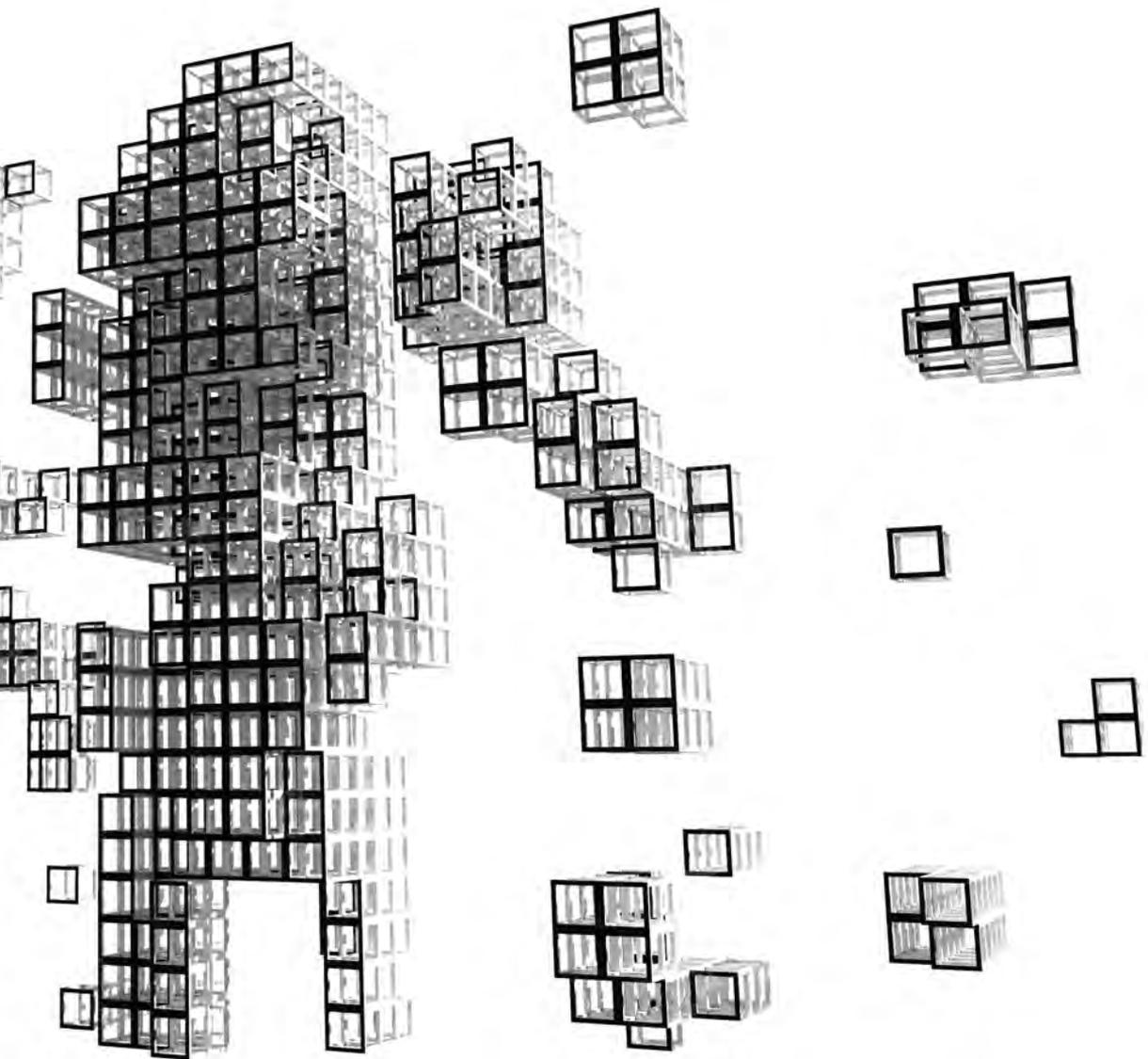
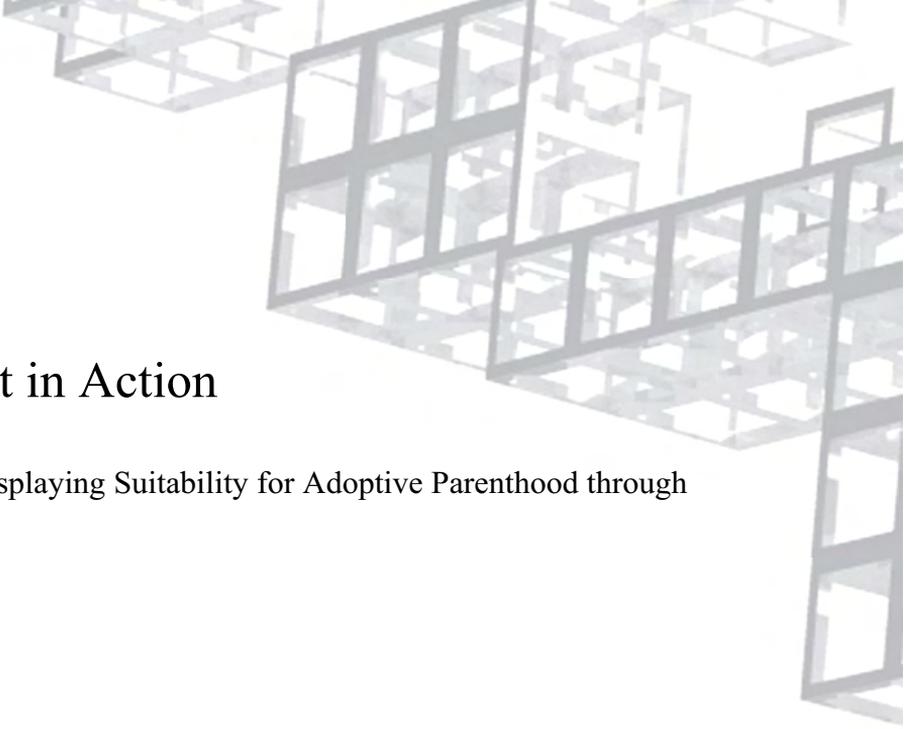


# Assessment in Action

Assessing and Displaying Suitability for Adoptive Parenthood  
through Text and Talk



**Martine Noordegraaf**



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Text and Talk

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# Assessment in Action

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Text and Talk

# Beoordeling in Beweging

Het Beoordelen en Tonen van Geschiktheid voor het  
Adoptiefouderschap in Tekst en Gesprek

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

# Proefschrift

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door

Martine Noordegraaf

Geboren op 27 juni 1978 te Rotterdam

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*Have you ever come on anything like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out.*

*Is there anyone around who can explain God?  
Anyone smart enough to tell him what to do?  
Anyone who has done him such a huge favour  
that God can ask his advice?*

*Everything comes from him  
Everything happens through him  
Everything ends up in him  
Always glory! Always praise!  
Yes, Yes. Yes.*

Romans 11: 33-36

Peterson, E. H. (2003). *The Message. Remix. The bible in contemporary language.* Alive Communications: Colorado Springs.



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# Introduction

This thesis is on institutional communication, and focuses in particular on interactional processes between social workers and prospective adoptive parents in assessment procedures for adoptive parenthood. These assessments are conducted in the Netherlands by the Child Protection Board (hereafter CPB). In order to make recommendations about the suitability of prospective adoptive parents, the CPB is tasked with assessing ‘possible risk and protection factors that might hinder a stable development of the adoptive child towards adulthood’ (CPB, 2001: 62). The assessment procedure includes a health check, whether or not the candidates have a criminal record, written life stories of the prospective adoptive parents and four interviews conducted by a social worker from the CPB. The procedure concludes with a formal record, including a recommendation, that is sent to the Dutch state agency. This thesis concentrates on institutional assessments of adoptive parenthood procedures through text and talk: on *assessment in action*. It includes an analysis of the interviews related to the life stories of the prospective adoptive parents and the reproduction of both in the recommendation record.

## *Assessment in action*

There are generally two main approaches to the study of assessment. The first approach concentrates on the development of diagnostic parameters that may predict future behaviour, and they lean very much on quantifiable terms, knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. The second approach focuses on the dynamics of decision making in practice and examines the assessment process (Cuzzi et al., 1993; Holland, 2004).

In the former field, research has been conducted into the elements used by social workers when arriving at a decision. The general aim of this ‘diagnostic approach’ is to aid prediction and accuracy and to reduce the influence of a social worker’s individual idiosyncrasies and practice wisdom. This approach has been used to develop assessment instruments by looking at the progress of clients through institutional systems, such as child protection, and monitors the outcomes, such as incidents of re-abuse (Holland, 2004). Certain elements are selected to aid the development of standardized questionnaires and checklists designed to objectify and validate decision-making procedures (Wald and Wooverton, 1990). The aim is to

identify factors that are empirically linked to risk and to develop instruments with strong claims to validity (Gambrill and Shlonsky, 2000). This ‘evidence-based’ approach is becoming increasingly popular, and is also promoted by governments because it is seen as a means of monitoring the output of social institutions and of improving the success rates of certain methods and treatments. Linell (1998) has characterized the ‘diagnostic approach’ as based on a monological understanding of the world. Monological approaches, according to Linell, assume that a clear distinction can be made between cognition and communication, that cognition precedes communication, and that ideas are represented and transmitted in communication (Linell, 1998). In the same vein, Van ‘t Hof (2006) claims that the theory of standardized interviews is based on a monological approach. By keeping the wording of questions constant across respondents, the meaning of the questions is also assumed to remain constant, whereas, as she demonstrates, this is not in fact the case (Van ‘t Hof, 2006).

In adoption assessment, Vinke (1999) attempted to standardize the assessment procedure and developed a questionnaire for prospective adoptive parents. She claims to have developed a questionnaire that can be used to improve the validity of the international adoption procedure. However, Juffer and Van IJzendoorn (1995) have criticized Vinke’s claim and have advised against using the questionnaire. For example, the questionnaire categorizes a traumatic life event as a risk factor for adoptive parenthood and positive childhood experiences as a protective factor. However, both practice and research have shown that these events and experiences are more complex: people who are able to cope with traumatic events are still capable of providing a safe environment for an adoptive child. And having positive childhood memories does not always have a positive meaning. It could, for instance, mean that someone has an idealized and distorted image of his or her childhood which might lead to non-responsive parenthood (Juffer and Van IJzendoorn, 1999). This example illustrates that meaning does not remain constant at all, but tends to be formed through interaction and is context bound. The question of how meaning is formed in and through interaction is studied in the second assessment approach: the ‘process’ approach.

The ‘process approach’ focuses on meaning making processes in face-to-face interactions and views assessment as a very complex, controversial and demanding activity that needs to be studied in detail in order to understand it better (see for example, Meyer, 1993; Milner and O’Byrne, 1998; Parton and O’Byrne, 2000). This approach emphasizes the uniqueness of each assessment interaction and treats assessment as a process rather than as a procedure. In this tradition, assessors and the people being assessed are interviewed, interactions are observed, recorded and transcribed and assessment procedures are evaluated. The aim of this approach

is to determine how social workers construct assessment in interaction, how they work together with their clients, and how they sometimes construct their final assessment in an official record. This approach derives from what Linell refers to as ‘dialogism’, which sees action, communication and cognition as thoroughly relational and interactional in nature, and claims that utterances must always be understood in their relevant contexts. Dialogism does not deny that people communicate ideas and thoughts, but it assumes that language contributes to sense-making. Where monologism tends to think of unilateral causality and ‘independent’ vs. ‘dependent’ variables in scientific models, dialogism insists on interdependencies and mutual influence between dimensions (Linell, 1998).

I associate myself with the latter approach in this thesis. I concentrate on how assessments on adoptive parenthood are formed through (open) conversations in relation to documents that are involved in the process. In particular, I study ‘*how social workers and prospective adoptive parents*’, in a Dutch adoption assessment process, ‘*assess and display suitability for adoptive parenthood in text and talk*’. I consider assessment as an institutional interaction and apply the institutional Conversation Analysis method (hereafter CA) in my study. Interaction analysis means that it is not the mental processes that are the subject of study, but the verbal, and non-verbal, behaviour those processes give rise to. This behaviour is researched using CA, that has a long and outstanding tradition in analysing talk-in-interaction.

### *Conversation Analysis*

CA is an approach that seeks to uncover how interlocutors, using discursive means, create meaning and make sense in social interactions. It starts from the idea that participants in a conversation construct and construe meaning and that by using language, they perform and interpret social action. CA uses naturally occurring data as its main empirical resource and takes (transcripts of) video and/or audio recordings of face-to-face interactions, and copies of written documents that are involved in the process, as the starting point for analysis. (For an overview and new directions in CA, see Drew and Curl, 2007.)

The main sociological insight of CA is the action-orientation of language. It is through conversation that we conduct the ordinary affairs of our lives, or, by using language, we do things. CA does not study single utterances but looks at how utterances are sequentially organized. In other words, how conversants treat each other’s utterances and how they respond to them. By analysing these sequences in detail we can see *how* participants in a conversation construct mutual understanding and meaning and come to perform social actions together. This meaning-making

process is both context shaping and context renewing (Heritage, 1984). Context cannot be taken for granted, nor can it be treated as determined in advance and independent of the participant's own activities. Instead, 'context' is shaped by the ways in which participants in conversation orient towards it (for instance, when a patient presents his health problems following a: 'How are you doing today' question from a GP, he shapes the interaction as being a medical consultation), and at the same time 'context' is renewed by the different actions that participants perform in the interaction (for example, the type of problems that a patient presents, and the way in which the patient does so, determine how a GP responds to them).

The CA method makes it possible to analyse in detail how people in conversation construct meaning. This is made possible by looking at what patterns occur and by analysing the kind of conversational means people use in order to do things. By looking at sequences we can also discover how people treat each other's utterances and how they perform social actions together.

CA has been applied in the study of both everyday and institutional interactions. In this thesis, I build on studies that have focused on the latter, which include: 1) studies conducted in 'testing environments', where people's skills, problems and needs are assessed, and where decisions have to be taken about someone's suitability (Komter, 1990, 1991); 2) studies into counselling, where people are helped to cope with difficult situations and to be better prepared for a possible future state of affairs (Peräkylä, 1995); and 3) studies on interactions where institutional representatives manage to integrate aspects of both 'testing' and 'helping'. They do this by asking people questions with a view to arriving at a decision about their suitability and also by giving advice to help them cope with difficult situations and to be better prepared for future life (Hall and others, 1999, 2006; Nijnatten, van, and others 2001, Nijnatten, van, 2005, 2006; Speer and Parsons, 2006; Speer and Green, 2007).

### *Institutional interactions*

Institutional interactions are task-related and involve at least one participant who wants something from the interaction. The interactions can be a wedding ceremony, a classroom interaction, a counselling session, a visit to a GP, an examination of a witness in court and anything in between, such as an adoption assessment procedure. What these interactions have in common is that their institutional task is 'primarily accomplished through an exchange of talk between a professional and a lay person'. The most clear distinctive features of institutional talk are that: 1) the interaction

involves goals that are tied to institution-relevant identities; 2) these identities have consequences for the interactions that the parties conduct, and 3) there will also be special 'institutional' aspects of reasoning and arguing that are developed in institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 21-25; Heritage, 2005).

In the case of adoption assessment, the main task and goal of the social worker is to 'make an assessment' and for the prospective adoptive parents to 'present themselves in a most suitable manner'. As in many other institutional settings, the representative of the institution determines the agenda and controls the turn-taking process; she takes the initiative to ask certain questions and to skip from one topic to another. Unless they are aiming for a negative outcome, it is likely that people in an assessment context will try to behave appropriately by, for instance, being willing to answer questions or by giving examples of why they are suitable. The social worker will most likely behave 'professionally', presenting herself as a representative of the institution rather than as an individual.

The main reason for using the CA method is, as stated above, to analyse patterns and sequences through which people conduct social action. When examining *institutional interaction*, I aim to analyse patterns and sequences through which social workers and prospective adoptive parents fulfil their institutional task of assessing and displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood respectively.

The main conversational means that the social worker has at his disposal is the asking of questions. He uses this means to gain an understanding of the suitability of prospective adoptive parents for adoptive parenthood. One of the outcomes of this thesis is an overview of questioning patterns and their responses. For instance, one question that all social workers ask is the hypothetical question. This question is related to the assessment of prospective adoptive parents' capabilities as future educators. I have studied the use of hypothetical questions in the interviews and analysed how these questions are answered by the prospective adoptive parents (study 5). I have also analysed how the ground for these questions is prepared in the interview and how these questions are preceded by a different kind of question (study 4). By studying these questions, I gained an insight into how institutional identities are orientated towards by conversants and into how people 'do assessment'.

### *Aim of the study*

The baseline for this thesis is the analysis of *assessment in action*. The institutional goal of the assessment interactions studied is to decide on the prospective parents'

suitability for adoptive parenthood. This goal is derived from official international adoption procedures and is fine tuned through the assessment of the written life stories of the prospective adoptive parents, the interviews and the drafting of the recommendation record. Through this process of text and talk, the main question of ‘whether the prospective adoptive parents are suitable for adoptive parenthood’, is divided up over several sub questions that are systematically answered during the assessment process.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the body of knowledge on ‘institutional communication’ and on ‘institutional assessment activities’ in particular. I bring together existing studies in this area and contribute my own analysis of the adoption assessment process to it.

I also hope to add something to the visibility of social work, which has long been referred to as an ‘invisible profession’ (Pithouse, 1998). This invisibility can be explained, for example, by the fact that social workers have considerable autonomy and privacy when dealing with clients, and that the cases are often only covered later in written records and oral presentations. By making social work more visible and by presenting a better understanding of the features of the adoption assessment process, I hope to make a contribution towards the development of both social work and social workers in general.

This thesis presents a series of conversation analyses. Conversations and texts have been subjected to a sentence by sentence analysis, taking both the local and the institutional context into account, with a view to answering the following general research questions:

1. How do social workers manage and succeed in assessing prospective adoptive parents’ suitability for adoptive parenthood?
2. How do prospective adoptive parents manage and succeed in displaying suitability?
3. How do questions 1 and 2 ‘work together’ and lead to features of suitability for adoptive parenthood?

The research questions are fine tuned even further in the various studies in this thesis, in which different stages of the adoption assessment process are analysed in detail. Details of the different studies are presented at the end of this introductory chapter in the overview. This is preceded by details of the data collection process.

## *Data collection*

The data corpus consists of the transcripts of the audio and video recordings of 47 conversations between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. They are the result of twelve assessments, each consisting of four interviews (except for one assessment that only consisted of three interviews), held at eight different CPB offices in the Netherlands, conducted between 2002 and 2005. Eleven different social workers and twelve different applicants were involved. One social worker allowed two different assessment interviews to be recorded. All twelve assessments ended with a positive recommendation for international adoption. In addition to the interviews, I also had access to eleven written life stories of prospective adoptive parents (written as preparation for the second interview), eight written formal recommendation records, one inter-collegial meeting and one multi-disciplinary case discussion.

I received informed written consent to use the recordings and copies of the life stories and records. All names and identifying details have been disguised. The excerpts in this study are both the Dutch transcripts and their English translations. I used the transcription system developed by Jefferson (2004), which highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail. An overview of these features can be found in the appendix.

The collection of text and talk as presented above is my main empirical source on which my analyses are based. As additional information, I also collected some ethnographical data, as follows: together with six prospective adoptive couples, I attended a six-session introductory course on international adoption; I had several unstructured interviews with social workers, and obtained information from internet forums and the weblogs of adoptive parents reporting on their adoption assessment experiences.

The prospective adoptive parents in my corpus can be divided into four categories: unwanted childless heterosexual couples (n=6), single aspirant adoptive mothers (n=2), a gay couple (n=1), and heterosexual couples wanting to adopt for ideological reasons (n=2)<sup>1</sup>. One of the latter couples, and one of the single mothers already had one biological child.

---

<sup>1</sup> Since 2006 it has been possible for homosexual couples in the Netherlands to apply to adopt a child. A single, homosexual or heterosexual, person may request for adoption since 1998. However, most countries from where children are adopted are only interested in married, heterosexual people adopting a child, and therefore single parents and homosexual couples are restricted in their options.

The four interviews are structured and certain prescribed topics are always covered and include: 'verification of the identity of the prospective adoptive parent(s), eligibility and suitability to adopt, background, family and medical history, social environment, reasons for wanting to adopt, the ability to enter into international adoption procedures, and the characteristics of the child they would be qualified to care for' (HCCH, 1993: article 15).

Attention is also given to 'how prospective parents deal with problems and stress in general, which includes how they cope with being childless, any special wishes they may have about a prospective adoptive child, expectations about their own child-raising abilities, and matters relating to the possible discrimination of the child as a foreigner, and any other particulars concerning the child' (CPB, 2001: 62).

As I began to analyse the different interviews in more detail, and got some insight into how these different topics were organized (both in the interviews and in the recommendation record), I ascertained that the assessment of prospective adoptive parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood covers three domains: 1) the prospective adoptive parents' autobiography; 2) the stability of their personalities and their relationship; and 3) their capacities as adoptive parents. In other words, their past, present and future states of affairs. In order to analyse the overall assessment process, I covered these different states of affairs in the different studies. In the next section I present how the different domains are divided over the different interviews and how the different studies in this thesis are related to them.

### *Overview of the thesis*

This thesis consists of five studies, each into different parts of the adoption assessment process. Together they cover all the assessment interviews, the life stories and the recommendation record. The studies in this thesis are presented in the same order as the assessment interviews as shown in the table below:

Interview	General domain	Assessing and displaying	Study
1	Acquaintance & general orientation	The assessment relationship → for instance: cooperation	1
2& 3	Paste state of affairs	How are problems and stress dealt with → for instance: life events	2
	Present state of affairs	The stability of personality and relationship → for instance: quarrelling	3
	Future state of affairs	Parenting capacities → for instance: discrimination	4,5
4	Discussion of the draft record	Features of suitability for adoptive parenthood → for instance: ability to reflect	2,3

Table 1: overview of the studies of the assessment interviews

Study 1 covers the opening of the assessment procedure, and the assessment relationship established in interview 1; study 2 deals with the life stories and the past state of affairs of the prospective adoptive parents, as mostly discussed in interview 2; study 3 analyses the relationship between the prospective adoptive couples (their present state of affairs) as mostly discussed in interview 2 or 3. Studies 4 and 5 deal with interview 3, where the future state of affairs of the parents is assessed and questions are asked that invite the prospective parents to enter a future horizon of living with and raising an adoptive child.

All the papers have either been published, resubmitted for publication, or are currently under review. For this reason, each study has its own abstract, introduction, conclusion and references. As a result, there is a degree of overlap in the description of the adoption procedure in the Netherlands and in the method sections. A brief overview of each study is given below. After the studies, this thesis concludes with a chapter that presents the general discussion of the main findings.

### *Study 1*

Study 1 focuses on the very first minutes of the adoption assessment procedure. It takes a close look at the openings of the first assessment interview and analyses in detail the actions performed by the social workers in these initial exchanges. As with any interaction, the opening functions as a means to establish contact and to form or confirm a relationship. In this analysis we follow the path towards introducing a first topic and interpret the work done by the social workers in order to start 'doing assessment'. We show that it only takes a few moments for the assessment

relationship to emerge. As we show, the ‘essence’ of adoption assessment interaction, which distinguishes it from any other type of activity, is already visible in these early moments.

### *Study 2*

Prospective adoptive parents taking part in an adoption assessment process are asked to write down their life stories. In this study, we examine how information from the life stories is ignored, or selected and transformed into a topic to talk about in an assessment interview. We then analyse how the information from both the life story and the interview is reported on in the recommendation record. By comparing the life stories with the recommendation records we can follow the decision-making process of the social worker and analyse how the past state of affairs is assessed and displayed through text and talk.

### *Study 3*

Study 3 examines how the relationship of the prospective adoptive couples is assessed and displayed in interactions between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. In particular, we analysed three different relationship questions that are put to couples: questions that are posed to one partner and to the couple, with and without an observation from the social worker. We do not only analyse ‘what’ couples reply to relationship questions, but also ‘how’ they answer together. The present state of affairs of the couples is assessed through relationship questions.

### *Study 4*

In study 4, we analyse the preliminary conversational work that has to be done before a hypothetical question is asked. We analyse the hypothetical questions in their sequential context and determine how social workers prepare the ground before asking a hypothetical question. While hypothetical questions as such are used to assess the parenting skills of prospective adoptive parents, preparatory questions would seem to have an ‘equipping’ function, to strengthen the effect of the hypothetical discussion. In this study, we present different patterns in which hypothetical questions are discussed and we also advocate the analysis of actions in their local sequential context.

## Study 5

Study 5 contributes towards understanding how welfare and justice discourses become apparent in adoption assessment interactions. Study 5 follows on from study 4 by studying hypothetical questions in even more detail. We focus on the nature of these questions and their answers, which enables us to analyse how the questions are oriented towards by prospective adoptive parents and how social workers manage to integrate aspects of *testing* the capabilities of the prospective adoptive parents while, at the same time, also *helping* them to become even better-prepared parents.

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# Study 1

## Opening Assessment. Unravelling opening activities in assessments for international adoption

### *Abstract*

This study takes a close look at the openings of twelve different Dutch adoption assessment sessions. In the first of a series of four adoption assessment sessions, social workers perform different actions that are analyzed in detail. The overall focus is on how contact and relationships are established in the openings, and how the social workers work towards the first topic. We found that adoption assessment is a non-self evident occasion, and this is due to the potential risk of a negative assessment being made - it is oriented to as a delicate setting. In the openings, social workers take time to explain and justify the need for assessment and construct a relationship in which they claim entitlement to conduct an assessment, while also stressing cooperation with the prospective adoptive parent(s).

This study is based on:

Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (accepted pending revisions). Opening Assessment. Unravelling activities in assessments for international adoption. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

## *Introduction*

This study presents the results of an analysis of twelve first exchanges between social workers and prospective adoptive parents in the first of four adoption assessment sessions. We analyze the (menu of) actions taken before actually ‘starting’ to talk about the ‘first’ topic in the opening activity of assessments<sup>2</sup>. The objective of these assessments is for social workers to discuss a range of topics with prospective adoptive parents in order to determine their suitability to adopt a child from abroad, and make the necessary recommendations.

We are interested in the following: how do social workers accomplish the complex institutional task of assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood in interaction? This study focuses on how assessments are opened, and examines how social workers *start* doing assessment. Schegloff (1986) asserted that what an opening does is to: ‘constitute or reconstitute the relationship of the parties for the present occasion’ (Schegloff, 1986: 113). In other words, openings are used to establish: 1) who the speakers are for each other i.e. their relationship; and 2) what it is they are going to do together i.e. the occasion (Schegloff, 1968, 1986, 2002; Ten Have, 1999, 2000).

In doing so, several identities of the speakers become relevant for the interaction and are manifest in the details of talk (cf. Drew, 2002). Openings are fundamental to the coming interaction and incorporate a predictive element. For instance, it is relatively easy to recognize an emergency call just by looking at an opening statement: ‘911, how can I help you?’ (Zimmerman, 1992). Analyzing openings gives us a better understanding of the nature of specific contexts.

This study takes a close look at the opening, introductory activities of twelve assessments by answering the following questions: how can we identify the activity of adoption assessment in the opening sequences; how are the relationship and the occasion constructed in the opening activity?

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<sup>2</sup> Heritage and Sorjonen (1994: 4) defined activity as: *the work that is achieved across a sequence or series of sequences as a unit or course of action- meaning by this a relatively sustained topically coherent and/or goal-coherent course of action.* using ‘activity’ rather the ‘phase’ leaves space for the occurrence of opening actions to occur when the opening phase in the assessment has already gone by (Robinson, 2003: 29).

### *Opening what? Assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood*

People in the Netherlands who wish to adopt a child from abroad, enter into a procedure that takes anything between three and five years. For most of that time, the prospective adoptive parents are on a waiting list: (1) to be introduced to the specifics of adoption by following a compulsory informative six session course<sup>3</sup> and, once they have completed the course: (2) their suitability for adoptive parenthood is assessed by a social worker from the Child Protection Board (CPB).

Formally, assessments for international adoption are a matter of child protection, the objective of which is to find parents with special parenting qualities required for children who, because they have been given up for adoption, are considered to be vulnerable. In order to be in a position to make recommendations about the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents, the CPB is tasked with assessing 'possible risk and protection factors that could hinder the stable development of the adoptive child towards adulthood' (CPB, 2001: 62).

This means that the CPB is empowered to influence whether the *prospective* parents will actually become *adoptive* parents or not. There are two main elements to this process: firstly, the prospective parents must be no older than 42, they have to produce a written medical statement about their state of health, and it is verified whether they have a record of convictions, or not. Secondly, if no serious problems come to light in the first assessment, the prospective adoptive parents are invited to a local CPB office for a series of four face-to-face sessions with a social worker.

These sessions are structured and certain prescribed topics are always covered and include verification of the identity of the prospective adoptive parent(s), eligibility and suitability to adopt, background, family and medical history, social environment, reasons for wanting to adopt, the ability to enter into international adoption procedures, and the characteristics of the child they would be qualified to care for (HCCH, 1993: article 15). Attention is also given to how prospective parents deal with problems and stress in general, which includes how they cope with being childless, any special wishes they may have about a prospective adoptive child, expectations about their own child-raising abilities, and matters relating to the possible discrimination of the child as a foreigner, and any other particulars concerning the child' (CPB, 2001: 62).

The last session of the informative course prepares the prospective adoptive parents for the CPB assessment. The instructors encourage the prospective adoptive parents

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<sup>3</sup> In Dutch: VIA, which means: information (on) international adoption

to be 'open and cooperative' and they stress that there is 'nothing to be afraid of'. The course guidelines states that the assessment 'should be seen as an exchange of ideas between prospective adoptive parents and the social worker' (Stichting Adoptievoorzieningen, 2002: 40). Nevertheless, prospective adoptive parents say they are still nervous about the assessment. Some of them keep public domain blogs, where they write about the assessment. These blogs give a good idea of the stress they are under before taking part in the assessment, and express their relief when a positive recommendation is given. An example:

#### Reflection 1 AiAWL

*Well, we've had the first session with the Child Protection Board!! And it went better than expected. They asked a lot of different questions, and we were able to answer them in some detail. It was an open and frank conversation and we spoke about ourselves and our ideas. We were very nervous, but were soon put at ease. The social worker said it made a welcome change to talk with cooperative people, rather than dealing with more distressing cases. They are not there to put us down, but just to see who we are, to look at the things we need to work on, and to see what our strong points are. It was actually quite good to have such conversation (from: <http://adoptielog.blogspot.com/>. Translated by MN).*

In the eyes of these prospective parents the social worker succeeded in getting them to have a positive attitude towards the assessment (*good to have such conversation*) and to comfort them (*We were very nervous, but were soon put at ease*). But they also learned to appreciate the importance of the assessment (*They are not there to put us down--- strong points*).

The example shows that during the opening interaction an effort is made to establish the relationship and occasion of assessment. What do social workers do during openings and how is this relevant for accomplishing their institutional assessment task?

### *Opening a conversation*

Our analysis builds on (extended) conversation analytical (CA) work on (telephone) openings in everyday talk and on (rare) CA studies of institutional openings. A condensed review of the literature is provided.

People establish frameworks in conversation that guide the delivery of any kind of following interaction (Goffman, 1979), and ‘by a few exchanges (..) participants establish a fully interactional state’ (Schegloff, 1986: 113) and reach a point from where they can start to do whatever they need to do together.

Schegloff provided us with a canonical model of the organization of openings<sup>4</sup> that can be seen as a ‘neutral menu of possibilities, from which deviations (...) may be made to reflect the particular circumstances of the call (conversation), in terms of the relationship between callers (speakers), and the type of nature of the particular call (occasion)’ (Drew & Chilton, 2000: 140, omission and insertions in brackets MN).

It is known that ‘particular circumstances’ are made relevant in how the conversation is organized and they can be located in the orientations of the participants. In the very first exchanges in talk, both the speakers’ relationship and the occasion in which they are speaking is revealed. Two examples of how ‘circumstances’ can crop up in openings are discussed briefly below.

In calls to a helpline, callers are oriented towards giving the reason for the call. To bring this reason to the fore, ‘greetings’ and ‘how-are-you’s’ are skipped, and after an invitational: ‘How can I help you’ from the call taker, the caller will report something serious that he has experienced or witnessed and requires some assistance (cf. Wakin and Zimmerman, 1999; see also Drew, 2002 who shows that the omission of how-are-you sequences is not a reserved feature reserved for institutional talk but merely an indication of calling to do business). Making this kind of call casts callers as service seekers/informants and call takers as service providers and position the parties to engage in a specific interaction: by reporting an event callers request assistance and the job of the call taker is to provide help for the event occasioning the call (cf. Raymond & Zimmerman, 2007). In only a few exchanges both the occasion for the call (e.g. a fire) and the ‘jobs’ of the participants (reporting and providing) become immediately clear and make the call identifiable as an emergency call.

In medical interaction the canonical ‘How are you?’ is not always omitted, but when used takes on a rather context specific meaning. The patient receives the ‘How are you?’ as a request to state her problem, and will then talk about a medical problem instead of answering with the canonical ‘Fine! How are you?’. Such a

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of space and clarity we do not give the complete canonical model here (see: Schegloff, 1986 or a good example of an application of the model in Ten Have, 1999).

question opens the floor to present the reason for the encounter (or the occasion for the visit) and marks the relationship immediately as that of doctor-patient (Garafanka and Britten, 2003, 2005; Robinson, 2003).

These examples illustrate how utterances take on a specific meaning in their specific context and how (institutional) identities are established in the initial exchanges of an encounter. Our analysis focuses on how both the occasion and the assessment relationship come to the fore in the openings in order to say more about the kind of activity that assessment entails. To this end we describe the different actions that are taken in the opening activity. Within or through those actions, the social worker and prospective adoptive parents build towards a base point or 'anchor position', from which they can 'start' to conduct the assessment (Schegloff, 1986).

### *Data and analysis*

The data used in this study are the openings of twelve assessments held at eight different CPB offices in the Netherlands, conducted between 2002 and 2005. Video and audio recordings were made of eleven different social workers while conducting an assessment, each of which consisted of four meetings. One social worker allowed us to record two assessments. Of the twelve assessments, two are with single applicants (both female), one is a gay couple, and the other nine are with heterosexual couples of whom seven are childless not by choice. The other two couples want to adopt for ideological reasons. The length of the opening sequences varies from two to seventeen minutes.

