

“Shared care” through instant messaging updates in youth care; an interaction analysis

(Post-print)

Abstract

In this paper we present an analysis of WhatsApp interactions in youth care. In family-style group care young people temporarily live in the family of professional foster parents (PFP), while they regularly visit their birth parents (BPs). Our data consist of instant messaging conversations between 11 pairs of PFPs and BPs during two months. Using Conversation Analysis (CA), we focused on the social interaction between BPs and PFPs, achieved in and through multi-modally constructed sequences of *updates* - *responses*. Updates are used by BPs in the context of the transfer from the child from/to the PFP to display responsibility towards the PFP and for the child. Also, PFPs use updates to provide BPs quasi primary access to the experiences of the child, centrally by sending images. Across these functions, we observe specific social actions of BPs and PFPs; while BPs work to display responsibility, PFPs subtly empower BPs as parents.

Keywords: *WhatsApp, foster care, youth care, updates, conversation analysis*

1. Introduction

Communication technologies like mobile text messaging/instant messaging have become increasingly used in professional settings and for professional purposes (Ganasgeran et al., 2017; Hay et al., 2020). One of the questions that arises from this development is how the communication technology affects work practices, goals and relationships. In this article, we address this question by focusing on the case of WhatsApp messaging in a specific type of Dutch youth care, called family-style group care. In family-style youth care, Professional Foster Parents (PFPs) take care of approximately four children within their own home, often

next to their own children (Wunderink, 2019). While the children live with the PFPs, they occasionally visit their birth parents (BPs). Previous research indicated that a difficult relationship between PFPs and BPs influences the child's behaviour (Vanderfaeillie et al., 2018). Hence, this relationship is crucial from a youth care perspective. PFPs and BPs have regular contact, including meetings and telephone calls, but also through WhatsApp.

Our analysis is concentrated on *updates* provided by both PFPs and BPs, specifically messages related to the child such as reports of the child's activities. Updates are recognizable sequences of actions conveying some kind of news that have been identified in instant messaging before (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008). Updates may be self-initiated or requested and they elicit a response from the recipient. The analysis focuses on how updates are organized interactionally and on what is achieved with updates in terms of the relationship between the participants in this youth care setting. It concerns hitherto unexamined *digital* social interactions in a precarious institutional setting.

2. Communication in family-style group care

Family-style group care is a form of youth care similar to foster care. It is meant for children under 18 who have to grow up outside their biological family and who are characterized by difficult behavior due to their background. The children require full time care and a safe and stable living situation. In family-style group care one of PFPs works as a youth worker in his/her own family, which implies he/she is always available (De Baat & Berg-le Clercq, 2013). The partner often has a job elsewhere and is available for the children only when at home. Family-style group care is meant to be a form of 'shared care'; (professional) foster parents and birth parents share as much responsibility as possible (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2020).

Problems in the relationship between PFPs and BPs seems to be one of the main reasons for placement breakdown. Enduring commitment of birth parents to their child has been

suggested as a major factor to prevent a breakdown (Ainsworth, 2018; Barken & Lowndes, 2018; Konijn et al., 2019). Although PFPs and BPs have a different position in the partnership, both positions are crucial for the care process. A successful partnership between PFPs and BPs is characterized by mutual respect, empathy and sharing information, responsibility and care (Nesmith et al., 2017).

One aspect that complicates communication between PFPs and BPs is their ambivalent relationship: PFPs are in charge of the daily care of the children, which is helpful and threatening for BPs at the same time. For BPs, not having access to their child(ren) is a sensitive issue (see Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). Another aspect that complicates communication between PFPs and BPs is the hybrid setting in which private and work life are intertwined: their interaction is embedded in the *everyday* social lives of both parties; it is not restricted to office hours and it affects the private lives of the participants (cf. Mols & Pridmore, 2020; Shklarski, 2019).

2.1 Instant messaging

A basic sequential unit in spoken interaction is an *adjacency pair*: two utterances of different persons produced in separate turns (Schegloff, 1968). In instant messaging, the normative sequential structure of adjacency pairs is maintained (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008). Often, participants send more than one first pair part in a single post, which makes it difficult to deliver the sequentially implicative response in directly adjacent positions (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008; Spagnolli & Gamberini, 2007). Despite such issues inherent to technologically mediated interaction, users manage to foreground specific topics while coordinating their (sequential) actions (König, 2019). Images embedded in the interaction are used as evidence that something has happened or as an interactional device, for instance by commenting on others' photos (Thelwall & Vis, 2017, p. 712).

