

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords: adoptive parenthood; conversation analysis; relationship questions; institutional communication.

1. Introduction

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

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

The ever-lengthening waiting lists for intercountry adoption means that prospective adoptive parents face years of preparation and assessment before the adoptive child is actually handed over to them. In the Netherlands, this may take four or five years. During this lengthy waiting period, when the prospective adoptive parents are extensively informed of the risks of raising an adoptive child, a certain percentage of prospective parents withdraw from the procedure either because of pregnancy or because they are no longer motivated.¹ The adoption applicants who then take part in the assessment process are therefore likely to be highly motivated and well prepared.

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

For our analysis we build on conversation analytical studies that have focused on assessment interactions such as job interviews (Komter 1990, 1991) and psychiatric assessments (of transsexual patients) (Speer and Parsons 2006; Speer and Green 2007). We have also used insights from studies into triadic interactions (Buttny 1990; Gale 1991; Kurri and Wahlström 2005; Peräkylä and Silverman 1991; Peräkylä 1995). Before presenting a brief review of this literature, we first outline the adoption assessment process in the Netherlands.

1.1. *The adoption assessment process*

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

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

Briefly, the assessment is based on three suitability criteria: the parents’ autobiography, the stability of their personality and relationship, and their capacities as adoptive parents. In other words: their past, present, and future state of affairs. Earlier studies in this project showed how hypothetical questions are used to assess future upbringing qualities (Noordegraaf et al. 2008) and how the discussion of past life events is used as a means to assess the coping skills of prospective adoptive parents (Noordegraaf et al. 2009a). The present study focuses on the present state of affairs, the stability of prospective adoptive parents’ relationship and the way it is discussed in the interviews.

2. **Theoretical background**

There are generally two main approaches to the study of assessment. The first approach is to develop diagnostic parameters that may predict future behavior. The second approach focuses on the assessment *process* (Cuzzi et al. 1993, cited in Holland 2004). Our study uses the latter approach.

Conversation analysis may contribute more insights into assessment interactions. One example is the study by Pomerantz (1984), which shows how negative assessments are dealt with in a delicate manner. Giving someone a compliment can be done in a straightforward manner, but there is a conversational “necessity” to utter negative conclusions in an indirect, toned down way, often accompanied by reasons for the negative message. This delicate matter is also reported on in the analysis of institutional settings where the threat of an overall negative assessment is present, not so much as the result of one particular message, but as the result of the interaction as a whole. Professionals in institutional settings behave in a neutral way, for instance by using an institutional “we” when referring to their institutional task of assessment (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Drew and Heritage 1992; Heritage and Maynard 2006). Other ways of counterbalancing the threatening context is to stress cooperation and touse awkwardness markers (Noordegraaf et al. 2009b), to use meta-remarks to explain and account for the situation (Van Nijnatten 2006), and to introduce “counter themes” (Emerson 1970, cited in Speer and Green 2007).

Clients adapt to “being assessed” by displaying suitability in a number of different ways. For instance, transsexual clients in psychiatric assessments display felinity or virility in both their answers and behaviors, and stress that they cannot go on living in the “wrong” body (Speer and Parsons 2006; Speer and Green 2007). However, an applicant in a job interview will display suitability by stressing his or her qualities, and by behaving politely and correctly (Komter 1991). When answering hypothetical questions, prospective adoptive parents display suitability by stressing their parenting qualities and by showing that they are aware of adoption-related problems (Noordegraaf et al. 2008).

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

Posing a question that addresses a couple’s relationship is complicated since it may put the couple in a difficult position. One partner will have to answer the question in front of the other partner, and when the question is addressed to both partners, they will have to decide who is to answer

first. In addition, the couple is not only answering questions about their relationship, they are also “doing their relationship” in front of the social worker. From the way the couple answers questions about their relationship, the social worker can observe how they respond to each other and how they work together when answering questions about their relationship.