The *very first* exchanges between social worker and prospective adoptive parents were not analyzed. There had, in all cases, already been an initial telephone exchange to make the appointment and/or an exchange in the corridor. Those exchanges had already covered such topics as whether 'to be on a first-name basis or not', small talk, a greeting, and an exchange of names.

The openings not only start *a* conversation, they are opening a series of meetings - they are in fact opening the assessment. In that sense, the openings have a double function: they are working towards an interactional state of conducting a conversation, and of constructing a starting point for the assessment itself. The openings analyzed here only occur in first meetings and must therefore be considered as the start of the assessment.

We describe and analyze all actions that can be taken in the opening sequences of the assessment and present them in the most common order. Our analysis includes every possible action that is taken before actually 'starting' to talk

about a first topic. The ‘first’ topic of talk is the first opportunity the prospective adoptive parents have the floor. That is, a question is posed that requires a clear, information giving reply from the parents. Of course, some topics are discussed before the ‘first’ topic, but they are marked as pre-topics.

We stress in our analysis a functional, rather than a structural use of concepts, taking into account that underlying differences in forms and formats leave room for ‘functional similarity’, that is: similar kinds of work need to be done (cf. Ten Have 1999: 5). In order to stress the ‘functional similarity’ of opening a conversation and for the sake of readability, we have divided the analysis of the opening activities over three organizational tasks of making an opening. That is: establishing contact, (re-) establishing a relationship, and working towards a first topic (cf. Schegloff, 1986: 113 in Ten Have 1999: 5). We then analyze how the opening activities are opened and closed. By including these utterances in our analysis we demonstrate how the participants themselves mark the actions studied as being part of an opening activity, rather than them being an analyst’s construction.

### *Establishing contact*

#### *(Re-)starting the conversation*

Our analysis starts with the social worker and the prospective adoptive parent(s) entering the room where the recording devices have been installed, they sit down and start to talk. In some assessments (3 of 12) the very first exchange is a sort of repetition of doing a first exchange:

#### Extract 1 AiAAM1

01 SW → nou: (.) welkom eh in je eigen huis  
*right: (.) welcome er to your own home*

02 PAM  
£ja dank je hahaha£ (lachend)  
*£yes thanks hahaha£ (smiley voice)*

03 SW  
e::h ja ik ben (naam RO) van de raad van  
*e::r yes I'm (name omitted) from the child*

04  
kinderbescherming maar goed we al: diverse keren  
*protection board anyway we've al:ready had*

05  
contact gehad=  
*contact several times=*

06 PAM  
ja  
*yes*

### Extract 2 AiABM1

01 SW → ok nou (.) welkom bij adoptie  
*ok right (.) welcome to adoption*  
02 PAF ɛja adoptief  
*ɛyes adoptionɛ (smiley voice)*

### Extract 3 AiADHE1

01 SW → zo (.) welkom  
*so (.) welcome*  
02 PAM ja (.) dank u wel (.)  
*yes (.) thank you (.)*

In all three extracts, by welcoming the parents, the social workers immediately take the floor and establish a position as both the ‘host’ and ‘chair’ of the assessment.

It is striking how similar these three ‘first’ exchanges are. They all start with a particle, followed by a micro pause and then a ‘welcome’ to the prospective adoptive parent(s). The combination of using a particle, followed by a micro pause is a common way of taking the floor. This combination also occurs in the openings where there is no repetition of a first exchange. In those cases, contact has already been established in the corridor. Then, when the prospective parents and the social worker are seated, the opening starts with the establishment of the relationship.

### *Establishing a relationship*

Having established contact, the social workers in our study did not get down to business straightaway. They all start a monologue that provides the prospective parents with all kinds of information, and explain at length what the assessment is all about. The provision of information comes across as a scripted narrative, a rehearsed story with some specific applications to the prospective adoptive parents in question.

In most opening actions, the social worker produces a multi-unit-turn, with information concerning the ‘who’ or ‘what’ of assessment. The prospective adoptive parents then nod, smile or give backchannels such as yes and hmm. In some cases, as we will see, their responses are a bit more extensive, but they seldom do more than answer what the first part of the sequence is asking for. The monological phase of the opening is often lengthy, in one case it took seventeen minutes.

### *Opening the opening*

Social workers do not start to tell the parents all kinds of information out of the blue, they tend to surround that information with preliminary statements. These statements reveal the status of the information, and separates the information that will be collected later on in the assessment from the information that is pre-known, either about the parents or about the ‘ways of assessment’. Two examples of these kinds of preliminary statements can be seen in extracts 4 and 5:

#### Extract 4 AiAAA21

01 SW okee weet je het lijkt mij het handigst dat ik  
*okay I think it would be a good idea for me just*  
02 gewoon aan jullie begin te vertellen wat de  
*to make a start to tell you what the aim is ehm:*  
03 bedoeling is ehm: en dan we(.)kijken we daarna  
*and then we (.) after that we just see err (.)*  
04 gewoon ehh (.) dan beginnen we daarna gewoon met  
*after that we then just start with*  
05 het gesprek  
*the conversation*

#### Extract 5 AiAAM1

01 SW e:hm (.) wat ik eigenlijk altijd doe is dat ik  
*e:rm (.) what I actually always do is that I say*  
02 eerst iets over mezelf vertel=  
*something about myself first=*  
03 PAM hm hmm  
*hm hmm*  
04 SW =en dan iets over de procedure en eh ja dan  
*=and then something about the procedure and then*  
05 beginnen we gewoon  
*er yes we just start*

These extracts show how the opening actions are marked as not yet being the ‘real’ assessment. This is done by lexical choices as (in bold):

AiAAA21 dan beginnen we daarna gewoon met het gesprek  
***after that** we **then** just start with the  
conversation*

AiAAM1 en eh ja dan beginnen we gewoon  
*and **then** er yes we just **start***

The start of the assessment (*then*) is located after the things to say *first*. The social worker in extract 5 does not explicate ‘what’ *then* starts and the social worker in extract 4 worker uses two repairs to come to the formulation of *the conversation*. The pause after *and then we* in line 3 and the pause after *after that we just see err* in line 3 are the places where the social worker restarts her announcement of the assessment. She finally comes to the formulation of *the conversation* in line 4.

Social workers speak of ‘conversations’ or sessions rather than use the word ‘assessment’. This, and other features, are attempts to deformalize and moderate the evaluative nature of the relationship between the social worker and prospective adoptive parents. This is also done by the use of ‘just’ and the accounts that are provided that explain the procedure. The use of *just* (extract 4: lines 1, 3, 4, extract 5: line 5) works as a normalizing device and marks the interaction as not being different from other conversations.

The social workers do not start to *say something about myself first* (extract 5, line 1,2) or *what the aim is* (extract 4, line2) but say that they are about to do so and account for that by giving reasons for that. Examples of such accounts are:

AiAAM1            wat ik eigenlijk altijd doe  
                      *what I actually always do*  
AiAAA21            het lijkt mij het handigst  
                      *I think it would be a good idea*  
AiABM1            we gaan in het begin altijd  
                      *in the beginning we always go*

These accounts detract the attention from the assessment of the prospective adoptive parents as being something ‘special’ or ‘exceptional’. By using a non specific recipient designed formulation, they categorize the people in the group of prospective adoptive parents, and by treating them in a routinized way, they position themselves as experts in conducting an assessment. This ambiguity can be seen in the shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ in extracts 4 and 5. When speaking about the information and the procedure, the social workers use ‘I’. They do not negotiate the procedural nature of the assessment and announce how they will lead the parents into talking about their suitability. When speaking about the conversation, the social workers use ‘we’ (e.g. extract 4: line 3 *we then just start*) including the parents as active members of the conversation.

So far, we can conclude that the social workers engage in preliminary work before explicitly introducing the assessment. In these introductory parts of the conversation,

they construct a dominant position in the relationship as ‘host’ and ‘chair’ of the meeting. Yet they also mark the assessment as routine and normal and not as a big thing. This is an indication of the ambiguity of the relationship between the social worker and the prospective adoptive parents. On the one hand, the social workers take control and position themselves as experts. On the other hand, by designing their turns the way they do, they emphasize the relational aspects and the informal nature of their collaboration.

We continue to look at *all the former things that need to be said* (AiARA1) and start with three extracts that all do something about ‘who we are for each other’. Different identities come to the fore and are made relevant. We will discuss the extracts separately, focusing on what they tell us in terms of assessment.

### *Who-the-interactants-are-for-each-other*

Talk in almost all institutional encounters is somehow related to the drawing up of a document. This is also the case in adoption assessment: a written recommendation about the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents. All social workers refer to the drawing up of the document, sometimes right at the beginning of the assessment:

#### Extract 6 AiARA1<sup>5</sup>

01 SW            lopen we nu even de personalia door (.) ik heb  
                  *lets just run through your details (.) I have*  
02                staan Parton Adrianis hè met I (.) S  
                  *written Parton Adrianis right? with I (.) S*  
03                [hè?]  
                  *[right?]*  
04 PAF           [klopt]  
                  *[right]*  
05 SW            en Brown Jacobine (Eveline)?  
                  *and Brown Jacobine (Eveline)?*  
06 PAM           ja  
                  *yes*  
07 SW            geboren in Arnhem op 01,07,68 (.) jij bent in  
                  *born in Arnhem on 01,07,68 (.) you are in the*  
08                hetzelfde Arnhem op 16,09,1971 (.) ja? (.2) jullie  
                  *same Arnhem on 16,09, 1971 (.) yes? (.2) you were*  
09                zijn gehuwd in Nijmegen op 15,06,1989 (.)

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<sup>5</sup> All identifiable items are replaced by different names, places and numbers.

married in Nijmegen on 15,06,1989 (.)  
 10 PAM ja  
           yes  
 11 SW [ja?]  
           [yes?]  
 12 PAF [ja]  
           [yes]  
  
 13-33 SW also checks profession, address and phone  
           number.  
  
 34 SW okee goed dat is wat ik van u weet wat ehh zeg  
           okay right that's what I know about you  
 35 maar de de feitelijke gegevens betreft  
           concerning err let's say call it the the factual  
           details

The social worker immediately points out that she is 'documenting'. She introduces the *factual details* (line 35) that are already known and that will be on the front page of the recommendation. By doing so, she immediately identifies the assessment as a 'writing activity' and preempts the fact that more information is needed. By introducing her knowledge status in line 34: *that's what I know about you* she establishes that she is entitled to know factual details about the prospective adoptive parents. By checking the data, she allows the prospective adoptive parents to correct the details, assuming that they 'own' the information that is needed for drawing up the record.

There are more identities made relevant in the openings. In the following extract, the delicate nature of the prospective adoptive parents being assessed by the social worker is mentioned.

#### Extract 7 AiARA1

01 SW ... dus ik voer de gesprekken met jullie  
           ... so I have the conversations with you  
 02 waarin £(lacht licht) jullie toch even van mij  
           where £ (smiley voice) you are  
 03 afhan[kelij]k=  
           depen[dent] on me for a =  
 04 PAF [mjaaa]  
           [myeees]  
 05 RO = zijn£ zeg ik altijd toch maar even hè want er  
           = moment£ I always say that, right? because there  
 06 zit natuurlijk toch iets in altijd van ja!



than other prospective adoptive parents. In other words, dependency is not the result of anything the prospective parents might say or do, it is simply procedural. The same is done by using *eventually* and *has* in line 7. By being indefinite the social worker places the initiative and responsibility for the fact that there *has to come a decision* outside herself and constructs her role as someone who is only conducting an institutional procedure<sup>7</sup>.

We will now present two short extracts that illustrate how social workers are vague about their position (extract 8) and how they stress a positive relationship with the prospective parents (extract 9).

Extract 8: AiAAA21

01 SW            ehm ik zit hier niet met een checklistje van (.)  
                  *ehm I'm not sitting here with a checklist like*  
02                eh drie foute antwoorden is af↓ (.) zo werkt het  
                  *(.) er three wrong answers and you're out<sup>8</sup>↓ (.)it*  
03                niet  
                  *doesn't work like that*

Extract 9: AiAAA21

01 SW            ehm (.) ja ik ik hoop gewoon dat we een een  
                  *ehm (.) yes I I just hope we can work well*  
02                beetje plezierig samen kunnen werken dat het een  
                  *that we have a few pleasant sessions*  
03                beetje leuke gesprekken worden  
                  *together*

We can conclude that social workers vaguely state their formal position (e.g. extract 8) and where they are forthright, they distance themselves from the procedure and add awkwardness markers to their formulations. They also emphasize a cooperative relationship with the prospective adoptive parents (e.g. extract 9).

Another way to moderate the relationship into a more equal one is by disclosing personal information about themselves to the prospective adoptive parents. Some

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<sup>7</sup> The formulations are also 'fleshed out' by the use of particles as 'toch' in line 2, 5 and 6. This particle however does not translate easily into English and the effect might be a bit lost in translation.

<sup>8</sup> Back to square one.



assessment requires the prospective adoptive parents to give personal information, and by doing so provide the social worker with material on which to assess them. By saying *in the coming period of time I'm going to get a lot of information from you* (Extract 10: lines 1 and 2) the social worker preempts this. The social worker in extract 11 gives another reason for his disclosure. He does not refer to the relationship but only to the later conversation where he will *mention them* (his children) *anyway* (line 4 and 5).

By sharing this personal information, the social worker is positioning himself towards parenthood. Almost all social workers happen to mention their 'child status' and whether their children are adopted or not. We don't know exactly *why* the social workers do this, but the conversational effect is the positioning of the social worker as both deliverer, checker and collector of information *and* as a parent. By doing so they add evidence to their expertise, since they have 'parenting knowledge' whereas most prospective adoptive parents do not, but it also brings them closer to the prospective adoptive parents because they can empathize with a wish for a child.

In sum, by analyzing what is being said about *who* the participants in the assessment are for each other, we identified two formats. In information delivery, the parents adopt the position of listeners, and in information checking, parents confirm or correct factual details that are already known. Social workers deliver information about the relationship with the prospective adoptive parents carefully and mitigate the formal nature of that relationship.

In more general terms, information is collected during the assessment in order to arrive at a decision about the prospective parents' suitability. The information 'owned' by the prospective parents will provide the social worker with material to use when making the recommendation. These two features of the relationship seem to balance each other: in order to make a recommendation the social worker needs information from the prospective parents, and the parents need a positive recommendation in order to adopt a child, and they are therefore willing to provide the social worker with the necessary information. The interests of the prospective adoptive parents have much more weight than that of the social worker. The social workers do their best to tone this down by an informal and friendly approach.

## *What-they-are-going-to-do-together*

### *Setting the agenda*

The first element in an assessment is the setting of the agenda for the four sessions. All the social workers in our study present the order in which they want to discuss the topics during the coming meetings. They do it in different ways. One example is given in extract 12:

#### Extract 12 AiAAA21

01 SW           ehmm wat gaan we doen in de gesprekken? Eh in dit  
                  *ehmm what are we going to do in our sessions? er*  
02               eerste gesprek wil ik het met jullie hebben over  
                  *in this first meeting I want to talk with you*  
03               ehm waarom jullie willen adopteren? jullie  
                  *about ehm why you want to adopt? your reasons and*  
04               motivatie en wat jullie verwachtingen zijn en wat  
                  *your expectations and what your wishes are with*  
05               jullie wensen zijn ten aanzien van de adoptie(.)  
                  *respect to adoption (.)*  
06               nou dan in het volgende gesprek het tweede  
                  *well then in the next session, the second*  
07               gesprek gaan we het hebben over ehm ehm jullie  
                  *conversation we will talk about ehm ehm your your*  
08               jullie levensverhaal dus echt van in wat voor  
                  *lifestories so really like the kind of family in*  
09               gezin zijn jullie geboren opgegroeid, lagere  
                  *which you were born and grew up, primary school*  
10               school middelbare school, werk, hobbies, vrije  
                  *high school, work, hobbies, spare time well yes*  
11               tijd nou ja alles wat maar met jullie eigen leven  
                  *everything that has to do with your own life*  
12               te maken heeft  
13 PAM           mmm  
                  *mmm*  
14 SW           en dan in het derde gesprek wil ik het met jullie  
                  *and then in the third conversation I want to*  
15               hebben over jullie relatie en over ehm wat wat  
                  *discuss your relationship with you and also ehm*  
16               voor ideeën jullie hebben over het opvoeden van  
                  *what what your ideas are about bringing up*  
17               kinderen

18 PAM            *children*  
                      *ja*  
                      *yes*

This social worker is summing up the content of the coming sessions, and although her formulations are rather general, she applies her sayings to the occasion in which the topics will be discussed by saying in line 4 and 5 *what your wishes are **with respect to adoption***. It appears that there are limits to the information that is requested.

Setting the agenda is the only kind of action that does occur in every opening activity in our corpus. There is one assessment in which the social worker in the opening activity immediately worked towards a first topic after having set the agenda. In that case, the social worker alternated opening actions with interview questions but when bringing the first session to a close still delivered most information in a more ad hoc way. For the social worker, setting the agenda seems to be conditional to questioning the prospective parents.

### *Giving a reason for the encounter*

In most openings, the social workers explain the rationale of the assessment by providing the prospective parents with a reason for the encounter(s). In these formulations the core of the assessment is presented or, at least that is how the sequences are constructed. These instances can be located by looking at phrases that express the ‘importance’ of what is being said. Examples (in pre-position) are:

AiADH1            *ik ben hier naar aanleiding van*  
                      *the reason I'm here is*  
AiAAM1            *wat ik moet doen is*  
                      *what I have to do is*  
AiAAM1            *wat wil ik? Ik wil eigenlijk gewoon*  
                      *what do I want? I actually just want*

The importance of what is being said can also be indicated in post-position. As follows:

AiAAA21            *kijk daar gaat het om*  
                      *look that's what it is about*  
AiAAM1            *dat is een beetje de insteek van het gesprek*  
                      *that's sort of approach of the conversation*

These announcing utterances remind us of how, in storytelling, the narrator makes clear that he is about to tell the plot of the story or that he has just told us the plot. Just like the plot in stories, the reason for the encounter can be repeated several times and with different wording. An example in which the social worker works from the general to the specific when giving the ‘reason for the encounter’ is given below:

### Extract 13 AiAAMI

01 SW mja? (1.0) wat ik moet doen is e:h (.) eh ja  
*myes? (1.) what I have to do is e:r (.) er*

02 kijken van ja of je voldoende geschikt bent  
*yes look at yes whether you are suitable*

03 om een kind uit het bui:tenland in jouw  
*enough to take in a fo:reign child in your*

04 gezinssituatie op te nemen=  
*family situation=*

05 PAM ja  
*yes*

06 SW =waarbij we kijken naar eh risicofactoren en  
*=where we look at er risk factors and at*

07 naar beschermende factoren  
*protective factors*

08 ja  
*yes*

09 SW mja? e::n op voo:rhand kan je ook stellen  
*myes? a::nd befo:rehand you can also state*

10 dat er al een paar risicofactoren zijn >>dat  
*that there are already a few risk factors*

11 is< hè dus je bent alleenstaand=  
*>>that is< well you're single=*

12 PAM (knikt) ja  
*(nods) yes*

13 SW =je bent eenenveertig nu hè?=  
*=you are forty-one now right?=  
 14 PAM (knikt) ja  
 (nods) yes*

15 SW =dus dat houdt in dat je dan een ouder kind  
*=so that means that you then*

16 moet [eh] (zal)adopterem  
*have to [er] (will) adopt an older child*

17 PAM [ja] (knikt)  
*[yes] (nods)*

The prospective mother confirms information checking devices with a nod and *yes* (lines 12, 14, 17) and adopts a listener's position when information is delivered. This a classic example of the multi-unit turn, minimal response format in which most sequences develop in the assessment openings.

Furthermore, this extract illustrates how the 'reason for the encounter' is formulated and specified to the prospective adoptive mother in question, who is a single applicant. In lines 1-8 the social worker uses a general formulation in which he detaches himself from what he is saying (by using *have to* in line 1 and by using *we* in line 6). He then applies the general phrase to the prospective mother's specific situation by setting out a few risk factors (still making use of a general *you*, line 9). By confirming these facts, by nodding and saying yes, and by not countering them as non-risk factors, the mother accepts she belongs to a group of prospective adoptive parents with pre-known risk factors.

Where the extract stops, the social worker continues with his 'application work'. Later on in the opening he again presents the 'reason for the encounter' using different words:

#### Extract 14 AiAAM1

01	SW	ja? (1.5) wat <u>wil</u> ik? ik wil eigenlijk gewoon een <i>yes? (1.5) what do I <u>want</u>? I actually just want</i>
02		eerlijk verhaal van jou zodat we een zo goed <i>an honest account about you so that we can make</i>
03		mogelijke inschatting kunnen maken <i>an as good as possible assessment</i>
04	PAM	ja <i>yes</i>
05	SW	(1.0) ik ga <u>wel</u> altijd uit van het positieve= <i>(1.0) I always <u>do</u> assume the positive=</i>
06	PAM	hm hmm <i>hm hmm</i>

He tends to express himself much more in his own words in this reason-giving device. Just as in extract 13, line 6 he presents the assessment as an institutional task by using *we* (line 2) when referring to the decision.

Another interesting feature of the way the reason is given is that the social worker constructs his turn as being a sequential pair in itself. By posing a question out loud (line 1: *what do I want?*) he shapes his monologue into a much more interactional form. This form is not only prohibited to the action of giving the

reason for the encounter but is a common way of making the opening more interactional (see also line 1 of extract 12).

Giving the ‘reason for an encounter’ is a common feature in opening activities, and on most occasions is analyzed as being the first topic of conversation. For instance, in medical consultations, the ‘reason for the visit’ is provided by the client, and is a response to a problem elicitor i.e. the GP (Ruusuvuori, 2000). The very fact that in our cases it is not the parents, but the social worker who gives the ‘reason for the assessment’ indicates that the assessment is a legal procedure rather than a voluntary encounter. The assessment is initiated by the CPB and therefore the social worker must give the reason for the encounter. We have no cases in which the parents come up with a candidate reason such as: ‘We are here because.....’.

### *Procedural tellables*

In most opening activities the social worker comes up with one or more procedural tellables. That is: information about the assessment procedures. For instance, the fact that the prospective parents may always request a different social worker, or that the final recommendation is always read by the social worker’s supervisor. There is no procedural aspect that is talked about by all social workers, and not all social workers provide the prospective adoptive parents with procedural information. This failure to provide procedural information is remarkable in this judicial context in which clients are usually informed at length about their rights. This may be because social workers do not expect the conversations with the prospective parents to lead to conflict and that the clients will not really need information about their legal position. This is different from CPB assessments in multi-problem families where the social workers explain the procedures in detail (Nijnatten van, 2006).

### *Pre-empting possible problems*

In the openings, some social workers already touch upon the possibility of problems regarding suitability. They either introduce the possibility of an additional session should there be topics that require more attention, or set out how they will deal with a situation in which doubts or worries come to the fore. The social worker in Extract 15 preempts the likelihood of problems like this:

Extract 15 AiAAA21

01 SW ehm (.) ja ik ik hoop gewoon dat we een een  
*ehm (.) yes I I just hope that we can have a a*  
02 beetje plezierig samen kunnen werken dat het een  
*rather pleasurable cooperation that it will*  
03 beetje leuke gesprekken worden ja en na<sup>↑</sup>tuurlijk  
*become rather nice meetings yes and of ↑course we*  
04 kunnen we op dingen stuiten waarvan ik denk mm  
*can come up against something I think mm that is,*  
05 dat is, dat zijn twijfels of dat is, dat is dat  
*that are doubts, that is that is worrying or*  
06 is zorgelijk of misschien is dat wel een risico  
*perhaps that's a risk (.) we have to talk that*  
07 daar moeten we het dan maar uitgebreid over  
*through in detail then↓*  
08 hebben↓  
09 PAM (.2) ja  
*(.2) yes*  
10 SW (.) en ik wil gewoon van jullie weten hoe jullie daar  
*(.) and I just want to know from you what you*  
11 een beetje in staan(.)  
*somehow think about this (.)*

In this extract the possibility of problems arising is constructed as something that might happen in the course of the assessment. By saying *of course we can come up against something* (line 3 and 4) the assumption is that something like that might happen. ‘Something’ is then explained in a three part list (lines 5 and 6: *doubts, worrying, risk*) that may gradually evolve into something more serious. The risk of ‘something’ emerging is packaged in more positive sayings, as follows:

Positive:	(line 2)	<i>rather pleasurable cooperation</i>
Positive:	(line 3)	<i>rather nice meetings</i>
Negative	(line 5)	<i>doubts</i>
Negative:	(line 5)	<i>worrying</i>
Negative:	(line 6)	<i>risk</i>
Positive:	(line 6, 7)	<i>talk that through in detail</i>
Positive:	(line 10,11)	<i>I just want to know from you what you somehow think about this</i>

The first two positive formulations focus on the relationship. The last two positive formulations focus more on the fact that possible problems can be solved.

The ‘positives’ play down the consequences of the threat of something worrying emerging. By sandwiching the ‘negatives’ the relationship is saved, but a platform has still been created for the possible use of the social worker’s authority. This is another practice of mitigating the formal aspects of the assessment by presenting it in an open dialogue between partners, without denying the fact that a final decision about the parents’ suitability has to be made.

To summarize the ‘what’ (or occasion) of assessment so far: by setting the agenda, social workers occasion the assessment as the discussion of topics relating to adoption, and in addition, by providing the prospective parents with the reason for the encounter, they occasion the assessment as a legal step in the adoption procedure. An issue we often see in most openings is the pre-emption of problematic issues that might have to be reviewed. We found that the social workers often packaged these remarks to mitigate their formal nature.

### *Working towards a first topic*

After all these tellables, which have ‘the degree of claimed priority or urgency embodied in the degree of preemption before anchor position pursued by the preempting party (Schegloff, 1986: 117), the social worker works towards a first topic in which the prospective parents are invited to talk. The social worker in extract 16 needs two attempts to get the parents going:

#### Extract 16 AiARA1

01	SW	hebben jullie ehh aan het begin zo van al deze <i>do you have err at the start of these</i>
02		gesprekken vra:gen aan mij zijn d’r dingen de <i>conversations que:stions to me is there anything</i>
03		afgelopen tijd waar van je zegt bij het VIA <i>lately like at the information course they sai:d</i>
04		zei:den ze maar toen heb ik ’s gehoord of dat <i>but then I’ve once heard</i>
05		soort dingen [on]duidelijkheden <i>or that kind of stuff [ob]scurities</i>
06		[nee] <i>[no]</i>
07	PAM	nee eigenlijk [niks nee] nee↓ <i>no actually [nothing no] no↓</i>

08 SW [niks nee?]=  
 [nothing no?]=

09 PAF [°nee ??°]  
 [°no ??°]

10 SW =[ho]e was de V:IA voor  
 = [ho]w was the VIA for

11 jullie dat is nu een tijdje geleden hoe was dat?  
 you that's been a while now how was that?

12 ja ik vond ik heb het zelf als heel positief  
 yes I felt I have experienced it as really

13 ervaren ja↑  
 positive myself yes↑

In almost all openings, the *information course* is the first topic of discussion. It is the last step the parents took in the adoption procedure and in that sense it is linked chronologically with the assessment. It is an open topic elicitor that enables the prospective adoptive parents to come up with different answers, which provide more specific topics to explore. Many parents relate how the information course made their wish to adopt even stronger, despite the fact that they had been told about numerous possible risks. From this point on we see the standard institutional sequences of question and answer.

### *Closing the opening*

Working towards a new topic goes hand in hand with the closing of the opening. At this point the social worker makes it clear that the monological nature of the conversation has come to an end. The social workers mark the ending of the opening activity by adding phrases such as:

AiARA1 hebben jullie ehh aan het begin zo van al deze  
 do you have err at the start of these  
 gesprekken  
 conversations

AiAAA41 u:::hm nou even denken, ik denk dat wel een  
 u:::hm well let's think, I guess that that's  
 beetje het belangrijkste is om op voorhand te  
 sort of the most important thing to tell you  
 vertellen aan jullie.  
 beforehand

AiAAA41 goed (.) even denken (.) heb ik al het  
 right (.) let's see (.) have I told you all the

belangrijke verteld (.2) volgens mij wel (.) nou  
*important things (.2) I think so yes (.) well*

AiAMM1 u::hm (.2) dan gaat het gewoon beginnen  
u::hm (.2) then it's just going to start

AiAMM1 u::hm (.) waar ik mee wil beginnen  
u::hm (.) *I want to start with*

Although several minutes have already passed, the social worker marks this point as the 'start' of the assessment. Although the activity of opening the assessment can be spread out over the first meeting, we found no similar activities in the other three meetings in which the social worker gets right down to business.

### *Conclusion*

In our openings, the relationship between social worker and prospective adoptive parents is explicated, explained and confirmed. There are several explanations for this extendedness.

Firstly, the occasion for the assessment is not self-evident: apart from a list of topics, there is no manual on *how* to interview prospective adoptive parents and how to measure suitability. The social workers have developed a range of questions to ask the prospective adoptive parents and deploy their professional insight to find ways of tackling social desirability and difficulties. Nevertheless, their task is complicated, not least because they have to assess parental capabilities without the opportunity to evaluate parental practice. At the time of the assessment there is no information yet about the specifics of a child to be adopted, and the prospective parents have had no opportunity to demonstrate their parenting skills with that child. However, the assessment is to ensure that the prospective adoptive parents are capable of raising an adoptive child. The parents are given the opportunity during the sessions to prove that they are. The CPB has developed a professional routine in which social workers 'do assessment'. This routine is accounted for in the openings of the first meeting and is explicated.

Secondly, although it is a legal obligation for the suitability of prospective parents to be assessed before obtaining permission to adopt a child, social workers are reluctant to be forthright about their role in this procedure. Assessment, and the risk of a negative assessment in particular, is a delicate matter (Pomerantz 1984, Raymond & Heritage 2006). In our study we found that social workers tended to work cautiously rather than confront the prospective parents with their formal role. When the social workers do express their entitlement to collect information to help them formulate a recommendation, they mitigate their authority by stressing that

they hope ‘their sessions are pleasant’, by, amongst other features, using awkwardness markers and sandwich constructions and by disclosing personal information about themselves. They confirm the ‘ownership’ the parents have with regard to the information to be collected. Nevertheless, they act as the host and chair of the assessment and sometimes already preempt possible problems or, more or less vaguely, touch upon the issues of dependency and decision making, and in any case do arrive at a final recommendation regarding the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents for adoption.

In opening a conversation, people constitute a relationship for the present occasion. When the occasion is a ‘business one’, people skip ‘greetings and how-are-you’s’ and pre-empt the reason for the call or encounter as we have seen in the examples of emergency calls and medical interactions. A simple ‘How can I help you’ is then sufficient to get the practice of ‘reporting an event’ or ‘seeking medical help’ going.

The reason for the encounter presents the particularities of ‘which event is reported’ and for ‘what medical problem’ help is required. In encounters in which the occasion is self-evident (e.g. checking in at an airport, Swinkels, 1997) or in encounters in which the occasion is just to keep in touch (Drew & Chilton, 2000) reasons are omitted and participants, at least after a greeting, start to either chat or to do business.

From this, we can distinguish between three levels of occasion: 1) no reason (just to keep in touch); 2) self-evident reason (standing in front of a check-in); or 3) a reason that needs to be specified (type of report or problem). More levels can occur at the same time. For instance, the occasion in medical interaction is self-evident - you do not go to a GP to report a fire - but there is a range of problems for which you can visit a GP and the specific reason needs to be specified (levels 2 and 3).

In any case the relationship between participants is confirmed in opening a conversation and even more clearly in working towards a first topic. Participants do not need to explain and explicate the relationship when the occasion for the conversation is self-evident.

In addition to the fact whether a reason for an encounter is evident or not, matters of entitlement and delicacy also seem to influence how explicative and forthright a relationship between participants is established. High entitlement (reporting a fire) makes it less necessary to explain who you are and so on. However, high entitlement (being a GP) in combination with delicate issues, e.g. an internal examination, also leads to more care on the part of the professional, who will give more information and will reassure the patient more than in a less delicate case. Of course, delicacy

and entitlement are not static factors and will be oriented to by the participants themselves and cannot be pre-determined and participants can still explicate the relationship even in a very self-evident occasion.

In sum, assessments for adoption can be considered as a not self-evident occasion for conversation and are regarded as delicate. When social workers open assessments for international adoption, work is being done to construct a relationship in which the social workers confirm and retain their entitlement to collect information which will enable them to make a recommendation about the prospective adoptive parent's suitability for adoption. Moreover, they share information about what assessment is all about and create an atmosphere in which prospective adoptive parents can speak about different, sometimes delicate, areas of their life in as nice a way as possible.

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## Study 2

### Assessing candidates for adoptive parenthood. Institutional *re* - formulations of biographical notes

#### *Abstract*

Prospective adoptive parents who take part in a Dutch adoption assessment procedure are asked to write down their life stories. In this study we examine how information from the life stories is deleted, selected and transformed into a topic to talk about in an assessment interview and/ or to write about in a recommendation record. We have shown in a detailed analysis how prospective adoptive parents demonstrate themselves to be 'normal people' with 'normal childhoods' and how life events are selected from the life stories as a means to assess the coping qualities of the prospective adoptive parents. We could conclude that social workers in the recommendation record: 1) turn statements made by the parents into facts; 2) leave statements in the parents' own words, and that they 3) assess suspicions of possible risk factors in the interview but omit them from the record. By using conversation analysis as a method we could gain an insight into the dynamics of assessment, making visible exactly how social workers collect information about people's background to arrive at a decision about whether the candidates are suitable adoptive parents.

This study is based on:

Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (accepted for publication). Assessing candidates for adoptive parenthood. Institutional *re* - formulations of biographical notes. *Children and Youth Services Review*.

