

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

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ABSTRACT

Prospective adoptive parents who take part in a Dutch adoption assessment procedure are asked to write down their life stories. In this article 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.

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1. 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 et al., 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. van Nijnatten & Heestermans, in preparation), 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 article 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 record drawn up by the CPB, which assesses the suitability of the potential adoptive parents to bring up an adoptive child. This record is sent to and used by two audiences: by a state agency for

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approval¹, 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.

2. 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; Cook-Gumperz & Messerman, 1999; Mäkitalo, 2005; Ravotas & Berkenkotter, 1998). 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 & Gerrig, 1990). The difference between a secretary taking the minutes and a social worker is that the task 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 use these conclusions as a starting point for 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, 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. This is due to the fact that 1) people use different constructions in either talking or writing and that 2) records in institutions are written with certain purposes like: providing an eye-witness report that can be used for legal purposes or supporting an institutional decision. In other words, the record serves a certain institutional goal and the information from face-to-face interactions has to be fitted into this orientation.

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, see also Jonsson & Linell, 1991).

3. 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:

- 1) which information from the written life story is included in the recommendation record;
- 2) how this information is transformed in terms of the institution;
- 3) which information is omitted in the recommendation record, and
- 4) how the written life story is assessed and transformed in the interview.

In order to answer our questions we conducted an (ethnographical) conversation analysis (CA), focusing on the “details of the actual event” of adoption assessment (Sacks, 1984a: 24). In other words, we analyse the actual transcripts of recorded conversations and texts of different assessments, rather than conduct interviews with the various participants. We analyse the data in relation to the institutional context of child welfare assessment in order to be in a position to say more about the sequential and institutional meaning of the excerpts as a collection of life story assessments of prospective adoptive parents.

We use concepts of institutional 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 parent” will change over time and differ among cultures.

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.

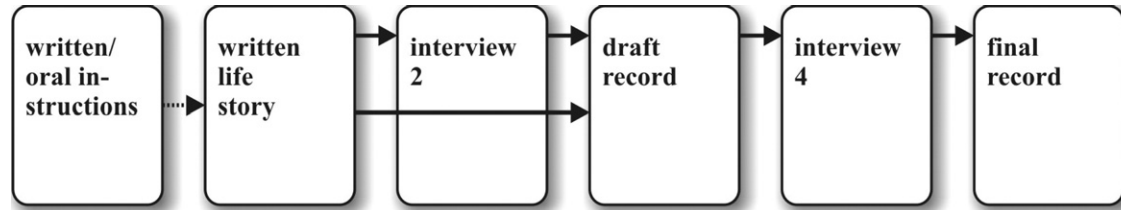
The biographical information of eight prospective parents was analysed in a written life story, interview(s) and record(s). All the people in our corpus received a positive recommendation and were authorized to proceed with the adoption process. We received written informed consent to use this highly personal information. All names and identifying details have been disguised. The excerpts in this article 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.

¹ In the Netherlands: the Ministry of Justice.

4. 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 on the right of that square means that the influence of the actions is not fully retraceable. Writing a life story is a mental process of selecting certain themes that come to the fore when prompted by different instructions. These instructions come from: 1) a compulsory information course that all prospective adoptive parents follow prior to the assessment during which they are informed that they will have to write a life story as preparation for the second interview; 2) information on the specifics of the assessment procedure from the weblogs of other adoptive parents, and from 3) a social worker in the first assessment 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. 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.

5. Transformation routes

Tracing the information from the record back to the life story and the interview led to different transformation routes: ways of making it to the record or being omitted in the process. → refers to transformation, X refers to omission:

1) Copying or restating information(Life story → Final record)One third of the background information in the life story is directly transferred to the record, without it being discussed in the interview. This information mainly consists of descriptions people give of their parental family, the family they were raised in, and it is mostly factual.

2) Omitting information(Life story X Final record)Another third of the information from the life story is also never discussed in the interview, or transferred to the record. This information is simply left out of the assessment. Most of this information comprises details of the parental family or work. They are details that are relevant to the prospective parent, but not to the institution.

3) Assessing and restating information(Life story → Interview 2 → Final record)(Interview 2 → Final record)There are also topics that are described in the life story that are discussed in interview 2 and transferred to the record. These are interesting topics since they seem to serve as a test case for suitability. Most of these topics are life events that illustrate how prospective parents respond when faced with adversity in their lives (such as the death of a parent, or divorce).

