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## Research on Language & Social Interaction

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t775653697>

### How Social Workers Start to Assess the Suitability of Prospective Adoptive Parents

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

**To cite this Article** Noordegraaf, Martine, van Nijmegen, Carolus and Elbers, Ed(2009)'How Social Workers Start to Assess the Suitability of Prospective Adoptive Parents',Research on Language & Social Interaction,42:3,276 — 298

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/08351810903095065

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08351810903095065>

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## How Social Workers Start to Assess the Suitability of Prospective Adoptive Parents

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This article takes a close look at the openings of 12 different Dutch adoption assessment sessions. In the first of a series of 4 adoption assessment sessions, social workers perform different actions that are analyzed in detail. The overall focus is on how contact and relationships are established in the openings, and how the social workers work toward the first topic. We found that adoption assessment is a non-self-evident occasion, and this is due to the potential risk of a negative assessment being made—it is oriented to as a delicate setting. In the openings, social workers take time to explain and justify the need for assessment and construct a relationship in which they claim entitlement to conduct an assessment, while also stressing cooperation with the prospective adoptive parent(s).

This article presents the results of an analysis of 12 first exchanges between social workers and prospective adoptive parents in the first of 4 adoption assessment sessions. We analyze the (menu of) actions taken before actually starting to talk about the first topic in the opening activity of assessments.<sup>1</sup> The objective of these assessments is for social workers to discuss a range of topics with prospective adoptive parents in order to determine their suitability to adopt a child from abroad and make the necessary recommendations.

We are interested in the following: How do social workers accomplish the complex institutional task of assessing suitability for adoptive parenthood in interaction? This study focuses on how assessments are opened, and examines how social workers start doing assessment. Schegloff (1986) asserted that what an opening does is to: “constitute or reconstitute the relationship of the

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<sup>1</sup>Heritage and Sorjonen (1994, p. 4) defined activity as “the work that is achieved across a sequence or series of sequences as a unit or course of action”—meaning by this a relatively sustained topically coherent and/or goal-coherent course of action, using “activity” rather than “phase” leaves space for the occurrence of opening actions to occur when the opening phase in the assessment has already gone by (Robinson, 2003, p. 29).

parties for the present occasion” (Schegloff, 1986, p. 113). In other words, openings are used to establish (a) who the speakers are for each other, i.e., their relationship; and (b) what it is they are going to do together, i.e., the occasion (Schegloff, 1968, 1986, 2002; Ten Have, 1999, 2000).

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

This study takes a close look at the opening, introductory activities of 12 assessments by answering the following questions: How can we identify the activity of adoption assessment in the opening sequences; how are the relationship and the occasion constructed in the opening activity?

### OPENING WHAT? ASSESSING SUITABILITY FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTHOOD

People in the Netherlands who wish to adopt a child from abroad enter into a procedure that takes anything between 3 and 5 years. For most of that time, the prospective adoptive parents are on a waiting list: (a) to be introduced to the specifics of adoption by following a compulsory informative six-session course<sup>2</sup> and, once they have completed the course, (b) their suitability for adoptive parenthood is assessed by a social worker from the Child Protection Board (CPB).

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

This means that the CPB is empowered to influence whether the prospective parents will actually become adoptive parents or not. Therefore, the prospective adoptive parents are invited to a local CPB office for a series of four face-to-face sessions with a social worker.

These sessions are structured, and certain prescribed topics are always covered and include verification of the identity of the prospective adoptive parent(s), eligibility and suitability to adopt, background, family and medical history, social environment, reasons for wanting to adopt, the ability to enter into international adoption procedures, and the characteristics of the child they would be qualified to care for (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 1993, Article 15).

In Dutch adoption assessment, Vinke (1999) attempted to standardize the assessment procedure and developed a questionnaire for prospective adoptive parents. She claims to have developed a questionnaire that can be used to improve the validity of the international adoption procedure. However, Juffer and Van IJzendoorn (1999) have criticized Vinke’s claim and have advised against using the questionnaire. For example, the questionnaire categorizes a traumatic life event as a risk factor for adoptive parenthood and positive childhood experiences as a protective factor. However, both practice and research have shown that these events and experiences are more complex: People who are able to cope with traumatic events are still capable of providing a safe environment for an adop-

<sup>2</sup>In Dutch: VIA, which means “information (on) international adoption.”

tive child. And having positive childhood memories does not always have a positive meaning. It could, for instance, mean that someone has an idealized and distorted image of his or her childhood, which might lead to nonresponsive parenthood (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 1999).