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

When questions are addressed to more than one recipient, eye contact continues to be important until the answer is given or until the other recipient initiates intra-turn talk, to add to the answer that his/her partner has given so far. When a recipient wants to add something to the other partner's answer, he/she can do this in an interruptive or in a smooth way. Interruptive ways are used in competitive environments such as classrooms, where students compete to give the correct answers, or in marriage counseling, where the partners impose their views on the marital discord. Yet in assessment interviews, participants are more oriented toward a harmonious presentation of their relationship. Recipients initiate intra-talk by, for instance, filling a mini-pause with a floor-opener such as *well*, by laughing in overlap, or by finishing the other person's words at the end of a sentence (Lerner 1993, 1996).

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

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

1. What questions do social workers use when addressing the prospective adoptive couples' relationship?

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

3. Method

In order to answer our questions we use the ingredients of basic conversation analysis (CA) such as “sequences,” “turn-design,” “repair,” and “lexical choice” (Drew and Curl 2007). We will analyze the data in relation to the institutional context of child welfare assessment in order to say more about the sequential and institutional meaning of the excerpts as a collection of relationship assessments of prospective adoptive parents.

We use concepts of institutional CA, which builds on the findings of basic CA, to examine the operation of social institutions in talk. Unlike the work in basic CA, these findings tend to be less permanent: they are historically contingent and subject to processes of sociocultural change, ideology, power, economics, and other factors impacting change in society (Heritage 2005: 105). For instance, norms of what is considered to be a “good relationship” will change over time and will differ among cultures. Our analysis is therefore also interesting as a means to observe considerations of what constitutes a good relationship.

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

4. Results

In our data we found questions used by the social workers to address the relationship of the prospective adoptive couples. In particular we have found relationship questions that are put to couples (using a general *you*), with and without an observation from the social worker. The ques-

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

4.1. Relationship questions

We will now focus on the questions that are used by the social workers to address the couples' relationship.

Excerpts (1)–(4) show the kind of question that is frequently used when the couples' relationship is under discussion. Different topics can be addressed, but in every case a plural *you* is used in the formulation. Excerpt (1) handles the topic of quarrelling, which is a classic question that leads back to the institutional instruction to assess "how prospective parents deal with problems and tensions" (CPB 2001: 62). Other topics that are often introduced and discussed are: the division of tasks (Extract [2]), differences between partners (Extract [3]), and things that the partners have or do together (Extract [4]).

(1) AiAAA43

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

(2) AiAAA22

- 1 SW: *(.2) hoe eh hebben jullie dingen geregeld?*
how er have you arranged things? for instance
 2 *bijvoorbeeld in het huishouden of financieel of*
the housekeeping or financial things or who er
 3 *wie eh wie wie regelt de dingen bij jullie thuis?*
who who arranges things at your place?

(3) AiARE2

- 1 SW: *ja (.) zijn er nog andere dingen waarin jullie*
yes (.) are there other things in which you
 2 *verschillen? [ver]=*
differ? [do]=

- 3 PAM: [ja]
[yes]
- 4 SW: =schillen jullie erg van elkaar of en [??]
= you differ much from one another or and [??]
- (4) AiAAA2
- 1 SW: *welke dingen doen jullie samen in jullie eh*
what things do you do together in your er
- 2 *relatie*
relationship?

These four questions give a good overview of the main assessment of the couple's relationship. The questions seem simple, almost in survey-interview format, and are neutrally formulated. Extracts (1) and (3) are interrogative yes/no questions. Extracts (2) and (4) are interrogative open questions in which the couples are asked to give an outline of activities (Extract [4]) or an explanation of the way they arrange things in the home (Extract [2]). Nevertheless, these questions cannot be answered by a simple yes or a simple factual description: there are many conversational implications in the simplicity of the question (Levinson 2000). Questions in assessment contexts have a normative dimension that is often hidden (Komter 1991). For instance, in Extract (1), although the structural preference of the question very much aims for a "yes," the social worker does not give any explicit hints about the preferred answer, and the couple has to guess whether quarrelling sometimes, quarrelling badly, or not quarrelling at all is considered to be an indicator of a good relationship. Besides the difficulty of answering within the constraints of institutional norms, the couples have to decide who will answer the question, since the social worker is addressing them both as possible answerer. In the following section we take a further step in analyzing this.