## *Introduction*

*'Servers of all kinds have the right to ask those they serve for pertinent biographical information. To seek a service, then, is to expose oneself to questioning' (Goffman, 1983: 41).*

Being able to construct a coherent life story, consisting of a sense of 'sameness within change' is of great importance for someone's mental health (cf. Chandler, 2003: 4). By telling and retelling one's life story, people 'construct agency and organise their life by taking up a position towards it' (cf. Nijnatten, van & Heestermans, forthcoming), and by telling stories people can exercise control over the type of encounter that they are having (Davis, 1988:127-128). For instance, when people get married, they tell others about how they met each other and how they came to be engaged. Or, when someone has died, people tell stories that claim to identify the spirit of the deceased. And, at a certain age, children can ask to have the story of their birth told and retold over and over again.

Talking about biographical information is common practice in people's everyday life, and also an important element in institutional communication. Asking questions about someone's background in institutional settings serves two main functions that can both be derived from the idea that telling one's life story and one's mental health are closely related. The first function is that of counselling, helping people to develop a coherent life story in order to get a grip on their lives, and to go on living, after, for instance, a traumatic episode in their life (White & Epston 1990). The other function is that of assessment, where life stories are used as a diagnostic tool to collect relevant information to find out about or to check on someone's physical or mental state. Halonen (2006) showed that life stories are used as evidence for assessing addiction. In this research, therapists used yes/no questions to establish facts, such as about 'increased drinking' and 'loss of control', in order to arrive at a diagnosis and to confront the patient with being an addict (cf. 2006: 294).

This study focuses on the function of biographies in assessments for international adoption. Social workers with the Dutch Child Protection Board (CPB) have to weigh up 'possible risk and protection factors that could hinder the stable development of the adoptive child towards adulthood' (CPB, 2001: 62). In addition to a health and criminal record check, four face-to-face interviews with prospective adoptive parents are part of the procedure. In the first interview, prospective adoptive parents are instructed to write out their life story, which partly sets the agenda for the second meeting. In addition to the stability of the relationship and

social network (present state of affairs) and parenting qualities (future state of affairs), the prospective parents' background (past state of affairs) is a major issue covered in the interviews. As in many institutional settings, the discussion with the prospective adoptive parents about their life story is reported on in an official recommendation record. These are not just representations of prior activities but indications for future readers (Garfinkel, 1974; Meehan, 1986). In our case, the life stories are part of the official report drawn up by the CPB, which assesses the suitability of the potential adoptive parents to bring up an adoptive child. This report is sent to and used by two audiences: by a state agency for approval<sup>9</sup>, and by the mediating agency that is responsible for the matching procedure and mediates between prospective adoptive parents and the countries where the adoptive child comes from.

Rather than an interest in the mental health status of prospective adoptive parents, our interest is in the ways in which social workers accomplish their institutional task of assessing suitability in both text and talk. We therefore analyse how the prospective adoptive parents present themselves in their life story, and how social workers use these stories during the interview to start a discussion about relevant issues that may help the professional to arrive at a recommendation. We first present a brief review of the literature on the making of an institutional record through text and talk.

### *Making an institutional record*

Text and talk are closely intertwined and interdependent in institutional communication. The immediate context of questioning people in institutions is the production of records (Agar 1985; Cedersund 1992; Ravotas and Berkenkotter 1998; Cook-Gumperz and Messerman 1999; Mäkitalo 2005). This means that texts that are produced preceding face-to-face meetings will partly set the agenda for what is attended to by both interlocutors, and what is attended to and discussed will inevitably be transformed when articulated in text (as a recommendation record) (Mäkitalo, 2005: 433).

This process of transformation is not simply a matter of transcribing what has been said in an interview or copying what has been written down in a life story. In fact, even a 'copy' is voiced in a different way and constitutes a new event in a new context, acquiring some new meaning (cf. Clark and Gerrig, 1990). The difference between a secretary taking the minutes and a social worker is that the task

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<sup>9</sup> In the Netherlands: the Ministry of Justice

of the latter is not just to collect information but also to interpret and even assess the information in accordance with institutional guidelines. This process of making a judgement touches upon the very heart of the institution.

Jonsson, Linell and Säljö (cf. 1991: 10, 11) analyzed the purposes for which information is transformed between a face-to-face meeting and a (police) record. Three main conclusions could be drawn from their analysis. Firstly, transformation is meant to create *coherence in a particular perspective*. This is a collaborative accomplishment between the professional and the client, where it is the professional's task to 'sift out what is legally relevant'. This means that interrogators use the 'psychological and symbolic tools of the institution to monitor and filter what is said'. The second conclusion is that the practice of remembering in an institutional context is, by definition, *future-oriented*. In a judicial setting, stories about past events are collected in order to arrive at a future decision. Thirdly, remembering serves the 'purpose of materializing an authoritative version of a client's past action which will legitimate further action'. In other words, the *making of a persistent version*.

We build on these conclusions in our analysis, and on other work that examines transference between text and talk, and on the analysis of such transferences in terms of their institutional context (Jonsson & Linell 1991; Komter, 2003, Komter 2006). Komter (2003) has shown how police officers deal with their dual task of both interrogating a suspect and, at the same time, the on-line construction of a written document in which the suspect's statement is recorded. It is inevitable that changes such as deletion, addition, selection and transformation occur when moving from verbal interrogation to a written record. These considerations, and the fact that these records can be used as evidence, make it clear how to read the record for what it is: 'a document that in some respects reflects what has been said in the interrogating room but that cannot be understood without taking into account its embedding in a bureaucratic and institutional environment' (Komter, 2006: 222; Jonsson & Linell 1991).

## *Method*

All studies on the institutional transformation of text and talk based their analysis on two institutional steps: from talk to text or vice versa. However, in our analysis we have access to three sources in the institutional procedure for adoption assessment: from text (written life story) to talk (interview) to text (recommendation record). This gives us the opportunity to analyse both the making of a record as described above, and to analyse how parents present themselves in their life story. By

comparing the life stories with the recommendation records we can follow the decision-making process of the social worker. We will trace back: which information from the written life story is included in the recommendation record; how this information is transformed in terms of the institution; which information is omitted in the recommendation record, and how the written life story is assessed and transformed in the interview.

In order to answer our questions we conducted an (ethnographical) conversation analysis, focusing on the ‘details of the actual event’ of adoption assessment (Sacks, 1984a: 24). We concentrate in particular on how the biographical information given by the prospective adoptive parents gets its institutional meaning through different stages of text and talk.

In our analysis, we started by comparing information from the records with the prospective parents’ written life story. This comparison helped us to cover most information because the record is the final ‘word’ in the assessment: it brings together information from the life story and the interview and helps the social worker to formulate risk and protective factors with regard to adoptive parenthood. In order to trace back the ‘origin’ of the information in the record, we compared each biographical topic in the record with the information in the life story. Subsequently, we traced back whether and how the topic was negotiated in the interview. This procedure helped us to identify almost all the topics that had undergone some change between life story, interview and record. The remaining topics only occurred in one stage of the assessment, and were left out in other stages. We included these topics because they provide relevant information about institutional selection mechanisms.

The biographical information of eight prospective parents was analysed in a written life story, interview(s) and record(s). All the people in our corpus received a positive recommendation and were authorized to proceed with the adoption process. We received written informed consent to use this highly personal information. All names and identifying details have been disguised. The excerpts in this study were taken from the transcripts and translated from Dutch into English. We used the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004), which highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail.

## Results

We first present an overview of all the relevant steps that are taken and that lead to the biographical information of prospective adoptive parents in a final record on the parent's suitability. The diagram below presents the steps in chronological order:

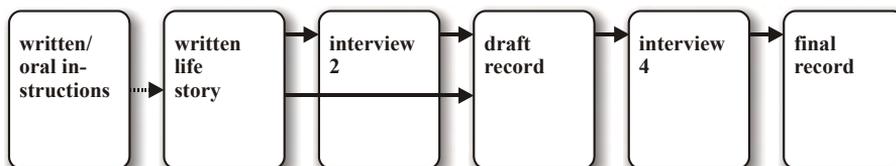


Diagram 1: biographical information through the different stages of the international adoption assessment procedure.

In the first square, under the heading of instructions, we have collected the most important actions preceding the written life story. The dotted arrow after that square means that the actions influence is not completely retraceable. We assume influence as a result of a compulsory information course that all prospective adoptive parents follow prior to the assessment and in which they are informed that they will have to write a life story as preparation for the second interview. As a result, many prospective adoptive parents seek information about the specifics of the assessment procedure by reading the web logs of other adoptive parents. Finally, the presentation of the life story is influenced by the instructions given by the institutional representative in the first interview. All social workers give a rough idea about the length and the contents of the life story. From the written and verbal instructions we deduced the following topics to be those that prospective parents are asked to write about:

- the composition of your original family (AiARE1);
- important events, uncomfortable events and the pleasant events (AiARA1);
- positive and negative experiences (AiADHE1);
- how was your upbringing (AiARA1);
- what kind of rules did your parents have for you (AiARA1);
- what are the characteristics of your parents (AiARA1);
- the mutual relationships among members of your birth family (AiADHE1);
- how did you meet (AiARE1);
- other relationships before your current partner (AiARE1);
- school career (AiARA1);
- profession (AiARA1);

- actually everything that made you who you are (AiADHE1);
- how you came to become yourself (AiARE1).

This list shows that the institutional influence actually commences before the parents have written their own versions of their past. They are not free to select what they want to write about from their past, but are instructed to write about certain issues. The prospective parents are free to choose the wording, and to select any specifics they want to mention or stress.

The written life stories are discussed in the second interview, during which the social worker selects topics from the life story to talk about and introduces topics that are missing from the life story. In the course of the assessment procedure, the social worker writes a draft version of the parents' background as part of the draft record. In the fourth interview, the prospective parents are invited to ask questions and comment on the draft record. These comments will be dealt with in the production of the final record. Prospective parents seldom make use of this opportunity. None of the prospective adoptive parents in our study asked any questions or commented on the way their past was presented in the draft record. All information in the draft record on the background of the prospective parents was identical to that in the final record. This means that all the parents in our study felt they had been well represented in the final records. We need to take a further look at the steps in the procedure to ascertain how social workers executed their transformation task, and how parents contributed to the transformation process.

The following routes are pertinent for our further analysis (→ refers to transformation, X refers to omission):

- A) Life story → Final record  
 Life story → interview 2 → final record  
 Interview 2 → Final record
- B) Life story X Final record  
 Life story → Interview 2 X final record  
 Interview 2 X Final record

The information in A is *transformed* in one or two steps from the written life story and/or the interview into the record. B shows information that is *omitted* in the final record in either one or two steps.

### *How prospective adoptive parents present their background*

Prospective adoptive parents follow the institutional instructions about how to present themselves in their life story. They describe how they became who they are, and focus on different areas of their lives. The greater part of their stories includes a description of their birth family. In addition, they also describe different life stages (primary school, high school etc.), the history of their relationship, career and life events.

We first discuss a number of examples of how parents present themselves in their life stories and in the interview and how this information is copied or restated in the record. We focus on the presentations of the parents to find out more about the ways they perceive the assessment, and on how much of their perspective is actually included in the record.

#### Excerpt 1 AiARE2 (*LS* → *R*)

##### Life story PAM

01 Toen ik 4 jaar werd ging ik naar de  
*When I was 4 years old I went to the [name]*  
02 kleuterschool[naam]. Wat ik me hier nog van kan  
*infants' school. What I can remember about it is*  
03 herinneren is dat de juf elke dag de hond mee  
*that the teacher brought her dog along to class*  
04 naar school nam. Dit vond ik erg leuk.  
*every day. I really enjoyed that.*

##### Final record

01 Toen mevrouw X. 4 jaar werd ging ze naar de  
*When Mrs. X. was 4 years old, she went to*  
02 kleuterschool. Wat zij zich hiervan herinnert is  
*infants' school. What she remembers about it is*  
03 dat de juf elke dag haar hond mee naar school  
*the teacher bringing her dog to class every day.*  
04 nam. Dit vond zij erg leuk.  
*She really enjoyed that.*

Excerpt 1 is an almost literal copy from life story to record. The social worker, in the record, only makes a shift from the first person (I) to the third person (Mrs. X, she) and leaves one detail out (the name of the school); this also means the excerpt is an example of omission.

This part of the life story might look like a meaningless episode in someone's life, but it is revealing. Firstly, it tells us that the woman started her

school career normally, at the age of four. Secondly, by adding a positive evaluation to that period (she enjoyed the teacher bringing her dog to school), it is marked as a good time, thereby implicitly excluding the presence of risk factors during early childhood as far as school is concerned. It is common for parents to combine the presentation of a fact together with a positive evaluation of it.

By including the memory, the prospective mother demonstrates ‘awareness’ of presenting a perspective on the past rather than the truth about it. The social worker also copied the formulation of remembering, which is weaker than just stating that ‘the teacher brought her dog to class every day’. Leaving the utterance in the copy, leaves the responsibility for the presented material with her. In excerpt 2, the social worker ‘allows’ a prospective father to be presented in his own words in the record, while stressing the fact that she (the social worker) is using the prospective father’s own words, leaving the responsibility for them with him.

#### Excerpt 2 AiARE2 (LS → R)

##### Life story PAF

01                   Ik had een probleemloze jeugd met de gewoonlijke  
                          *I had a trouble-free youth with the*  
02                   problemen die kleine jongens aan kattenkwaad  
                          *usual mischief that little boys get up to.*  
03                   uithalen.

##### Final record

01                   De heer X. omschrijft zijn jeugd als  
                          *Mr X. describes his youth as trouble-free*  
02                   probleemloos, met de ‘gewoonlijke problemen die  
                          *with the ‘usual mischief that little boys get up*  
03                   kleine jongens aan kattenkwaad uithalen’.  
                          *to’.*

The social worker shows that she is quoting the prospective father by using quotation marks and by changing ‘had’ into ‘describes’. This emphasizes that the social worker is using the words of the prospective father. The social worker is making it clear that she does not take responsibility for the description, she is simply writing down what the man wrote or said. It makes the formulation a description by the client rather than a fact. On the other hand, by not adding any doubts, she is allowing the father to present himself in his own terms, which are clearly oriented towards ‘normality’. The father uses several ‘normality’ markers by using words such as ‘trouble-free’ and ‘usual mischief’. These kinds of formulations do not invite further questioning but tend to summarize a childhood that does not seem to

have any possible risk factors with regard to raising an adoptive child. Note that the prospective father's formulation has a realistic tone to it. In all the prospective adoptive parents' descriptions we see this same orientation to 'normality', making sure that they do not present themselves as 'superior' or in any way deviating from normality.

In excerpt 3 we see an example of a topic that is initiated by the social worker in the interview.

### Excerpt 3 AIAAM2 (*I* → *R*)

#### Interview

- 01 SW           hoe was jij als kind? om maar de opstap te  
*what were you like as as a child? to make the*
- 02               maken naar het moment dat jij dan al bent.  
*step to the time that you already exist.*
- 03 PAM        ehhehe als kind ehm  
*ehhehe as a child ehm*
- 04 SW        lagere school periode  
*primary school time*
- 05 PAM        lagere school kind  
*primary school child*
- 06 SW        ja  
*yes*
- 07 PAM        ehh (.2)nou 't staat in mijn rapportjes £  
*err (.2) well it's in my reports £ (???) £ then*
- 08               (???) £ dan weet je't nog niet helemaal maar  
*you still don't completely know it but then you*
- 09               dan zie je van ik geloof dat ik redelijk  
*see like I belief that I was fairly quiet and and*
- 10               rustig was en en ehm beetje verlegen ehm ehh  
*ehm a bit shy ehm err I observed things also as*
- 11               observerend ook als kind wel mmm en ehm  
*child mmm and ehm after that was yes ehm actually*
- 12               daarna was ja ehm eigenlijk een ehm een een  
*a ehm a a not not too difficult not too difficult*
- 13               niet niet te moeilijk niet te moeilijk kind *child*

#### Final record

- 01               Aspirant adoptiefouder was als kind rustig,  
*Prospective adoptive mother was quiet as a child,*
- 02               observerend en een beetje verlegen.  
*observed things and a bit shy.*

The social worker starts with an open topic elicitation (line 1: *what were you like as a child*), followed by a specification (line 4: *primary school time*) when the woman seems to have trouble answering the question. This is quite a common institutional way of initiating a change of topic (Noordegraaf, Nijnatten, van & Elbers, 2008).

After the specification, the woman refers to an external source, a school report, and repeats what it said in that source about what she was like as a child. She presents that information as being more reliable than another memory description by saying in lines 7, 8: *'then you still don't completely know'*, assuming that we *do* know now, although it's not completely watertight. She continues showing uncertainty (or: cautiousness) by starting her next sentence with *'I believe.. I was'* (line 9), which is a relatively weak statement if you compare it with alternative formulations as *'in the reports was noted that..'* or *'I was'*. The social worker, however, presents the characteristics of the woman as an established fact (record, line 1: *'prospective adoptive mother was'*). It becomes a feature of the adoptive mother as a child. The evaluative statement *'not too difficult'* (line 12) is omitted. Such a statement is reminiscent of the statements on *'usual mischief'* in excerpt 2.

We also see this kind of 'fact-making-process' in other institutional contexts where a face-to-face interview leads to a record being drawn up. People use external resources (such as a legal or a school record), to speak for them and to strengthen what they are saying (Drew, 2006). Anward (1997) referred to this as 'text talk', when a certain truth is established as the result of acceptance of a certain fact by both parties. Police hearings are closely linked to the making of a verbatim record. Both police officer and suspect refer to the record by referring to it in the interaction, or even by speaking in a written manner. In this 'writing activity' (cf. Komter: 2003, 2006), 'text talk' is an institutionalised goal of interaction. A 'writing activity' is often visualised with the presence of a notepad, where the professional openly takes notes. The writing down of information is often accompanied by several seconds of silence. Sometimes the officer says out loud what she is writing down (Komter, 2006). In our study we also observed that the social worker made notes during the interview. During these 'writing seconds' the prospective parents have eye contact with each other, look towards the camera or even try to get a glimpse of the social worker's notepad.

So far we have seen that prospective adoptive parents present themselves as 'normal people' with 'normal childhoods', with an emphasis on their positive experiences. Social workers follow the descriptions of the prospective parents and copy or restate them or turn them into facts. 'Subjective statements' are generally presented in the

record in terms of the prospective adoptive parents' words and formulations, whereas 'evidential statements' (supported with external sources or other hard material such as dates and places) are presented in the record as facts. Prospective parents seem to have a strong position in the assessment when it comes to biographical information. They first get the opportunity to write their own life story, within the constraints of the institution, and they can then elaborate on it in the interview.

However, when it comes to topics that go beyond the more descriptive, such as someone's birth family, social workers take more control and question the prospective parents further. In these cases, they still rely on the descriptions of the parents but keep on asking questions about the subject.

### *Assessment in action*

In each of the assessments, at least one fundamental event in the parent's lives is selected by the social worker as a topic for further questions. What social workers stated about this, is that they use the discussion to get an insight into the impact of a certain life event on the prospective parents' lives. Without exception, they emphasized that it is not the *number* of life events that count, but rather the way the parents coped with the events. Having dealt successfully with life events in the past is then taken to be a positive indicator for the future. When prospective parents are able to demonstrate that they can deal with stressful life events, social workers describe this as a major protective factor.

The following episode is an example of the discussion of a life event. In this excerpt the (relatively early) death of the prospective mother's mother is picked up as a major topic for further discussion in the interview.

#### Excerpt 4 AIAAM2(LS → I → R)

##### Life story PAM

01                   Mijn moeder overleed plotseling net nadat ik naar  
*My mother died suddenly just after I had arrived*  
02                   Nederland was gekomen. Dit was heel verdrietig,  
*in the Netherlands. It was very sad, but as a*  
03                   maar als gezin hadden we veel steun aan elkaar.  
*family we had lots of support from each other.*  
04                   De confrontatie met de vergankelijkheid van het  
*This confrontation with the transitory nature of*  
05                   bestaan was een aanleiding om te gaan trouwen.  
*existence was the reason for us to get married.*

## Interview

- 01 SW           het overlijden van je moeder is natuurlijk een  
*the death of your mother is of course, as you*
- 02               heel ingrijpend iets dat beschrijf je ook  
*describe, very traumatic*
- 03 PAM           hmm  
*hmm*
- 04 SW           hoe is dat nu nu je zeg maar ook bezig ben met  
*what do you feel about it now since you of course*
- 05               met je aanstaande moederschap(.3)  
*are also thinking about about your coming motherhood*  
*(.3)*
- 06 PAM           na ja dat vind ik inderdaad ehh jammer dat ze d'r  
*well yes I indeed think it's a pity that she*
- 07               dan niet meer is en mijn zus had het ook die vond  
*isn't here anymore and my sister felt the same*
- 08               het heel jammer want ik denk dat ze het  
*she also felt it a great shame because I think*
- 09               hartstikke leuk heeft gevonden  
*that she would have liked it a lot*
- 10 SW           ja(.4)  
*yes (.4)*
- 11 PAM           En ehm na ja toen ben ik naar mijn zusje heb ik  
*and ehm well after yes then I went to my little*
- 12               daar ehh ? week ehh ben ik daar geweest toen om  
*sister I have a there ehh ? week ehh I was there*
- 13               met mijn nichtje te helpen en dan maar het is  
*to help with my little niece and then but it is*
- 14               toch wel ja 't d'r ontbreekt iets dan ja(.3)  
*indeed so yes it there is something missing then yes*  
*(.3)*
- 15 SW           em o.k. ja goed dat heeft almaal een plekje  
*hm ok yes right that has all fallen into place*
- 16               gekregen 't stof dat is gedaald  
*the dust has settled*
- 17 PAM           £ja ja je kan (toch?)£ ik ja ze kan ook niet  
*£yes yes you can (right?)£ I yes she can't come*
- 18               terug komen  
*back either*
- 19 SW           nee  
*no*
- 20 PAM           £neef  
*£nof*

21 SW            nee kan ook niet nee. nee is helder is helder  
*no is not possible no. no it's clear, it's clear*

#### Final record

01            In [year] is haar moeder plotseling overleden,  
*In 1989 her mother suddenly passed away,*  
02            een verdrietig gebeuren, waarbij aspirant  
*a sad event, at which prospective adoptive mother*  
03            adoptiefmoeder geconfronteerd werd met de  
*was confronted with the transitory nature of*  
04            vergankelijkheid van het bestaan. Het gezin had  
*existence. The family*  
05            veel steun aan elkaar. Het overlijden heeft  
*supported each other. Her death has meanwhile*  
06            inmiddels een plaats in haar leven gekregen.  
*got a place in her life*

This excerpt is an example of assessment in action. By asking questions of the prospective adoptive mother, the social worker assesses how she dealt with her mother's death. He is doing more than just presenting the prospective mother's past. He is assessing whether this past consists of elements that might threaten the future upbringing of an adoptive child.

As in former excerpts, the prospective mother presents the fact of her mother's death and then gives it a positive perspective (life story, lines 2 & 3: 'this was *very sad, but as a family we had lots of support*'). Note that the description by the social worker in the record is different. Both components (of sadness and support) are present, but are not linked to each other. By separating the sadness and the support, the sadness of the event is not counter-balanced by the support of the family but stands on its own as a stressful life event. By subsequently adding the support factor and the fact that the prospective mother coped well with the event, the social worker uses those two arguments as positive aspects in relation to a stressful life event. In this way, they can be considered to be protective factors.

The social worker uses different words in the interview to refer to the death of the mother. Instead of speaking of her death in terms of sadness, he refers to it as '*very traumatic*' (interview, line 2) and makes this a shared way of looking at it by adding: '*as you describe*'. The prospective adoptive mother (by backchanneling: hmm) accepts this description, which gives the social worker the opportunity to reinforce his assessment. He places the mother's loss in the light of her coming motherhood. By doing this he places the death in the context of the adoption assessment, which is his permission to ask further questions and he opens up the possibility to assess whether and how the prospective mother coped with her

mother's death. The prospective mother must now 'prove' how she is dealing with her loss in relation to her coming motherhood.

There are two examples of 'having coped with a life event' that show up in other cases of assessing how prospective parents coped with life events. A 'good' presentation of coping includes a healthy amount of emotion and at the same time sufficient distance from what happened. When this type of answer is given, the social worker closes the questioning and arrives at a positive conclusion in the recommendation.

In this excerpt, the mother demonstrates her feelings about her mother's death by stating that it is a pity (interview, line 6) and that there is something missing (interview, line 14). She makes this a shared experience with her sister (interview, line 8: *she also felt is a great shame*), which again marks her response as 'normal'. By saying '*the dust had settled*' (interview, line 16), the social worker concludes (but also rechecks) that the life event has been dealt with. This kind of check is common in the assessments and demonstrates that not having dealt with it would perhaps have been considered to be a risk factor in relation to adoption.

The social worker concludes that the death '*has meanwhile got a place in her life*' (record: lines 5 & 6). He thereby transforms the mother's account into a formulation that fits the institutional context of collecting evidence for suitability. A professional judgement is given, which is often completed with jargon. The next excerpt from another case makes this even clearer:

#### Excerpt 5 AiARE2

Final record

- 01 De heer X. heeft, ook achteraf, niet het gevoel dat hij iets  
*Mr. X. does not feel he has suppressed something,*
- 02 verdrongen heeft  
*also not in retrospect*

The conclusion in the record refers to the fact the mother of this prospective adoptive father died when he was in his late teens and that soon after that his father began a relationship with another woman. In his life story, the prospective adoptive father writes about the events in a positive way, and when the social worker asks further questions about them, he keeps stating that he did not have a problem with them and that he was and is happy for his father. The social worker never shows that she has doubts about that, and in the interview does not suggest that the prospective father is suppressing his feelings. Nevertheless, she does introduce this concept in the record and marks it as his feeling (line 1: *Mr X does not feel*). So, she is making

an interpretation based on what the prospective father has written and said in the interview, but she does not share this interpretation with him. Only, in the record, by mentioning suppression, does she make it clear that she was assessing whether the father had suppressed his feelings or not.

Comparing this conclusion with the conclusion in excerpt 4 (*'the death has meanwhile taken a place in her life'*) makes it clear that social workers interpret events and evaluate them while assessing prospective adoptive parents' suitability. Where the conclusive interpretation in excerpt 4 is positive: the prospective mother dealt with the fundamental event of losing her mother, the conclusion in excerpt 5 is much more ambivalent, it leaves room for doubt as to whether the father dealt with the loss of his mother sufficiently well. Although the social worker reports negatively on the fact of 'feelings of suppression', she does not confirm whether she thinks this is indeed the case.

In the next excerpt we see another example of doubt on the part of the social worker with regard to a complex relationship between the prospective adoptive mother and her mother. The prospective mother mentioned her handicapped brother in the life story and the fact that her parents did not get on together at certain times in their relationship, but she did not write about her relationship with her mother. Still the social worker comes up with a hypothesis on parentification. Different from the social worker in excerpt 5, she shares this suspicion with the prospective mother:

#### Excerpt 6 AiADHE2

##### Interview

01 SW            kent u het begrip parentificatie?  
*are you familiar with the idea of parentification?*

02 PAM            nee  
*no*

03 SW            parentificatie (.) daar zit het woord parents in  
*parentification (.) is has the word parent in it*

04 PAM            ja  
*yes*

05 SW            en eh (.) dat is dus als kinderen voor hun ouders  
*and eh (.) that is when children take care of*

06                    zorgen  
*their parents*

07 PAM            mja  
*myes*

08 SW            of de rollen tussen eh duidelijker worden tussen  
*or the roles between eh becomes more clear*

09                    de ouders en de opvoeders en de kinderen

10                   *between the parents and the upbringers and the*  
duidelijker worden. speelt dat een rol?  
                      *children becomes more clear. does that play a role?*

11 PAM           nee ik denk niet dat dat zover ging  
                      *no I don't think it went that far*

12 SW           nou: (.) dat kan dus hele grote vormen aannemen  
                      *we:ll (.) that thus can take on really big*

13                   en dat kan ook wat mindere grote vormen aannemen  
                      *proportions and it also can take smaller proportions*

14 PAM           ja nou, in mindere vorm ehm (.)  
                      *well yes, in smaller proportion ehm (.)*

15 SW           u was niet een moeder voor uw moeder?  
                      *you weren't a mother to your mother?*

16 PAM           nee  
                      *no*

17 SW           dat hoefde niet, maar dat was misschien wel een  
                      *that wasn't needed, but that was perhaps an*

18                   bondgenoot van uw moeder?  
                      *ally of your mother?*

19 PAM           ja steun toch, zou ik het noemen (.) maar meer  
                      *yes support still I would name it but more like*

20                   zoiets van als zij het zag dat ze het gewoon niet  
                      *as she saw it that she just didn't take it*

21                   trok en dat ze gewoon toch heel weinig steun van  
                      *anymore and that she just got really little*

22                   mijn vader kreeg, dat hij toch zijn handen er  
                      *support from my father that he after all took his*

23                   vanaf trok en ook (.) ja op cruciale momenten,  
                      *hands off of it and also yes at crucial moments*

24                   want in mijn herinnering er was, kan best zijn  
                      *because in my remembrance there was, might be*

25                   dat zijn subjectieve mening=  
                      *that his subjective opinion=*

26 SW           =maar dat is je vader vervangen  
                      *=but that is replacing your father*

27 PAM           verving ik eigenlijk mijn vader ja  
                      *I actually did replace my father yes*

28 SW           yes  
                      *yes*

In this excerpt we see how the social worker introduces her hypothesis of parentification to the prospective adoptive mother (lines 1-9). She then gives the mother the opportunity to say whether she thinks it was the case in her family (10-

11). The social worker pursues her line of thought by adding a further explanation about the concept of parentification, which allows the mother to agree to a certain amount of parentification, which she almost does in line 14, but she cannot finish her attempt at agreeing. The social worker reformulates parentification (line 15: *you weren't a mother to your mother?*) and rechecks her hypothesis. When the mother denies this, she makes one more attempt by coming up with being an '*ally*' (line 18). The social worker is directive in verifying her hypothesis and partly succeeds in that since the mother comes up with an alternative formulation of '*support*' (line 19). In the end the social worker comes up with a final understanding of the relationship between the prospective adoptive mother and her mother, which is repeated by the prospective mother. They now 'agree' about the fact that the prospective adoptive mother '*replaced her father*' .

The fact that this 'diagnosis' is not repeated in the record is relevant. The prospective adoptive mother gets a positive recommendation in the record and the possible presence of parentification is omitted from that recommendation. This leads us to the conclusion that the record is not a reflection of the interviews but rather a collection of information that supports the recommendation. The social worker investigates whether there are items in the prospective adoptive parents' lives that could indicate possible problems in raising an adoptive child. When these kinds of items are not present, *or* the items are not sufficiently threatening to lead to a conclusion of non-suitability, social workers write a recommendation that presents the prospective adoptive parents in a positive light.

## *Conclusion*

In this study we have built on studies into the drawing up of an institutional record, based on face-to-face interactions. We can confirm that, just as in police questioning , information from an interview is transformed into a *coherent, persistent* record. Irrelevant details are omitted and interpretations that support the recommendation of the social worker are added to the descriptions of the prospective adoptive parents. However, it is the social worker who decides *what* is considered relevant and *what* irrelevant. However, this is also confirmed by the prospective adoptive parents since they do not make use of their right to comment on the draft record. And when prospective adoptive parents are questioned about life events, social workers relate their past to the *future* upbringing of an adoptive child. We have also shown how social workers manage to both assess prospective adoptive parents in the interview, while, at the same time, making notes for the recommendation record. The excerpts discussed here show how, in the transference between text and talk, deletion,

addition, selection and transformation occurs. However, unlike police questioning, the record does not so much function as a piece of evidence but rather as an argumentation that supports the recommendation that the social worker gives on the prospective adoptive parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood. Possible incriminating facts are assessed in the interview, but when not considered to be evidential and/or when countered by the prospective adoptive parent(s), they are omitted from the record.

Since we had access to the written life stories of the prospective adoptive parents, we can add a few more conclusions to the ones above, with the intention of contributing to a further understanding of the practice of making an institutional judgement through text and talk. By studying the interviews and the records in relation to the life stories, we gained an insight into the ways prospective parents present themselves within the constraints of the institution, and we were able to analyze which topics were selected for further assessment in the interviews that were either transformed into or omitted from the final record. It turned out that life events function as a means to assess the coping qualities of the prospective adoptive parents.

Compared with the other two main domains of assessment (present and future state of affairs), the prospective parents have high levels of ownership when it comes to presenting their life stories. Although the parents have to write their life story within the constraints of the institution, they emphasise the positive aspects of their lives and thereby have the opportunity to present the social worker with a selected version of their past. In a detailed analysis we have shown how parents demonstrate themselves to be 'normal people' with 'normal childhoods', adding positive evaluations to facts and stressing not being exceptionally good or bad by using normality markers such as 'usual', 'not too difficult' and 'problem-free'. Social workers follow their descriptions and copy or restate their descriptions and turn them into facts. However, when the facts are uncertain, or when a fact is evaluated, the social workers leave the statements with the prospective parents and either quote them or make it clear that they are recording the parents' own words. Previous discourse studies have shown that 'doing being ordinary' is something that people rely on in defensive environments (cf. Sacks, H. 1984b; Lawrence 1996; Snejder, P. 2006). Therefore, the significance of being dependent on a social worker for fulfilling an adoption wish is, in the assessment, oriented towards playing safe, being modest and demonstrating normality. It is obvious that prospective adoptive parents do not express their deepest worries or fears in adoption assessment but tend to concentrate on how they have overcome difficulties, thereby demonstrating that they can also face possible problems in the future upbringing of an adoptive child.

The social worker's task, however, is not to fulfil the prospective adoptive wishes but to prevent an adoptive child growing up in a potentially harmful environment. It is a social worker's job to see through reactions based on social desirability and to get an insight into possible experiences in the prospective adoptive parents' past that they have not coped with. As said before, social workers do not use the norm that prospective adoptive parents should have a spotless background. Nonetheless, being able to demonstrate coping skills in relation to difficulties is considered to be a protective factor for parents since living with an adoptive child will be likely to yield difficulties as well. In all of our cases, social workers select one or more life event from the life story of the prospective adoptive parent to ask questions about. The prospective parents then have to 'prove' their competence as adoptive parents, based on their past state of affairs. Therefore, they need to do more than just claim to have coped well with their life events, they also have to talk about them convincingly. When parents were able to answer in a way that demonstrated a healthy amount of emotion in combination with a certain distance, we found that the social worker closed the questioning and came to a positive conclusion in the recommendation. We also found that social workers selected something worrisome in a prospective parents' past for discussion during the interview. This is a way for social workers to assess their suspicion that there might be a risk factor in the prospective parents' personality. We saw that parents successfully countered the suspicion *or* that social workers did not find sufficient evidence for a negative recommendation, the suspicion was dropped and was not (or at least not negatively) reported on in the final record.