This example illustrates that meaning does not remain constant, but tends to be formed through interaction and is context bound (see also Van 't Hof, 2006). The question of how meaning is formed in and through assessment interaction is studied in this article. In particular, by looking at the openings, we study what social workers do during openings and how this is relevant for accomplishing their institutional assessment task.

## FORMER STUDIES ON OPENINGS

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

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

Schegloff provided us with a canonical model of the organization of openings<sup>3</sup> that can be seen as a “neutral menu of possibilities, from which deviations . . . may be made to reflect the particular circumstances of the call (conversation), in terms of the relationship between callers (speakers), and the type of nature of the particular call (occasion)” (Drew & Chilton, 2000, p. 140).

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

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

Potter and Hepburn (2003) also show how (institutional) roles are revealed in early actions. In their analysis of 50 calls reporting cases of abuse, it becomes manifest how there is an asymmetry of knowledge in the first exchanges of the call. Firstly, the caller knows something, that is, the reason and concern for and details of the call, and the call taker knows nothing yet. But secondly, the

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<sup>3</sup>For the sake of space and clarity we do not give the complete canonical model here (see Schegloff, 1986, or a good example of an application of the model in Ten Have, 1999).

call taker knows about child protection and so forth. This asymmetry of knowledge constitutes the relationship in a certain way and provides a way of “taking abuse claims seriously while not having to presuppose their truth” (see pp. 230–231).

In medical interaction doctors and patients perform regular tasks to prepare for dealing with medical issues. Before the medical talk starts, doctors and patients work to determine each other’s readiness to deal with the chief complaint (Robinson, 1998, p. 114). In these openings, greetings, getting the patient to sit down, and securing the patient’s identity are routine items (Heath, 1981). However, during these routine items, doctors and patients use gaze and body orientation to communicate levels of engagement with each other (Robinson, 1998, p. 114). This finding helps to understand how complaints can be elicited or offered without elaborate explication of institutional roles. By doing complaint talk, and by using gaze and body orientation, the institution of general practice consultation is talked into being (Gafaranga & Britten, 2003, 2005; Robinson, 1998, 2003).

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

## DATA AND ANALYSIS

For our analysis we used the method of conversation analysis (CA). The CA method makes it possible to analyze in detail how people in conversation construct meaning. This is made possible by looking at what patterns occur and by analyzing the kind of conversational means people use in order to do things. By looking at sequences we can also discover how people treat each other’s utterances and how they perform social actions together (for an overview and new directions in CA, see Drew & Curl, 2007).

The data used in this study are the openings of 12 assessments held at eight different CPB offices in the Netherlands, conducted between 2002 and 2005. Video and audio recordings were made of 11 different social workers while conducting an assessment, each of which consisted of four meetings. One social worker allowed us to record 2 assessments. Of the 12 assessments, 2 are with single applicants (both female), 1 with a gay couple, and the other 9 with heterosexual couples of whom seven are childless not by choice. The other two couples want to adopt for ideological reasons. The length of the opening sequences varies from 2 to 17 minutes.

The very first exchanges between social worker and prospective adoptive parents were not analyzed. There had already been, in all cases, an initial telephone exchange to make the appointment and/or an exchange in the corridor. Those exchanges had already covered such topics as whether to be on a first-name basis or not, small talk, a greeting, and an exchange of names.<sup>4</sup>

The openings not only start a conversation, they are opening a series of meetings—they are in fact opening the assessment. In that sense, the openings have a double function: They are working

<sup>4</sup>All social workers were questioned on their contact with the prospective parents preceding the first face-to-face session.

toward an interactional state of conducting a conversation, and of constructing a starting point for the assessment itself. The openings analyzed here only occur in first meetings and must therefore be considered as the start of the assessment.

We describe and analyze all actions that can be taken in the opening sequences of the assessment and present them in the most common order. Our analysis includes every possible action that is taken before actually starting to talk about a first topic. The first topic of talk is the first opportunity the prospective adoptive parents have the floor. That is, a question is posed that requires a clear, information-giving reply from the parents. Of course, some topics are discussed before the first topic, but they are marked as pretopics.