Previous studies of instant messaging focused on interaction among family and/or friends (e.g. Al Rashdi, 2018; Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018; Sampietro, 2019), while studies focusing on instant messaging in *hybrid* settings like family-style group care are still rare (Mols & Pridmore, 2020). In the context of parenting, research on *digital* parenting including studies of blogs and fora related to issues of parenting (e.g., Lyons, 2020; Mackenzie & Zaho, 2021) is increasing. Lyons (2020) examined how new mums in WhatsApp group interaction constructed expertise and exchanged experiences of being a mum. These studies mainly concern group interactions between peers.

In the field of social work and particularly in the context of foster care, research on the use of mobile communication devices, such as instant messaging, tends to be based on interviews. Care-givers and young people report being positive about the role of mobile communication in their relationship (Alford, Denby & Gomez, 2019; Simpson, 2017). However, research on real-life instant messaging communication in youth care is lacking. Our analysis of WhatsApp communication in the setting of family-style group care provides novel insights into the relationship of PFPs and BPs.

2.2 Updates as news

Updating is a common activity in (digital) interaction: participants continuously exchange information and news. Hutchby and Tanna (2008) found that SMS – the previous iteration of WhatsApp – is used for news announcement. Such news announcement (e.g., “food ordered”) calls upon shared knowledge. Also, it makes relevant some news receipt in response, which implies that news in messaging is sequentially implicative. Updates delivered as a first pair part (Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 1968) can be characterized as *informings*: in first position, the participant is ‘doing a report’ that is assessed by the listener as a conditionally relevant second pair part (Pomerantz, 1984). Such reports are also called *announcements of news* (Terasaki,

2005). In response to these announcements, recipients have several reception procedures available to indicate to the deliverer whether they assess the news as ‘news’ and how they appreciate the news (Maynard, 1997; Terasaki, 2005).

Requested updates, vary from open, explorative news inquiries to specific, itemized news inquiries, which nominate a particular item for reporting (Button & Casey, 1984). Despite the difference in elicitation of updates (self-initiated vs. other-initiated/requested), the conditional relevance (Schegloff, 2007) of an assessment of the news is maintained.

Based on this previous research on the sequential structure of sharing news in interaction, not only in spoken interaction, but also in instant messaging, the analysis focuses on the question of what is achieved with instant messaging updates in the particular setting of family-style group care. Particularly, we closely examine the interactional work around updates related to the transfer of the young people between PFPs and BPs, updates of events in the life of the young people while staying with PFP and updates in the context of a prior problem.

3. Data & Methodology

Our data consist of naturally occurring instant messaging (WhatsApp) conversations between 11 pairs of Professional Foster Parents (PFPs) and Birth Parents (BPs) during two months. The relationship between PFPs and BPs was in all cases about an adolescent who lived in the PFP’s home, but visited their BPs on occasion (weekends, holidays). The participants were recruited as part of a research project on cooperation between PFPs and BPs. We have ethical approval for the study: all participants were fully informed about the aim of the study and gave their consent preceding the data collection period. The data were anonymized; names were replaced by pseudonyms.

The data involve 11 adolescents (3 boys, 8 girls) between 13 and 20 years old. The length of the in-family placement varied between 9 months and 126 months and was 49 months

on average. In some interactions, there is just one BP involved, in others, both birth mother (BM) and father (BF) participate. Most PFP and BP dyads did not have daily contact. The time between communicative exchanges varied between a few hours and a few weeks.

Our data consist of the chat logs as they were produced by the chat export functionality of WhatsApp. The two-month chat logs consist of 30 to 228 posts per dyad/triad. The chats mainly include text messages but also images and some videos depicting the young people and/or PFPs/BPs.