All in all, assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood, (partly) based on biographical information of prospective adoptive parents, is a delicate matter, in which both social worker and prospective adoptive parents do their best to either demonstrate suitability and to assess suitability in a cooperative manner. In an exchange of information, the participants form an assessment relationship, in which social workers invite the parents to disclose themselves, having to 'trust' the way they have presented their background and the profession of the social worker. Analyzing such exchanges in detail helped us to make the profession of social work and in particular assessment activities, become more visible and gives us an insight into how social workers come to make institutional judgements on individuals' lives.

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## Study 3

### Assessing and displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood: a conversation analysis of relationship questions and answers

#### *Abstract*

In this study we examine how suitability for adoptive parenthood is assessed and displayed in interactions between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. In particular, we have analysed three kinds of relationship questions that are put to couples: questions that are posed to one partner and to the couple, with and without an observation from the social worker. The answers are featured as: very precise, stressing the positive aspects of the relationship but avoiding sainthood and accompanied with examples that illustrate the stability of the relationship. We concluded that it is not only 'what' couples answer but also 'how' they answer that is taken into account in the assessment. That is why 'being able to finish off each other's sentences when giving an answer' and 'having the ability to reflect on the relationship' is considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood.

This study is based on:

Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (submitted for publication). Assessing and displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood: a conversation analysis of relationship questions and answers.

## *Introduction*

The number of adopted children from all countries throughout the world has increased steadily in the past decade, and currently stands at around 40,000 children a year. Recent evidence of illegal practices in adoptee countries, and a better understanding of the possible adverse effects of adoption on the adoptive child have led to intercountry adoption being ever more closely scrutinised. There is today a considerable amount of professional assistance available to help prospective parents to prepare to adopt a child, and to provide advice should parents be faced with problems when raising their child.

Research has mainly focused on birth parents' motivation for giving up a child for adoption, and on the ways they deal with it. Remarkably little research has been conducted into the motives and capacities of prospective adoptive parents and into the validity of assessment procedures. Some evidence from non-clinical studies show that adoptive parents tend to demonstrate good psychological health and levels of marital adjustment at the time of adoption (Levy-Shiff, Bar & Har-Even, 1990). Yet these outcomes may be due to both effective assessment and to self-selection. Other studies focus on personal and social definitions of the 'parental' role (Freundlich, 2002: 160).

The ever lengthening waiting lists for intercountry adoption means that prospective adoptive parents face years of preparation and assessment before the adoptive child is actually handed over to them. In the Netherlands, this may take four or five years. During this lengthy waiting period, when the prospective adoptive parents are extensively informed of the risks of raising an adoptive child, a certain percentage of prospective parents withdraw from the procedure either because of pregnancy or because they are no longer motivated<sup>10</sup>. The adoption applicants who then take part in the assessment process are therefore likely to be highly motivated and well prepared.

Part of the Dutch assessment process is a series of four assessment interviews during which it is a social worker's task to identify the existence of possible risk factors that would endanger the safe upbringing of an adoptive child. The aim of the present study is to gain an insight into how social workers assess prospective adoptive parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood through text and talk. To this end, we apply conversation analysis to consider assessment in action. In other words, we study how an assessment is arrived at during interaction: what kind of questions are posed to assess prospective parents' capabilities, and how do prospective adoptive parents display suitability in their answers? One criterion is

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<sup>10</sup> 1230 of 3197 (= 38.5%) requests for adoption were withdrawn in the Netherlands in 2006.

that the prospective parents have a harmonious and stable relationship. In this study, we analyze how social workers assess the prospective adoptive parents' relationship. What kind of questions do social workers use to assess a relationship and how do the prospective parents answer these questions?

For our analysis we build on conversation analytical studies that have focused on assessment interactions such as job interviews (Komter, 1990, 1991) and psychiatric assessments (of transsexual patients) (Speer and Parson, 2006; Speer and Green, forthcoming). We have also used insights from studies into triadic interactions (Buttny, 1990; Gale, 1991; Kurri and Wahlström, 2005; Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991; Peräkylä, 1995). Before presenting a brief review of this literature, we first outline the adoption assessment process in the Netherlands.

### *The adoption assessment process*

When a Dutch couple plan to adopt a foreign child, the following steps have to be taken: they first register, then enrol in a special course that gives prospective parents information about international adoption (six sessions); finally an assessment procedure is conducted by the Child Protection Board (CPB). The assessment procedure includes a health check, whether or not the candidates have a criminal record, and four interviews conducted by a social worker from the CPB. The procedure concludes with the record with a recommendation sent by the CPB to the Dutch state agency<sup>11</sup>. A positive record results in authorization to adopt a foreign child. The prospective adoptive parents can then register with one of the official mediating agencies, which will start the matching procedure. Finally a child is introduced. The present study concentrates on the third step in the adoption procedure: the assessment by the CPB.

The goal of the assessment is to 'advise on the suitability of prospective adoptive parents' (CPB, 2001: 61). This is done by weighing up the 'possible risk and protection factors that could hinder the stable development of the adoptive child towards adulthood' (CPB, 2001: 62). Part of the social worker's task is to carry out four interviews with the prospective adoptive parents which should shed light on 'how prospective parents deal with problems and tensions, including coping with being childless, any special wishes regarding an adoptive child, expectations about their own child-raising capabilities and possible discrimination of the foreign child and other particulars concerning the child' (CPB, 2001: 62).

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<sup>11</sup> In the Netherlands: the Ministry of Justice

Briefly, the assessment is based on three suitability criteria: the parents' autobiography, the stability of their personality and relationship, and their capacities as adoptive parents. In other words: their past, present and future state of affairs. Earlier studies in this project showed how hypothetical questions are used to assess future upbringing qualities (author's own) and how the discussion of past life events is used as a means to assess the coping skills of prospective adoptive parents (author's own). The present study focuses on the present state of affairs, the stability of prospective adoptive parents' relationship and the way it is discussed in the interviews.

### *Theoretical background*

There are generally two main approaches to the study of assessment. The first approach is to develop diagnostic parameters that may predict future behaviour. The second approach focuses on the assessment *process* (Cuzzi et al., 1993 in: Holland, 2004). Our study uses the latter approach. Conversation analysis may contribute to more insight into assessment interactions. One example is the study by Pomerantz (1984) which shows how negative assessments are dealt with in a delicate manner. Giving someone a compliment can be done in a straightforward manner, but there is a conversational 'necessity' to utter negative conclusions in an indirect, toned down way, often accompanied by reasons for the negative message. This delicate matter is also reported on in the analysis of institutional settings where the threat of an overall negative assessment is present, not so much as the result of one particular message, but as the result of the interaction as a whole. Professionals in institutional settings behave in a neutral way, for instance by using an institutional 'we' when referring to their institutional task of assessment (Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Maynard, 2006). Other ways of counterbalancing the threatening context is to stress cooperation and to use awkwardness markers (author's own, forthcoming), to use meta remarks to explain and account for the situation (Nijnatten, van, 2006) and to introduce 'counter themes' (Emerson, 1970 in Speer and Green, forthcoming).

Clients adapt to 'being assessed' by displaying suitability in a number of different ways. For instance, transsexual clients in psychiatric assessments display femininity or virility in both their answers and behaviours, and stress that they cannot go on living in the 'wrong' body (Speer and Parsons, 2006; Speer and Green, forthcoming). However, an applicant in a job interview will display suitability by stressing his or her qualities, and by behaving politely and correctly (Komter, 1991). When answering hypothetical questions, prospective adoptive parents display

suitability by stressing their parenting qualities and by showing that they are aware of adoption-related problems (Noordegraaf et al., 2008).

Little is known about the exact way social workers assess people's relationship in interaction. We know that couples in marriage counselling tend to blame each other for the problems they are having (Buttny, 1990; Edwards, 1995; Kurri and Wahlström, 2005). Counsellors, who witness the couple quarrelling, can, from the extent of hostility between spouses, assess how much work needs to be done to 'fix' the relationship. However, in our data we expect couples to display a harmonious relationship. With this as the starting point, we briefly discuss a number of concepts that might help us understand the dynamics of relationship questions and their answers in assessment interaction.

Posing a question that addresses a couple's relationship is complicated since it may put the couple in a difficult position. One partner will have to answer the question in front of the other partner, and when the question is addressed to both partners, they will have to decide who is to answer first. In addition, the couple is not only answering questions about their relationship, they are also 'doing their relationship' in front of the social worker. From the way the couple answers questions about their relationship, the social worker can observe how they respond to each other and how they work together when answering questions about their relationship.

Questions that address both partners are likely to be designed by using a plural 'you'. Gaze can then be used as a means of selecting one addressee (Goodwin, 1979, 1980). Speakers usually orient posturally to their addressees during the course of their turns. They usually look at the addressee at the beginning and/or end of the turn (see Goodwin, 1981; Heath, 1986). Addressees can also display potential recipientship or non-commitment by seeking or ignoring encouraging looks or by leaning forward (Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991: 455).

When questions are addressed to more than one recipient, eye contact continues to be important until the answer is given or until the other recipient initiates intra-turn talk, to add to the answer that his/her partner has given so far. When a recipient wants to add something to the other partner's answer, he/she can do this in an interruptive or in a smooth way. Interruptive ways are used in competitive environments such as classrooms, where students compete to give the correct answers, or in marriage counselling, where the partners impose their views on the marital discord. Yet in application interviews, participants are more oriented towards a harmonious presentation of their relationship. Recipients initiate intra-talk by, for instance, filling a mini-pause with a floor-opener such as 'well', by laughing

in overlap, or by finishing the other person's words at the end of a sentence (Lerner, 1993, 1996).

Finally, when couples are answering questions about their relationship they will have to generate entitlement to speak on the other's behalf. They will somehow have to demonstrate that the answer that they are giving is demonstrative of their relationship. To do this, recipients carefully choose forms such as 'we', when answering these kinds of questions and give their partners room to confirm their answers with agreement tokens (Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991: 470).

Building on former studies, our aim is to arrive at more specific observations of the way social workers assess prospective adoptive couples' relationship and the ways in which the couples tend to demonstrate a harmonious relationship in both their answers and behaviours. This will add to the knowledge about the assessment process and may help make practical improvements to assessment procedures. We will answer the following questions:

- 1 What kinds of questions do social workers use when addressing the prospective adoptive couples' relationship?
- 2 What features of their relationship do couples display *in* their answers and *in how* they answer the questions?
- 3 How do couples display collaboration when answering questions that are addressed to both of them?
- 4 What features of the couples' answers to relationship questions are evaluated positively and are considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood?

## *Method*

In order to answer our questions we use the ingredients of basic conversation analysis (CA) such as: 'sequences', 'turn-design', 'repair' and 'lexical choice'. We will analyze the data in relation to the institutional context of child welfare assessment in order to say more about the sequential and institutional meaning of the excerpts as a collection of relationship assessments of prospective adoptive parents. We use concepts of institutional CA, which builds on the findings of basic CA, to examine the operation of social institutions in talk. Unlike the work in basic CA, these findings tend to be less permanent: they are historically contingent and subject to processes of socio-cultural change: ideology, power, economics and other factors impacting change in society (Heritage, 2005: 105). For instance, norms of what is considered to be a 'good relationship' will change over time and will differ among

cultures. Our analysis is therefore also interesting as a means to observe considerations of what constitutes a good relationship.

We analyzed the interviews with ten prospective adoptive couples who, in the end, were authorized to adopt. We received informed written consent to use the interviews. All names and identifying details have been disguised. The excerpts in this study were taken from the Dutch transcripts and translated into English. We used the transcription system developed by Jefferson (2004), which highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail.

## *Results*

In our data we found three different kinds of questions used by the social worker to address the relationship of the prospective adoptive couples. The questions were introduced in either the second interview after the discussion about the parents' past, or in the third interview, before the future upbringing of the adoptive child was introduced. It is a relatively small part of the assessment, consisting of several topics, that we will specify when examining the different questions. In almost all assessments, the relationship questions were linked to or combined with questions on the identity of the prospective adoptive parents, in which parents are, for instance, asked to state their good and bad characteristics. The relationship and the identity questions together form the assessment of the present state of affairs of the prospective adoptive parents, together with more factual questions about jobs, hobbies and social network.

### *Relationship questions*

We will now focus on the three kinds of questions used by the social workers. In the next section, some of these questions will be analyzed in relation to the answers given by the parents, but in this section we first give an overview of the tools social workers use to introduce the topic of relationship as a subject to talk about.

The first kind of question is a question addressed to one of the partners. This question is often asked in the context of a discussion about his or her life story. After the social worker introduced the relationship, she asks, for instance, about her first impression of the partner when she first met him:

### Excerpt 1: AiARE3

01 SW:           hmm (.5)je hebt net al een beetje genoemd toen  
                  *hmm (.5)earlier you already touched upon your*  
02               je vertelde over jullie ontmoeting maar wat was  
                  *acquaintance a bit in your<sup>12</sup> story but what*  
03               het nou dat je zegt van goh dat zijn nou de  
                  *actually was it that you say like gee those*  
04               eigenschappen in hem die ik heel leuk vind, dat  
                  *really are the things that I really like about*  
05               mij aantrekt  
                  *him, that appeal to me?*

This kind of question functions as a shift from one topic to another and prepares the floor for questions that are more directly related to the couples' relationship as such. They function as a 'normal' institutional sequence in which the social worker asks the question and the client gives an answer. The question in excerpt 1 is explicitly asking for the prospective adoptive mother's perception, but these kinds of questions are also used to skip from the relationship back to one of the partners, for instance when he or she seems to contribute to a relationship problem to a considerable extent. In that case, the question is more focused on the identity of one of the partners rather than on the relationship.

Excerpts 2, 3, 4 and 5 show the kind of question that is frequently used when the couples' relationship is under discussion. Different topics can be addressed, but in every case a plural 'you' is used in the formulation. Excerpt 2 handles the topic of quarrelling, which is a classic question, that leads back to the institutional instruction to assess 'how prospective parents deal with problems and tensions' (CPB, 2001: 62). Other topics that are often introduced and discussed are: the division of tasks (extract 3), differences between partners (extract 4) and things that the partners have or do together (extract 5).

### Extract 2: AiAAA43

01 SW:           uhm (.) \*hebben jullie wel eens ruzie?  
                  *uhm (.) \*do you quarrel sometimes?*  
                  \*sw looks at paper while asking the question

### Extract 3: AiAAA22

01 SW:           (.2) hoe eh hebben jullie dingen geregeld?  
                  *how er have you arranged things? for instance*

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<sup>12</sup> plural

02                   bijvoorbeeld in het huishouden of financieel of  
                      *the housekeeping or financial things or who er*  
03                   wie eh wie wie regelt de dingen bij jullie thuis?  
                      *who who arranges things at your place?*

#### Extract 4: AiARE2

01 SW:             ja (.) zijn er nog andere dingen waarin jullie  
                      *yes (.)are there other things in which you*  
02                   verschillen? [ver]=  
                      *differ?             [do]=*  
03 PAM:             [ja]  
                      *[yes]*  
04 SW:             = schillen jullie erg van elkaar of en [??]  
                      = *you differ much from one another or and [??]*

#### Extract 5: AiAAA2

01 SW:             welke dingen doen jullie samen in jullie eh  
                      *what things do you do together in your er*  
02                   relatie  
                      *relationship?*

These four questions give a good overview of the main assessment of the couple's relationship. The questions seem simple, almost in survey-interview format and are neutrally formulated. Extracts 2 and 4 are interrogative yes/no questions. Extracts 3 and 5 are half-open questions in which the couples are asked to give an outline of activities (extract 5) or an explanation of the way they arrange things in the home (extract 3). Nevertheless, these questions cannot be answered by a simple yes or a simple factual description: there are many conversational implications in the simplicity of the question (Levinson, 2000). Questions in assessment contexts have a normative dimension that is often hidden (Komter, 1991). For instance, in extract 1: although the structural preference of the question very much aims for a 'yes', the social worker does not give any explicit hints about the preferred answer, and the couple have to guess that either quarrelling sometimes, quarrelling badly or not quarrelling at all is considered to be an indicator of a good relationship.

Besides the difficulty of answering within the constraints of institutional norms, the couples have to decide who will answer the question, since the social worker is addressing them both as possible answerer. In the following section we take a further step in analyzing this. Before this, we will show another way of assessing the couple's relationship.

The third way of posing a relationship question is by confronting the couple with direct observations. Unlike the domains of past and future, the social worker can rely on his/her observations of the way the prospective adoptive parents *actually* interact with each other during the interviews. These observations will sometimes become a topic of conversation when the social worker expresses what strikes him in the way the parents interact and invites the couple to respond to such an observation. An example is given in extract 6:

Extract 6: AiABT3

01 SW: want ik me:rk >ik geloof dat ik dat de vorige  
*because I noti:ce> I believe that I said that the*  
02 keer ook al zei zo van< jullie zijn \*verbaa<sup>1</sup>  
*last time as well like< you're both fairly strong*  
*\*SW brings hands towards her mouth*  
03 best sterk allebei hè (.) betekent dat \*\*dat  
*\*verba*<sup>1</sup>*lly right? (.) does that mean \*\*that you*  
*\*\*SW is moving hands back and forward, palms up*  
04 jullie ook heel veel(.)met elkaar dingen  
*also discuss a lot of things with eacho*<sup>1</sup>*ther?*  
05 bediscussie<sup>1</sup>ren?

In this extract, the social worker observes that both partners are ‘fairly strong verba<sup>1</sup>lly’ (lines 2 & 3). She leaves some room for the couple to have a different view about this, by ending her statement with ‘right?’, which is an agreement check. Neither partner contradicts her statement and the social worker adds a candidate understanding to them being verbally strong. By starting her understanding with ‘does that mean’ (line 3), she again leaves room for disagreement. Most of the social workers use this strategy when presenting an observation to the couples. They mark their view as uncertain and by doing so invite the recipients to confirm or disconfirm the observation and give an ‘authentic’ version of their relationship (cf. Bergman, 1989). The other goal of confronting clients with direct observation is to convince them of alternative versions of what they have stated before (Buttny, 1996). In any case, the couples have to respond to the social worker’s observation either by explaining their behaviour or by countering what has been suggested. Unlike the more neutral relationship questions as described above, here the couples here have to work with or against a factual observation, which leaves less room for them to come up with just any old answer.

Again, it is not clear whether ‘discuss a lot of things with each<sup>1</sup>other’ (line 4), is considered to be a positive or a negative factor. The Dutch word used here is:



05 SW: ok woordenwisseling  
*ok exchange of words*  
*ok argument*<sup>14</sup>

06 PAF: nee zelfs dat n[au:welijk]s  
*no even that h[a: r d le]y*<sup>15</sup>

07 PAM: [nee in het] begin nog wel es maar  
*[no in the] beginning sometimes*

08 nu nee nee eigenlijk nooit (.) zelden nee zelden  
*but now no no actually never (.) seldom no seldom*

09 >°laat ik het zo zeggen°<  
 >°let me put it like that°<

10 (3)

11 PAF: wel eens dat we hoo: ↑guit dat je es  
*sometimes that we at the mo: ↑st that you're*

12 teleu:rgesteld bent in iets maar (3) nee nee  
*disappoi:nted in something but (3) no no quarrel*

13 ruzie ik heb met jou [volgens mij=  
*I have never had [a quarrel=*

14 PAM: [fhaha neef]  
 [fhaha nof]

15 PAF: =nog nooit ruzie gehad  
 =with you yet I think

16 PAM: nee  
 no

17 SW: (5.0) °ja° is dat gezond?  
 (5.0) °yes° is that healthy?

18 PAM: ja [het voelt voor mij goed dus:  
 yes [it feels good for me so

19 PAF: [het werkt uitstekend tot nu toe] dus eh  
 [it works perfectly so far ] so eh

20 PAM: ja  
 yes

In this extract the woman (PAM) opts to answer the question first. The social worker avoids addressing one of the partners by looking at her notepad while posing the question. The woman looks at her husband and when she sees that he does not make a move to answer (such as an intake of breath, leaning forward or making a move

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<sup>14</sup> bandy words/skirmish/altercate with someone, have an exchange of words/a discussion/disagreement

<sup>15</sup> scarcely/ barely

with his hands), she starts answering the question, using 'well' in overlap with her check. She then looks back to the social worker, directing her answer at her.

The couple are trying to be very precise. They choose several different words for both 'quarrelling' and for the extent to which they do or don't quarrel. The PAF designs his turn in a way that he sides with the 'very little' of his wife in line 2, but turns down the fact that it is *quarrelling* that they do 'very little'. By uttering 'no' (line 4) in overlap with her husband, the PAM immediately sympathizes with this compromise. As a response to that, the social worker comes up with a possibly less negative synonym: 'exchange of words' in line 5. The couple then work together to counter that they also 'hardly' (line 6), 'actually never' (line 8), 'seldom' (line 8) have an exchange of words. Then PAF comes up with something that does happen in their relationship, which is being 'disappointed' (line 12) but restates that he thinks that he 'still have never had a quarrel with you' (line 13 & 15). And again PAM sides with him by confirming his statement with 'no' (line 16).

This whole interaction may come across as a word game, but it makes it clear that the prospective adoptive couple are very much oriented to the outcome of this interview and the good impression they have to make. They know that their answers may be written down in the record and adapt to that by being very precise when qualifying their behaviour. In addition, they work together and side together to produce a similar, univocal answer. Although they speak against the idea of quarrelling, they do come up with a 'negative' emotion that comes across in their relationship in 'confessing' that they do get disappointed sometimes. This is something that we also see in other answers: couples are very precise in their answers, try to give a positive image, but are also 'honest' about weaknesses. In order to counterbalance the positive image they create of their relationship, they try to avoid sainthood.

As we see in this extract, the absence of a quarrel is not considered to be the right answer per se. The social worker challenges the couple's answer by asking whether it is healthy never to quarrel, at least implying that there might be a risk attached to not quarrelling. The couple counters this risk immediately by producing, in overlap, a collaborative reply to the challenge. The PAM stresses her own experience by saying that it *feels* good for her (line 18). The PAF gives a more pragmatic answer by stressing that it 'works perfect so far' (line 19).

Later in the discussion, the couple state that they do pour their heart out and that PAF does quarrel in other situations, such as at work. The 'problem' of not quarrelling is linked to the woman's personality. In the recommendation record, the social worker states the following about this topic:

### Extract 8: AiAAA43 (record)

Ze (PAM) is een introvert persoon en kan niet tegen ruzie. Het *She (PAM) is an introvert person and can't stand quarrelling.* echtpaar vertelt dan ook dat ze nooit ruzie hebben en *The couple also say then that they never quarrel and arguments* woordenwisselingen komen nauwelijks voor in hun relatie. Ze *are very rare in their relationship. Their opinion about it is* zijn van mening dat dat te maken heeft met het feit dat ze het *that it is because of the fact that they easily agree with* snel met elkaar eens zijn. Ook is een goede onderlinge *each other. Good communication is also important in that.* communicatie daarbij van belang. Aspirant adoptief moeder is *Aspirant adoptive mother might be introvert, but in their* dan weliswaar introvert, maar in hun relatie heeft ze er geen *relationship she doesn't have problems with pouring her heart* moeite mee om haar hart te luchten. *out.*

The above excerpt shows that the couple adapts to being assessed by presenting a positive and realistic image of their relationship. They stress the positive elements of their relationship but avoid sainthood by also disclosing weaknesses. However, the social worker does not take the statements of the couple for granted, and challenges the answer when she is not satisfied - there may, after all, be a possible risk below the surface.

In extract 9 we show how the question in extract 6 is answered. The couple in this extract is a homosexual couple, we will therefore refer to them as prospective adoptive father 1 (PAF1) and prospective adoptive father 2 (PAF2).

### Extract 9: AiABT3

01 SW: want ik me:rk >ik geloof dat ik dat de vorige  
*because I noti:ce> I believe that I said that the*  
02 keer ook al zei zo van< jullie zijn \*verbaa<sup>↑</sup>l  
*last time as well like< you're both fairly strong*  
*\*SW brings hands towards her mouth*  
03 best sterk allebei hè (.) betekent dat \*\*dat  
*\*verba<sup>↑</sup>lly right? (.) does that mean \*\*that you*  
*\*\*SW is moving hands back and forward, palms up*  
04 jullie ook heel veel(.)met elkaar dingen  
*also discuss a lot of things with eacho<sup>↑</sup>ther?*  
05 bediscussië<sup>↑</sup>ren?

06 PAF2: \*(.2) °ja ik vind 't° ik vind het wel grappig want  
 \*(.2)°yes I find it° I find it rather funny because it  
 \* PAF2 starts smiling in the pause

07 eh dat zeggen we ook wel eens van:eh ook ook  
*er we because sometimes say that as well like:er*

08 grappend want hij hij kan natuurlijk (.) ook heel  
*also also in an jokey way he he ofcourse (.)can*

09 adrem en verbaal goed reageren=  
*also be very pertinent and react well verbally well=*

10 SW: =uhuh=  
 =uhuh=

11 PAF1: =hh[ha  
 =hh[ha

12 PAF2: [ik zeg met name bij heel veel opmerkingen van  
*[with many remarks in particular I say like*

13 (.) "£joh ik eh ik::£" ehm we maken er soms ook  
*(.)"£mate I er I:: £"ehm we also do make it a game*

14 wel een spel van van dat je er dan nog een keer  
*sometimes like that (general) you then again give*

15 overheen gaat,=  
*it a good going<sup>16</sup>,=*

16 PAF1: =ja=  
 =yes=

17 PAF2: =\*in in die zin en dat is dan weer iets positiefs  
 =\*in in that sense and that is then again something  
 \* AAF2 points towards social worker

18 is prikkelt hij daarin £mij ook weer£  
*positive is he stimulates me with £that as well£*

19 SW: ja ja [ja  
 yeah yeah [yeah

20 PAF2: [dat klinkt een beetje raar \*omdat we  
*[that sounds a bit strange \*because we're*  
 \*AAF2 makes stroking gesture towards AAF1

21 elkaar een beetje lopen aaien maar hij eh ik  
*stroking each other's ego a bit but he I mean we*

22 bedoel dit soort dingen (be-)spreken we beiden  
*both (dis-)express this kind of thing seldom =*

23 zelden uit=

24 PAF2: =ik [d e n k d a t i s w e l een gevoe:l hoor  
 =I [think that's however only a fee:ling

25 PAF1: [>hebben we nooit zo uitgesproken<  
 [>we've never really expressed<

---

<sup>16</sup> lathering, lay it across someone, sock it to someone

26 PAF1:       ja  
                  yes  
27 SW:         ja=  
                  yes=

Father 2 opts to answer by starting to smile in an obvious manner. The social worker and father 1 can both see him smile and respond to this by looking at him. Father 2 then starts to answer the question. Just as in extract 9, the division of turns is accomplished in a subtle, non-competitive way. Father 2 continues to be the answerer but uses several techniques to involve his partner in his answer. In lines 7, 13, 20 and 22 he speaks on behalf on his partner, using ‘we’. In lines 16 and 26 father confirms the answer of his partner by a simple agreement token and in line 25 he repeats the statement made by his partner, stressing that it is also his stance. What is interesting is that he repeats the statement in which his partner (PAF2) has used ‘we both’ in repair position (lines 21/22 ‘he er I mean’ → ‘we both’). He strongly sides with his partner by stressing that they indeed ‘both’ ‘express this kind of thing seldom’ (line 22). Lerner and Kitzinger (2007) analyzed how the use of a simple addition as ‘both’ can express a strong orientation towards making a univocal but still independent statement in interaction.

Lines 25 and 26 are very much linked to each other in the sense that line 25 uses repetition to show alignment and line 26 agrees once more with father 1, by uttering the agreement ‘yes’. This indexically refers back to line 24, that was produced in overlap. Although it is not clear what ‘that’ refers to in line 24, the confirmation of father 1 closes the answer about the partners being ‘verbally strong’. The way this couple collaborate when giving their answers is positively evaluated in the record, as we see in extract 10:

Extract 10: AiABT (record)

**Factoren die van invloed zijn op het onderzoek:**

**Factors that influence the assessment:**

De gesprekken met de aspirant adoptieouder en zijn partner  
The conversation with the prospective adoptive parent and his  
verliepen in goede sfeer. *Zij vulden elkaar goed aan in het*  
partner were held in a pleasant atmosphere. *They complemented*  
*geven van informatie.*  
*each other well in giving information.*

So, even before we have analyzed the content of the answer in extract 9, we have demonstrated how producing an answer collaboratively in interaction is considered to be positive and works in favour of the perceived suitability for adoptive

parenthood, as far as the assessment of present affairs is concerned. However, this does not mean that the couples can answer anything they want to as long as they side with each other when giving the answer. As we saw when examining extract 8, the answer itself is also assessed and is challenged if it is not considered satisfactory. We will now continue to analyze extract 9, focusing more on the features of the answer itself.

Father 2 starts his answer by smiling and places them as being ‘verbally strong’ in a humorous context. He labels it as ‘funny’ (line 6) and as a ‘game’ (line 13). He is thereby countering the negative implication (of quarrelling a lot) that we discussed earlier, when analyzing the question in extract 6. He makes this evident by adding illustrations to his answer, presenting it as a story by using ‘we sometimes say that as well’ (line 7), ‘I say’ (line 12), “‘mate I er I: £” (line 13). Although the quote in line 13 is not a clear saying at all, it illustrates the fact that their ‘discussions’ are held in a friendly, humorous way. Father 2 does not deny that they are verbally strong, he even confirms that his partner can ‘also be very pertinent and reacting well verbally’ (line 9), but places that in a positive context. Another thing that this answer does is that it shows ‘awareness’ of the observation that the social worker has given. Rather than seeming surprised, father 2 confirms the social worker’s observation and does not treat it as ‘news’. By giving illustrations of how he and father 1 get along with their ‘being verbally strong’ he claims ownership by being aware of this aspect of their relationship.

Father 2’s way of giving evidence for his answer, by placing his answer in a story that represents how he and his partner get along’, is something that is another feature of how couples answer relationship questions. They often add examples or stories that have to underline or even prove what they are saying. Again, this is either mostly positive, or a confession required to counterbalance sainthood and which demonstrates awareness of the observation of the social worker. Father 2 continues his answer by adding another positive feature to the way he and his partner get along. He explicitly marks the fact that father 1 ‘stimulates’ him as ‘again something positive’ (lines 17/18 ). The observation of the social worker of the couple being ‘verbally strong’, is now framed as something humorous and stimulating and has countered the possible negative implication of ‘fighting a lot’. To counter the image that they are constantly praising one another for their verbal skills, father 2 stresses the fact that they don’t express these kinds of things very often (lines 21-23), but that it is ‘a feeling’ (line 24). Since father 1 agrees with this in a subtle but clear way, they have demonstrated that they both appreciate their

partner as ‘verbally strong’, that they discuss in a humorous and stimulating way and that they are aware of this aspect of their relationship.

The social worker phrases this topic in the record in the following way. We added some additional information to illustrate the topic of ‘discussion’ in the context in which the social worker has put it:

Extract 11: AiABT (record)

**Stabiliteit relatie en persoonlijkheidsgegevens:**

*Stability of relationship and personal particulars:*

Beide heren geven te kennen dat hun samen zijn prettig en  
*Both gentlemen make it clear that their being together feels*  
vanzelfsprekend aanvoelt. Zij zijn tamelijk gelijkgestemd en  
*both enjoyable and natural. They are fairly like-minded and*  
hebben dezelfde interesses en ideeën, waarover veelvuldig  
*have shared interests and ideas, which are frequently*  
gediscussieerd wordt. Er is over en weer sprake van interesse  
*discussed. There is a mutual interest in each other and a*  
in elkaar en het gevoel gewaardeerd en gerespecteerd te worden  
*feeling of being validated and respected by the other.*  
door de ander. Meningsverschillen worden altijd opgelost.  
*Arguments are always solved.*

The topic of ‘discussion’ is fully embedded in a positive context, as the couple oriented to in their answer as well. The fact that they ‘frequently’ discuss things is connected with them being ‘fairly like-minded and having ‘shared interests and ideas’. In this sense, it could be read that their discussions have led to a common set of interests and ideas and have made them univocal. The negative implication is fully dealt with and the couple have managed to counter any possible risks attached to them being ‘verbally strong’.

### *Conclusion and discussion*

We were aware from earlier research into assessment interaction and/or collaborative practices that assessment is a delicate matter (Pomerantz, 1984) and that couples either behave competitively in order to blame each other (as in marriage counselling) (Buttny, 1990) or that they use several means, such as agreement tokens and overlap, to present univocal answers (Lerner 1993, 1996). We expected that couples that answer questions about their relationship in the context of adoption assessment will very much focus on this by presenting their relationship as being as harmonious as possible. Our aim in this study was to make more specific

observations of *how* social workers assess the prospective adoptive couples' relationship and of *how* couples demonstrate suitability for adoptive parenthood by claiming and demonstrating a harmonious relationship in both their answers and their behaviour. We therefore answered the following questions:

- 1 What kinds of questions do social workers use when addressing prospective adoptive couples' relationship?
- 2 What features of their relationship do couples display *in* their answers and *in how* they answer the questions?
- 3 How do couples display collaboration when answering questions that are addressed to both of them?
- 4 What features of the couples' answers to relationship questions are evaluated positively and are considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood?

As a result of our analysis we showed three kinds of questions. The first is a simple question to one of the partners, for instance, about the first impression his/her partner made. These questions function as a way to shift from talking about the past to the present or to initiate relationship-talk at the beginning of an interview. These questions are also used when, in the course of a discussion about the relationship, some specifics of one partner need to be highlighted. The second kind of question is an interrogative question that addresses both partners as addressee. The questions seem neutral and survey-like but abound with implications and are constrained by institutional norms of what constitutes a 'good relationship'. Topics such as quarrelling, housekeeping, shared activities and differences between partners are often the subject of these questions. The third kind of question is similar to question two, using a general 'you' to address both partners, but includes an observation about the couple's reaction to the question which invites the couple to respond.