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

## ESTABLISHING CONTACT

### (Re-)starting the Conversation

Our analysis starts with the social worker and the prospective adoptive parent(s) entering the room where the recording devices have been installed. They sit down and start to talk. In some assessments (Extracts 1, 2, and 3 of 12) the very first exchange is a sort of repetition of doing a first exchange:

#### Extract 1 AiAAM1

- 01 SW → nou: (.) welkom eh in je eigen huis  
*right: (.) welcome er to your own home*
- 02 PAM £ja dank je hahaha£ (lachend)  
*£yes thanks hahaha£ (smiley voice)*
- 03 SW e::h ja ik ben (naam RO) van de raad van  
*e::r yes I'm (name omitted) from the child*
- 04 kinderbescherming maar goed we al: diverse keren  
*protection board anyway we've al:ready had*
- 05 contact gehad=  
*contact several times=*
- 06 PAM ja  
*yes*

<sup>5</sup>The idea that an assessment opening activity consists of several actions that cluster different organizational tasks is an outcome of our study. Ten Have (1999) offered us the words to categorize these findings.

## Extract 2 AiABM1

- 01 SW → ok nou (.) welkom bij adoptie  
*ok right (.) welcome to adoption*  
 02 PAF £ja adoptie£  
*£yes adoption£ (smiley voice)*

## Extract 3 AiADHE1

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

In all three extracts, by welcoming the parents, the social workers immediately take the floor and establish a position as both the host and chair of the assessment. The repetition of the first exchange works as a way to mark the goal orientation of the encounter and to formalize it.

In Extracts 1 and 2 the institutional orientation of the encounter is explicitly mentioned (Extract 1, lines 3 and 4: “from the child protection board”; Extract 2, line 1: “to adoption”). This strengthens the institutional role of the social worker and is in both extracts sequentially confirmed by the adoptive parent (Extract 1, line 6: “yes”; Extract 2, line 2: “yes adoption”).

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

## ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP

Having established contact, the social workers in our study do not get down to business straightaway. They all start a monologue that provides the prospective parents with all kinds of information, and explain at length what the assessment is all about: the who and what of assessment. In this monological phase it becomes manifest what the occasion for the sessions is and what (institutional) identities are relevant for the assessment.

The provision of information comes across as a scripted narrative, a rehearsed story with some specific applications to the prospective adoptive parents in question. In most opening actions, the social worker produces a multiunit turn, with information concerning the who or what of assessment. The prospective adoptive parents then nod, smile, or give backchannels such as “yes” and “hmm.” In some cases, as we will see, their responses are a bit more extensive, but they seldom do more than answer what the first part of the sequence is asking for. The monological phase of the opening is often lengthy: In one case it took 17 minutes.



## OPENING THE OPENING

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

## Extract 4 AiAAA21

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

## Extract 5 AiAAM1

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

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

- AiAAA21 dan beginnen we daarna gewoon met het gesprek  
***after that we then** just start with the conversation*  
 AiAAM1 en eh ja dan beginnen we gewoon  
*and **then** er yes we just **start***

The start of the assessment (“then”) is located after the things to say “first.” The social worker in Extract 5 does not explicate what “then” starts, and the social worker in Extract 4 uses two repairs to come to the formulation of “the conversation.” The pause after “and then we” in line 3 and the pause after “after that we just see err” in line 3 are the places where the social worker restarts her



announcement of the assessment. She finally comes to the formulation of “the conversation” in line 5. The use of repair here indicates some hesitancy and delicacy on how to label the current activity and to avoid explicit referral to the evaluative nature of the conversation(s).

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

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

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| AiAAM1  | wat ik eigenlijk altijd doe<br><i>what I actually always do</i>      |
| AiAAA21 | het lijkt mij het handigst<br><i>I think it would be a good idea</i> |
| AiABM1  | we gaan in het begin altijd<br><i>in the beginning we always go</i>  |

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

So far, we can conclude that the social workers engage in preliminary work before explicitly introducing the assessment. In these introductory parts of the conversation, they either explicitly construct a dominant position in the relationship as host and chair of the meeting (by welcoming the adoptive parents), or just take up their institutional task of providing the parents with information on the assessment. Yet they also mark the assessment as routine and normal and not as a big thing. This is an indication of the ambiguity of the relationship between the social worker and the prospective adoptive parents. On the one hand, the social workers take control and position themselves as experts. On the other hand, by designing their turns the way they do, they emphasize the relational aspects and the informal nature of their collaboration.

