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## ARTICLE

## Future Talk

### Discussing Hypothetical Situations with Prospective Adoptive Parents

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#### 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 article 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.

#### KEY WORDS:

adoptive  
parenthood  
child protection  
conversation  
analysis  
hypothetical  
situations  
institutional  
communication

## 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 et al., 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 of 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, 2005; Nijnatten et al., 2001: 717; Stenson, 1993). 'Indirection' may be seen as an 'extension of the negotiation and particularisation of identity categories' (Hall et al., 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 (Abell and Stokoe, 2001; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998).

In this article, 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>1</sup> Part of the social worker's task is to carry out a family assessment that includes four interviews with the prospective adoptive parents.<sup>2</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 is 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 (Hague Conference on Private International Law [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 report for the state agency,<sup>3</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 report: autobiographical notes on the prospective parents' lives, the stability of their personality and relationship, and their capacities as adoptive parents. In other words: their past, present and future state of affairs.

This article 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 that 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>4</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 so doing, 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.

## 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: 270–1). 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 might arise and is helped with ways of how to deal with them.<sup>5</sup>

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. 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 creates opportunities for interlocutors to gain information about future states 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). This 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: (1) an event that *might* occur, (2) located in the future, and (3) used as 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, 301–4).

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 article 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 (2004) was used. This system highlights features of speech delivery as well as emphasis, intonation and sequential detail.<sup>6</sup>

## RESULTS

Forty-five extracts containing a hypothetical situation were analysed. The sequential organizations of these extracts follow the patterns outlined in Table 1. In

**Table 1 SEQUENTIAL ORGANIZATION PATTERNS OF DISCUSSING HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS**

**No. 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
	Total	45
	With advice	22
	Without advice	23
	With follow-up question	23
	Without follow-up question	22

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).

## ASKING (A) QUESTION(S) ABOUT A HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION: DESCRIPTION – PROJECTABLE

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

Extract 1 (AiADA3)

- 1 SW: [0.4] mm (.) going back to that behavior, for instance mm, what  
 2 (1)→ you said then was that you'd expect the child might cry a lot,  
 3 have fits of temper or °withdraw into it[self°=  
 4 PAM: [yes  
 5 SW: =°loss of appetite, difficulty in getting to sleep° [3.0]  
 6 (2)→ if u:m that sort of thing should occur (.) what do you do then?  
 7 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 lines 6 and 7: '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 report, 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: OK let's assume it would be a child of one and a half years  
 02 (2)→ old how do you imagine that? °wha-° (.) what for example  
 03 can a child of that age do, or not do?

- 04 PAF:(3)→ yes I also think it differs from child to child [what=  
 05 SW: [mm  
 06 PAF children are and aren't able to [and it also depends on er (.)  
 07 SW: [yes  
 08 PAF: yes how long they have been in the children's home [and (?)  
 09 SW: [mm  
 10 PAF: yes children's homes eh are often much more independent [at a=  
 11 SW: [yes  
 12 PAF: very young age than as a as normal babies  
 13 SW: [.2] mm hm  
 14 PAF: so yes it also depends ehh (.) I think on what child er mm is  
 15 offered so [to speak what the proposal is  
 16 SW: [yes  
 16 SW: hmm=  
 14 PAM:(3)→ =we:ll (she) will in any case be able to walk ehh (.) of  
 15 c[ourse=  
 16 SW: [yes  
 17 PAM: =that is of course quite a [big=  
 18 SW: [mm  
 19 PAM: =difference with a very young one of ehh a year and a half  
 20 [.2] so yes that's something you really have to be aware of  
 21 when you get the proposal [.3]

In this extract the social worker explores the sense of reality of the prospective parents. She gives the description and then asks two questions: a general question (line 2 'how do you imagine that?') and a more specific question (line 2/3: 'What for example can a child of that age do, or not do?'). The social worker gets the 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' (line 6 and 14), 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 12), 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 14). She confirms her answer twice by saying 'of course' (in lines 14–15 and 17), 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 20 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 extract. But just as in the 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: but if I if I look at you↓(.) then you are people who er (.)  
 02 tend to persevere who have certain goals in life and when I  
 03 say that then I definitely look a bit more at \*you  
 \*SW looks at PAM  
 04 because you're the one who from when you were little  
 05 PAM: °mm°  
 06 SW: yes actually still ehm [.3]=  
 07 PAM: =well [>if our child says it doesn't want to<  
 08 SW: [have done your best and after all had [fought (a bit)  
 09 PAM: [>>yes yes<  
 10 SW: to achieve what you have achieved right?=  
 11 PAM: =yes that's what I would try to give to the child↓  
 12 SW: yes you do have certain goals in mind right?=  
 13 PAM: =yes (.)