The answers to the questions have several features. They are precise, possibly as a result of an orientation towards the written outcome of the interviews in the recommendation record and oriented to the fact that these answers are written down in a recommendation record. They deal with possible negative implications attached to the question and try to either counter the negative or stress the positive aspects of the relationship. In being positive, couples avoid sainthood by accounting for being too positive or by admitting to having weaknesses. To reinforce their claims, couples bring in stories or examples that illustrate what they are saying and make them more evidential. By doing so, they show awareness and claim ground to

counter negative implications that are hidden in the question and/or the observations that the social workers present to them.

Couples display collaboration by not fighting to answer, but by being polite in giving the answer to the partner that has opted to answer. In a subtle few moments, couples divide the turns by smiling, gazing or looking for eye contact. When answering a question, they leave space for the partner to add agreement tokens and they sometimes even produce the same sort of saying in overlap. In addition, they sometimes speak for both themselves and their partners by using 'we'.

Interestingly, it does not seem to matter too much *what* answers the couples give to relationship questions. What seems to be more important is how they produce the answers and whether they display some insight into their relationship. Being able to finish off each other's sentences when giving an answer is positively evaluated in the recommendation record and can therefore be considered as a protective factor for adoptive parenthood. Another protective factor is the ability to reflect on the relationship. The couples provide descriptions of their relationship and give reasons for why they behave in certain ways (for instance, why they think they never quarrel). So, having a normal (not overtly positive or negative), explainable relationship or at least *presenting* a relationship as such, is considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood. As conversation analysts we can only conclude that the couples manage to give an impression of their relationship as a response to relationship questions. And social workers manage to get and to assess information that helps them draw up a recommendation record in which positive advice about the couple's suitability for adoptive parenthood is constructed. In Goffmanian terms: the couple's performance of good enough adoptive parenthood is successful since they are able to influence the outcome of the assessment positively by showing 'unanimity', 'familiarity' and by avoiding 'false notes' (Goffman, 1959). However, only research to follow up on the actual parenting practices of these couples in the future will tell us whether the conversational skills as demonstrated in the assessment interview will somehow predict success as an adoptive parent.

Once more, being able to produce a version of a shared experience can be counted as an indication of a close and intimate relationship between the producer of the version and the one whom it is about. The presentation of an account of the inner experience of the relationship may be an indication of good partnership. It may even be an indication of a particularly close and caring relationship if, in the account, intimate thoughts and feelings are included in a sensitive way (Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991: 470). Being able to answer for both yourself and your partner is proof of inside knowledge about the relationship. If the other partner does not

complete the answer he fails to confirm whether the inside knowledge that the other is displaying is right or not. Therefore, it comes down to how you formulate an answer to a question that is addressed to both yourself and your partner in a way that satisfies the social worker and your partner. We have seen how couples manage to do this, and how social workers appreciate couples who work together to give their answers. Nevertheless, social workers remain critical about the answers as such and will challenge the answers if they are not satisfied, or if they suspect a possible risk factor.

The aim of this study was to contribute towards understanding the motives and capacities of prospective adoptive parents and to throw light on assessment processes. We showed how assessment is a shared activity between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. It is in the interaction that we see 'assessment in action', an interaction in which the actual decision about peoples' suitability is constructed. We also wanted to help practitioners working in the field of assessment to understand the complexities of the situation. We believe that by presenting examples of 'assessment of work' and by working towards examples of 'good practice', conversation analysis can contribute towards a reconsideration of the field of assessment, and can perhaps even provide material to help train social workers.

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## Study 4

### Assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood. Hypothetical questions as part of ongoing conversation

#### *Abstract*

Social workers with the Dutch Child Protection Board use hypothetical questions as a means to assess the suitability of prospective adoptive parents for adoption. In particular, while talking about the future, prospective adoptive parents are assessed on their educational skills, knowledge and awareness with regard to adoption-specific problems. In our study we analysed the preliminary conversational work that has to be done in order to pose a hypothetical question. We distinguished between (1) patterns that start with an eliciting question as a way of collecting topics with which to build a hypothetical question, and (2) patterns that start with a retrieving question, using themes from earlier conversation. Follow up questions are part of the preparatory work and form a bridge between the elicitation of topics and the actual hypothetical question. These follow up questions can be asked both before and after the introduction of the hypothetical question. Follow-up questions in post-position allow the social worker to challenge parents' answers to hypothetical questions.

This study is based on:

Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (2008). Assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood. Hypothetical questions as part of ongoing conversation. *Discourse Studies*, 10 (5).

## *Introduction*

In the procedure for international adoption in the Netherlands, social workers with the Child Protection Board (hereafter: CPB) investigate the suitability of people hoping to adopt a child from abroad. The assessment procedure includes a series of four extensive interviews. The social workers then report their findings to the Ministry of Justice. A positive recommendation usually results in authorization to adopt a child. The suitability of the prospective adoptive family is investigated by weighing up the risk and protection factors in different aspects of the prospective adoptive parents' lives (CPB, 2001).

The four sessions are usually arranged as follows: during the first discussion the social worker and the prospective adoptive parents get to know each other and general information is presented; the second session concentrates on the personal development of the prospective adoptive parents and the development of their relationship; the third examines future parenting practice, and the draft record is covered in the final session.

This study focuses on the third session in which the future parenting practice is discussed. Due to the absence of the child, who is still abroad, and the prospective parents' lack of parenting experience (childlessness being the main motive for couples to adopt a child), social workers have nothing factual to reflect upon in this interview. They therefore engage the prospective parents in a discussion about hypothetical situations the parents and the child they are to adopt might find themselves in. This study concentrates on the sequential organization of the hypothetical question in the institutional context of the CPB. In other words, we analyse the different patterns in which hypothetical questions are posed and pay special attention to the preliminary work that has to be done in order to introduce a hypothetical situation.

The aim of this study is to make a contribution to the body of knowledge concerned with the analysis of text and talk in institutional settings under the heading of (institutional) conversation analysis (CA). We hope, in particular, to contribute towards understanding how sequences serve as 'vehicles for institutional activities' (Peräkylä, 1995: 236). Sequence organization refers to 'patterns and structures controlling the relation between successive turns (and successive activities accomplished through turns) in talk-in-interaction'. Whatever activities are done by the participants of an interaction, their accomplishment involves the organization of sequences (Drew and Heritage, 1992: 37-42). For instance, questioning is possible

by virtue of the participants' orientation to the structural relationship between questions and answers (Peräkylä, 1995).

In this study, we analyse how, in a series of sequences, social workers accomplish their institutional task of assessing prospective adoptive parents' parenting skills. By doing so, we follow Drew and Curl (2007) and others (Heinemann 2006, Curl et al, forthcoming), who investigated how 'initial' actions (such as hypothetical questions) come to be formed in the first place. They stated that: 'although studies in CA have tended to treat actions such as assessments, invitations, complaints etc. as 'first' actions (e.g. first pair parts in adjacency pairs), in reality they also emerge from ongoing interaction; they do not come from nowhere – they arise out of whatever particular interactional circumstances and contingencies that obtain up to that point' (Drew and Curl, 2007: 27). For instance, when clinicians give negative diagnostic news to the parents of mentally retarded children, medical professionals, before giving the bad news, often first elicit the parents' view (Maynard, 1992). Such pre-sequencing actions are often used in conversation, for instance as a pre-request, and function as a means to delimit the risk of failure. When a recipient's response is non-problematic, a 'green light' is given for the projected continuation. Besides a 'green-light-response' (or 'go ahead'), recipients can also respond by 'blocking' or 'hedging' (Schegloff, 1995). In the latter two cases, the chance of success is less likely and the questioner still has a safe way out, an escape route, before having to ask the 'real' question or before having to utter the request.

Taking this into account, our analysis focuses on the *preparation* of hypothetical questions rather than on the hypothetical questions and their answers alone. By examining this preparation it is possible to analyse how social workers elicit parents' cooperation for entering a future, hypothetical world. We will discuss examples of successful pre-sequences. By successful, we mean: leading towards the posing of a hypothetical question.

### *Theoretical and analytical framework*

Earlier CA studies of the use of hypothetical questions in institutional contexts show that: (1) hypothetical questions are posed in contexts in which the objective of the talk is in the (near) future, and that (2) hypothetical questions are preceded by other sorts of questions that 'open the future horizon' and provide 'a proper environment' in which the hypothetical question can be delivered (cf. Peräkylä, 1995: 271).

Although there are clear similarities in future-orientation and conversational organization of hypothetical questions, differences remain depending

on the specific institutional task that is being performed by asking hypothetical questions. The literature distinguishes two functions of discussing hypothetical situations, functions which may occur at the same time. The first function is that of *testing* someone's suitability, for instance in job interviews, in which the competence of applicants for a future job has to be established (Komter, 1991). Secondly, hypothetical questions may serve an *instructive* function. An example of this kind of context is that of social workers helping an HIV patient to become aware of possible AIDS-related problems the patient may have to cope with in the future (Peräkylä, 1995). Finally, there are contexts in which both functions are found together. Speer and Parsons (2006) describe how, in a context in which professionals have dual identities, like being both gatekeeper and helper, hypothetical questions are asked in order to both assess and help people. Similarly, this is also the case in assessments for international adoption. Social workers working at the interface between welfare and justice have a dual function i.e. to act both as assessor and as helper (Noordegraaf, Nijnatten van & Elbers, forthcoming). They sometimes explicitly refer to this mix, and provide additional information about their conversational intentions in addition to their formal role (Nijnatten van, 2006). In the case of future talk, they ask hypothetical questions for assessing the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents, while, sometimes, also providing advice or giving warnings in reaction to the parents' answers<sup>17</sup>.

In this study, we analyse in detail how social workers prepare the environment (claim interactional ground) for asking hypothetical questions when assessing prospective adoptive parents' parenting skills. We start our analysis by finding and examining hypothetical questions, and then 'reason' backwards to see how the future talk is introduced, i.e. how the social worker works towards posing a hypothetical question. We conclude with an overview of the overall organization of talking about the future with prospective adoptive parents.

The data for this study were taken from a corpus of a larger study into the process of assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood in text and talk. We analysed twelve sessions (in all cases the third interview) from different assessments with eleven social workers.

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<sup>17</sup> Implicitly both functions always occur when asking hypothetical questions: answers to hypothetical questions always provide information about the state of awareness of the answerer, and by discussing hypothetical situations, people automatically become (more) aware of these situations.

We used the transcription system developed by Jefferson (2004), which highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail. All names and identifying details have been disguised.

## *Results*

All eleven social workers in our corpus ask hypothetical questions, but some use them more than others. For instance, two social workers introduce a hypothetical situation only once, whereas others pose five or more hypothetical questions. One explanation for this can be attributed to the fact that in those cases where only a few hypothetical questions are asked, the prospective adoptive parents already have experience with ‘parenting’ a child. In one assessment the prospective parent already has a biological child. In the other assessment one of the prospective parents runs a crèche. This is a concrete issue that can be discussed in the assessment. In these cases, hypothetical questions are not the only means available for assessing the parenting capabilities of the prospective parents. Nevertheless, in most cases, parenting experience is limited and ‘evidence’ of suitability has to be derived from the answers to hypothetical questions. The application of hypothetical questions in which a hypothetical future is discussed is based on the assumption that, if parents are able to talk about the future and come up with sensible solutions to possible problems, the social worker can use this information as an indication for future parenting qualities. We will see how social workers close the discursive split of discussing (possible) future parenting problems in present time by approaching ‘reality’ as close as possible.

We present our results by discussing two hypothetical questions. We then examine in more detail two patterns in which future oriented topics, which lead to the asking of a hypothetical question, are introduced.

## *Hypothetical questions*

All the hypothetical questions in our corpus present likely *problematic* situations to the prospective adoptive parents, and invite them to come up with a solution. Extracts 1 and 2 are examples of hypothetical questions and their answers.

### Extract 1 AiARE3

- 01 SW → Ehh even uitgaan dat het een kind van anderhalf  
Err let's assu:me it would be a child of one and  
02 zou worden, hoe zien jullie dat voo:r je? °wa-°



## Extract 2 AiAAA22

- 01 SW → ja ja (.) want als jullie kindje nu in de  
*yes, yes (.) what if, when your little child*
- 02 puberteit zit en zegt van als jij destijds ik  
*becomes an adolescent and says, as you did at*
- 03 wil niet meer naar de kerk, van 'dat geloof in  
*that age, 'I am not going to church anymore,*
- 04 god dat zie ik allemaal niet meer zitten'  
*I don't believe in God'*
- 05 PAF misschien dat je het dan op dat moment zou  
*perhaps that you would then accept it from a*
- 06 accepteren van een kind, dat het op z'n eigen  
*acceptereren van een kind, dat het op z'n eigen*
- 07 manier mee bezig is  
*child for that moment, that it's occupied with it*
- 08 SW ja (.)  
*on its own way*
- 09 PAF ik denk dat ik het heel moeilijk zou hebben als  
*yes (.)*
- 10 het kind het helemaal aan de kant schuift van  
*I think I would have a very hard time if the*
- 11 'ik wil er helemaal niets van weten  
*child were to put it aside to tally like 'I don't*
- 12 SW mm (0.2)  
*'ik wil er helemaal niets van weten*
- 13 PAF ik zou niet willen eisen van een kind 'en je gaat  
*mm (0.2)*
- 14 naar de kerk want dat moet' ofzo=  
*I wouldn't demand from a child something like*
- 15 PAM =nee  
*'and you're going to go to church because you have to'=  
=no*

In their description of hypothetical situations, social workers use words that indicate that the situation is both hypothetical and 'real'. The hypothetical nature of the situation is marked as being conditional. In extract 1, the social worker uses *assume* (line 1) to indicate that the situation that she is about to pose is imagined. It only exists in the conversation and does not predict the future. This is reinforced by leaving the gender of the child open (lines 1, 3: *a child*), indicating that the subject is a *hypothetical* child of whom the social worker lacks any concrete information. In extract 2 the social worker uses the conditional *if* (line 1) to mark that the situation is based on an assumption. The combination with *what* and *if* or *suppose that* are the forms that are most commonly used to indicate that the question is hypothetical. But

the social workers make clear that the situation is not inconceivable even though it is imaginary. In extract 1 two questions are added to the assumption that invite the parents to come up with concrete answers (especially question 2: *what .. can a child of that age do or not do*). In extract 2, the social worker brings the situation close to the prospective adoptive parents and makes the situation concrete by using phrases such as *your little child* (line 1), and by quoting the imaginary teenager: *'I'm not going to church anymore, I don't believe in God'* (lines 3, 4). By giving the child a voice, or a concrete age, social workers create a 'real' situation and by doing so display professional expertise on parenting issues. These realistic depictions compensate for the lack of information about the child and build a position from which they can assess the prospective parents' competencies as future parents.

In extract 2 the social worker uses an extra tool to make the hypothetical situation more real. In line 2, she is referring to the prospective adoptive father, who in the previous interview said that he had stopped believing in God in his teens, by adding *as you did at that age* (lines 2,3) to her formulation. By doing so, she makes the father the source for her description and thereby makes her question more evidential. She counters the possibility of the father avoiding giving an answer to the question by saying something like *I don't think such a thing would happen*. His biography provides proof that such a thing *can* happen.

In extract 2 the social worker does not spell out the hypothetical *question*. She formulates the hypothetical *situation* carefully, but does not add the question (like *what would you do or how would you feel*). There are cases in which the social worker does spell out the question (as in extract 1), but in many cases the question is implicit. However, the prospective adoptive parents still treat the social worker's contribution as a question, and come up with an answer as a reaction to the social worker. Apparently the situation is sufficiently clear for the parents that they are supposed to give an answer. There are two explanations for this. Firstly, this is because the prospective parents have already been involved in discussions of preceding questions, that have presented the horizon of the future parenting practice, and have therefore already constructed sufficient content to be able to come up with an sensible answer. Secondly, the interview format of the conversation has been established in previous turns and interviews. Prospective adoptive parents have 'learned' that their job is to provide reactions to the contributions by the social worker and to treat these contributions as questions.

## *Starting to talk about the future*

Now we will trace back from the hypothetical question to the place where the social worker introduces a future parenting related topic which is not yet hypothetical. We encounter two patterns: (1) an introductory question, that opens the floor for future talk, and (2) a topicalizing follow-up, a question that steers towards posing a hypothetical question. These patterns amount to *topic-eliciting questions*, open questions that invite the parents to come up with a range of answers, and *retrieving questions*, in which topics from earlier talk are being reintroduced and placed in a future-oriented context (cf. Perakyla, 1995). We discuss both patterns, and analyse how they, in their own ways, prepare the ground for posing hypothetical questions.

## *Entering the parenting field: topic-eliciting questions*

Topic-eliciting questions appear, when the issue to be discussed still requires preparation. By asking open questions, the social worker gets the chance to find out what the prospective adoptive parents consider to be important in relation to the upbringing of their child. Komter (1991: 174) describes similarly how questions about the future performance of job applicants are preceded by open questions about their understanding of the job. Extract 3 is an example of how a topic-eliciting question can lead to the posing of a hypothetical question.

### Extract 3 AiAAA23

- 01 SW → 1 wat wat zien jullie want jullie worden dan ouders  
*what what do you see because you will become*
- 02 wat wat vinden jullie °belangrijke taken van  
*parents what what do you feel are ° important*
- 03 ouders wat houdt ouderschap in wat jullie  
*tasks of parents what do you think parenthood*
- 04 betreft°°?  
*involves°°?*
- 05 PAM onvoorwaardelijk voor je van je kind houden en  
*unconditionally loving your child and being*
- 06 ervoor zijn  
*there*
- 07 SW mm  
*mm*
- 08 PAM echt ervoor zijn dat je d'r gewoon eh (0,2) op  
*really being there that you just eh (.2) in*
- 09 wat voor manier dan ook altijd voor je kind  
*whatever way always be there for your child*

10                   klaarstaat

11 SW → 2   °mm° (0,2) kan je dat onvoorwaardelijk van een  
                  °mm° (.2) *can you do that unconditionally °loving°*

12                   adoptiekind °houden°?  
                  *an adoptive child?*

13 PAF           ja  
                  *yes*

14 PAM           ja absoluut  
                  *yes absolutely*

15 SW → 2   weet je dat zeker?  
                  *are you su:re?*

16 PAF           ja  
                  *yes*

17 PAM           ja  
                  *yes*

18 SW → 3   °en als dat nou niet zo is°?  
                  °and what if it isn't like that°?

This example<sup>18</sup> shows how a social worker works towards posing a hypothetical question. Three steps are taken: 1) an open topic elicitation is asked, 2) follow-up questions steer the answers towards the posing of 3) a problematic hypothetical situation. The topic-eliciting questions concern parenthood in general. Two questions about parenthood are asked concerning parental tasks (lines 1-3) and what parenthood involves (lines 3,4). The social worker qualifies her questions by adding *because you will become parents* (lines 1,2), accounting for and contextualizing the introduction of ‘parenthood talk’. This makes these questions pertinent to *their* prospective parenthood. Such remarks constitute the context of talk and distinguish it from any other type of talk.

In the course of the conversation, the number of accounts related to personal future related questions decreases. Open topic eliciting questions not only prepare the floor for posing hypothetical questions, but also constitute a framework in which social workers are entitled to pose questions in sequence. By answering within the constraints of the assumption, the prospective adoptive parents confirm their status as future parents and in a way ‘agree’, give ‘green-light’ to being interviewed about their future thoughts (Schegloff, 1995). This is common ground for further conversation.

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<sup>18</sup> In many cases in our study this process takes much longer because some answers are long, and side remarks are made either by the social worker or the parents. Reproducing them here would take up too much space.

The social worker shows her neutrality (cf. Heritage, 1984) by emphasizing that she is asking for the opinions of the prospective parents (line 2: *what do you feel*' line 3 *'what do you think*). This neutrality encourages the prospective parents to give the answer they wish and the social worker promotes the speakership of the parents with "passive reciprocity" (Jefferson, 1981), with utterances such as 'mm' in line 4. The social worker seems to let the prospective parents talk until she has enough material to lead the topic towards a hypothetical situation. She then (in lines 11,12) asks a follow-up question that, in two ways, narrows the conversation down. Firstly, she now speaks about *an adoptive child*, which specifies the question further to the situation of the prospective adoptive parents, and, secondly, she questions the answer of the prospective adoptive mother rather than confirming it or asking for elaboration. By asking *can you* (line 11), she puts the prospective parents in an awkward situation. When saying 'no we can't' they risk being corrected in the form of 'well you should' and when saying 'yes', they risk being challenged to 'prove' that they can. There is no right answer to such a question. Later on in the conversation the social worker relieves the parents from their awkward position by saying:

#### Extract 4 AiAAA23

01 SW            maar dat heb je natuurlijk ook met eigen  
                  *but that can of course also be the case*  
02                biologische kinderen  
                  *with your own biological children*  
03 PAF           ja  
                  *yes*  
04 PAM           mm  
                  *mm*  
05 SW           ehm je zou dan als ouder niet zo gauw toegeven  
                  *ehm you wouldn't admit that not so quickly but it*  
06                maar het gebeurt natuurlijk dat je voor het ene  
                  *of course happens that you feel more for the one*  
07                kind meer voelt dan voor het andere kind al dan  
                  *for child than the other child even if they are*  
08                zijn ze allebei je eigen kinderen en met een  
                  *both your own children and with an adoptive child*  
09                adoptiekindje heb je dat natuurlijk ook. er kan  
                  *you have that of course as well. there might be*  
10                iets zijn in dat kind wat je enorm tegenstaat  
                  *something in the child that you really can't stand*

She continues by informing the parents about matters of attachment. This example shows how posing hypothetical questions, while assessing the prospective adoptive parenting qualities, can function as a stepping stone towards the giving of advice.

In sum, topic-eliciting questions occur mostly at the beginning of conversations and function as a way of collecting topics that can form the agenda for the rest of the conversation. The questions are also a starting position from where the social worker can pose hypothetical questions. In other words, they introduce the horizon of the conversation. Not all such questions in the third session lead to future talk. Due to the openness and neutrality of the questions, they can spark off different kinds of topics, and the conversation can end off-topic. If this is the case, a social worker will start again.

### *Recycling topics: retrieving questions*

The second pattern of social workers starting talking about the future is to retrieve themes that have been mentioned in earlier talk. Most themes stem from the same interview, but sometimes they go back to an earlier conversation. They differ from the topic elicitation in the sense that: (1) they use earlier talk as a resource, and (2) the social worker has more control of the course of the future pattern. Therefore, the risk of getting off-topic is diminished.

The retrieving question is by far the most frequently used question to introduce a (new) hypothetical situation. Extract 5 is an example of this kind of pattern. Again we chose a brief example in which the different questions follow each other in an orderly fashion and in which the answers are short or even omitted. In most cases, the preamble towards the posing of hypothetical questions is much longer. Nevertheless, the ingredients for the patterns are the same.

#### Extract 5 AiAAA23

- 01 SW: → 1 (.4) ehɦm (.) even terug op dat gedrag he? ehɦm  
(.4) ehɦm (.) going back to that behaviour right?
- 02 → 2 wat jullie al z↑eiden, jullie verwachten dat het  
ehɦm for instance what you already said then was
- 03 kindje veel zou kunnen h:uilen driftig kan zijn  
that you'd expect the child might cry a lot,
- 04 °teruggetrokken kan zijn  
have °fits of temper or °withdraw into itself°
- 05 PAM ja  
yes

06 SW → 2 °eetproblemen slaapproblemen°  
 °problems with eating, have difficulty getting to sleep°  
 07 → 3 (.) als eh dat eh inderdaad zo blijkt te zijn wat  
 (.) if um that sort of thing should occur (.)  
 08 (.) wat doe je dan? h:oe los je dat op?  
 what would you do then? h:ow would you solve it?

Just as with eliciting questions, two steps are taken before the hypothetical question is posed: (1) a retrieving question is asked, (2) then a follow-up and finally, (3) the hypothetical question itself. In this extract the different steps are latched to each other in a roof-tile turn construction. That is, the different questions are not constructed in separate sequences, each completed with an answer, but are designed as a multi-unit turn in which the questions follow each other before an answer is given. The social worker then has enough resources and entitlement to lead the conversation towards a possible future problem and to ask the parents to come up with a solution. Nevertheless, even in a turn like this, the hypothetical question is prepared. For matters of understanding, social workers have to mark that they are leading the parents into a discussion about a hypothetical question. In contrast to the other (eliciting) pattern, the social worker in this example steers more. She immediately starts by narrowing down to behaviour (line 1) and then selects a few examples of possible problematic behaviour.

Another feature of retrieving questions is that they explicitly refer to earlier talk, in our extract *what you already said then* in line 2. The rhetorical power of using ‘reported speech’ is considerable (Holt, 1996). After all, the subject of ‘possible behaviour’ (line 1) is retrieved from an earlier answer by the prospective adoptive parents. By using their earlier answer in a new framework the social worker creates a strong position, since it is unusual to criticize your own answer. The prospective mother in line 5 confirms the enumeration of possible behaviour by saying *yes* as in ‘yes, I did say that’.

We recognize retrieving questions by, for instance, the use of ‘floor holders’. In this case, the extract starts with a (long) pause followed by ‘ehm’. Generally such an item as ‘uh’ can be used to mark ‘getting back to’ some prior talk. It frequently appears among a set of devices used to return to interrupted conversation. (Button, 1990; Jefferson, 1984). The next extract shows that the topic of behaviour is indeed retrieved from earlier talk, talk that was elicited with an open question earlier on in the conversation. The extract is at the beginning of the (third) interview? conversation, and elicits parental expectation about problematic behaviour the child might show after arrival in their family. For the sake of clarity: in the interview, extract 6 chronologically comes **before** extract 5 in the

conversation. Extract 5 showed how the posing of a hypothetical question is preceded by a retrieving and follow-up question. Extract 6 shows the *source* for the retrieving question in extract 5. Extract 6 shows the eliciting question that is asked somewhere at the beginning of the third interview and that did not lead to the posing of a hypothetical question there, but that occasioned the retrieving pattern given in Extract 5.

### Extract 6 AiARE3

- 01 SW → 1 mmmm ja want hoe eh wat wat voor gedrag verwacht  
*mmm yes because how er what what kind of*
- 02 je van het kind? of wat zou je kunnen verwachten?  
*behaviour do you expect from the child or what could you expect*
- 03 PAM als het kind klein is heel veel huilen  
*when the child is little very much crying*
- 04 SW mm  
*mm*
- 05 PAM stoppen met eten eh (.) niet willen slapen ik  
*stopping eating er (.) not wanting to sleep I do*
- 06 denk dat dat toch wel de meeste (.) bij hele  
*think that that is mostly (.) with the very*
- 07 kleintjes voor zover (.)ja ook bij groter wel  
*little ones as far (.)yes also when older*
- 08 maar ik denk dat grotere daarentegen ook wel  
*but I think that older ones on the other hand also*
- 09 weer heel boos gedrag kunnen laten zien=  
*can show very angry behaviour=*
- 10 SW =mmm=  
*=mmm=*
- 11 PAM =met dingen gooien en dat soort dingen nou dat  
*=throw stuff and those kinds of things well I*
- 12 verwacht ik nog niet echt van een baby  
*don't expect that yet from a baby*
- 13 SW nee(.) ja nou ja babies kunnen natuurlijk ook wel  
*no (.) yes well yes babies can of course cry in a*
- 14 hee:l driftig huilen [...?..  
*ve:ry angry way as well [...?..*
- 15 PAF [ja  
*[yes*
- 16 PAM [ja absoluut  
*[yes absolutely*
- 17 SW → 2 ja (.) of?  
*yes (.) or?*

18 PAM            of juist heel stil teruggetrokken  
                      or on the contrary very quiet and withdrawn  
19 SW             ja  
                      yes

This extract illustrates how the asking of an eliciting questions can fail to work towards the posing of a hypothetical question: After the answer to the follow-up question in line 17, the social worker does not come up with a hypothetical question. The topic ends there and the conversation shifts to something else. Nevertheless, as we have seen in extract 5, the information that is elicited with the question (a list of possible problematic behaviour) is recycled as a resource for a retrieving question later on in the interview.

We can conclude that retrieving questions use the (answers to) eliciting questions as a resource to start working towards the posing of a hypothetical question. By starting the retrieving pattern, a pattern that is more steering than the eliciting pattern, with a topic that has already been covered, the social worker creates a platform from which the prospective parents are ‘pushed’ into discussing hypothetical situations. By referring to the parents and selecting topics they have put forward themselves, the social worker excludes the possibility of not answering a hypothetical question with a reason such as ‘I don’t think such a thing would happen’.

### *Follow-up questions in pre-position*

The follow-up question in general is observably responsive to a preceding turn, rather than a fresh first act (Peräkylä, 1995). With the follow-up question the social worker delimits the content of the topic for further elaboration. She prescribes the horizon of further conversation. Topics covered in institutional communication are mostly controlled by a representative and as such the follow-up question is often selective (Drew & Heritage, 1992). The social worker steers the conversation by asking questions related to the institutional task. As we have seen in our data so far, the follow-up questions in pre-position (i.e. before the hypothetical question is posed) often highlight a problematic feature of something that the parents came up with or simply specify the ‘problem or situation’ that leads to the hypothetical question.

The follow-up question in pre-position is designed so that it can easily be followed by a hypothetical situation. Working towards the posing of hypothetical questions is akin to a triple jump. The opening question (either eliciting or

retrieving) works as a *hop* into the future of bringing up an adoptive child. The follow-up question in pre-position functions as a *step* for the social worker to pose the hypothetical question and to *jump* into the hypothetical future, together with the prospective adoptive parents.

### *Follow-up questions in post-position*

Follow-up questions sometimes also occur *after* the posing of a hypothetical question. In that case, the previous hypothetical question has already consolidated a platform to discuss a future possible problem and the follow-up question can then immediately be latched on to the answer(s) of the prospective adoptive parents.

The follow-up question is, then, supplementary to the information collected with the hypothetical question or sometimes challenges or even questions the given answer by adding some complications to the (hypothetical) problem. The introduction of complications again shows the strategic (asymmetrical) position of the social worker. She can make the hypothetical situation as complicated as she wants (cf. Komter, 1992).

The hypothetical question in extract 7 deals with the topic of background information. In earlier turns the woman came up with this topic when answering a question about giving (background) information to the adoptive child. The woman emphasized that she hopes to collect as much information about the child's background as possible.

#### Extract 7 AiARE3

- 01 SW → 3 Hmhm (0.03) Stel dat je die informatie hebt hoe  
*Hmmm (.3) Suppose that you have that information*
- 02 denken jullie daarmee om te gaan ?  
*how do you think you would handle it?*
- 03 PAM ehm (0.02) sowieso voor onszelf [ehh]  
*ehm (.2) in any case for ourselves [ehh]*
- 04 SW [hmm]  
*[hmm]*
- 05 PAM (.)ter informatie en ehh(.1) ja dat je dat  
*(.) for our information and ehh (.1) yes that you*
- 06 meeneemt in hoe je kijkt naar het kind en weet  
*bear that in mind in the way you look at the*
- 07 wat er ja in het leven heeft afgespeeld  
*child and know what there yes has played a role in its*  
*life*
- 08 SW ja

*yes*  
 09 PAM en sowieso als het ja latere leeftijd als [?]=  
*and in any case if it yes later age if* [?]=  
 10 SW [hmm]  
*[hmm]*  
 11 PAM =kind er zelf ehh om vraagt  
*child asks ehh for it*  
 12 SW: → 4 hm(.)hoe(hanteren) jullie een kind daarom zou  
 hm(.)how would you (deal with) a child that asks  
 13 kunnen vragen?  
*for that?*

After the hypothetical question is posed (in lines 1 & 2) the woman's responses are elaborated on but are audibly incomplete and she thereby establishes herself as the intended giver of further information. In turn, the social worker encourages elaborating talk by means of the production of continuers. The most common are: yes (line 7) and mm hm (lines 4 & 9) (Heritage, 1984). Another way is to remain silent in order to encourage the other person to elaborate their answers further (cf. Komter 1991: 180).

From the answer given, the social worker picks up a theme for further questions. In this extract the social worker picks up the theme mentioned in line 10.

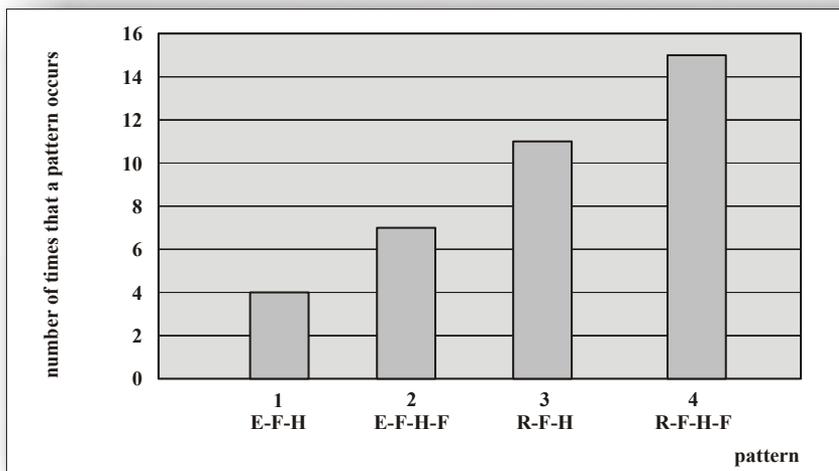
Follow-up questions after the posing of a hypothetical questions are not so much a step *towards* the future but another step *in* the future, because the imaginary nature of the situation no longer has to be prepared. Once a hypothetical problematic situation is launched, no more work has to be done to inform the parents of the imaginary nature of the discussion. However, when wanting to discuss a new hypothetical problem, the work begins again from the start.

### *Conclusion and discussion*

Although in theory hypothetical questions can be posed out of the blue, our study confirms earlier findings that they are carefully prepared in conversation. In this preparation, cooperation is brought about by discussing the topic in a general manner. Only after the hypothetical question is formulated does the social worker confront the prospective parents with possible problems with *their* adoptive child.