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

## WHO THE INTERACTANTS ARE FOR EACH OTHER

Talk in almost all institutional encounters is somehow related to the drawing up of a document. This is also the case in adoption assessment: a written recommendation about the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents. All social workers refer to the drawing up of the document, sometimes right at the beginning of the assessment (Extract 6):

Extract 6 AiARA1<sup>6</sup>

- 01 SW    lopen we nu even de personalia door (.) ik heb  
           *lets just run through your details (.) I have*  
 02       staan Parton Adrianis hè met I (.) S  
           *written Parton Adrianis right? with I (.) S*  
 03       [hè?]  
           *[right?]*  
 04 PAF       [klopt]  
           *[right]*  
 05 SW    en Brown Jacobine (Eveline)?  
           *and Brown Jacobine (Eveline)?*  
 06 PAM   ja  
           *yes*  
 07 SW    geboren in Arnhem op 01,07,68 (.) jij bent in  
           *born in Arnhem on 01,07,68 (.) you are in the*  
 08       hetzelfde Arnhem op 16,09,1971 (.) ja? (.2) jullie  
           *same Arnhem on 16,09, 1971 (.) yes? (.2) you were*  
 09       zijn gehuwd in Nijmegen op 15,06,1989 (.)  
           *married in Nijmegen on 15,06,1989 (.)*  
 10 PAM   ja  
           *yes*  
 11 SW    [ja?]  
           *[yes?]*  
 12 PAF   [ja]  
           *[yes]*  
 13-33   SW also checks profession, address and phone number.  
 34 SW    okee goed dat is wat ik van u weet wat ehh zeg  
           *okay right that's what I know about you*  
 35       maar de de feitelijke gegevens betreft  
           *concerning err let's say call it the the factual details*

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

<sup>6</sup>All identifiable items are replaced by different names, places and numbers.

adoptive parents to correct the details, assuming that they own the information that is needed for drawing up the record. Note that the prospective adoptive parents again hold a submissive recipient position and that they voluntarily provide the social worker with information. They do not question, but provide second pair-parts where they are requested. These turns add up to a cooperative nature of the assessment and construct a basis for the latter assessment questions.

There are more identities made relevant in the openings. In Extract 7, the delicate nature of the prospective adoptive parents being assessed by the social worker is mentioned.

Extract 7 AiARA1

- 01 SW .... dus ik voer de gesprekken met jullie  
     .... *so I have the conversations with you*  
 02 waarin £(lacht licht) jullie toch even van mij  
     *where £ (smiley voice) you are*  
 03 afhan[kelijk]=  
     *depen[dent] on me for a =*  
 04 PAF [mjaaa]  
     [myees]  
 05 RO = zijn£ zeg ik altijd toch maar even hè want er  
     = *moment£ I always say that, right? because there*  
 06 zit natuurlijk toch iets in altijd van ja!  
     *is always still something in it like yes!*  
 07 uiteindelijk moet er een beslissing komen over  
     *eventually a decision has to be made about*  
 08 wel of geen beginseltoe[stem]ming  
     *whether or not authori[za]tion or not*  
 09 PAF [ja]  
     [yes]  
 10 verstrekken dus hè dat weten jullie↓  
     *is provided so right? you know that↓*  
 11 PAM °ja°  
     °yes°

This extract is pretty exceptional due to its forthrightness. Other social workers in our corpus are more vague about their actor status and only refer to their authority in a more indirect manner (see also Van Nijnatten, 2005; Hall, Slembrouck, & Sarangi, 2006; Noordegraaf, Van Nijnatten, & Elbers, 2008). However, this vagueness does not mean that the social workers will not use their authority. In fact “the whole conversation might be understood as an arena of positioning: constructing interactional and institutional identities while introducing and discussing several different topics. In the end: it is not necessary to spell out that you are . . . a gatekeeper to act as one” (Noordegraaf et al., 2008, p. 2).