Before doing so, we will show how social workers sometimes add an observation to the question that is assessing the couple's relationship. For the assessment of the couples' relationship the social worker can rely on his/her observations of the way the prospective adoptive parents *actually* interact with each other during the interviews. These observations will sometimes become a topic of conversation when the social worker expresses what strikes him/her in the way the parents interact and invites the couple to respond to such an observation. An example is given in Extract (5):

- (5) AiABT3
- 1 SW: *want ik me:rk >ik geloof dat ik dat de vorige*
because I noti:ce >I believe that I said that the

- 2 *keer ook al zei zo van< jullie zijn *verbaa↑l*
last time as well like< you're both fairly strong
*SW brings hands toward her mouth
- 3 *best sterk allebei hè (.) betekent dat **dat*
*verba↑lly right? (.) does that mean **that you
**SW is moving hands back and forward, palms up
- 4 *jullie ook heel veel(.)met elkaar dingen*
also discuss a lot of things with each o(ther?)
- 5 *bediscussiē↑ren?*

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

Again, it is not clear whether “discuss a lot of things with each o↑ther” (line 4) is considered to be a positive or a negative factor. The Dutch word used here is: “bediscussiē↑ren” (line 5). This is a contraction of ‘talking about things’ (*dingen bespreken*), of ‘discussing things’ (*over dingen discussiëren*). This leaves room for both a negative and a more positive interpretation. “Talking about things” has a less negative connotation than “discussing things.” The negative implication of “discussing things” might be that they quarrel a lot and are therefore not so harmonious.²

5. The answers

In this section we continue to analyze Extracts (1) and (5). We will present the answers to the questions and analyze how the couples adapt to

“being assessed.” The two extracts serve to illustrate our collection of relationship questions. Not all extracts are suitable for presentation in a study, due to their length or complexity. In the following two sections we will add some shorter answers in order to explain the specifics of how couples answer relationship questions. We first show the answer to the question about quarrelling as illustrated in Extract (1). Extract (6) shows the question again, together with (part of) the answer.

(6) (extension of Extract [1]): AiAAA43

- 1 SW: *uhm* (.) **hebben jullie weleens ruzie?*
uhm (.) *do you quarrel sometimes?
 *sw looks at paper while asking the questionfl
- 2 PAM: **nou £nnee hahaha£ heel weinig*
 *well £nno hahaha£ very little
 *PAM looks at PAF while starting to answer the question
 and then looks back to the SW
- 3 PAF: *nou ruzie n[ee]*
 well quarrel n[o]
- 4 PAM: *[nee]*
[no]
- 5 SW: *ok woordenwisseling*
 ok exchange of words
 ok argument³
- 6 PAF: *nee zelfs dat n[au:welijk]s*
 no even that h[a:rdl]y
- 7 PAM: *[nee in het] begin nog wel es maar*
[no in the] beginning sometimes
- 8 *nu nee nee eigenlijk nooit* (.) *zelden nee zelden*
 but now no no actually never (.) seldom no seldom
- 9 >°*laat ik het zo zeggen*°<
 >°let me put it like that°<
- 10 (3.0)
- 11 PAF: *wel eens dat we hoo: ↑guit dat je es*
 sometimes that we at the mo: ↑st that you're
- 12 *teleu:rgesteld bent in iets maar* (3.0) *nee nee*
 disappoi:nted in something but (3.0) no no quarrel
- 13 *ruzie ik heb met jou [volgens mij]=*
 I have never had [a quarrel=
- 14 PAM: *[£haha nee£]*
[£haha no£]
- 15 PAF: *=nog nooit ruzie gehad*
 =with you yet I think

- 16 PAM: *nee*
no
- 17 SW: (5.0) °*ja*° *is dat gezond?*
(5.0) °yes° *is that healthy?*
- 18 PAM: *ja* [*het voelt voor mij goed dus:*
yes [it feels good for me so
- 19 PAF: [*het werkt uitstekend tot nu toe*] *dus eh*
[it works perfectly so far] so eh
- 20 PAM: *ja*
yes

In this extract the woman (PAM) opts to answer the question first. The social worker avoids addressing one of the partners by looking at her notepad while posing the question. The woman looks at her husband and when she sees that he does not make a move to answer (such as an intake of breath, leaning forward, or making a move with his hands), she starts answering the question, using “well” in overlap with her check. She then looks back to the social worker, directing her answer at her.