- 4) Assessing and omitting information (Life story → Interview 2 X Final record) Some of the information that is selected for discussion in the interview does not make it to the record. These are the same kind of topics as 3), life events or specific stages of life (such as puberty). This is interesting material since it seems that once information has been introduced in the interview it is more difficult to leave it out of the record. In these cases a possible risk factor is assessed in the interview. If the parents can convince the social worker of the non-risk element of a certain life event, for instance, the topic is omitted in the interview.
- 5) Adding information (Interview 2 → Final record) Finally, in only a few cases did a social worker introduce a topic in the interview that was missing in the life story, e.g. puberty).

In sum, the greater part of the information that ends up in the final record is first described in the life story. This means that the prospective parents determine, to a considerable extent, how they are presented in the record, at least as far as background information is concerned, and that the life stories written by the prospective parents cover most of the information that is sought. We will show in a more detailed analysis how parents demonstrate themselves in terms of their past.

Some of the parents' descriptions are selected as a test case for suitability for adoptive parenthood. These cases demonstrate assessment in action; it is in the face-to-face interaction that the prospective parents must prove their competence as adoptive parents, based on their past state of affairs. Therefore, they need to do more than simply claim to have coped with, for instance, certain life events – they must also be able to talk about that event in a manner that proves that they coped. Later we analyse in detail how past events become a test case for suitability in interaction and how social workers present those cases in the record.

6. 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 what they treat as relevant for the assessment, and on how much of their presentation is actually included in the record.

Excerpt 1 AiARE2 (LS → R)

Life story PAM

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

Final record

- 01 Toen mevrouw X. 4 jaar werd ging ze naar de kleuterschool. Wat
When Mrs. X. was 4 years old, she went to infants' school.
What
- 02 zij zich hiervan herinnert is dat de juf elke dag haar hond mee
she remembers about it is the teacher bringing her dog
- 03 naar school nam. Dit vond zij erg leuk.
to class every day. 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
problemen die
I had a trouble-free youth with the
- 02 kleine jongens aan kattenkwaad uithalen.
usual mischief that little boys get up to.

Final record

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

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. 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 maken
naar het
what were you like as a child? to make the step to the
time
- 02 moment dat jij dan al bent.
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 £ (???) £ dan weet je
err(.2) well it's in my reports £(???) £ then you
- 08 't nog niet helemaal maar dan zie je van ik geloof dat ik still don't completely know it but then you see like I believe
- 09 redelijk rustig was en en ehm beetje verlegen ehm ehh
that I was fairly quiet and and ehm a bit shy ehm err I
- 10 observerend ook als kind wel mmm en ehm daarna was ja ehm
observed things also as child mmm and ehm after that was yes
- 11 eigenlijk een ehm een een niet niet te moeilijk niet te ehm actually a ehm a a not not too difficult not too difficult
- 12 moeilijk kind
child
- Final record
- 01 Aspirant adoptiefouder was als kind rustig, observerend en een
Prospective adoptive mother was quiet as a child, observed things
- 02 beetje verlegen.
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, van Nijnatten, & 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"* (lines 8 and 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 11) 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.

7. 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 Nederland was
My mother died suddenly just after I had arrived in the Netherlands.
- 02 gekomen. Dit was heel verdrietig, maar als gezin hadden we veel
It was very sad, but as a family we had lots of support from
- 03 steun aan elkaar. De confrontatie met de vergankelijkheid van
each other. This confrontation with the transitory nature of
- 04 het 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 heel ingrijpend
the death of your mother is of course, as you describe, very
- 02 iets dat beschrijf je ook
traumatic
- 03 PAM hmhm
hmm
- 04 SW hoe is dat nu nu je zeg maar ook bezig ben met met je
what do you feel about it now since you of course are also
- 05 aanstaande moederschap (.3)
thinking about about your coming motherhood(.3)
- 06 PAM na ja dat vind ik inderdaad ehh jammer dat ze d'r dan niet meer
well yes I indeed think it's a pity that she isn't here
- 07 is en mijn zus had het ook die vond het heel jammer want ik
anymore and my sister felt the same she also felt it a great