Two patterns of organizing a hypothetical situation are identified. (1) Patterns that start with an eliciting question, and patterns that start by retrieving themes from earlier talk. Then we have (2) patterns with and patterns without a follow-up question in post-position: short and long episodes. For an overview, the different

patterns are presented in the following histogram. The statistics are from a detailed micro-analysis of 37 units of future talk: patterns that include an eliciting (E) or retrieving (R) question, a follow-up question (F), in pre- and/ or post position of the hypothetical question (H).



Histogram 1: overview of patterns through which hypothetical questions are posed

The pattern in which most possibilities for elaboration are used is the one that starts with an eliciting question including a post-follow-up question (pattern 2). All questions ‘promote the speakership’ of the prospective parents (Komter, 1991: 177), but the eliciting question (E) is the most effective in that manner. Because of the open nature of the question and the list of topics that are elicited, this pattern includes many turns and takes several minutes; it evokes many different kinds of information. Only seven of our 37 discourse units are of this type. Although they do collect much information as a result of the openness of the first question, not all the information is useful. This pattern is mostly used at the beginning of an interview as a way of getting the conversation going and to establish a position from which parents can be questioned.

Both patterns 1 and 2 occur at the beginning of the interview and provide the social worker with topics to retrieve later on in the conversation. Candidate hypothetical situations are abundantly present in patterns 1 and 2. Only one topic is chosen to become a hypothetical question. The other possible topics are picked up later as a retrieving theme. So, patterns 1 and 2 function as a resource for patterns 3 and 4. Without patterns 1 and 2, patterns 3 and 4 could not exist, with the exception

of themes retrieved from the first and second assessment interviews. Hence, most topics (over 90%) in patterns 3 and 4 are retrieved from the same interview, collected by an eliciting question.

Patterns 1 and 2 are productive in collecting topics since they provide, with only 30% (11 of 37) of units, enough material to start the other 70% (26 of 37) units with. In the beginning of the interview, the agenda is co-constructed by both the social worker, who asks eliciting questions, and the prospective adoptive parents, who come up with a range of topics. Once enough eliciting questions have been used, retrieving questions follow each other in an orderly fashion.

Since the topics in the retrieving patterns (3 and 4) are provided by the prospective adoptive parents themselves, social workers have a strong position when posing the problematic hypothetical questions. Earlier than in the eliciting patterns (1 and 2), they can become concrete and proceed towards realistic hypothetical problems. The combination of using topics that have been mentioned by the parents (demonstrating their insight into the world of adoption) and concretization of hypothetical questions, make the use of hypothetical questions an effective tool in the assessment of suitability for adoptive parenthood. Eliciting patterns function best to assess the prospective parents' knowledge and awareness of the type of problems that could occur in the near future. In the retrieving patterns, the parents are assessed in particular on the ways they would solve those problems.

Another way to strengthen the assessment quality of a hypothetical question is to add a post-follow-up question to the prospective parents' answer to the hypothetical question. Most units (22 of 37 = 60%) include a follow-up question in post-position. It can be concluded that the answers to the hypothetical question are likely to be more challenged in patterns with a post-follow-up question. The prospective parents' answers are not accepted in the first instance. It is a starting point for introducing a more complicated and concrete version of the hypothetical situation and therefore, as far as the prospective parents are concerned, it is a test they must pass. This primary institutional goal is most obvious in the increasing complexity of a hypothetical question. The hypothetical question is used in particular as a way of assessing the suitability of prospective adoptive parents, and their upbringing qualities in particular.

Analysing the future-talk sequences as part of an institutional activity, rather than as singular actions, helped us to get a handle on the accomplishment of the social worker's institutional task of assessment. By presenting an overview of the overall organization of the interview, we were able to add to the existing knowledge about the use of hypothetical questions in institutional settings. A finding of special

interest is that eliciting patterns precede retrieving patterns. Eliciting questions are successfully used to construct a shared agenda for the interview and to bring about cooperation for discussing hypothetical questions. Retrieving questions (combined with a steering follow-up question), turned out to be particularly successful in the actual posing of a hypothetical question.

This approach to analysing sequences in their local context, will also help make CA studies more accessible to practitioners who conduct the interviews with clients. Analysing activities as a whole, rather than just as single sequences, will make our analysis more familiar for them, or even: more ‘real’. After all, their job is to have *conversations* with people (with certain institutional goals) rather than to *utter sequences*. This approach also visualizes the complexity of social action<sup>19</sup>. By showing how ‘initial’ actions are carefully formed in interaction and by involving these pre-sequences in our analysis, we can counter any image that suggests that social action can be totally scripted and formulaic and can be replaced by standardized procedures<sup>20</sup>. Professionals use many catchphrases in their interactions; some parts of interaction are highly organized and orderly, showing ‘that the specificities of meaning and understanding in interaction would be impossible without this orderliness’ (Drew and Curl, 2007: 22). However, at the same time, as our research shows, social workers use high levels of creativity and improvisation in order to perform their activities (Sawyer, 2004).

The practical impact of our study is therefore more complex than just suggesting how to teach social workers to ask hypothetical questions. Training social workers should also encompass a reflection on how to prepare hypothetical questions in different ways.

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<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that an analysis of single sequences or utterances diminishes the complexity of social action per se. Any analysis can stress this complexity by underlining the many details of language and/or by adding sociological theory to the analysis. However, we argue that including local sequences in an analysis, visualizes this complexity in the most obvious manner. Having said that, we of course are aware that any analysis presents the reader with a ‘selective attention for the world’ and presents ‘perspectives on reality’ rather than reality as such (cf. Elbers, 1991). As analysts we always omit certain things in order to make an analytical focus of a particular aspect. In order to go in at the deep end, rather than only to make general statements, we sometimes have to violate the aspect of the complexity of social action, in order to show the complexity of language in depth.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance van’t Hof (2006) for an extended overview of the use of standardized survey interviews and how they fail to constitute predictable and unvaried interaction.

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## Study 5

### Future talk: Discussing hypothetical situations with prospective adoptive parents

#### *Abstract*

The objective of this study is to contribute towards understanding how welfare and justice discourses become apparent in institutional conversations where social workers involved in child protection have dual professional identities: that of helper and of gatekeeper. In this study we analyse a specific conversational practice in a particular child protection context: social workers asking questions about hypothetical situations in interviews with prospective adoptive parents. We show the nature of these questions in face-to-face interactions between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. In addition, we also analyse how the social workers manage to integrate aspects of *testing* the capabilities of the prospective adoptive parents while, at the same time, also *helping* them to become even better-prepared parents. Using the method of conversation analysis makes it possible to analyse how the social workers are doing being a gatekeeper and/ or helper without spelling that out.

This study is based on:

Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (2008). Future talk: Discussing hypothetical situations with prospective adoptive parents. *Qualitative Social Work*, 7 (3).

## *Introduction*

Social workers involved in child protection work are at the junction between discourses of welfare and justice. They are deployed as executors of the law, but they are also trained to be helpers. And in the latter sense they are experts at dealing with client problems (cf. Hall, Sarangi, and Slembrouck, 1999: 306). However, as executors of the law they also have a gatekeeping function. In other words, they are authorized to advise state agencies on very serious matters such as supervision orders, visiting arrangements, and suitability for adoptive parenthood.

Former studies on the communicative practice of child protection show that social workers ‘are vague about their formal powers, using several strategies to mask their authority. They express their legal authority vaguely and non-specifically and only indicate it indirectly’ (Nijnatten, Hoogsteder, and Suurmond, 2001: 717; Nijnatten, 2005; Stenson, 1993). ‘Indirection’ may be seen as an ‘extension of the negotiation and particularisation of identity categories’ (Hall, Sarangi and Slembrouck 2006: 76). What this means in practice is that the lack of clarity when it comes to social workers defining themselves either as helpers or as gatekeepers, or as both, does not necessarily mean that they do not adopt these positions in conversation. In fact, the whole conversation might be understood as an arena of positioning: constructing interactional and institutional identities while introducing and discussing several different topics. In other words: it is not necessary to spell out that you are a helper or a gatekeeper to act as one. In that sense, it is likely that several identities will come to the fore during a conversation (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Abell and Stokoe, 2001).

In this study, we use general interview material taken from the adoption assessment process to analyse whether we come across manifestations of the tension between social workers’ roles as helper/gatekeeper during face-to-face interactions with prospective adoptive parents when social workers ask questions about hypothetical situations.

Before taking a closer look at the interactions themselves, we first elaborate on the adoption assessment process itself and discuss the literature that illustrates how discussing hypothetical situations can be a means to *test* someone’s capabilities and a means to *help* someone be prepared for future distressing issues.

## *The adoption assessment process*

In the Dutch international adoption procedure, social workers from the Child Protection Board (CPB) investigate the suitability of couples hoping to adopt a

child<sup>21</sup>. Part of the social worker's task is to carry out family assessment that includes four interviews with the prospective adoptive parents<sup>22</sup>. The goal of the family assessment is to 'advise on the suitability of prospective adoptive parents' (CPB, 2001: 61). This is done by weighing up the 'possible risk and protection factors that could hinder the stable development of the adoptive child towards adulthood' (CPB, 2001: 62). This means that the social worker is authorized to influence whether the *prospective* parents will become *adoptive* parents or not.

Ratified by 66 nations in The Hague in May 1993, the Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption provides for the domains in which the protection and risk factors are covered. The convention built directly on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which seeks to protect all parties to international adoptions and to prevent international trafficking in children (HCCH, 1993).

When the CPB social worker is satisfied that the prospective adoptive parents are eligible and suitable to adopt a child, he/she prepares a record for the state agency<sup>23</sup> which includes: 'how prospective parents deal with problems and tensions, including coping with being childless, any special wishes regarding an adoptive child, expectations concerning their own child-raising capabilities and possible discrimination of the foreign child and other particulars concerning the child' (CPB, 2001: 62).

The different domains are roughly divided into three categories in the record: autobiographical notes on the prospective parents' lives, the stability of their

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<sup>21</sup> When a Dutch couple plan to adopt a foreign child, the following steps have to be taken: registration with the Ministry of Justice, having taken a special course (VIA) that gives the prospective parents information about international adoption (six sessions) and family assessment by the Child Protection Board (CPB), which consists of four interviews, after which a report is sent to the Ministry of Justice. A positive report results in authorization to adopt a foreign child. The prospective adoptive parents can then register with one of the legal mediating agencies, which will start the matching procedure. Finally a child is introduced. This study concentrated on the third step in the adoption procedure: family assessment.

<sup>22</sup> Family assessment is a 'people sorting process'; professionals assess the claims of an 'amateur' to certain social goods, services or life-chances, in the knowledge that this person will seek to influence the decision (cf. Komter, 1991: 32). Although 'people sorting processes' usually involve many written reports to validate the claims of the people involved, face-to-face interaction is often considered to be more important.

<sup>23</sup> In the Netherlands: the Ministry of Justice.

personality and relationship, and their capacities as adoptive parents. In other words: their past, present and future state of affairs.

This study examines how the future state of affairs is discussed with prospective adoptive parents. Our analysis focuses in particular on the use of hypothetical situations posed during the third interview during which the future adoptive practice is discussed. The main instrument for collecting information about the prospective parents' capacities is to engage the couple in a discussion about hypothetical situations which might possibly arise and in which they and their adopted child might be involved.

From a discursive perspective, hypothetical productions are script formulations that serve particular interactional and institutional functions (Edwards, 1994). We follow this discursive perspective when studying the hypothetical situations in detail in order to analyse the particular functions of these productions<sup>24</sup>. We examine the following question: what function does asking questions about hypothetical situations serve in the third session of the family assessment? We look specifically at how the social workers manage to work with their conflicting roles both as helper and gatekeeper.

Four steps need to be taken:

- 1 What are the issues raised in the hypothetical situations?
- 2 What are the answers from the prospective parents?
- 3 What are the social worker's reactions to the answers?
- 4 How do the participants treat each other's conversation: what institutional roles and tasks of the participants are referred to in 1, 2 and 3?

Before answering these questions, we first discuss the use of hypothetical situations in other institutional settings. In doing so, we illustrate how participants refer to their institutional roles and tasks in conversations and how the asking of questions about hypothetical situations can function in a different manner with respect to the context in which the questions are posed.

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<sup>24</sup> Previous studies on the use of hypothetical situations in institutional settings display careful conversational preparation of the hypothetical situation (Noordegraaf, Nijnatten, and Elbers, 2006; Peräkylä, 1995). 'In this preparation, cooperation is constructed by discussing the topics in a general manner. It is only when the hypothetical situation has been formulated that the social worker confronts the prospective parents with possible problems with *their* adoptive child' (Noordegraaf, Nijnatten, and Elbers, 2006: 387). For reasons of space and clarity we do not include the conversational preparations in our analysis. We start our analysis at the point where the hypothetical situations is introduced.

### *The use of hypothetical situations in institutional settings*

One institutional setting where the use of hypothetical situations is analysed is that of AIDS counselling (Peräkylä, 1993, 1995). In this practice, a counsellor attempts to involve the AIDS patient in a conversation about the threat of illness and/or an untimely death. The counsellor invites the patient to examine his life in the hypothetical world at some future point where the crisis has already taken place. This gives the patient the opportunity to name the object of his fears and worries (Peräkylä, 1995: 270-71). The patient is not obliged to give an answer; although by asking *how* his life would change, it is suggested *that* his life will change.

The institutional task to be fulfilled in the counselling session is to *help* the client be aware of future risks and to prepare for that future now. The patient is not obliged to speak about his feelings or concerns, but the opportunity for him to do so is created. He/she is prepared for the eventuality that such feelings and concerns might arise.

In short, the function of the hypothetical situation in the institutional practice of counselling could be formulated as creating an opportunity for the client to come up with his fears and worries regarding the future. In doing so, the client is prepared that such feelings<sup>25</sup> might arise and is helped with ways of how to deal with them.

Another setting in which hypothetical situations are used is in the job interview (Komter, 1991). The main goal in this kind of interview is to get an idea of the skills the applicant has, bearing in mind the skills that are required for the job. The questions about hypothetical situations are presented as a test that the applicants have to pass (cf. Komter, 1991:175, 176).

The direction questions take in job interviews is oriented towards obtaining a reaction from the applicant about how he/ she would deal in a certain, generally problematic, situation. The reaction that is asked for could be required in a situation the applicant might come across in his future job. The aim is to 'give the applicants the opportunity to provide an 'assessable performance' (Komter, 1991: 181).

In the institutional setting of the job interview, the hypothetical situation creates an opportunity for the applicant to demonstrate his/her skills for the job.

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<sup>25</sup> In addition to the domain of 'feelings', which is illustrated in the extract, domains of 'practical conduct of life' and 'coping strategies' are discussed in AIDS counseling (Peräkylä, 1995, 303-304). We choose here to illustrate only one domain for the sake of space and clarity. The two other domains do function in the same way as the 'feeling' domain: they help the client to be prepared for the future.

These skills are subjected to a developing hypothetical drama. The answer gives the interviewer information about the suitability of the applicant. In short, asking questions about hypothetical situations functions primarily as a test.

Asking questions about hypothetical situations create opportunities for interlocutors to gain information about future state of affairs, and this information can be used for different purposes. In an institutional setting these purposes refer to institutional tasks and roles. In the case of counselling, hypothetical situations function as a means to *help* the patient to be prepared for the future. In the case of counselling, questions about hypothetical situations are designed so that interviewers can get an idea of the applicant's skills.

As opposed to a therapist, a job interviewer has the 'institutional authority to influence whether the proposed hypothetical scenario may come about' i.e. simply whether the applicant will get the job or not. Such authority illustrates a gatekeeping situation (cf. Speer and Parsons, 2006).

This overview of the literature has illustrated that hypothetical situations can function as an instrument for testing and as an instrument for helping, and differ according to the context in which they are posed. This means that different identities for the interlocutors are constructed depending on the context. It is important to consider that a certain strategy, such as the asking of questions about hypothetical situations, only took on meaning in their interactional and institutional environment. Every context gives rise to certain expected answers, since we know that social desirability has a considerable part to play in interactions between social workers and clients (Holland: 2000, 2004). However, as far as our analysis is concerned, ascertaining whether the prospective adoptive parents' answers are true or false is not important, but what is important is analysing whether their answers are oriented towards revealing fears and worries or towards demonstrating pedagogical capabilities, or both.

### *Methodological considerations*

Our analysis is based on the principles of conversation analysis (CA). Three principles are briefly outlined below.

The first principle is that of *turn design*. CA sees utterances in turns as practices for interactional accomplishments. 'By choosing certain words instead of others, by employing certain syntactic constructions and in uttering words and sentences in certain ways, speakers may orient to their institutional tasks and roles'

(Peräkylä: 1995: 237). For our analysis it is important not only to focus on *what* the social workers are asking but also to include *how* they formulate their questions.

The second principle is that of *participants' orientation*. The turn design in institutions is generally organized in question-answer *sequences*. These sequences need to be studied as pairs and can therefore not be separated as if they were discrete statements (Drew and Heritage, 1992). That is because, in their turns in interaction, speakers display an understanding of the prior speaker's intention (Sacks, 1992). Therefore, if we study the questions asked about hypothetical situations, it is also important to include the answers to the questions and also (if any) the responses to the answers.

Another relevant aspect of our analysis is to consider an extract in its institutional context. In our analysis we think it is important to question what our extracts mean in line with the adoption assessment context.

### *Analytical procedure*

We gathered all the conversational extracts from our data that consisted of a hypothetical situation and subjected them to systematic analysis.

The first step was to make the terms we used in our research questions operational. The research question 'what function does asking questions about hypothetical situations serve in the third session of the family assessment?' consists of two elements: (1) the hypothetical situation, and (2) the function of asking questions about the hypothetical situation.

We formulated three features in order to identify hypothetical situations: a hypothetical situation is: an event that (1) might occur (2) in the future and that is used as (3) subject matter for conversation in the institutional interview. With these features in mind, we went through our data to identify hypothetical situations posed during the third interview. In order to analyse the functions of asking questions about hypothetical situations, we reduced these three features to two: a description of a certain hypothetical state of affairs (features 1 and 2) and a projectable: the issue to be discussed within the horizon of the description (feature 3). We have taken these terms from Peräkylä (1995: 289-91, 301-304).

To analyse the function of the hypothetical question, we studied the entire extract: the hypothetical situation, the question (projectable), the answer(s), and possible follow-up questions and advice from the social worker.

The aspect of justice is made operational as 'assessing' the suitability' of prospective parents. In other words: establishing whether prospective parents comply with the legal requirements for adoptive parenthood. In that case, social

workers use the hypothetical situations to create the opportunity for the prospective parents to demonstrate their skills. This might be typified as a *testing* instrument.

The welfare component is made operational as helping the prospective parent to become good (i.e. prepared) adoptive parents. This aspect might be typified as a *helping* instrument. This emerges when the social workers create opportunities for the prospective parents to share their concerns, fears and worries about the future.

When social workers create the opportunity to demonstrate skills, but prospective parents come up with their concerns, fears and worries, we analyse that hypothetical situation functioning as a 'preparing question' and vice versa.

The data for this study were taken from a corpus from an extensive doctoral research study on the adoption assessment process collected by the first author. All social workers included in this study are female, and we refer to them throughout as 'she'. All the interviews were recorded on video. The data for this study were taken from the audio and video recordings of 5 interviews (average duration 67.5 minutes).

The video camera was not operated manually but fixed on a tripod. Although the set-up allowed the camera to encompass all the participants in its visual field, the recordings were static and we could not record participants if they moved around. The excerpts in this study were taken from the transcripts and translated into English. All names and identifying details have been disguised.

The audiotapes were initially transcribed to first-pass (words only) standard. Then all sections that included hypothetical questions were transcribed in full. The transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (Jefferson, 2004) was used. This system highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail.

## *Results*

45 extracts containing a hypothetical situation were analysed. The sequential organizations of these extracts follow the following patterns:

Nr.	Patterns of discussing hypothetical situations:	
1	Description → projectable → answer	10
2	Description → projectable → answer → advice	13
3	Description → projectable → answer → follow-up question → answer	13
4	Description → projectable → answer → follow-up question → answer → advice	8
5	Description → projectable → answer → advice → follow-up question → answer → advice	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>With advice</b>	<b>22</b>
	<b>Without advice</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>With follow-up question</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>Without follow-up question</b>	<b>22</b>

Table 1: Sequential organization patterns of discussing hypothetical situations

In order to understand more about the function of the hypothetical situation, we now analyse the different steps of the patterns, which can be seen as links in a chain.

We analyse the following links:

Description (1) – Projectable (2)

Projectable (2) – Answer (3)

Answer (3) – follow up question (4)

Answer (3) – advice (5)

The turn design of this chain is located in a simple question-answer format. All patterns include a question-answer format, but can be followed by follow-up questions or advice, or both. This illustrates the institutionality of the interaction; the representative of the institution marks the organization of talk. In ordinary conversation, topics often flow from one to another, without any boundary between them. In various forms of institutional talk, the topics change in a marked fashion, so that successive topics are segmented from one another (Drew and Heritage, 1992).

### *Introducing a hypothetical situation: description – projectable*

An example of a question about a hypothetical situation is given in the following extract:

### Extract 1 (AiADA3)

- 01 SW: (0.4) eh<sup>h</sup>m (.) even terug op dat gedrag he? eh<sup>m</sup>  
(0.4) mm (.) *going back to that behavior right?*,  
02 (1) → wat jullie al z<sup>↑</sup>eiden, jullie verwachten dat het  
*for instance mm, what you said then was that*  
03 kindje veel zou kunnen h:uilen driftig kan zijn  
*you'd expect the child might cry a lot, have fits*  
04 °teruggetrokken kan [zijn°=  
*of temper or °withdraw into it[self°=*  
05 PAM: [ja  
[yes  
06 SW: = °eetproblemen slaapproblemen° (.)als eh dat eh  
=°*loss of appetite, difficulty in getting to*  
07 inderdaad zo blijkt te zijn wat (.) wat doe je  
*sleep° (.) if u:m that sort of thing should occur*  
08 dan? h:oe los je dat op?  
09 (2) → (.)*what do you do then? h:ow do you solve this?*

In this extract, the possible (problematic) behaviour of the adoptive child is indicated. The projectable can be found at the end of the extract where the social worker asks in line 9: 'what do you do then, how do you solve this?'

The hypothetical situations are a reflection of topics that, by law, must be covered: every social worker must collect information on how prospective parents will deal with – for instance - possible discrimination. However, it is not prescribed *how* the topics are to be discussed; what questions need to be asked. We therefore need to get a closer look at the formulated projectables. The projectable steers the coming answer(s) in a certain direction. It is in the projectable that we can partly discover what type of information the social workers are looking for, what the expected answers are. It is only by analysing both question and answer, however, that we can say more about the function of the hypothetical question.

There are three domains of projectables: pedagogical capabilities (N = 18), psychological capabilities (N = 15), and sense of reality (N = 12). An example of a 'pedagogical projectable' is given in the above extract where the prospective parents are asked how they would handle a certain future pedagogic situation. In the 'psychological projectable', social workers ask for character traits of the prospective parents in relation to the possible behaviour of the adoptive child (see extract 3a). The 'reality projectable' explores whether the prospective parents have realistic expectations of the future (see extract 2).

Three projectables set up three different, locally constructed identities for the parents. By asking about pedagogical skills, the parents are approached as ‘parental subject’. In asking for psychological traits, the parents’ local identities are constructed as ‘reflective subject’. The reality projectable creates a ‘self-conscious subject’.

However, this classification is an analyst’s construction, and in actual talk the different types of projectables often get mixed up (as we will demonstrate in extract 3a). It tells us something about the direction of the questions. It might be the case that in answering these questions, prospective parents come up with answers that cover a domain that is different from the one that was asked for, or answers can be given that overlap two or more domains. We now examine the answers of the prospective parents.

### *Entering the hypothetical situation: projectable – answer*

Extract 2 shows a ‘reality projectable’. The prospective parents would prefer to adopt a baby - as young as possible. However, the mediating agency works with children from 0 – 24 months, which means that the prospective parents will be offered a child within that category. The social worker can mention the prospective parents’ preference in the record, but it does not necessarily guarantee that the agency will come up with a very young baby. The social worker puts forward a hypothetical description of the adoption of a child of one and a half years old.

#### Extract 2 (AiARE3)

- 01 SW: ehh even uitgaan dat het een kindje van anderhalf  
*OK let's assume it would be a child of one and*
- 02 zou worden hoe zien jullie dat voo:r je? °wa-°  
*half years old how do you imagine that? ° wha-°*
- 03 (2)→ (.) wat kan zo'n kindje bijvoorbeeld wel of niet?  
*(.) what for example can a child of that age do or not do?*
- 04 PAF: (3) → ja ik denk dat het ook per kind verschillend is  
*yes I also think it differs from child to child*
- 05 [wat kinderen wel en niet kunnen [en =  
*[what children are and aren't able to [and it =*
- 06 SW: [mm [ja  
*[mm [yes*
- 07 PAF: = afhankelijk is van een ehh een ehh (.) ja hoe  
*= also depends on er (.) yes how long they have*
- 08 lang zit het al in het kindertehuis [en (??) ja =



opportunity to ascertain whether the prospective parents' expectations are realistic; if they consider the possibility of getting a child older than they really want.

The man's answer is avoiding answering; by saying: 'it differs' (line 4), 'it depends' (lines 7 and 15), he rhetorically says: I cannot give an answer until your description is real. He does give the 'fact' that children from children's homes are often more independent than babies with parents born into families (lines 10 and 11), which demonstrates that he is well-informed and aware of adoption specifics. Note that he comes up with a 'fact' about *babies*, which might be understood as an orientation/fixation about having a young baby.

Then the woman comes up with an 'adequate' answer. She demonstrates her knowledge of children by giving a characteristic of a child of one and a half years old: being able to walk (line 20). She confirms her answer twice by saying 'of course' (in line 21), thereby demonstrating that she is aware of the differences between a very young child and an older child. She completes her answer by explicitly saying in line 25 that 'you really have to be aware'. She presents herself as a conscious subject.

In all the answers given to the hypothetical questions in our data, prospective parents take the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and/or awareness. There are only three examples of evasive answers –like the answer of the man in the above extract. But just as in the above extract the other prospective parent makes up for it by coming up with an 'adequate' answer. Apparently, the prospective parents' understanding of the hypothetical question is that a demonstrating answer is required. An answer such as: 'I don't know' or 'never thought about it' is never given as the final answer.

It is significant that prospective parents only mention positive skills and traits, and demonstrate as best they can that they are very aware and conscious of the risks adoption entails. This shows that the hypothetical questions function primarily as a test of pedagogical skills, of being a well-balanced person in a stable relationship and with a sense of realism. When parents do say that they accept things might be difficult it is rhetorically formulated as having self-knowledge or being realistic enough to ask for help or to admit that sometimes you are insecure or incapable. In this way, the negative points of the prospective parents are presented as a way of putting the skills into perspective; the parents present themselves as normal parents rather than as super parents, and they are willing to demonstrate suitability in different areas. In answering the hypothetical questions, the prospective parents demonstrate suitability in the domains of the projectables.

The following extract is an example of where the answer is not in keeping with the projectable. The social worker describes a hypothetical situation where the character of the adoptive child is the opposite of that of the woman. She invites the woman to reflect on this.

### Extract 3a (AiAMM3)

- 01 SW: maar als als ik jullie zie dan zijn jullie  
*but if I if I look at you↓(.) then you are people*
- 02 mensen die eh (.) een stuk doorzettingsvermogen  
*who er (.) tend to persevere who have certain*
- 03 hebben die bepaalde doelen in hun leven hebben en  
*goals in life and when I say that then I*
- 04 ik haak toch weer wat nadrukkelijker bij jou aan\*  
*definitely look a bit more at \*you because you're*
- \* SW looks at PAM
- 05 want jij bent degene die van klein af aan  
*the one who from when you were little*
- 06 PAM: °mm°  
°mm°
- 07 SW: ja eigenlijk steeds ehm (.3)=  
*yes actually still ehm (.3) =*
- 08 PAM: = nou [ > als ons kind zegt van ik wil niet <  
*= well [ > if our child says it doesn't want to<*
- 09 SW: [heeft ingezet en toch een stukje  
*[have done your best and after all had*
- 10 *[gevochten heeft*  
*[fought a bit*
- 11 PAM: [ >>ja ja<  
*[ >>yes yes<*
- 12 SW: om te bereiken wat je bereikt hebt he?  
*to achieve what you have achieved right? =*
- 13 PAM: = ja dat probeer ik ook over te brengen aan ons  
*= yes that's what I would try to give to the*
- 14 ki↓nd  
*chil↓d*
- 15 SW: ja jij hebt doe::len voor ogen staan he?=  
*yes you do have certain goa::ls in mind right? =*
- 16 PAM: =ja (.)  
*=yes (.)*
- 17 SW: en dat probeer je over te brengen?  
*and that you'll try to convey?*
- 18 PAM: ja=

yes=  
 19 SW: (1) → =MAAR\_nu ka↑n het een kind zijn dat eh (.) zich  
 =BUT it mi↑ght just be a child that er (.)  
 20 niet zo laat aanspreken  
 isn't so approachable  
 21 PAM: nou eh =  
 well er=  
 22 SW: =dat heel anders van karakter is[als het =  
 =that has a totally different personality [from =  
 23 PAM: [ja  
 [yes  
 24 SW: = karakter wat jij, wat jullie hebben en wat niet  
 = the one you than both you have and that  
 25 zoveel doorzettingsvermogen heeft of wat eh  
 perseveres less or something like that something  
 26 zoiets heeft van ik leef vandaag lekker en morgen  
 like I live for today and tomorrow, well  
 27 morgen zie ik wel  
 tomorrow I'll see  
 28 PAM: ja ja  
 yes yes  
 29: SW: en wat minder eh ja die die die=  
 and less of that er yes that that that=  
 30 PAM: =drang heeft=  
 =has a tendency to=  
 31 SW: (2) → =die drang heeft om hoe hoe hoe wat zou dat voor  
 =a tendency to how how how what would that mean  
 32 jullie betekenen?  
 to you?  
 33 PAM: nou [ik denk  
 well [I think=  
 34 SW: [omdat je toch gewoon heel anders in elkaar  
 [>>because you are very d↑ifferent< you  
 35 zit snap je?  
 understand?  
 36 PAM: (3) → ik denk dat je toch probeert om zo goed mogelijk  
 I think you'll try to offer supp↑ort as well as  
 37 te begeleiden in richting (.2) welke richting  
 possible in a certain direction (.2) in a  
 38 dan ook wat bij hem of haar past  
 direction that suits him or her  
 39 SW: (.) [mm  
 (.) [mm

40 PAM: [en waar ze zich gelukkig in voelen ze moeten  
 [and in which they feel happy, of course they  
 41 zich natuurlijk wel gelukkig voelen in het leven  
 have to feel happy in life

The social worker asks a ‘psychological projectable’: she confronts the prospective mother with a strong character trait: having perseverance, and then asks what it would be like to have a child that does not have this trait. She approaches the women as a reflective subject, someone who is able to reflect upon herself.

The woman is answers right away; she cannot wait to demonstrate her skills. In her first turn she pre-guesses what the hypothetical situation might be in line 8. By doing so, she shows she is aware that not everyone has the same character traits as herself. Then she pops in again in line 13. There she presents herself in the role of a child raiser by emphasizing that she wants to pass on her own trait of perseverance to the child. The social worker is not perturbed, and finishes her description and question, which she steers in the direction of a psychological test: are you able to look beyond your own character (are you rigid)? The woman does not show any introspection but continues to demonstrate her pedagogical intentions: to guide the child towards happiness. We return to this extract in the following link, where the social worker is determined to involve the woman in more self-reflection.

### *When a first answer is not enough: answer – follow-up question*

As we can see in the table above, in 23 of the 45 cases, the prospective parents’ answer is followed by another question. Through follow up questions the social worker achieves deeper penetration into the parents’ perception of their future. This might be a clarification question in order to concretize the hypothetical situation, or a challenging question in the form of introducing complications. Upgrading the problem level then further develops the hypothetical question. The participants arrive, in cycles, at a detailed version of the hypothetical future. Extract 3a is continued below.

#### Extract 3b (AiAMM3)

42 SW: → 4 ook als dat een stuk la::ger ligt dan|=  
 even if it's a bit lo::wer than|=  
 43 PAM: ja:: > als dat wat jij ook zegt < (.) als het er  
 =ye::s > if what you say as well< (.)if it is not  
 44 niet in zi:t dan zit het er niet in je houdt toch  
 the:re then it's not in there you still love  
 45 evenveel van je kind dat eh (.) je gaat er niet

46 *your child just the same that er (.) you won't*  
 minder om houden omdat het niet goed zou zijn in  
 47 *love your child less for not being good*  
 een bepaald vak of (.2) eh=  
*certain subject or (.2) er=*  
 48 SW: → 1 =NEE:: het zou wel goed kunnen zijn in een  
 =NO:: *it might very well be good at a certain*  
 49 bepaald vak en het heeft de mogelijkheden dan zeg  
*subject has the ability then I think the example*  
 50 ik het voorbeeld wat \*jij geeft↓  
*\*you gave↓*  
 \* SW points towards PAF  
 51 PAM: nou dan zou ik om eh eh (.) door middel van  
*well then I would er er (.) with special support*  
 52 begeleiding toch (.) daar te krijgen wat mogelijk  
*still (.) to get it there to what is possible I*  
 53 is ik denk dat het kind (.)°anders later spijt  
*think the child (.) °might otherwise*  
 54 krijgt ervan°=  
*regret it° =*  
 55 PAF: =ja goed=  
*=yes right=*  
 56 SW: → 1 =nu loop je tegen de grens van het kind aan  
*=now you're reaching the limits of the child*  
 57 PAM: °dan houdt het op°  
*°then there's no point in going on°*  
 58 SW: → 4 >>ja maar< k↑un je dat ook zelf ook iets mee?  
 >>yes but< c↑ould you do something with that?  
 59 k↑un je daar ook mee ophouden? k↑un je dat ook  
 c↑ould you let it end? c↑ould you also put it  
 60 naast je neerleggen?  
*aside?*  
 61 PAF: [ja natuurlijk!=  
*[yes of course!=*  
 62 PAM: [>ja ja ja<  
*[>yes yes yes<*  
 63 PAF: = die ervaring hebben we zelf denk ik (.)  
*=I think we've had that experience ourselves (.)*  
 64 PAM: ja  
*yes*

The follow-up question is an instrument that shows the social worker's strategic position. She can make the hypothetical situation as difficult as she wants it to be; the situation becomes more complicated with every new question or obstacle.