- 14 SW: and that you'll try to convey?  
 15 PAM: yes=  
 16 SW:(1)→ =BUT it mi↑ght just be a child that er (.) isn't so  
 17 approachable  
 18 PAM: well er=  
 19 SW: =that has a totally different personality [from the one you=  
 20 PAM: [yes  
 21 SW: =than both you have and that perseveres less or something like  
 22 that something like I live for today and tomorrow, well  
 23 tomorrow I'll see  
 24 PAM: yes yes  
 25 SW: and less of that er yes that that that=  
 26 PAM: =has a tendency to=  
 27 SW:(2)→ =a tendency to how how how what would that mean to you?  
 28 PAM: well [I think=  
 29 SW: [>>because you are very d↑ifferent< you understand?  
 30 PAM:(3)→ =I think you'll try to offer supp↑ort as well as possible in a  
 31 certain direction [2.0] in a direction that suits him or her  
 32 SW: (.) [mm  
 33 PAM: = [and in which they feel happy, of course they have to  
 34 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 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 7. 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 11. 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 Table 1, 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 3 is continued below.

## Extract 3b (AiAMM3)

- 35 SW:(4)→ even if it's a bit lo::wer than↓=  
 36 PAM: =ye::s > if what you say as well< (.) if it is not the:re then  
 37 it's not in there you still love your child just the same  
 38 that er (.) you won't love your child less for not being good  
 39 at a certain subject or [.2] er=  
 40 SW:(1)→ =NO:: it might very well be good at a certain subject and it  
 41 has the ability then I think the example \*you gave↓  
 \*SW points towards PAF  
 42 PAM: well then I would er er (.) with special support still (.) to  
 43 get it there to what is possible I think the child (.) °might  
 44 otherwise regret it°=  
 45 PAF: =yes right=  
 46 SW:(1)→ =now you're reaching the limits of the child  
 47 PAM: °then there's no point in going on°  
 48 SW:(4)→ >>yes but< c↑ould you do something with that? c↑ould you let  
 49 it end? c↑ould you also put it aside?  
 50 PAF:(3)→ [yes of course!=  
 51 PAM:(3)→ [>yes yes yes<  
 52 PAF:(3)→ =I think we've had that experience ourselves (.)  
 53 PAM:(3)→ 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 40, 41 and 46 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 read the future and it makes it easier to avoid answering the question.

Lines 40 and 41 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 42–4 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 48/9) ‘c↑ould you do that?’. The topic is closed with both prospective parents’ statements that *of course* they are able to lay things down (lines 50–3). The social worker rests her case.

## TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO ‘HELP’: ANSWER – ADVICE

Twenty-two of the 45 extracts include advice. We recognize 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:           (.) yes you wouldn’t d:o that (.) let the child share your bed?  
 02 PAM:           yes if [ne↓cessary=  
 03 SW:                     [yes  
 04 PAM:           =yes sometimes it’s necessary (.) sometimes it’s not  
 05 PAF:           [.2](?)slowly but surely you try to get it into its own bed  
 06 SW:(5)→       yes yes (.) no right preferably in its o:wn bed  
 07 PAF:                     [ye:s  
 08 PAM:           [try that first and if tha:t doesn’t work=  
 09 PAF:           =you don’t take it into your bed with you as a matter of  
 10                     course  
 11 SW:(5)→       no I wou:ldn’t [do that=  
 12 PAF:                     [ yes yes  
 13 SW:                     =no on the whole these children are used to sleeping in their  
 14                     own beds

The social worker asks a closed question and the woman gives a vague answer in line 4: ‘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 6 ‘preferably in its own bed’. The man and woman copy the advice of the social worker (lines 8, 9 and 10). The social worker confirms this again in line 11 and justifies her statement in lines 13 and 14. They cooperate in constructing a common conclusion on the hypothetical question.

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 advice social workers display preferred responses to the hypothetical situations.

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.

## 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 article 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 et al., 2001).

In interactions with prospective adoptive parents, social workers do not 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.

## APPENDIX 1 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
° °°	softly uttered, according to volume
(?)	unintelligible, one or two words
[ . . . ]	simultaneous speech
xxx-	indicates a 'cut-off'
=	no gap between the two lines
:	prolongation of the immediately prior sound
↑	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

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### Notes

- 1 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 In the Netherlands: the Ministry of Justice.
- 4 Previous studies on the use of hypothetical situations in institutional settings display careful conversational preparation of the hypothetical situation (Noordegraaf et al., 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 et al., 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 situation is introduced.
- 5 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: 303–4). 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.
  - 6 See Appendix 1 for a clarification of abbreviations and transcript conventions symbols.

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