- 08 denk dat ze het hartstikke leuk heeft gevonden
shame because I think that she would have liked it a lot
- 09 SW ja(.4)
yes(.4)
- 10 PAM En ehm na ja toen ben ik naar mijn zusje heb ik daar ehh ?
week
and ehm well after yes then I went to my little sister I have
- 11 ehh ben ik daar geweest toen om met mijn nichtje te
helpen en
a there ehh? week ehh I was there to help with my little
niece
- 12 dan maar het is toch wel ja 't d'r ontbreekt iets dan ja(.3)
and then but it is indeed so yes it there is something missing
then yes(.3)
- 13 SW em o.k. ja goed dat heeft almaal een plekje gekregen 't
stof
hm ok yes right that has all fallen into place the dust has
- 14 dat is gedaald
settled
- 15 PAM Eja ja je kan (toch?)E ik ja ze kan ook niet terug komen
Eyes yes you can(right?)E I yes she can't come back either
- 17 SW nee
no
- 18 PAM EneeE
EneE
- 19 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, een
verdrietig
In 1989 her mother suddenly passed away, a sad event, at
- 02 gebeuren, waarbij aspirant adoptiefmoeder geconfron-
teerd werd
which prospective adoptive mother was confronted with
the
- 03 met de vergankelijkheid van het bestaan. Het gezin had
veel
transitory nature of existence. The family supported each
- 04 steun aan elkaar. Het overlijden heeft inmiddels een
plaats in
other. Her death has meanwhile got a place in her life
- 05 haar leven gekregen.

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, line 2: *"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, lines 1 and 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 12). She makes this a shared experience with her sister (interview, line 7: *she also felt is a great shame*), which again marks her response as "normal". By saying *"the dust had settled"* (interview, lines 14,15), 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: line 4). 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 zorgen
and eh(.) that is when children take care of their parents
- 06 PAM mja
myes
- 07 SW of de rollen tussen eh duidelijker worden tussen de
ouders en
*or the roles between eh becomes more clear between the
parents*
- 08 de opvoeders en de kinderen duidelijker worden. speelt
dat een
*and the upbringers and the children becomes more clear. does
that play a role?*
- 09
that play a role?
- 10 PAM nee ik denk niet dat dat zover ging
no I don't think it went that far
- 11 SW nou: (.) dat kan dus hele grote vormen aannemen en dat
kan ook
well:(.) that thus can take on really big proportions and it
- 12 wat mindere grote vormen aannemen
also can take smaller proportions
- 13 PAM ja nou, in mindere vorm ehm (.)
well yes, in smaller proportion ehm(.)
- 14 SW u was niet een moeder voor uw moeder?
you weren't a mother to your mother?
- 15 PAM nee
no
- 16 SW dat hoefde niet, maar dat was misschien wel een
bondgenoot van
that wasn't needed, but that was perhaps an ally of your
- 17 uw moeder?
mother?
- 18 PAM ja steun toch, zou ik het noemen (.) maar meer zoiets van
als
yes support still I would name it but more like as she saw it
- 19 zij het zag dat ze het gewoon niet trok en dat ze gewoon
toch
that she just didn't take it anymore and that she just got
- 20 heel weinig steun van mijn vader kreeg, dat hij toch zijn
really little support from my father that he after all took his
- 21 handen er vanaf trok en ook (.) ja op cruciale momenten,
want
hands off of it and also yes at crucial moments because in my
- 22 in mijn herinnering er was, kan best zijn dat zijn subjectieve
remembrance there was, might be that his subjective
- 23 mening=
opinion=
- 24 SW =maar dat is je vader vervangen
=but that is replacing your father

25 PAM verving ik eigenlijk mijn vader ja

I actually did replace my father yes

26 SW yes
yes

In this excerpt we see how the social worker introduces her hypothesis of parentification to the prospective adoptive mother (lines 1–8). She then gives the mother the opportunity to say whether she thinks it was the case in her family (8–10). 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 13, but she cannot finish her attempt at agreeing. The social worker reformulates parentification (line 14: *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 16). 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 18). 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.

8. 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. This makes it clear that the social worker is not reporting on the reality as such but is reporting on the prospective parents' perspective of their own past. Or in other words: that the “evidence” for a positive recommendation for parents' suitability for adoptive parenthood is grounded in the parents' description of their past (cf. Goffman, 1981).

Previous discourse studies have shown that “doing being ordinary” is something that people rely on in defensive environments (cf. Lawrence, 1996; Sacks, 1984b; Sneijder, 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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