Being forthright requires a lot of conversational work. The bottom lines of this extract are in lines 2 and 3, and in lines 8 and 10 where the social worker says: “you are **dependent** on me” and “a **decision** on whether or not authorization is provided.” Those two keywords summarize the core of the assessment in all its delicacy—in the end, whether or not the prospective parents’ adoption

wish is fulfilled is in the hands of the social worker. The social worker sort of fleshes this idea out by adding different awkwardness markers.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most clear marker is the smiley voice of the social worker in lines 2–5. Although a smiley voice can mean a lot of things in conversation (e.g., Jefferson, 1984, 2004), here it would seem to contribute toward cushioning what she is saying.

The lexical use of “always” in line 5 (see also Extract 5 for the use of “always”) also marks the fact that although in this situation the prospective adoptive parents are dependent on the social worker’s decision, they are no more or no less dependent than other prospective adoptive parents. In other words, dependency is not the result of anything the prospective parents might say or do, it is simply procedural. The same is done by using “eventually” and “has” in line 7. By being indefinite the social worker places the initiative and responsibility for the fact that a decision **has** to be made outside herself and constructs her role as someone who is only conducting an institutional procedure.<sup>8</sup>

The prospective adoptive parents provide I-hear-you-parts by uttering *myees* (line 4), “yes” (line 9), and “yes” (line 11). The whole excerpt can be read as an announcement rather than as a question. Although the social worker in line 10 seems to ask the parents a question (“right?”), she ends her turn with a downward intonation (“you know that↓”), indicating that her saying is ended. This change of action (from possible question to be answered, to end of saying to be confirmed) is followed with a softly uttered “yes” (line 11) by the prospective adoptive mother. The softness indicates some hesitance. She is confirming the “you know that↓” of the social worker in line 10, which has a strong preference to confirmation. However, the question formulation just before that (“right?”, line 10) will have its effect on her turn as well. Besides, although she provides a second pair-part as requested, there are of course several implications to the announcement of the social worker that she cannot oversee at that point. This might also explain the hesitance in her softly uttered “yes.” In sum, when a social worker is forthright about the evaluative nature of the assessment, an announcement is made rather than a discussion opened.

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

Extract 8: AiAAA21

- 01 SW ehm ik zit hier niet met een checklistje van (.)  
           *ehm I'm not sitting here with a checklist like*  
 02 eh drie foute antwoorden is af↓ (.) zo werkt het niet  
           *(.) er three wrong answers and you're out<sup>9</sup>↓ (.) it*  
 03 doesn't work like that

Extract 9: AiAAA21

- 01 SW ehm (.) ja ik ik hoop gewoon dat we een een  
           *ehm (.) yes I I just hope we can work well*

<sup>7</sup>We owe many thanks to Paul Drew for his contribution to the analysis of the data in this study in general but especially for his thoughts on social workers' use of awkwardness markers in this extract.

<sup>8</sup>The formulations are also fleshed out by the use of particles as *toch* in line 2, 5, and 6. This particle, however, does not translate easily into English, and the effect might be a bit lost in translation.

<sup>9</sup>Back to square one.

- 02 beetje plezierig samen kunnen werken dat het een  
 03 beetje leuke gesprekken worden  
*together*

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

Another way to moderate the relationship into a more equal one is by disclosing personal information about themselves to the prospective adoptive parents. Some social workers share more information than others, but all of them disclose their parenthood status. We can see this in Extracts 10 and 11:

Extract 10 AiAAA41

- 01 SW uhhm ik krijg in de komende tijd toch heel veel  
 02 *uhhm in the coming period I'm going to get a lot*  
 03 van jullie te horen (.) dus ik vind het wel zo  
 04 *of information from you (.)so I think it's only*  
 05 eerlijk om dan ook iets over mezelf te vertellen(.)  
 06 *fair to say something about myself as well (.)*  
 07 uhh (.) ik ga beginnen met mijn  
 08 *uhh I'll start with my (.)*  
 09 leeftijd (.) dan heb ik dat gehad [hahaha  
 10 *age (.) then we've £had that£ [hahaha*  
 11 PAM [hahaha  
 12 PAF [hahaha