The hypothetical descriptions in lines 48, 49, 50 and 56 are additions to the description given earlier (see extract 3a). Hypothetical questions are based in hypothetical descriptions. When the description is not clear, it is difficult to tread the future and it makes it easier to avoid answering the question.

Lines 48, 49 and 50 function as a rejection of the answer given by the woman. They are both a (re-)description and a new follow-up question: although an explicit question is not asked, the woman comes up with an answer. She gives a fine demonstration of perseverance by sticking to her earlier answer. In lines 51 – 54 she repeats herself, coming up with the same pedagogical solution: giving support to the child.

The social worker keeps emphasizing that she wants to assess self-reflection and not pedagogical solutions. This is confirmed in the last follow-up questions where she explicitly asks: (line 58-60) *could you do that?* The topic is closed with both prospective parents' statements that *of course* they are able to lay things down (lines 61-64). The social worker rests her case.

### *Taking the opportunity to 'help': answer – advice*

22 of the 45 extracts include advice. We recognise advice when the social worker uses her turn explicitly to inform the prospective parent about some specifics of adoption, and therefore she formulates advice in the form of: 'it is important to know this or that' or 'do you realize that' and sometimes even 'I wouldn't do this or that'. Or in other words: the social worker comes up with a steering comment as a reaction to the answer of the prospective parents. Extract 4 is an example of such a device:

#### Extract 4 (AiADA3)

01 SW: ja ja ja jullie zouden dat niet doen het kind bij  
(.) *yes you wouldn't d:o that (.) let the child*  
02 je in bed nemen?  
*share your bed?*  
03 PAM: als het [n]odig is wel=  
*yes if [ne]cessary=*  
04 SW: [ja  
*[yes*  
05 PAM: =ja soms is het nodig (.) en soms niet  
*=yes sometimes it's necessary (.) sometimes it's not*

06 PAF: (.2) (?)je probeert het langzaam aan naar het  
 (.2)(?) *slowly but surely you try to get it into*  
 07 eigen bedje te krijgen  
*its own bed*

08 SW:→ 5 ja ja (.) nee goed liefst in het ei:gen bedje  
*yes yes (.) no right preferably in its o::wn bed*

09 PAF: [ja:  
*[ye:s*

10 PAM: [eerst dat proberen en als het da:n niet lukt=  
*[try that first and if tha:t doesn't work=*

11 PAF: =je neemt het niet direct mee in je eigen bed  
*=you don't take it into your bed with you as a*  
 12 natuurlijk  
*matter of course*

13 SW:→ 5 nee dat zou ik niet doen  
*no I wou:ldn't [do that=*

14 PAF: [ja ja  
*[ yes yes*

15 SW: =nee op zich zijn die kinderen ook wel gewend  
*=no on the whole these children are used to*  
 16 om in hun eigen bedje te slapen  
*sleeping in their own beds*

The social worker asks a closed question and the woman gives a vague answer in line 5: 'sometimes it's necessary, sometimes it's not'. The man is a bit more precise in his answer, which is immediately copied and confirmed by the social worker who makes a clear statement in line 8 'preferably in its own bed'. The man and woman copy the advice of the social worker (lines 9-12). The social worker confirms this again in line 13 and justifies her statement in lines 15 and 16. They cooperate in constructing a common conclusion on the hypothetical question.

The conclusion prepares the prospective adoptive parents for hypothetical problems to come: if the adoptive child has trouble sleeping, first try to get it to sleep in its own bed.

Giving advice shows that discussing hypothetical situations sometimes serve a secondary function: *helping* the prospective parents to be prepared for adoptive parenthood. In these sequences, the social worker explicitly teaches the prospective parents about certain future behaviour. In the advices social workers display preferred responses to the hypothetical situations.

## *Conclusion*

Parents do not need permission to raise children. Becoming a parent is everyone's social right. However, parenthood is scrutinized in adoption cases. When assessing the suitability of prospective parents, the social worker is there to protect the adoptive child's rights. The fact that prospective parents need to prove their capabilities as adoptive parents *before* having the child is exceptional. Social workers define this task as difficult in terms of: 'the pressure of playing God' (Weststeijn and Wouters, 2005: 31).

In this study we analysed how the social workers accomplish this difficult task by discussing hypothetical situations with prospective adoptive parents. We found an analytical line between components of welfare and justice in the communicative practice of the family assessment. Analysing the explicit utterances of the social workers and parents could draw this line: both the projectables formulated by the social worker and the responses to them from the prospective parents show the hypothetical question functioning primarily as a test. Prospective adoptive parents do their very best to demonstrate that they have what it takes to become a good enough adoptive parent. Prospective parents are tested in three domains: pedagogical capabilities, psychological capabilities, and sense of reality. The testing function is further demonstrated in the follow-up questions. The social worker continues to ask questions about the situation until she has enough 'evidence' to open the gate to adoptive parenthood.

A secondary function of discussing hypothetical situations is that of preparing the prospective parents for parenthood. Social workers take the opportunity to teach the parents something about adoptive parenthood and also help them to be prepared by giving them advice.

This outcome might suggest that the element of justice plays a bigger part in the family assessment practice than the element of welfare. However, we argue that elements of welfare and justice are more interwoven than suggested in the analysis of only the explicit utterances. We argue that elements of welfare and justice cannot be approached separately as if they were static divisions of child protection. The relationship between justice and welfare must be characterized sooner as cooperating, supplementary partners: when the testing character is in the foreground, the preparing function does not disappear so to speak, and vice versa.

Komter (1991: 184) suggests that the length of a hypothetical situation is 'also to demonstrate that the problems last longer than two turns at speaking'. This implies that the hypothetical situation in itself includes a learning element. Although the hypothetical situations in family assessment are primarily designed as testing

instruments, they do help the parents to be prepared for things to come. By discussing certain topics it is suggested that they are *important* topics: when asking *how* parents would react if the child were discriminated against, it becomes clear *that* the child might be discriminated against and that the prospective parents need to be aware of this eventuality and be prepared for it. The social workers provide the parents with ‘selective attention for the world (of adoption)’ or ‘perspectives on reality’ By giving these perspectives (by asking questions in certain ways), social workers both assess and transform the prospective parents (cf. Elbers, 1991).

Conversely, we might say that when the social worker explicitly advises the prospective parents, their ability to learn and to receive advice is also being tested. The testing element is then not in the foreground but nevertheless present. This underlines the interwovenness of aspects of welfare and justice. The combination, however, does not seem to cause friction of any kind. We are more inclined to think that the profession of social worker is to combine contradictory discourses in an institutional, natural way in communication (Nijnatten, 2005; Nijnatten, Hoogsteder, and Suurmond, 2001).

In interactions with prospective adoptive parents, social workers don’t spell out their dual professional identities of being both gatekeeper and helper. Nevertheless, as we have showed in our analysis, both roles come to the fore in asking questions about hypothetical situations and in responses to the answers given by the prospective adoptive parents.

We argue that the method of conversation analysis gives us the tools to unravel dynamics in conversation that otherwise might not be noticed and is therefore an important contribution to the understanding of social work practices.

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# General discussion

In this thesis, I have analysed the interactional processes between social workers and prospective adoptive parents involved in assessment procedures for adoptive parenthood in the institutional context of the Dutch Child Protection Board (CPB). These assessments consist of a health check, an investigation into whether or not the candidates have a criminal record, the written life stories of the prospective adoptive parents, four interviews, and a recommendation record resulting from the life stories and the interviews.

The CPB uses face-to-face interactions, together with the relevant documents, as their main and conclusive basis for a professional appraisal of prospective adoptive parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood, rather than using standardized checklists, questionnaires or other 'diagnostic' tools. In these interactions, social workers and prospective adoptive parents, by asking questions and formulating answers, work together to both assess and display suitability.

Starting my analysis from the epistemological stance of 'dialogism', I consider CPB adoption assessment process as good practice. 'Dialogism' sees action, communication and cognition as thoroughly relational and interactional in nature, and claims that utterances must always be understood in their relevant contexts (Linell, 1998). From this perspective, face-to-face interactions are considered to be *the* arena through which social interaction is performed and interpreted. Furthermore, social interaction in itself is seen as an 'exquisite accomplishment', through which different participants come to construct meaning together (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995).

In this thesis, the analyses of twelve adoption assessments function as a case study to demonstrate *how* people in interaction come to construct meaning together (in this case on suitability for adoptive parenthood) and *how* this complex and dynamic process is carried out.

I have demonstrated how *assessment in action* is a shared accomplishment of both the social workers and the prospective adoptive parents, in which every interaction is unique and involves particulars that determine the outcome of the assessment. At the same time I have shown that certain patterns emerge when social workers assess suitability for adoptive parenthood. Within these frameworks, social workers and prospective adoptive parents co-construct what is considered to be 'good enough parenthood'.

I used the conversation analysis (CA) method to analyse the face-to-face interactions in detail. The analyses included how the written life stories and the recommendation record (the texts) relate to these interactions. This method turned out to be a very useful tool for analysing my data, and helped to understand both the particulars and the patterns through which suitability for adoptive parenthood is displayed and assessed in the assessment process. Above all, CA facilitated the observation of the dynamics of the assessment and enabled it to be studied as a social representation, rather than as a representation of an objective reality (Rommetveit, 1992). CA let the data 'speak for itself', rather than it being analysed from a standpoint of preconceived ideas. This led to the conclusion, for example, that social workers have dual identities: in addition to being an assessor/gatekeeper, they also act as a helper and advise prospective adoptive parents about how to handle certain potential problems with raising an adoptive child.

Generally speaking, suitability for adoptive parenthood is assessed through three main domains : the *past*, *present* and *future* states of affairs of the prospective adoptive parents. To facilitate discussing the past state of affairs, prospective parents are asked to write out their life stories which are then discussed, to a certain extent, in the second interview. The present state of affairs is then discussed in the second or third interview which concentrates on the stability of the personalities and the relationship of the prospective adoptive parents. The future state of affairs is discussed in the third interview during which the pedagogical skills of the prospective adoptive parents are assessed.

These past, present and future domains are the main body of the adoption assessment procedure, and are also the main focus of this thesis. Each domain is also reported on in the recommendation record. However, before starting these substantive conversations, social workers take time in the first interview to introduce the assessment procedure and to establish an assessment relationship.

This chapter first summarizes the main conclusions of each individual study and then presents a general overview of the scientific significance of this thesis. This is followed by a number of suggestions for further research. It was also my intention to make a contribution towards the visibility of social work and towards the development of social work and social workers in general. I also reflect in this chapter on the importance of this thesis for assessment practice.

### *Opening assessment (study 1)*

An effort is made during the opening of the first interview to explain, clarify and confirm the assessment relationship. We described and analysed how the relationship between the social worker and the prospective parents emerges in the first few minutes of the interview, and what actions are taken in the opening activity. The different actions can be categorized as the three tasks involved in opening a conversation: establishing contact, establishing a relationship, and then working towards a new topic (cf. Schegloff, 1986: 113 in Ten Have 1999: 5).

The first task of the participants in a conversation is to establish contact. In three of the twelve openings studied, social workers do this explicitly by 'welcoming' the prospective adoptive parents. By doing so, the social workers immediately take the floor and establish a position as both 'host' and 'chair' of the assessment procedure. No explicit work was done in the other openings to establish contact. However, this does not necessarily mean that this has been omitted, but it means that contact has been established beyond the range of the camera, for instance in the corridor or on the phone. This is followed by discussing whether or not to 'be on first name terms' and some small talk.

However, the overriding task of an opening is to establish the relationship between the participants, from which they can start doing whatever they want to do in the conversation. In this part of the opening, social workers introduce themselves to the prospective adoptive parents and explain what they and the parents are going to do together. In doing this, the social workers set the agenda, set out the reason for the encounter, give some procedural tellables, and pre-empt possible problems. In our openings, we saw how social workers take several minutes to talk about the assessment relationship and to pre-empt any possible negative associations attached to that relationship. Although not all actions are taken in every opening, all the social workers explicitly refer to the relationship and share information about what assessment involves and create an atmosphere in which prospective adoptive parents can speak about different, sometimes delicate, areas of their life in as nice a way as possible. Social workers proceed from this relationship talk towards the first topic. The prospective adoptive parents then get the chance to answer questions and do more than just provide information or adopt a listening position.

We concluded from the analysis of the social workers' and prospective adoptive parents' conversations, that adoption assessments are not considered to be an occasion for conversation that is self-evident, and they are dealing with a delicate matter. When social workers open international adoption assessments, they work at constructing a relationship where the social workers confirm and retain their entitlement to collect information that will enable them to make a recommendation

about the prospective adoptive parent's suitability for adoption. Nevertheless, social workers state their formal position vaguely and distance themselves from the procedure and add 'awkwardness markers' to their formulations. They also emphasize the cooperative nature of the relationship with the prospective adoptive parents. Another way to moderate the relationship into a more equal one is by disclosing personal information about themselves. Some social workers divulge more information than others, but all of them disclose their parenthood status.

### *Past state of affairs (study 2)*

Essential to this study is the question of how social workers assess the past state of affairs of the prospective adoptive parents and how parents display their suitability for adoptive parenthood, drawing from their background. In addition, it is also an analysis of the making of an institutional record.

We showed how, in their life stories, prospective parents present themselves as 'normal people' with 'normal childhoods', with an emphasis on their positive experiences. Social workers follow the descriptions of the prospective parents and write them down verbatim or restate them. 'Subjective statements' are generally presented in the record in terms of the prospective adoptive parents' words and formulations, whereas 'evidential statements' (supported with external sources or other hard material such as dates and places) are presented in the record as facts. Social workers pick at least one life event from the life story to discuss in more detail in the interview. The prospective parents are not only expected to be able to write about these events, but are also confronted with questions that assess whether such life events have been dealt with properly. When prospective adoptive parents are questioned about life events, social workers relate their past to the future upbringing of an adoptive child. A 'good' presentation of coping includes a healthy amount of emotion and, at the same time, sufficient distance from what happened. When this type of answer is given, the social worker brings the questioning to an end and arrives at a positive conclusion in the recommendation. Possible unfavourable facts are also assessed in the interview, but when not considered to be evidential or when countered by the prospective adoptive parents, they are omitted from the record.

When drafting an institutional record, we are able to confirm that, just as in police interaction, information from an interview is transformed into a coherent, persistent record (cf. Jonsson, Linell and Säljö, 1991: 10-11). Irrelevant details are omitted and interpretations that support the social worker's recommendation are added to the descriptions by the prospective adoptive parents. We have also shown

how social workers manage to both assess prospective adoptive parents in the interview, while, at the same time, making notes for the recommendation record. The excerpts discussed show how, in the transition from between text and talk, deletion, addition, selection and transformation occurs. However, unlike police questioning, the record does not so much function as a piece of evidence but rather as argumentation that supports the recommendation that the social worker gives about the prospective adoptive parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood.

### *Present state of affairs (study 3)*

The aim of study 3 was to make more specific observations of how social workers assess the prospective adoptive couples' relationship and of how couples demonstrate suitability for adoptive parenthood by claiming and demonstrating a harmonious relationship in both their answers and in their behaviour.

Three kinds of questions emerged from our analysis. The first was an interrogative question addressed to one of the partners about, for instance, the first impression his or her partner made. This type of questions functions as a way to shift from talking about the past to the present, or to initiate relationship talk at the beginning of an interview. The second kind of question is an interrogative question using a general 'you' to address both partners as possible answerer. This type of questions seems neutral and survey-like but abound with implications and are constrained by institutional norms of what constitutes a 'good relationship'. Topics such as quarrelling, housekeeping, shared activities and differences between partners are often the subject of these questions. The third kind of question is again an interrogative question, addressed to both partners, just as question two, but includes an observation about the couple's behaviour.

The answers to the questions have several features. They are precise, possibly as a result of focusing on the written outcome of the interviews in the recommendation record. They deal with possible negative implications attached to the question and try to either counter the negative or stress the positive aspects of the relationship. In being positive, couples avoid sainthood by accounting for being too positive or by admitting to having weaknesses. To reinforce their claims, couples contribute stories or examples that illustrate what they are saying and make them more evidential. By doing so, they show awareness and claim ground to counter any negative implications hidden in the question and/or the observations that the social workers present to them.

Interestingly, it does not seem to matter too much what answers the couples give to relationship questions. What seems to be more important is how they

produce the answers and whether they display some insight into their relationship. Being able to finish off each other's sentences when giving an answer is evaluated positively in the recommendation record and is considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood. Another protective factor is the ability to reflect on their relationship. The couples provide descriptions of their relationship and give reasons for behaving in certain ways (for instance, why they think they never quarrel). Therefore, having a normal (not overtly positive or negative), explainable relationship or at least presenting a relationship as such, is considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood.

### *Future state of affairs (studies 4 & 5)*

In the last two studies of this thesis we examined the practice of discussing hypothetical situations with prospective adoptive parents. This practice is a means to assess parenting skills for the future upbringing of an adoptive child. We analysed the hypothetical questions in its full sequential context: we first traced back how the topic of upbringing was introduced in the interview how this theme was developed until the hypothetical questions were posed (study 4). We then analysed the hypothetical questions and their answers in more detail, seeking to understand how they function as a means to both assess and display upbringing qualities (study 5). In the latter study, we also analysed how discourses of welfare and justice emerge in the practice of 'future talk'.

Study 4 confirms earlier findings on the asking of hypothetical questions that state that these questions are carefully prepared in conversation (Komter, 1991; Peräkylä, 1995; Speer and Parsons, 2006). During preparation, cooperation is brought about by the topic being discussed in a general manner. Only after the hypothetical question is formulated does the social worker confront the prospective parents with possible problems with their adoptive child. In this study, we analysed: 1) the patterns in which hypothetical questions are discussed. We looked at the kind of questions that were asked, and also at how different patterns follow each other throughout the course of the interview. In addition, we questioned: 2) what work is done to prepare sequences. Two patterns of building up to a hypothetical situation were identified: (a) patterns that start with an eliciting question, and (b) patterns that start by retrieving themes from earlier talk. We could then distinguish between patterns with and patterns without a follow-up question in post-position: short and long episodes. A finding of special interest is that eliciting patterns precede retrieving patterns. Eliciting questions are successfully used to construct a shared agenda for the interview and to bring about cooperation for discussing hypothetical

questions. Retrieving questions, combined with a steering follow-up question, turned out to be particularly successful in the actual posing of a hypothetical question. Follow-up questions function as a means to discuss the topic in more depth or to make the hypothetical situation more complex.

In study 5, we analysed the hypothetical questions in more detail using the answers given to the questions. The questions project three different domains of suitability: pedagogical capabilities, psychological capabilities, and sense of reality. Prospective adoptive parents, in answering hypothetical questions, do their best to demonstrate that they have what it takes to become a good enough adoptive parent. Besides the aspect of assessing prospective adoptive skills, we also showed how social workers use the discussion of hypothetical situations to give advice about upbringing-related issues. Therefore, although hypothetical questions primarily function as a test, a secondary function is to ‘help the prospective parents to become better prepared for adoptive parenthood’. In interactions with prospective adoptive parents, social workers do not actually spell out their dual professional identities of gatekeeper and helper. Nevertheless, both roles come to the fore when asking questions about hypothetical situations and in the responses to the answers given by the prospective adoptive parents.

### *Main findings*

I now present an overview of the main findings of this thesis. I draw on my original overall research questions and formulate an answer to them. I then elaborate on the more specific key findings of this thesis and summarize a number of main features that influence assessment.

The overall research questions:

- 1 How do social workers manage and succeed in assessing prospective adoptive parents’ suitability for adoptive parenthood?
- 2 How do prospective adoptive parents manage and succeed in displaying suitability?
- 3 How do questions 1 and 2 ‘work together’ and lead to features of suitability for adoptive parenthood?

In answering the questions, I looked for: the particular choice of *words* used, the kind of *turns* they are used in, the *organization* of those turns, the appearance of certain *sequences* of turns, and the *overall shape* of the interaction (Heritage, 2005).

Re 1): Social workers manage to assess suitability for adoptive parenthood by establishing an assessment relationship, asking questions and by making observations and interpreting prospective adoptive parents’ behaviour. They cover

different aspects of the prospective parents' lives by assessing their past, present and future states of affairs. To do this they discuss life events, and ask relationship questions and hypothetical questions. In addition to these observed practices, they also draw conclusions from the way prospective adoptive parents cooperate when answering questions and from how they behave during the interviews. In arriving at a recommendation, social workers combine their impressions and gather together all the items that are protective factors for adoptive parenthood during the assessment process. Should possible risk factors emerge in the process, social workers check whether they are serious enough to lead to a negative recommendation, and if not, these factors are left out of the record.

Re 2): Prospective adoptive parents display their suitability for adoptive parenthood by cooperating when answering questions and by behaving in required ways. They willingly disclose elements of their life stories and reveal intimate details of their personal and relational life. Moreover, they also display intentions and skills that they think they have for raising an adoptive child. In answering questions about their past and about their relationship, prospective adoptive parents stress positive aspects, but also 'normality' in order to avoid sainthood. They show a healthy amount of emotion when discussing life events, but are also able to relate to their past issues with a certain distance. Prospective adoptive parents display knowledge and awareness when it comes to adoption-specific problems. They also show willingness to receive help if necessary. Finally, throughout the entire assessment process, prospective adoptive parents show an ability to reflect upon themselves and their surroundings and are able to abstract from the concrete.

Re 3): Social workers and prospective adoptive parents work together in assessing and displaying suitability, and social workers attempt to see through any notions of social desirability. Prospective adoptive parents aim to present themselves in a positive but 'normal' way. Social workers continue asking questions until a satisfactory answer has been given and prospective adoptive parents disclose their weak points. Social workers also confront the parents with their behaviour during the interviews and give the parents the opportunity to explain or to elaborate upon their behaviour. When all the domains have been discussed and the social worker has enough material to make a recommendation, the institutional task of assessment has succeeded. Important protective factors include: overcoming life events, an ability to cope with stress and arguments, being able to work together as a couple, awareness of adoption-specific problems, and having pedagogical solutions and alternatives. The impression of the prospective adoptive parents presented in the recommendation report is a co-construction between social workers' questions and interpretations and the answers, life stories and behaviours of the prospective adoptive parents.

### *The delicacy of assessment*

Adoption assessment is a delicate matter simply because the social workers are authorized to give a negative recommendation on prospective adoptive parents' suitability. Social workers cope with this by working cautiously, rather than by confronting the prospective parents with their formal role. When the social workers do express their entitlement, they mitigate their authority by stressing that they hope that the sessions will be 'pleasant'. They also give reasons for having to ask personal questions and use 'awkwardness markers' when they discuss the asymmetric, dependant relationship they have with the prospective adoptive parents. Social workers disclose their own parenthood status, and use an institutional 'we' when referring to procedural items in the adoption assessment. This enables them to build up a working relationship in which prospective parents are welcome to talk about their past, present and future states of affairs while the social workers retain their entitlement to make a recommendation about the parents' suitability.

Prospective adoptive parents focus on the delicate assessment context by 'working along' willingly, and by not raising questions or problems with having to answer personal questions. They 'accept' their dependant role and play safe, are modest and demonstrate normality. 'Doing being ordinary' is something that people rely on in defensive, delicate environments (cf. Sacks, 1984; Lawrence 1996 and Sneijder, 2006).

### *Dual identities*

In addition to being a delicate arena for decision-making, adoption assessment is also a field in which social workers integrate the dual identities of being both gatekeeper and helper. Besides testing the parents' capabilities, social workers also help the parents to become better-prepared parents, by advising them on upbringing-related issues. This identity duality does not lead to confusion but is blended in during the different interviews where the social workers combine contradictory discourses in an institutional, natural way in communication (Van Nijnatten, Hoogsteder, and Suurmond, 2001; Van Nijnatten, 2005).

In my data, I found that in all instances, both social workers and prospective adoptive parents focus on the fact that they are interacting in a test environment'. However, the aspect of 'helping' was the most explicit in the third interview, where the future state of affairs was discussed. In this third interview, the prospective adoptive parents are confronted with fictitious problems with a hypothetical child. I conclude from this interview that the emergence of 'help' and 'advice' is triggered by problem-related topics, and the way in which these topics

are designed and organized in the talk, rather than by the profession of being a social worker or a certain context (such as child welfare) as such. For instance, when, in my corpus, social workers discussed life events with the prospective adoptive parents, they did not help the parents to cope with these issues in better ways.

Nevertheless, although ‘test environments’ do not always induce dual (professional) identities of the assessors, I argue that assessment always has a certain learning effect on the people undergoing the assessment: by discussing certain topics it is suggested that these are important topics: when asking how people would respond in certain circumstances, it becomes manifest that such circumstances might occur. This raises awareness and helps the person being assessed to prepare for such a situation. An assessor provides the person being assessed with ‘selective attention for the world’ or with ‘perspectives on reality’ By giving these perspectives (by asking questions in certain ways), assessment in general both tests and transforms people (cf. Elbers, 1991).

### *Differences in past, present and future states of affairs*

In addition to the fact that social workers only give advice in instances of ‘future talk’, there are more subtle differences between the discussion of the past, present and future states of affairs. My main conclusion is that it requires conversational work to skip between times. Entering a ‘time’ requires preparation, and equally applies to leaving a time. When, for instance, social workers go from a past to a future state of affairs, they mark the transition by giving reasons for doing so. For instance, when discussing the death of a prospective adoptive mother’s mother, the social worker asks if and how this will influence the upbringing of her adoptive child in the near future. In doing so, the social worker explains that this is relevant to the future upbringing of a child, and that he wants to know for matters of assessment. When returning to the past, the social worker marks this again by simply saying ‘OK, let’s go back to the time your mother had just died’.

The above observation is of societal importance since the length of the adoption assessment process is, and has been, the subject of considerable discussion. For instance, research commissioned by a Dutch state agency suggested that the length of the adoption assessment process could be shortened to three interviews (Weststeijn and Wouters, 2005). As a result of my observation, I would advocate against this, since it takes time to co-construct adoptive parenthood, and to talk about past, present *and* future states of affairs and to build up an assessment relationship. Moreover, there is a saturation point in the number of topics that can be discussed in one interview. In my data, one of the social workers chose to conduct

only three interviews and discussed the past, present and future states of affairs, partly in interview one, but mostly in interview two. She discussed the draft record with the parents in interview three. Interview two took over two hours and at the end, questions and answers were exchanged as if a checklist were being run through. The parents' answers were no longer challenged, and any answer might have done. As a process of cooperation, the quality of this assessment was inferior to the other eleven assessments. Therefore, an accurate assessment requires some scrutiny, and it would be unwise to skip an interview for financial reasons.

Another observation of differences in discussing past, present and future states of affairs is that there seems to be a shift in entitlement and ownership of information for the different participants.

When discussing the past, prospective adoptive parents have considerable ownership, since they have sole access to *their* background. And although social workers give instructions as to what topics need to be written about in the life stories, prospective parents can, and do, present their past in as positive a way as possible. So, discussing personal experience gives a participant in assessment interaction a strong position, and renders the assessor partly dependent on what information she can work with in the interview.

The present state of affairs of the prospective adoptive parents is a totally different story, and includes the identity and relationship of the prospective adoptive parents. This is difficult, and somewhat delicate, since it is unusual to praise yourself too much. Besides, people do not just speak about their own personality and relationship, they are also 'doing' their 'self' and their 'relationship' in front of the social worker. This requires considerable congruency between talk and behaviour, and gives the social worker a lot of material to ask questions about. It gives the social worker 'observatory' knowledge. Therefore, both the social worker and the prospective adoptive parents have ownership of 'present' information. The social worker can also rely on her 'professional insight' into these matters, since she has been trained to help people with all kinds of personal and relational problems. However, the prospective adoptive parents can rely on 'inside information'. This requires a good and harmonious presentation since it would be damaging for the 'presentation of stability' and so on, if couples were to contradict each other when answering questions about themselves and their relationship.

Discussing the future state of affairs means that the participants in assessment interaction are equal since they both have nothing concrete to rely on. In the case of adoption assessment, the adoptive child is still an unknown quantity abroad. Prospective adoptive parents can rely on the knowledge they themselves

have acquired about the country where they would like to adopt a child, on what they learned during the information course, and on any other information they have obtained from books or the internet etc. In many cases, prospective adoptive parents have become experts on all kinds of adoption-specific matters during the waiting period in the adoption procedure. However, social workers have not been trained in adoption specifics, but are professionals in relational and personal issues. They have access to stories in which problems occurred with the upbringing of an adoptive child. Furthermore, many social workers rely on their own parenting experiences, which most prospective adoptive parents lack because of their unwanted childlessness.

### *Text and talk*

In this thesis, it became clear that text and talk ‘work together’ to form a recommendation about suitability for adoptive parenthood.

Taking the life stories of the prospective adoptive parents together with the interactions, it was possible to understand the selection social workers make when either omitting, transforming or selecting topics to talk about in the interview. This illustrates the fact that social workers make institutionally-relevant judgements about the importance of certain topics above others. They do not take information for granted, but relate to it in institutionally relevant ways. In other words, they assess whether the information collected might be important to the upbringing of an adoptive child. Prospective parents can claim whatever they want in their life stories, but have to demonstrate, face-to-face, the reliability of these claims to the social worker.

The recommendation record is not so much a reflection of the written life stories and the interviews, but a document that supports the final recommendation. It is an overview of various, co-constructed, protective factors that together advocate suitability.

Analysing both talk *and* text presents opportunities to analyse institutional mechanisms that are not visible in the interviews alone, since the considerations and choices of the social worker are not always accounted for in the interview. These considerations are usually made behind closed doors. Involving texts in the analysis means it is possible to trace back whether a certain topic is considered important or not.

### *Parameters that influence assessment*

In this last section I move from the specifics of adoption assessment to institutional assessments in general. I make a distinction between features that are attached to assessments, just as saying 'I do' is attached to a wedding ceremony. I then go on to determine a number of parameters that influence the specifics of assessment interaction.

The first feature in institutional assessment interaction is that there is always some sort of *dependency* involved, since the person being assessed has a certain need, and the assessor has the authority to either to meet this need or not. Because there is an element of dependency, and because a negative assessment might be given, and as a result of the need for disclosure, assessment always involves some *delicacy*. Thirdly, in every assessment activity, the people being assessed need to *perform* in a certain way to give an impression of their skills, problems or needs<sup>26</sup>. However, besides these general features, many differences remain in the specifics of assessment interaction. From the different outcomes of the studies in this thesis, I now present a number of parameters that might induce differences in assessment interaction.

The first parameter is that of whether or not the occasion for the assessment is self-evident. In the case of adoption assessment, social workers use many words and give several accounts to explain the assessment. In other words, the reason for the encounter is spelled out, especially when compared with other institutional encounters, such as emergency calls or a visit to a dentist. In those cases, the occasion for calling or visiting is self-evident. In the case of adoption assessment, prospective parents are obliged to participate in assessment interviews before they are given permission to adopt a child. This is not self-evident, since normally people do not need permission to become pregnant and have children. This is a context in which an adoptive child is protected by law and has the right to get 'good parents' in order to obviate further harm or damage. The social worker has to account for this in the interaction and has to create entitlement to conduct the assessment. This influences the interaction, and means that it is then very different from a job

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<sup>26</sup> The features that I have mentioned here are of course not unique to assessment interactions. The feature of delicacy, for instance, is also highly reported on in interactions between counsellors and HIV patients. In these interactions counsellors also use hypothetical questions in order to discuss the (possible threatening) future with the patient (Peräkylä, 1995). So, the features mentioned are not conclusive but overlap with other interactional features and have to be considered in relation to each other and are, in the end, relative to how participants in conversation treats them.

interview for instance, where applicants voluntarily apply for a job and compete with others to get it. Nevertheless, the assessors in a job interview are likely to introduce themselves and explain the procedure that the applicants will be following. Therefore, an occasion for assessment is always confirmed in interaction, but the number of explanations and accounts given will depend on whether the occasion is self-evident or not.

Another parameter that influences the interaction is the significance of the outcome of the assessment. Assessment can vary between whether or not you can buy cigarettes or alcohol to whether or not you will become a parent. In the first example, you can get 'lucky' if you get access even though you are under-age or are turned down because of your age. Of course this cannot really be compared with getting a negative recommendation for an adoption request. Or in daily life, it is easier to cope with a negative assessment about the weather, than it is about your new boyfriend. In all cases, a negative assessment is rather delicate, but the extent of 'care' required to give a negative message increases when the significance level is higher.

The last parameter is closely related to the other two. It concerns the relationship between the topic of the assessment and the interactional features of assessment. Discussing a traumatic life event is obviously more sensitive than discussing work-related skills. This can, of course, differ from person to person or setting, but in general I would claim that there is some scale of whether or not a certain topic is more delicate than another. As with the other two parameters, when a topic is more delicate, people will use more awkwardness markers and similar features.

All these parameters interrelate with each other and with other personal, institutional or societal features that are also constructive for interaction. The best, or perhaps only, way to 'detect' such parameters is to look at how the participants in the conversation orient towards them in their interactions, which was also the working method in this thesis.

### *Main limitations*

The main limitation of this study is that it is only based on assessments that conclude with a positive recommendation. Although this is representative for the adoption assessment field, since less than 5% of prospective adoptive parents get a negative recommendation, it is nevertheless a limitation. I expect that in an assessment that ends with a negative recommendation, some assessment dynamics

become more visible and that social workers have to work ‘extra hard’ to, for instance, construct entitlement when arriving at a negative recommendation.

Another limitation of the study is that it stands on its own and is not linked to other assessment research, for instance in foster care or other institutional areas. Consequently, I was only able to compare my findings with results taken from research in the literature, which was, of course, conducted under different circumstances and with different objectives. It was therefore not possible, for instance, to have specific data on assessment-related issues such as the use of hypothetical questions, and to compare my findings with others in more detail.

### *Further research*

Departing from the findings of this thesis, as presented so far, I now present a number of suggestions for further research.