3.1 Method

We analyzed the instant messaging from a conversation analytic perspective (Sacks et al., 1974), because Conversation Analysis (CA) can provide an in-depth and meticulously detailed understanding of communication. To validate the understanding/ interpretation of the researcher, a basic principle of conversation analysis is the *next-turn proof procedure* (Sacks 1995); in their interaction, participants themselves show in the next position how they understood the prior utterance. This enables the researcher to understand how participants themselves derive meaning from, and interpret their conversational activities (Sidnell, 2013). CA has proven to be a valid and useful method for examining how participants construct social actions via (mediated) interaction, including specifically instant messaging (e.g., Hutchby & Tanna, 2008; Spagnolli & Gamberini, 2017). Both text and visual aspects like emoji and photos/videos are examined as potentially interactionally relevant.

Based on the data-driven approach typical for CA, we started with an exploration of the data. We noticed that a common opening of a new stretch of interaction between PFPs and BPs consisted of sharing news: one of the participants delivers news (cf. Hutchby & Tanna, 2008; Terasaki, 2005) which is responded to with an assessment (Pomerantz, 1984). To avoid the equation of a digitally mediated phenomenon with a concept specific to spoken social

interaction we decided to call these sequences “updates”. We identified a total number of 54 updates either self- or other-initiated in our data. Through inductive analysis (Silverman, 1993, p. 161), we decided to focus on what was achieved by the unfolding updates in terms of the parenting relationship. The sequences varied in length between 3 and more than 10 posts, depending on elaboration of the news. The updates were divided unequally among the dyads/triads: varying from 1 update (in an exchange of 30 posts) to 14 updates (in an exchange of 209 posts). Most updates were unelicited (see Table 1), i.e. opening a new stretch of interaction after a few days of no messaging. Some updates were elicited (see Table 1), i.e. provided in response to an itemized news enquiry (see section 4.3).

	<i>Self-initiated updates</i>	<i>Elicited updates</i>
Professional Foster Parents	15	8
Birth Parents	25	6
Total	40	14

Table 1: numbers of self-initiated and elicited updates by PFP and BP

The use of photos and/or videos was quite common for updates: in 13 cases (out of 54) the update was done with a photo/video, while photos/videos were rarely used in other interactional contexts. In the next section, we present our findings about what is achieved by updates in instant messaging between PFPs and BPs. The original post (presented in italics) is translated from Dutch into English.

4. Findings

We identified three central types of WhatsApp updates in PFP-BP contact: 1) updates related to the transfer of the young people between PFPs and BPs and 2) updates related to experiences of the young people while staying with PFP and 3) updates in the context of a prior problem.


4.1 Transfer updates

Transfer updates are a product of the situation that young people live with the PFPs but on occasion visit their BPs. As they sometimes travel by themselves (by public transport or bike), the PFPs and BPs may coordinate the departure and/or arrival of the young people. Transfer updates inform the other party, but they also display responsibility and orient to norms about parenthood, as can be seen in Excerpt 1.

(1) Excerpt: Safe arrival

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, BM: Birth Mother, child [Kees]

Post Time

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-----|---|
| 1 | 13.40 | BM | [Kees] has arrived safely
<i>[Kees] is goed aangekomen</i> |
| 2 | 13.44 | PFP | Thxs! Have fun together.
<i>Thxs! Veel plezier samen.</i> |
| 3 | 13.49 | BM |  |

BM informs PFP that the child has arrived safely. The packaging of the update (BM) is to the point (no greeting, no preface) but does mark that the child arrived safely (*goed*), which implies that the traveling went smoothly. With the update, BM presents herself as responsible for, or

as taking responsibility for, informing PFP and thus for the relationship with PFP. The announcement itself also implies that BM now takes responsibility for the child. Hence, these four words construct BM as a responsible parent who informs PFP when relevant.

In response, PFP receives the news with an informal and colloquially designed response (“Thxs”, post 2). Hereby, PFP also *appreciates* the update as news and she extends this news receipt with a wish (“have fun together”) towards BM. BM responds to this wish with a visual acknowledgement (😊, post 3), which aligns with PFP’s emphasis on fun and closes the sequence. In short, this fragment shows how BP constructs herself as responsible. Transfer updates may also be other-initiated with an enquiry, like in Excerpt 2.

