and accompanying them must be exercised with deliberation and a readiness to assimilate to the clients' requirements. Parents, to a large extent, give the 'pastor' the power to guide, by allowing her insights into their conscience and conduct, and the pastor's power practices are transformed by clients' wishes, requirements and reactions to her counselling.

10 Conclusion

The aspirations and tasks of the MVB are clearly of pastoral nature. Framed as 'accompaniment', the MVB offers (usually) voluntary guidance by a committed advisor that is intended to be preventative, long-term and health promoting. The relations between a client and the MVB are ideally characterized by proximity – in order to receive guidance, clients provide their advisor with insights into their 'private' lives and access to their conscience by expressing their inner feelings verbally.

Advice is intended to be tailored to the specific needs and requirements of each individual family, which is carefully assessed by the MVB. The MVB's counselling facilitates technologies of self, such as self-reflection, in order to find out which way of handling events, for example, to calm a crying baby, feels right to the parents. This approach aims to equip parents with techniques that will enable them to eventually guide themselves. Through introspection parents are expected to be able to reach a state of autonomy in which they are confident about parenting. Even if (some) parents are encouraged to say what is 'right' themselves, the divide between client and expert remains clear-cut, as otherwise the expert's authority to provide guidance, collect data, and make observations would dwindle. Observing children's and parents' behaviours in order to recognize issues such as developmental delays or a lack of attachment that clients might have no knowledge of, supplements the promotion of technologies of self, or may reveal things that clients do not want to disclose.

As the recent parliamentary initiatives and the Swiss UNESCO Commission's publication show, early childhood continues to be a focus of policy makers, who advocate the support and expansion of programmes that boost parental education. At no time are parents more encouraged to make use of counselling and health services than during the early years of their offspring's lives. In Switzerland, a comprehensive public early childhood programme has been created over the last hundred years that reaches over half of all new families. Policy makers facilitate easy access to expert counselling by providing the MVB free of charge and ensuring that every family can be contacted and informed about the service directly by providing notice of every new birth in their community. By financing one-to-one MVB counselling sessions, the state can monitor children's development and encourage an expert-led way of 'parenting', which has been depicted as a modern way of childrearing with globalizing tendencies (Faircloth et al., 2013, p. 4).

Early childhood, thought of as a 'seminal' phase that will directly influence an individual's circumstances in later life, is a concern of the state, which has a vested interest in ensuring the 'wellbeing' of its citizens. Thus, the condition, behaviour, and practices of parents during early childhood, which are believed to have an immediate effect on children's health and development (Furedi, 2002), is subject to preventative expert monitoring and guidance. This way, undesirable outcomes stemming from, for example, a failure to thrive or a lack of maternal sensitivity, can be recognized and corrected before any deep-seated 'problems' arise. By encouraging a 'prophylactic' use of the service, the state invests in the 'risk management' of families with young children (Vandenbroeck et al., 2011, p. 76).

The practices deemed appropriate for the surveillance and guidance of parenting in Switzerland today are characterized by pastoral forms of power which aim to achieve families' 'salvation', that have both individualizing and totalizing effects. The MVB's pastoral work is future-oriented in the way that its promotion of health and positive parent-child relationships are believed to have beneficial effects reaching into adult life. While the MVB advisors themselves usually only talk about caring for the wellbeing of individual families, the report from the MVB trade association underlines the significance of their work for a prosperous future of the entire nation (FVMVB, n.d.). Thereby, the MVB asserts that it shares the state's (whose financing the MVB also wants to secure to sustain its own institution) concerns and responsibilities regarding the rights and wellbeing of young children, as well as the ambition to provide them with 'good' parents.

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