### *Application work*

The first suggestion is that scientific findings be applied to practice. In working together with key people from a studied field, the research findings could be developed from ‘dry facts’ to develop sustainable working methods for people in practice. In doing so, there has to be some translational work, since findings cannot often be applied one to one. It would be possible from the research in this thesis to select some good practices of adoption assessment; examples from which it becomes visible how to, for instance, ‘work against notions of social desirability’ or ‘how to prepare the ground for the posing of hypothetical questions’. Or ‘which type of hypothetical questions deliver a considerable amount of information?’ Answering these questions could be of considerable help for training social workers.

An example of how to apply CA studies to practice is given in Peräkylä and Vehviläinen (2003) and in Stivers (2007). Lamerichs and others (2007) unfold how such application can be taken. They have developed a method (discursive action method) through which studies can be applied to practice and discussed with practitioners.

### *Epistemics of institutional relationships*

Another, more theoretical, suggestion is on the analysis of the epistemics of institutional relationships. Lately, Raymond and Heritage (2006: 677) and others,

started to investigate how ‘mechanisms by which a specific identity is made relevant and consequential in any particular episode of interaction’ could be analysed from a CA perspective. From this perspective, ‘rights to evaluate states of affairs are “ordinarily patrolled and defended” by individuals in routine conversational practices through which these rights are ranked by speakers relative to one another’ (Heritage and Raymond, 2005: 34).

I would like to link up with this question and add ‘how *institutional* identities are made relevant and consequential in interaction’. I have already touched upon this question in this thesis by analysing how institutional identities of both ‘gatekeeper’ and ‘helper’ are made relevant in interaction (study 5), by studying how social workers ‘anchor’ their assessment position in openings (study 1) and by questioning how ownership and entitlement shifts when either past, present or future states of affairs are discussed in interaction (present chapter). However, many questions remain unanswered. For instance, whether the ‘ranking’, which Heritage and Raymond speak of, is done in similar ways in institutional interaction as in everyday interaction. Unlike in everyday interaction, participants in institutional interaction already have some pre-known professional identity as, for example, an assessor, GP, or lawyer. This does not mean, however, that they do not focus on these and perhaps other identities, in conversation, and it would be interesting to analyse how participants in institutional conversation structurally claim rights and responsibilities. This kind of analysis could be linked to studying ‘asymmetries’ as presented by Drew and Heritage (1992: 49) i.e.: ‘distribution of knowledge, access to conversational resources and to participation in the interaction’.

One starting point from this thesis would be to analyse ‘manifestations of assessment awareness’. In some instances in my data, social workers reveal their institutional agenda in conversation and leave their guard down. For example, they make remarks such as: ‘I’m really glad that you give this answer, since I became worried on whether you fully understand the differences between a biological and an adoptive child (AiARE3)’. Sometimes, prospective adoptive parents do the same by pre-empting the ‘assessment reason’ for asking a certain question. They may say, for instance: ‘Oh, I get it; you probably wonder whether my perfectionism is going to be a problem in the upbringing of an adoptive child (AiARE2)’. By analysing such remarks in detail, it could become manifest how participants in interaction ‘understand’ the assessment context and how they perceive each other.

### *Analysing sequences in their local and institutional context*

A final suggestion for further research is a methodological one. I already advocated this in study 4, which studied hypothetical questions as part of an ongoing conversation. In doing so, we took our analysis beyond the hypothetical questions and their answers alone and analysed 'future talk' as a whole. The bottom line of what I advocate here is to analyse sequences in their local and institutional contexts in order to say more about the overall action that is taken with a particular sequence (see also Drew and Curl, 2007). By doing so, conversations are treated as sociological phenomena, through which participants conduct social action, rather than as singular utterances.

I want to add that with some data, as with mine, we also need to consider including all the interactions in our analysis, because the institutional activity might take longer than just one interview. In this general discussion I have tried to combine insights from all four assessment interviews and to treat them as one 'long conversation', where particular themes and preoccupations are repeatedly returned to across the different interviews (Maybin 2006: 29).

However, having to combine insights from different interviews in a journal article requires a considerable amount of thought to choose the 'right' excerpts and to explain to the reader how the different excerpts are interrelated. Nevertheless, doing so is a challenge, as is developing ways for CA researchers to draw general conclusions rather than just arrive at fragmentary insights into practices.

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# Appendix

## *Clarification of abbreviations and transcript conventions*

SW	social worker
PAF	prospective adoptive father
PAM	prospective adoptive mother
?	sentence marked as question by grammar or intonation
(.)	short break (1-2 seconds)
(pause)	longer break (> 2 seconds)
,	indicates a continuing tone
.	indicates a falling tone
<u>xxx</u>	with emphasis
(xxx)	probable speech
o °°	softly uttered, according to volume
(?)	unintelligible, one or two words
[...]	simultaneous speech
xxx-	indicates a 'cut-off'
xxx=	no gap between the two lines
:	prolongation of the immediately prior sound
£	smiley voice
↑	intonation going up
↓	intonation going down
*	non-verbal communication
>>	a hurried beginning
> <	quicker pace than surrounding talk
WORD	especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk



# Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift heb ik het interactionele proces tussen raadsonderzoekers en aspirant adoptiefouders geanalyseerd. Dit proces vindt plaats in de context van gezinsonderzoeken naar geschiktheid voor adoptief ouderschap, uitgevoerd door de Raad voor de Kinderbescherming. Zo'n gezinsonderzoek bestaat uit twee delen: als eerste wordt informatie ingewonnen over de medische gezondheid van de aspirant adoptiefouders en wordt er een uittreksel uit het Justieel Documentatieregister opgevraagd. Vervolgens, wanneer in deze documenten geen onoverkomelijke risicofactoren zijn aangetroffen, worden de aspirant adoptiefouders uitgenodigd voor een mondeling onderzoek. In een serie van vier gesprekken wordt uitgebreid gesproken over verschillende aspecten van het leven van de aspirant adoptiefouders. Ook wordt de ouders gevraagd om hun levensverhaal op papier te zetten. De inhoud van de levensverhalen, de gesprekken en de interpretatie daarvan wordt verwerkt tot een adviesrapport aan het Ministerie van Justitie. Een positief advies leidt tot een beginseltoestemming een kind uit het buitenland te adopteren.

De Raad gebruikt de interviews, samen met de betrokken documenten, als belangrijkste en doorslaggevende basis om tot een oordeel te komen over de geschiktheid van de aspirant adoptiefouders voor het adoptiefouderschap. Ze geeft hier de voorkeur aan boven het gebruik van checklists, gestandaardiseerde vragenlijsten of andere diagnostische middelen. In de gesprekken werken raadsonderzoekers en aspirant adoptiefouders samen om zowel geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap te beoordelen als te tonen.

Vanuit een epistemologisch dialogische invalshoek, waardeer ik het beoordelingsproces van de Raad als een goede praktijk. In een dialogische benadering worden actie, communicatie en cognitie als volledig relationeel en interactioneel beschouwd en wordt onderstreept dat uitingen altijd in hun context begrepen moeten worden (Linell, 1998). Vanuit dit gezichtspunt zijn gesprekken *de* plek waar sociale interacties worden gevormd en geïnterpreteerd. Sociale interactie wordt dan gedefinieerd als een 'gezamenlijke voltooiing', waarbinnen verschillende deelnemers samen betekenis construeren (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995).

In dit proefschrift functioneren twaalf gezinsonderzoeken als een 'case study' voor de demonstratie van *hoe* mensen in interactie samen betekenis construeren (over geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap) en *hoe* dit een dynamische en complex proces is.

Met dit proefschrift pleit ik voor het behoud van ‘face-to-face’ interacties als onderdeel van beoordelingsprocedures. Ik heb laten zien hoe de beoordeling van geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap een gezamenlijke voltooiing is van zowel raadsonderzoeker als aspirant adoptiefouder(s), waarin elke interactie zijn unieke eigenschappen heeft die de uitkomst van de beoordeling mede bepalen. Ik heb ook laten zien dat er bepaalde patronen zijn waarin raadsonderzoekers geschiktheid beoordelen. Binnen deze kaders construeren de raadsonderzoekers en de aspirant adoptiefouders samen wat ‘goed genoeg’ is om geschikt te zijn voor het adoptiefouderschap.

Ik heb de methode van de Conversatie Analyse (CA) gebruikt om de gesprekken in detail te analyseren. In de analyses heb ik de geschreven levensverhalen en de adviesrapporten betrokken. De methode bleek zeer bruikbaar voor de analyse van mijn data en heeft geholpen om inzicht te krijgen in zowel de patronen als de unieke eigenschappen van het beoordelen en tonen van geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap. CA maakte het vooral mogelijk om de dynamiek van het beoordelingsproces te analyseren en het te bestuderen als een sociale presentatie, in plaats van als een representatie van een objectieve werkelijkheid (Rommetveit, 1992). Ik kon daardoor de data ‘voor zichzelf laten spreken’, in plaats van het met allerlei vooropgezette ideeën te analyseren. Dit heeft bijvoorbeeld tot de conclusie geleid dat de raadsonderzoekers een dubbele identiteit tentoonspreiden in de gesprekken; naast dat ze als ‘beoordelaar’ optreden, functioneren ze ook als ‘helper’ en geven ze adviezen aan de aspirant adoptiefouders over hoe ze het beste met bepaalde adoptiespecifieke problemen kunnen omgaan.

Er zijn grofweg drie kaders waarbinnen geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap wordt beoordeeld. Dit zijn de bespreking en beoordelen van het *verleden*, *heden* en de *toekomst* van de aspirant adoptiefouders. Om het verleden te bespreken, worden de adoptiefouders gevraagd om hun levensverhaal op te schrijven. Dit is de basis voor de bespreking van het verleden, wat meestal in het tweede interview plaats heeft. Het heden van de aspirant adoptiefouders wordt in het tweede of in het derde interview besproken en behelst de beoordeling van de stabiliteit van de persoonlijkheid en de relatie van de ouders. In het derde interview wordt de toekomst met de adoptiefouders doorgesproken. Zij worden dan beoordeeld op hun pedagogische kwaliteiten.

Deze drie domeinen, van het *verleden*, *heden* en de *toekomst* van de aspirant adoptiefouders, vormen de belangrijkste inhoud van het gezinsonderzoek en zijn ook de ‘rode draad’ in dit proefschrift. Over elk domein wordt ook in het adviesrapport geschreven. Voordat de raadsonderzoekers deze inhoudelijke

domeinen echter beginnen te bespreken, nemen ze de tijd om de adoptieprocedure toe te lichten en om een relatie te vestigen met de aspirant adoptiefouders. Dit doen ze in het eerste interview.

In deze samenvatting zal ik eerst een samenvatting geven van de belangrijkste conclusies van elke studie in dit proefschrift. Vervolgens zal ik een overzicht geven van de belangrijkste ‘oogst’ van dit onderzoek.

### *De opening van het gezinsonderzoek (studie 1)*

In de openingen van het eerste interview van het gezinsonderzoek wordt werk verricht om de institutionele relatie te expliciteren, uit te leggen en om deze te bevestigen. We hebben beschreven en geanalyseerd welke acties er worden genomen in de openingsactiviteit en hoe de institutionele relatie al zichtbaar wordt in de allereerste minuten van het interview. De acties zijn verdeeld over drie verschillende functies die het openen van een gesprek heeft: het vestigen van contact, het vestigen van een relatie en het toewerken naar de bespreking van een eerste onderwerp (Schegloff, 1986: 113 in Ten Have, 1999: 5).

De eerste taak van deelnemers van een gesprek is het vestigen van contact. In drie van de twaalf bestudeerde openingen doen raadsonderzoeker dit expliciet door de aspirant adoptiefouders te verwelkomen. Doordat zij dit doen nemen ze direct de leiding en positioneren zichzelf als de gastheer/vrouw en als de voorzitter van het gesprek. In de andere gesprekken wordt er geen expliciet werk verricht om de gesprekken te openen. Dit betekent echter niet dat dit wordt overgeslagen, maar wijst er eerder op dat het contact al gevestigd is buiten het zicht van de camera, bijvoorbeeld aan de telefoon of op de gang. Onderwerpen als ‘tutoyeren’ en gewone ‘koetjes-en-kalfjes-onderwerpen’ zijn dan al gepasseerd.

De belangrijkste en meest omvangrijke taak van een opening is echter om een relatie te vestigen. Daarvanuit starten de deelnemers datgene wat ze dan ook willen doen in het gesprek. In dit deel van de opening introduceren de raadsonderzoekers wie ze voor de aspirant adoptiefouders zijn en wat ze in de komende gesprekken gaan doen. Concreet gezien geven ze: de agenda voor de gesprekken, de reden(en) voor het uitvoeren van een gezinsonderzoek, bepaalde procedurele informatie en lopen ze vooruit op eventuele problemen die er kunnen ontstaan. In de door ons bestudeerde openingen hebben we gezien hoe raadsonderzoekers een aantal minuten nemen om over de institutionele relatie te praten en om alle mogelijke negatieve associaties die daaraan gekoppeld zijn te ontkrachten. Hoewel niet in iedere opening elke actie wordt genomen, besteedt wel iedere raadsonderzoeker aandacht aan het benoemen van de (afhankelijke)

institutionele relatie en wordt er een sfeer geschapen waarin aspirant adoptiefouders kunnen praten over verschillende, soms delicate aspecten van hun leven. Vanuit het praten over de relatie werkt de raadsonderzoeker toe naar de introductie van een eerste onderwerp. De ouders krijgen dan, voor het eerst, de kans om het woord te nemen, antwoord te geven op vragen en om meer te doen dan alleen maar te luisteren.

We konden concluderen dat gezinsonderzoeken voor internationale adoptie niet als een vanzelfsprekendheid, maar eerder als delicaat, worden beschouwd in de gesprekken. Bij het openen van de gezinsonderzoeken verrichten de raadsonderzoekers interactioneel werk om een relatie te construeren waarin er ruimte is om informatie te verwerven waarover een oordeel kan worden geveld. Tegelijkertijd verwijzen de raadsonderzoekers niet heel direct naar hun bevoegdheid maar gebruiken zij ‘awkwardness markers’ in hun formuleringen. Daarnaast benadrukken zij dat ze graag een coöperatieve relatie met de aspirant adoptiefouders. Een manier om dit benadrukken is dat de raadsonderzoekers open zijn over het feit of ze zelf wel of geen kinderen hebben.

### *Het verleden (studie 2)*

Het meest essentiële van deze studie is de vraag hoe raadsonderzoekers het verleden van aspirant adoptiefouders beoordelen en hoe tegelijkertijd de ouders hun geschiktheid voor het adoptief ouderschap tentoonspreiden wanneer zij praten en schrijven over hun verleden. Daarnaast is deze studie ook een analyse van hoe een institutioneel rapport tot stand komt.

We hebben laten zien dat aspirant adoptiefouders in hun levensverhalen zichzelf presenteren als ‘normale mensen’ met een ‘normale jeugd’ en dat ze de nadruk leggen op positieve ervaringen. Raadsonderzoekers volgen deze beschrijvingen letterlijk of parafrasen ze in het rapport. In het rapport worden subjectieve uitlatingen in de woorden van de ouders weergegeven en bewijsleverende gegevens, ondersteund door externe bronnen of door data en plaatsnamen, als feit.

Alle raadsonderzoekers kiezen in elk geval één levensgebeurtenis uit het levensverhaal van de aspirant adoptiefouders om over te praten in het interview. De adoptiefouders moeten in staat zijn om hier over te schrijven, maar ze worden ook geconfronteerd met vragen die duidelijk moeten maken of de levensgebeurtenis voldoende verwerkt is. Wanneer de ouders ondervraagd worden over de levensgebeurtenis, wordt dit verbonden aan de toekomstige adoptiepraktijk. Een ‘goede’ presentatie van verwerking bevat een gezonde hoeveelheid emoties maar

ook voldoende afstand van wat er gebeurd is. Wanneer dit type ('goede') antwoord wordt gegeven, rond de raadsonderzoekers het onderwerp af en komt ze tot een positieve conclusie in het rapport. Mogelijk negatieve aspecten uit het verleden worden ook onderzocht in het interview. Wanneer de ouders dit echter goed kunnen weerleggen of wanneer niet kan worden aangetoond dat deze aspecten van invloed zijn op de opvoedingspraktijk, wordt dit weggelaten uit het rapport.

We hebben kunnen bevestigen dat in de samenstelling van een institutioneel rapport, informatie uit het interview wordt getransformeerd tot een coherent en persistent geheel (cf. Jonsson, Linell and Saljö, 1991: 10-11). Irrelevante details worden weggelaten en interpretaties van de raadsonderzoekers worden toegevoegd aan de beschrijvingen van de aspirant adoptiefouders. Deze interpretaties ondersteunen het (positieve) oordeel van de raadsonderzoekers. We hebben ook laten zien hoe het raadsonderzoekers lukt om de ouders te bevragen en te beoordelen, terwijl ze ook aantekeningen maken voor het rapport. De besproken fragmenten laten zien hoe in de transitie van tekst naar gesprek (en vice versa), verwijdering, toevoeging, selectie en transformatie plaatsvindt. Desalniettemin worden de rapporten vooral gebruikt als een ondersteuning van de beoordeling van geschiktheid. Dit is anders dan in bijvoorbeeld politierapporten waar het rapport vooral als bewijsmateriaal wordt gebruikt.

### *Het heden (studie 3)*

Het doel van studie drie was om meer specifieke observaties te beschrijven van de wijze waarop raadsonderzoekers de relatie van aspirant adoptiefouders beoordelen en hoe de koppels proberen om een demonstratie te geven van een harmonieuze relatie. Voor dit laatste hebben we zowel naar verbaal als non-verbaal gedrag gekeken.

Vanuit onze observaties kwamen drie typen vragen naar voren. De eerste is een onderzoekende vraag die aan een van de partners wordt gevraagd, bijvoorbeeld over wat de eerste indruk van zijn/ haar partner was. Dit type wordt gebruikt om het onderwerp van het gesprek te verschuiven van het verleden naar het heden. Het tweede type is ook een onderzoeksvraag waarbij beide partners worden aangesproken met 'jullie'. Deze vragen lijken neutraal maar zijn vol van implicaties, die worden gekleurd door wat wordt gezien als een 'goede relatie'. Een aantal onderwerpen die vaak aan bod komen in dit type vraag zijn: ruzie, huishouden, gezamenlijke activiteiten en verschillen tussen partners. De derde vraag is hetzelfde als het tweede type, alleen wordt aan deze vraag een observatie van de raadsonderzoeker over het gedrag van het koppel toegevoegd.

De antwoorden op deze vragen hebben verschillende eigenschappen. Ze zijn precies, wat waarschijnlijk een oriëntatie is op het feit dat de gesprekken worden weergegeven in het rapport. Verder, gaan de antwoorden in op eventuele negatieve implicaties die aan de vraag verbonden zijn en proberen ze negatieve aspecten van de relatie te weerleggen en positieve aspecten te onderstrepen. In het positief zijn, proberen de aspirant ouders te voorkomen dat ze als ‘heilig’ overkomen door niet overdreven positief te zijn en door ook zwakheden te noemen. Om hun punt te versterken voegen de ouders verhalen of voorbeelden toe, die het vertelde moeten illustreren en meer feitelijk moeten maken. Door dit te doen refereren ze naar de beoordelende situatie.

Wat interessant is, is dat het niet zoveel lijkt uit te maken *welk* antwoord de koppels geven. Meer belangrijk lijkt te zijn, *hoe* de koppels de antwoorden produceren en de mate van inzicht in hun relatie die uit de antwoorden blijkt. Het in staat zijn om een gezamenlijk antwoord te produceren wordt positief beoordeeld in het rapport. Ook het kunnen reflecteren op de relatie blijkt als een beschermende factor te worden beschouwd. De koppels beschrijven hun relatie en geven redenen voor de manier waarop zij zich gedragen, bijvoorbeeld waarom ze denken dat ze nooit ruzie maken. Het hebben van een ‘normale’ relatie (dat is: niet te positief en niet te negatief), waar goed over gepraat kan worden, wordt gezien als een beschermende factor voor het adoptief ouderschap.

### *De toekomst (studie 4 & 5)*

In de laatste twee studies van dit proefschrift zijn het gebruik van hypothetische situaties door raadsonderzoekers geanalyseerd. Deze praktijk is een manier om de aspirant adoptiefouders te beoordelen op hun pedagogische kwaliteiten met betrekking tot het opvoeden van een adoptiekind. We hebben de hypothetische situaties in hun volledige sequentiële context geanalyseerd. We hebben eerst gekeken hoe het onderwerp van opvoeding wordt geïntroduceerd en hoe dit vervolgens wordt gecontinueerd tot aan het stellen van de hypothetische vraag zelf (studie 4). We hebben vervolgens de hypothetische vragen, met de daarop gegeven antwoorden, tot in detail geanalyseerd. Dit hebben we gedaan om te kunnen begrijpen hoe de vragen en antwoorden worden gebruikt om pedagogische kwaliteiten zowel te kunnen beoordelen als te kunnen demonstreren (studie 5). In de laatste studie hebben we ook bekeken hoe het discours van ‘welzijn’ en ‘justitie’ manifest worden in de gesprekken.

Met studie vier hebben we eerdere onderzoeken bevestigd die aantonen dat het bespreken van hypothetische situaties zorgvuldig wordt voorbereid (Komter, 1991;

Peräkylä, 1995; Speer and Parsons, 2006). Gedurende deze voorbereiding wordt coöperatie tot stand gebracht door het thema van opvoeding eerst op een algemene manier te bespreken. Pas wanneer de hypothetische situatie wordt ingebracht, worden de aspirant ouders geconfronteerd met eventuele problemen die met hun adoptiefkind zouden kunnen plaatsvinden. In deze studie hebben we twee manieren beschreven die tot het introduceren van een hypothetische situatie leiden, De eerste start met een uitlokkende vraag over opvoeding in het algemeen. De tweede grijpt terug op een onderwerp waar men eerder over gesproken heeft. Daarnaast is er een verschil in patronen met- en patronen zonder een vervolgvraag; de lange en de korte episodes. Vervolgvragen zorgen ervoor dat de hypothetische situatie met meer diepgang en/of complexiteit kunnen worden besproken.

In studie vijf hebben we ook de antwoorden bekeken die worden gegeven op een hypothetische vraag. In de vragen en antwoorden worden drie verschillende domeinen aangeboord: pedagogische capaciteiten, psychologische capaciteiten en realiteitszin. Aspirant adoptiefouders doen hun uiterste best om te bewijzen dat ze alles in huis hebben om een goede adoptiefouder te worden. Naast het beoordelende karakter, heeft het bespreken van hypothetische situaties ook een adviserende functie met betrekken tot de toekomstige opvoeding van het adoptiefkind; ouders worden door het bespreken van eventuele toekomstige situaties ook geholpen om beter voorbereid te zijn op het adoptiefouderschap.

In de interacties met aspirant adoptiefouders, zijn de raadsonderzoekers niet expliciet over hun rol als beoordelaar en/ of helper. Echter, beide rollen worden zichtbaar in de wijze waarop ze reageren op de antwoorden van de ouders en door de wijze waarop ze dit gesprek weergeven in het rapport.

### *Belangrijkste bevindingen*

Ik zal nu een overzicht geven van de belangrijkste bevindingen van dit onderzoek. Ik vertrek vanuit de oorspronkelijke onderzoeksvragen en zal deze afzonderlijk beantwoorden. In het beantwoorden van deze vragen worden bovenstaande studies samengebracht en samengevat.

De onderzoeksvragen:

1. Op welke wijze beoordelen raadsonderzoekers geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap van aspirant adoptiefouders in tekst en gesprek?
2. Op welke wijze demonstreren aspirant adoptiefouders geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap in tekst en gesprek?
3. Hoe komen vraag 1 en 2 bij elkaar en leidt dit tot eigenschappen van geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap?

In het beantwoorden van deze vragen heb ik gekeken naar het *woordgebruik*, de *beurten* waarin deze worden gebruikt en naar de *totale organisatie* van de interactie (Heritage, 2005).

Ad 1): Raadsonderzoekers beoordelen de geschiktheid voor het adoptief ouderschap van aspirant ouders door: een beoordelingsrelatie te bouwen, door vragen te stellen en door observaties en interpretaties van het gedrag van de ouders te maken. Ze beoordelen verschillende aspecten van het leven van de aspirant ouders door zowel het verleden, het heden en de toekomst met hen te bespreken. Ze doen dit onder andere door levensgebeurtenissen te bespreken, door vragen te stellen over de relatie en door hypothetische situaties te bespreken. Naast het antwoord op al de vragen bekijken ze ook hoe ouders samen werken in het geven van antwoorden en op het algemene gedrag van de ouders gedurende de interviews. In het komen tot een beoordeling worden al deze impressies en informatie samengevoegd om tot een advies te komen. Wanneer mogelijke risicofactoren naar voren komen dan wordt gewogen in hoeverre dit leidt tot een negatieve beoordeling. Wanneer dit niet het geval is, dan worden deze factoren weggelaten uit het rapport.

Ad 2): Aspirant adoptiefouders geven blijk van geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap door het meewerken aan het geven van antwoorden en door zich 'goed' te gedragen tijdens de interviews. Ze zijn bereid om intieme details uit hun persoonlijk leven prijs te geven, zoals over hun levensverhaal en relatie. Daarnaast uiten ze hun intenties en vaardigheden die ze hebben aangaande de opvoeding van een adoptiefkind. Bij het bespreken van hun relatie, benadrukken de koppels de positieve aspecten maar zijn ook bescheiden om niet 'heilig' over te komen. Wanneer levensgebeurtenissen besproken worden, kunnen ze daar met gepaste emotie, maar ook met voldoende afstand over praten. Ook tonen de aspirant adoptiefouders kennis en bewustzijn ten aanzien van adoptiegerelateerde problematiek. Ze tonen ook bereidheid om hulp te ontvangen waar dat nodig is. En als laatste: de aspirant ouders zijn in staat om te reflecteren op zichzelf en op hun omgeving en hebben het vermogen om in abstracte termen te kunnen spreken.

Ad 3): Raadsonderzoekers en aspirant adoptiefouders werken samen in het beoordelen en demonstreren van geschiktheid voor het adoptiefouderschap. Daarbij proberen de raadsonderzoekers door uitingen van sociale wenselijkheid heen te kijken, De aspirant adoptiefouders proberen zichzelf zo 'goed', maar tegelijkertijd 'normaal' mogelijk neer te zetten. De raadsonderzoekers blijven vragen stellen totdat de aspirant ouders voldoende informatie hebben verstrekt. De raadsonderzoekers confronteren de ouders ook met de wijze waarop ze over komen in de gesprekken en geven de ouders de ruimte om hierop te reageren. Wanneer alle aspecten van het leven van de aspirant ouders besproken zijn en de

raadsonderzoeker voldoende informatie heeft om tot een beoordeling te komen, dan is de institutionele taak van beoordeling geslaagd.

Belangrijke beschermende factoren voor geschiktheid blijken te zijn: het overkomen van ingrijpende levensgebeurtenissen, het vermogen om met spanning en ruzie om te gaan, het kunnen samenwerken als koppel, adoptiebewustzijn en het kunnen bedenken van opvoedingsstrategieën. De weergave van de aspirant adoptiefouders in het rapport is een co-constructie van datgene wat ze zelf hebben geschreven in hun levensverhaal of hebben verteld in het rapport en de interpretaties en observaties van de raadsonderzoeker,

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Martine Noordegraaf

Ede, July 2008

# Publications and presentations

## *Publications*

- Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (submitted for publication). Assessing and displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood: a conversation analysis of relationship questions and answers. *Text and Talk*. (Study 3).
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- Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (2006). 'Wat zou je doen als...?' Gesprekken over opvoeding met aspirant adoptiefouders. ['What would you do if...?' Conversations on upbringing with prospective adoptive parents.] *Toegepaste Taalwetenschap in Artikelen*, 76 (2), 87 – 100.
- Noordegraaf, M., Nijnatten, C. van & Elbers, E. (2006). Discussing Future Pedagogic Practices in the Adoption Assessment Process. In: T. Koole, J. Nortier & B. Tahitu (red.). *Articles of 5th Sociolinguistic Conference*, 377-391. Delft: Eburon.

## *Presentations*

- Noordegraaf, M. (2007, December). Displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood. How couples are collaboratively answering questions about their relationship. Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> AWIA Symposium on Analyzing talk in Interaction, Groningen, The Netherlands.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2007, March). Opening Assessment. Unravelling activities in assessments for international adoption. Data presented and discussed in a small group of researchers at the University of York, UK, guided by Professor Celia Kitzinger.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2007, January). Displaying suitability for adoptive parenthood. How couples are collaboratively answering questions about their relationship. Data presented and discussed in a small group of researchers at the University of York, UK, guided by Professor Paul Drew.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2006, October). Assessing adoptive Parenthood. Institutional (re)formulations of autobiographical notes. Paper presented at symposium 'communication in institutional settings'. Utrecht University, The Netherlands.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2006, March). Discussing Future Pedagogic Practices in the Adoption Assessment Process. Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Sociolinguistic Conference, Lunteren, The Netherlands.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2006, February). Communicative Practices in the Adoption Assessment Process. Paper presented at the 3<sup>th</sup> Danaswac conference, Tampere, Finland.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2003, September). The emergence of selection criteria. Paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> AWIA Symposium on Talk in Institutional Settings: Psychological categories as participants' recourses. Wageningen, The Netherlands.

# Curriculum Vitae

Having completed her secondary education at the Revius College in 1995, Martine Noordegraaf (1978) obtained a bachelor's degree in social work in 1999 at the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede. Passionate about theory, she went on to study at the Radboud University Nijmegen, where she completed her MSc in the philosophy of education in 2002. Martine worked part time (1998-2002) as a social worker with autistic youngsters. In 2002 she became involved in a research project on the history of mental health in the twentieth century, which involved, among other things, studying archives and journals and interviewing experienced psychiatrists.

Martine was a PhD student at the Department of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at Utrecht University between 2003 and 2008. She combined her background in social work, and her MSc in educational science in this present doctoral project on the adoption assessment process of the Child Protection Board in the Netherlands. Examining how the institutional task of assessment is accomplished through talk and text, she aimed to contribute towards an understanding of the profession of social work, which has long been referred to as an invisible profession. As a PhD student she also gave classes in the course on family intervention. Martine was also a mentor to two master's students participating in her research project, both of whom graduated on this topic under her supervision.

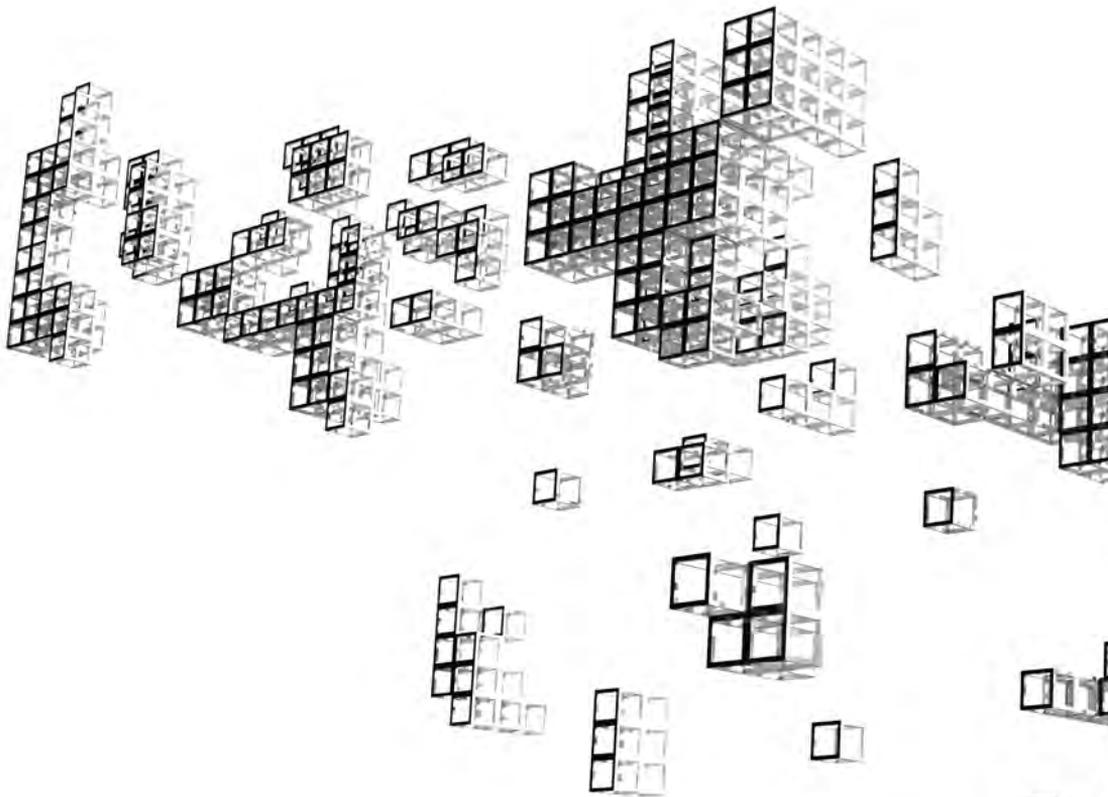
In the spring of 2007, Martine studied at the University of York in the UK, where she followed courses on 'communication in medical care' and 'conversation analysis', and participated in weekly data analysis workshops under the supervision of Professor Paul Drew. It was during these workshops that the basic analysis of two studies in these thesis (1 & 3) came into being.

In September 2008 Martine is set to continue her career as a teacher of education and research skills at the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede, where she will also mentor students pursuing a bachelor's or master's degree.









'Assessment in action' is an ethnographical conversation analysis of how suitability for adoptive parenthood is assessed in institutional interaction. It is about talking with clients and transforming this talk into documents.

Conversations and texts are submitted to a sentence by sentence analysis that takes both the local and the institutional context into account; and that questions how the assessment practice can be understood in the context of child protection where social workers have dual professional identities: that of helper and that of gatekeeper.

The main objective of the analysis is to explore *how* social workers carry out their institutional task of assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood through text and talk in the context of the Child Protection Board in the Netherlands.