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

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

try to give a positive image, but are also “honest” about weaknesses. In order to counterbalance the positive image they create of their relationship, they try to avoid sainthood. “Doing being ordinary” is something people rely on in defensive, delicate environments (cf. Sacks 1984).

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

In Extract (7) we show how the question in Extract (5) is answered. The couple in this extract is a homosexual couple; we will therefore refer to them as prospective adoptive father 1 (PAF1) and prospective adoptive father 2 (PAF2).

(7) (extension of Extract [5]): AiABT3

- 1 SW: *want ik me:rk >ik geloof dat ik dat de vorige*
because I noti:ce >I believe that I said that the
- 2 *keer ook al zei zo van< jullie zijn *verbaa↑l*
last time as well like< you’re both fairly strong
*SW brings hands toward her mouth
- 3 *best sterk allebei hè (.) betekent dat **dat*
*verba↑lly right? (.) does that mean **that you
**SW is moving hands back and forward, palms up
- 4 *jullie ook heel veel(.)met elkaar dingen*
also discuss a lot of things with eacho↑ther?
- 5 *bediscussië↑ren?*
- 6 PAF2: **(.) °ja ik vind 't° ik vind het wel grappig want*
*(.) °yes I find it° I find it rather funny because it
*PAF2 starts smiling in the pause
- 7 *eh dat zeggen we ook wel eens van:eh ook ook*
er we because sometimes say that as well like:er
- 8 *grappend want hij hij kan natuurlijk (.) ook heel*
also also in an jokey way he he of course (.) can
- 9 *adrem en verbaal goed reageren=*
also be very pertinent and react well verbally well=
- 10 SW: =uhuh=
=uhuh=
- 11 PAF1: =hh[ha
=hh[ha

- 12 PAF2: [ik zeg met name bij heel veel opmerkingen van
[with many remarks in particular I say like
13 (.) “£joh ik eh ik::£” ehm we maken er soms ook
(.) “£mate I er I::£” ehm we also do make it a game
14 wel een spel van van dat je er dan nog een keer
sometimes like that (general) you then again give
15 overheen gaat,=
it a good going,=
16 PAF1: =ja=
=yes=
17 PAF2: =*in in die zin en dat is dan weer iets positiefs
=*in in that sense and that is then again something
*PAF2 points toward social worker
18 is prikkelt hij daarin £mij ook weer£
positive is he stimulates me with £that as well£
19 SW: ja ja [ja
yeah yeah [yeah
20 PAF2: [dat klinkt een beetje raar *omdat we
[that sounds a bit strange *because we’re
*AAF2 makes stroking gesture toward AAF1
21 elkaar een beetje lopen aaien maar hij eh ik
stroking each other’s ego a bit but he I mean
22 bedoel dit soort dingen (be-)spreken we beiden
we both (dis-)express this kind of thing seldom=
23 zelden uit=
24 PAF2: =ik [denk dat is wel een gevoe:] hoor
=I [think that’s however only a fee:ling
25 PAF1: [>hebben we nooit zo uitgesproken<
[>we’ve never really expressed<
26 PAF2: ja
yes
27 SW: ja=
yes=

Father 2 opts to answer by starting to smile in an obvious manner. The social worker and Father 1 can both see him smile and respond to this by looking at him. Father 2 then starts to answer the question. Just as in Extract (6), the division of turns is accomplished in a subtle, noncompetitive way. Father 2 continues to be the answerer but uses several techniques to involve his partner in his answer. In lines 7, 13, 20, and 22 he speaks on behalf on his partner, using “we”. In lines 16 and 26, Father 1 confirms the answer of his partner by a simple agreement token and in

line 25 he repeats the statement made by his partner, stressing that it is also his stance. What is interesting is that he repeats the statement in which his partner (PAF2) has used “we both” in repair position (lines 21 and 22 “he I mean” → “we both”). He strongly sides with his partner by stressing that they indeed “both” “express this kind of thing seldom” (line 22). Lerner and Kitzinger (2007) analyzed how the use of a simple addition as “both” can express a strong orientation toward making a univocal but still independent statement in interaction.