## Extract 11 AiAAM1

- 01 SW e:hm goed zoals ik al zei ik be' ik ben (naam RO)  
 02 e:rm well what I said before I a' I'm (name  
 03 ik ben vijfenveertig ik heb twee dochters van  
 04 omitted) I'm forty-five I have two daughters who  
 05 inmiddels zes en tien (1.0) ik vertel het er  
 06 are now six and ten (1.0) I always say this too  
 07 altijd bij want gaandeweg de rit voer ik ze toch  
 08 because as we go along I will mention them  
 09 wel op=  
 10 anyway=  
 11 PAM ja  
 12 yes  
 13 SW =aantal voorbeelden (2.0) en ik werk nu twaalf  
 14 =several examples (2.0) and I've now worked with  
 15 jaar bij de raad van de kinderscherming  
 16 the child protection board for twelve years

These extracts show that the social workers quite voluntarily place themselves in a vulnerable position by disclosing personal information. Of course, this act of vulnerability bears no relation to the real vulnerability of the prospective adoptive parents. There is no decision to be made that will affect the social workers' personal life. Moreover, the social worker controls the conversation and can decide exactly what to share and, more importantly, what not to share. In contrast, the assessment requires the prospective adoptive parents to give personal information, and by doing so provide the social worker with material on which to assess them. By saying "in the coming period of time I'm going to get a lot of information from you" (Extract 10: lines 1 and 2) the social worker preempts this. The social worker in Extract 11 gives another reason for his disclosure. He does not refer to the relationship but only to the later conversation where he will "mention them" (his children) "anyway" (line 4 and 5).

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

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

## WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO DO TOGETHER

### Setting the Agenda

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

#### Extract 12 AiAAA21

- 01 SW ehmm wat gaan we doen in de gesprekken? Eh in dit  
*ehmm what are we going to do in our sessions? er*  
 02 eerste gesprek wil ik het met jullie hebben over  
*in this first meeting I want to talk with you*  
 03 ehm waarom jullie willen adopteren? jullie  
*about ehm why you want to adopt? your reasons and*  
 04 motivatie en wat jullie verwachtingen zijn en wat  
*your expectations and what your wishes are with*  
 05 jullie wensen zijn ten aanzien van de adoptie(.)  
*respect to adoption (.)*

- 06           nou dan in het volgende gesprek het tweede  
               *well then in the next session, the second*
- 07           gesprek gaan we het hebben over ehm ehm jullie  
               *conversation we will talk about ehm ehm your your*
- 08           jullie levensverhaal dus echt van in wat voor  
               *lifestories so really like the kind of family in*
- 09           gezin zijn jullie geboren opgegroeid, lagere  
               *which you were born and grew up, primary school*
- 10           school middelbare school, werk, hobbies, vrije  
               *high school, work, hobbies, spare*
- 11           tijd nou ja alles wat maar met jullie eigen leven  
               *time well yes everything that has to do with*
- 12           te maken heeft  
               *your own life*
- 13   PAM   mmm  
               *mmm*
- 14   SW    en dan in het derde gesprek wil ik het met jullie  
               *and then in the third conversation I want to*
- 15           hebben over jullie relatie en over ehm wat wat  
               *discuss your relationship with you and also ehm*
- 16           voor ideeën jullie hebben over het opvoeden van  
               *what what your ideas are about bringing up*
- 17           kinderen  
               *children*
- 18   PAM   ja  
               *yes*

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

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

### Giving a Reason for the Encounter

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

- AiADH1   ik ben hier naar aanleiding van  
               *the reason I'm here is*



- AiAAM1 wat ik moet doen is  
*what I have to do is*
- AiAAM1 wat wil ik? Ik wil eigenlijk gewoon  
*what do I want? I actually just want*

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

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

These announcing utterances remind us of how, in storytelling, the narrator makes clear that he is about to tell the plot of the story or that he has just told us the plot. Just like the plot in stories, the reason for the encounter can be repeated several times and with different wording. An example in which the social worker works from the general to the specific when giving the reason for the encounter is in Extract 13:

Extract 13 AiAAM1

- 01 SW mja? (1.0) wat ik moet doen is e:h (.) eh ja  
*myes? (1.) what I have to do is e:r (.) er*
- 02 kijken van ja of je voldoende geschikt bent  
*yes look at yes whether you are suitable*
- 03 om een kind uit het bui:tenland in jouw  
*enough to take in a fo:reign child in your*
- 04 gezinssituatie op te nemen=  
*family situation=*
- 05 PAM ja  
*yes*
- 06 SW =waarbij we kijken naar eh risicofactoren en  
*=where we look at er risk factors and at*
- 07 naar beschermende factoren  
*protective factors*
- 08 ja  
*yes*
- 09 SW mja? e::n op voo:rhand kan je ook stellen  
*myes? a::nd befo:rehand you can also state*
- 10 dat er al een paar risicofactoren zijn >dat  
*that there are already a few risk factors*
- 11 is< hè dus je bent alleenstaand=  
*>that is< well you're single=*
- 12 PAM (knikt) ja  
*(nods) yes*
- 13 SW =je bent eenenveertig nu hè?=  
*=you are forty-one now right?=  
 14 PAM (knikt) ja  
 (nods) yes*

- 15 SW =dus dat houdt in dat je dan een ouder kind  
           =*so that means that you then*  
 16 moet [eh] (zal)adopteren  
           *have to [er] (will) adopt an older child*  
 17 PAM [ja] (knikt)  
           [yes] (nods)

The prospective mother confirms information checking devices with a nod and *yes* (lines 12, 14, 17) and adopts a listener's position when information is delivered. This is a classic example of the multiunit-turn, minimal-response format in which most sequences develop in the assessment openings. This format can be understood as an interactional agreement of undergoing assessment. The interactional susceptible attitude marks the position of the prospective parent as a recipient of information (as is the case in, for instance, teacher–student interaction). However, during the course of the assessment, prospective parents get plenty of room to talk. Then they have to show their suitability, and the social worker takes more of an examiner role (note the overlap with teacher–student interaction again, where the teacher also takes the role of an examiner, after instructions are given).

Furthermore, this extract (13) illustrates how the reason for the encounter is formulated and specified to the prospective adoptive mother in question, who is a single applicant. In lines 1–8 the social worker uses a general formulation in which he detaches himself from what he is saying (by using “have to” in line 1 and by using “we” in line 6). He then applies the general phrase to the prospective mother's specific situation by setting out a few risk factors (still making use of a general “you,” line 9). By confirming these facts, by nodding and saying “yes,” and by not countering them as nonrisk factors, the mother accepts she belongs to a group of prospective adoptive parents with preknown risk factors.

Where the extract stops, the social worker continues with his application work. Later on in the opening he again presents the reason for the encounter using different words (Extract 14):

#### Extract 14 AiAAM1

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

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

Another interesting feature of the way the reason is given is that the social worker constructs his turn as being a sequential pair in itself. By posing a question out loud (line 1: “what do I want?”), he shapes his monologue into a much more interactional form. This form is not only restricted to the action of giving the reason for the encounter but is a common way of making the opening more interactional (see also line 1 of Extract 12).

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

### PROCEDURAL TELLABLES

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

### PREEMPTING POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

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

Extract 15 AiAAA21

- 01 SW ehm (.) ja ik ik hoop gewoon dat we een een  
           *ehm (.) yes I I just hope that we can have a a*  
 02 beetje plezierig samen kunnen werken dat het een  
           *rather pleasurable cooperation that it will*  
 03 beetje leuke gesprekken worden ja en na<sup>↑</sup>tuurlijk  
           *become rather nice meetings yes and of<sup>↑</sup>course we*

- 04 kunnen we op dingen stuiten waarvan ik denk mm  
*can come up against something I think mm that is,*  
 05 dat is, dat zijn twijfels of dat is, dat is dat  
*that are doubts, that is that is worrying or*  
 06 is zorgelijk of misschien is dat wel een risico  
*perhaps that's a risk (.) we have to talk that*  
 07 daar moeten we het dan maar uitgebreid over  
*through in detail then*  
 08 hebben↓  
 09 PAM (.2) ja  
 (.2) yes  
 10 SW (.)  
 en ik wil gewoon van jullie weten hoe jullie daar  
 (.) and I just want to know from you what you  
 11 een beetje in staan(.)  
*somehow think about this (.)*

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

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

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

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

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

## WORKING TOWARD A FIRST TOPIC

After all these tellables, which have “the degree of claimed priority or urgency embodied in the degree of preemption before anchor position pursued by the preempting party” (Schegloff, 1986, p. 117), the social worker works toward a first topic in which the prospective parents are invited to talk (Extract 16):