Lines 25 and 26 are very much linked to each other in the sense that line 25 uses repetition to show alignment and in line 26 Father 2 agrees once more with Father 1, by uttering the agreement “yes”. This indexically refers back to line 24 that was produced in overlap. Although it is not clear what “that” refers to in line 24, the confirmation of Father 1 closes the answer about the partners being “verbally strong”. The way this couple collaborate when giving their answers is positively evaluated in the record, as we see in Extract (8):

(8) AiABT (record)

Factoren die van invloed zijn op het onderzoek:

De gesprekken met de aspirant adoptieouder en zijn partner verliepen in goede sfeer. Zij vulden elkaar goed aan in het geven van informatie.

Factors that influence the assessment:

The conversation with the prospective adoptive parent and his partner were held in a pleasant atmosphere. They complemented each other well in giving information.

Producing an answer collaboratively in interaction is considered to be positive and works in favor of the perceived suitability for adoptive parenthood, as far as the assessment of present affairs is concerned. However, this does not mean that the couples can answer anything they want to as long as they side with each other when giving the answer. As we saw when examining Extract (6), the answer itself is also assessed and is challenged if it is not considered satisfactory. We will now continue to analyze Extract (7), focusing more on the features of the answer itself.

Father 2 starts his answer by smiling and places them as being “verbally strong” in a humorous context. He labels it as “funny” (line 6) and as a “game” (line 13). He is thereby countering the negative implication (of quarrelling a lot) that we discussed earlier, when analyzing the question in Extract (6). He makes this evident by adding illustrations to his answer, presenting it as a story by using “we [...] sometimes say that as well” (line 7), “I say” (line 12), “fmate I er I: £” (line 13). Although the quote in line 13 is not a clear saying at all, it illustrates the fact that their “discussions” are held in a friendly, humorous way. Father 2 does not

deny that they are verbally strong, he even confirms that his partner can “also be very pertinent and react well verbally” (line 9), but places that in a positive context. Another thing that this answer does is that it shows “awareness” of the observation that the social worker has given. Rather than seeming surprised, Father 2 confirms the social worker’s observation and does not treat it as “news.” By giving illustrations of how he and Father 1 get along with their “being verbally strong”, he claims ownership by being aware of this aspect of their relationship.

Father 2’s way of giving evidence for his answer, by placing his answer in a story that represents how he and his partner get along, is something that is another feature of how couples answer relationship questions. They often add examples or stories that have to underline or even prove what they are saying. Again, this is either mostly positive, or a confession required to counterbalance sainthood and which demonstrates awareness of the observation of the social worker. Father 2 continues his answer by adding another positive feature to the way he and his partner get along. He explicitly marks the fact that Father 1 “stimulates” him as “again something positive” (lines 17 and 18). The observation of the social worker of the couple being “verbally strong”, is now framed as something humorous and stimulating and has countered the possible negative implication of “fighting a lot.”

To counter the image that they are constantly praising one another for their verbal skills, Father 2 stresses the fact that they don’t express these kinds of things very often (lines 21–23), but that it is “a feeling” (line 24). Since Father 1 agrees with this in a subtle but clear way, they have demonstrated that they both appreciate their partner as “verbally strong”, that they discuss in a humorous and stimulating way, and that they are aware of this aspect of their relationship.

The social worker phrases this topic in the record in the following way:

(9) AiABT (record)

Stabiliteit relatie en persoonlijkheidsgegevens:

Beide heren geven te kennen dat hun samen zijn prettig en vanzelfsprekend aanvoelt. Zij zijn tamelijk gelijkgestemd en hebben dezelfde interesses en ideeën, waarover veelvuldig gediscussieerd wordt. Er is over en weer sprake van interesse in elkaar en het gevoel gewaardeerd en gerespecteerd te worden door de ander. Meningsverschillen worden altijd opgelost.

Stability of relationship and personal particulars:

Both gentlemen make it clear that their being together feels both enjoyable and natural. They are fairly like-minded and have shared interests and ideas, which are frequently discussed. There is a mutual interest in

each other and a feeling of being validated and respected by the other. Arguments are always solved.