## Extract 16 AiARA1

- 01 SW hebben jullie ehh aan het begin zo van al deze  
*do you have err at the start of these*
- 02 gesprekken vra:gen aan mij zijn d'r dingen de  
*conversations que:stions to me is there anything*
- 03 afgelopen tijd waar van je zegt bij het VIA  
*lately like at the information course they sai:d*
- 04 zei:den ze maar toen heb ik 's gehoord of dat  
*but then I've once heard*
- 05 soort dingen [on]duidelijkheden  
*or that kind of stuff [ob]scurities*
- 06 [nee]  
*[no]*
- 07 PAM nee eigenlijk [niks nee] nee↓  
*no actually [nothing no] no↓*
- 08 SW [niks nee?]=  
*[nothing no?]=*
- 09 PAF [°nee ??°]  
*[°no ??°]*
- 10 SW =[ho]e was de V:IA voor  
*= [ho]w was the VIA for*
- 11 jullie dat is nu een tijdje geleden hoe was dat?  
*you that's been a while now how was that?*
- 12 ja ik vond ik heb het zelf als heel positief  
*yes I felt I have experienced it as really*
- 13 ervaren ja↑  
*positive myself yes↑*

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

## CLOSING THE OPENING

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

- AiARA1 hebben jullie ehh aan het begin zo van al deze  
*do you have err at the start of these*  
 gesprekken  
*conversations*
- AiAAA41 u:::hm nou even denken, ik denk dat wel een  
*u:::hm well let's think, I guess that that's*  
 beetje het belangrijkste is om op voorhand te  
*sort of the most important thing to tell you*  
 vertellen aan jullie.  
*beforehand*
- AiAAA41 goed (.) even denken (.) heb ik al het  
*right (.) let's see (.) have I told you all the*  
 belangrijke verteld (.2) volgens mij wel (.) nou  
*important things (.2) I think so yes (.) well*
- AiAMM1 u:::hm (.2) dan gaat het gewoon beginnen  
*u:::hm (.2) then it's just going to start*
- AiAMM1 u::hm (.) waar ik mee wil beginnen  
*u::hm (.) I want to start with*

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

## CONCLUSION

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

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

Second, although it is a legal obligation for the suitability of prospective parents to be assessed before obtaining permission to adopt a child, social workers are reluctant to be forthright about their role in this procedure. Assessment, and the risk of a negative assessment in particular, is a delicate matter (Pomerantz, 1984; Raymond & Heritage, 2006). In our study we found that social workers tended to work cautiously rather than confront the prospective parents with their formal role.

When the social workers do express their entitlement to collect information to help them formulate a recommendation, they mitigate their authority by stressing that they hope their sessions are pleasant, by, among other features, using preliminaries,<sup>10</sup> awkwardness markers, and sandwich constructions and by disclosing personal information about themselves. They confirm the ownership the parents have with regard to the information to be collected. Nevertheless, they act as the host and chair of the assessment and sometimes already preempt possible problems or, more or less vaguely, touch upon the issues of dependency and decision making, and in any case do arrive at a final recommendation regarding the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents for adoption.

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>10</sup>As one of our anonymous reviewers pointed out to us, there are different levels of preliminaries in our data and analysis. These are: (a) pre-pre's, announcing preliminaries (like in Extract 5, line 1: "what I actually always do"). In our data, these utterances come across as pre-pre-delicates; (b) the preliminary information itself (e.g., self-disclosure by social worker or explanation of the aim of the assessment sessions); and (c) some gathering of information is considered as a pre-task (e.g., checking prospective parents name and address). According to Schegloff (1980, 2006) preliminaries (or action projections) are used to convey "what the projected action will be, and that it will be delayed so as to allow certain necessary preliminaries to be dealt with. The recipient is thereby put on notice that what will follow directly is not itself what the speaker means to get said or to get done, and its end should not be taken as the end of the speaker's turn" (2006, p. 150). Interestingly, in some occasions in our data (when the pre-preliminaries are pre-pre-delicates) the delicates themselves are never uttered but just done (assessment in action). The amount of preliminaries are an indicator of the delicacy of the assessment activity.



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

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

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