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

6. Discussion and conclusion

We were aware from earlier research into assessment interaction and/or collaborative practices that assessment is a delicate matter and that couples either behave competitively in order to blame each other (as in marriage counseling; Buttny 1990) or that they use several means, such as agreement tokens and overlap, to present univocal answers (Lerner 1993, 1996). We expected that couples that answer questions about their relationship in the context of adoption assessment will very much focus on this by presenting their relationship as being as harmonious as possible. Our aim in this study was to make more specific observations of *how* social workers assess the prospective adoptive couples' relationship and of *how* couples demonstrate suitability for adoptive parenthood by claiming and demonstrating a harmonious relationship in both their answers and their behavior. We therefore answered the following questions:

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

As a result of our analysis we showed an interrogative question that addresses both partners as addressee. The question seems neutral and survey-like but is abound with implications and is constrained by institutional norms of what constitutes a “good relationship.” Topics such as

quarrelling, housekeeping, shared activities, and differences between partners are often the subject of these questions. The other kind of question that we have shown contains a general *you* to address both partners, but includes an observation about the couple's reaction to the question which invites the couple to respond.

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

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

Interestingly, being able to finish off each other's sentences when giving an answer is positively evaluated in the recommendation record and can therefore be considered as a protective factor for adoptive parenthood. Another protective factor is the ability to reflect on the relationship. The couples provide descriptions of their relationship and give reasons for why they behave in certain ways (for instance, why they think they never quarrel). So, having a normal (not overtly positive or negative) explainable relationship or at least *presenting* a relationship as such is considered to be a protective factor for adoptive parenthood. As conversation analysts we can only conclude that the couples manage to give an impression of their relationship as a response to relationship questions. And social workers manage to get and to assess information that helps them draw up a recommendation record in which positive advice about the couple's suitability for adoptive parenthood is constructed. In Goffmanian terms, the couple's performance of good enough adoptive parenthood is successful since they are able to influence the outcome of the assessment positively by showing "unanimity," "familiarity," and by avoiding "false notes" (Goffman 1959). However, only research to follow up on the

actual parenting practices of these couples in the future will tell us whether the conversational skills as demonstrated in the assessment interview will somehow predict success as an adoptive parent.

Once more, being able to produce a version of a shared experience can be counted as an indication of a close and intimate relationship between the producer of the version and the one whom it is about. The presentation of an account of the inner experience of the relationship may be an indication of good partnership. It may even be an indication of a particularly close and caring relationship if, in the account, intimate thoughts and feelings are included in a sensitive way (Peräkylä and Silverman 1991: 470). Being able to answer for both yourself and your partner is proof of insider knowledge about the relationship. If the other partner does not complete the answer, s/he fails to confirm whether the insider knowledge that the other is displaying is right or not. Therefore, it comes down to how you formulate an answer to a question that is addressed to both yourself and your partner in a way that satisfies the social worker and your partner. We have seen how couples manage to do this, and how social workers appreciate couples who work together to give their answers. Nevertheless, social workers remain critical about the answers as such and will challenge the answers if they are not satisfied, or if they suspect a possible risk factor.

The aim of this study was to contribute toward understanding the situated and contingent performance of moral selves and the impact this has on social workers' decision making. We showed how assessment is a shared activity between social workers and prospective adoptive parents. It is in the interaction that we see "assessment in action," an interaction in which the actual decision about peoples' suitability is constructed.

Appendix: Transcription 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
<u>xxx</u>	with emphasis
(xxx)	probable speech
◦ ◦	softly uttered, according to volume
[...]	simultaneous speech

xxx=	no gap between the two lines
:	prolongation of the immediately prior sound
£	smiley voice
↑	intonation going up
*	nonverbal communication
> <	quicker pace then surrounding talk

Notes

1. 1230 of 3197 (= 38.5%) requests for adoption were withdrawn in the Netherlands in 2006.
2. What does adding *be-* to *discussieren* do? With many thanks to Tracy Curl for providing us with the following thoughts: (i) Grammatically speaking, the main job of adding *be-* is to transform intransitive verbs into transitive ones (such as *handelen* and *be-handelen*). This is why it does not make sense in *be-discussieren* because *discussieren* is already transitive. (ii) The adding of *be-* removes the possible negative implication of discussion (in Dutch it can mean 'argument'). (iii) However, adding *be-* to *spreken* makes perfect sense. You need the *be* there to say that you want to speak about something instead of just speaking to someone.
3. Bandy words/skirmish/altercate with someone, have an exchange of words/a discussion/disagreement.

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