(2) Excerpt: Good order

Post Time

1 19.51 BF Hi Anton

Hoi Anton,

Did Job arrive in good order? Grtz, Jan

Job in goede orde gearriveerd? Grtz Jan

2 20.23 PFP Yeah [untranslatable *hoor*], made it to piano lesson. Looks healthy

Ja hoor, pianoles gehaald. Ziet er gezond uit

BF elicits an update about the arrival of son Job in the first post with a polar question. The design of the post is notable: first, it is a package post (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008) including greeting and salutation, which marks the message as relatively formal. Also “arrived in good order” is a rather formal phrasing, which usually refers to the complete and intact transfer of objects rather than to people traveling from A to B. However, the post also has typically informal features, such as “Hi” and “Grtz”, which orient to familiarity between BP and PFP.

By asking, BF displays responsibility for his son Job and his whereabouts in relation to PFP, but also virtually marks the transfer of care, that is, that this responsibility lies in the hands of PFP now.

In response (post 2), PFP affirms (“yeah”) while also subtly warding off the relevance of asking (Dutch untranslatable tag *hoor*). This is then expanded with evidence of the “good order” arrival in terms of its timeliness and Job’s state more generally (“looks healthy”). This “good news”, including a positive assessment of Job, acknowledges and indirectly compliments BF for taking good care of Job.

Hence, through transfer updates BPs display responsibility in caring for their children as well as responsibility towards the PFP in keeping them posted or eliciting an update. In response, PFPs orient to BPs as good or responsible parents (appreciating updates, indirectly complimenting BP). In other words, updates about the transfer of the young people are means for BPs and PFPs to interactionally construct collaboration and shared responsibility.

4.2 Updates as access to youngsters’ experiences

Updates on youngsters’ experiences while staying with PFP typically provide BPs with quasi real-time access to important events in the life of the young people. These updates enable BPs to witness these important events of their children that they would not have had access to without instant messages from PFPs. Despite the physical distance to the child, which BPs sometimes experience as a failure or shortcoming (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; Nesmith et al., 2017), updates allow BPs to display parental involvement. In Excerpt 3, a child is granted her swimming certificate while she is with PFP. PFP shares this achievement with BM sending a snapshot (post 1):

(3) Excerpt: Swimming certificate

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, BM: Birth Mother

Post Time

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-----|---|
| 1 | 15.25 | PFP | <i>((photo of child in swim suit -next to the pool- with a swimming certificate))</i> |
| 2 | 15.26 | BM | Ahhhh superduper cool!!!!
<i>Ahhhh supervet cool!!!!</i> |
| 3 | 15.26 | BM | Congratulations honey
<i>Gefeliciteerd lieverd</i> |
| 4 | 15.28 | PFP | Thank you she says 🙌🏠
<i>Dankjewel zegt ze 🙌🏠</i> |

Without verbal announcement PFP provides BM quasi-immediate and quasi-primary access to the positive result of the swimming test that the child just completed. The update consists of an image without accompanying text and is an example of a social practice in which participants use images to elicit interaction and/or as evidence that something has happened (Thelwall & Vis, 2017). The lack of comment or verbal assessment of the child's achievement leaves the possibility for BM to interpret and evaluate the news by herself, which is exactly what happens in response to the photo (see post 2). First of all, the timing of the response, within one minute, works up the impression that BM was waiting for news and thus suggests direct engagement with the event. Also the content of the response conveys overt enthusiasm and involvement ("superduper cool" plus multiple exclamation marks). BM's next post ("Congratulations honey") is directed to her daughter ("honey"), thus treating PFP merely as the messenger. By addressing her daughter and using the nickname "honey", BM displays involvement and

affection *as a mother*. In response (post 4), PFP aligns with the role of intermediate while also closing the exchange by reported speech of the child (post 4) followed by emoji that enact PFPs stance (Lyons 2018); an evaluation of the achievement [👏] and a classification of this occasion as festive [🎉]. The emoji mark the valence of the news (cf. Al Rashdi, 2018; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) and legitimate the real-time sharing: this is a special moment in the life of the child.

Hence, the composition of PFPs messages (photo, text and emoji) shows an orientation to the (semi)-professional relationship with BM. Despite the spatial limits inherent to the young people being with PFP, PFP enables BM quasi real-time access to the young people deploying the affordances of the technology. This allows BM ad hoc involvement as a mother. Put differently, PFP creates an interactional environment that allows BM to actively take part in parenting (cf. ‘shared care’ in contrast to ‘substitutional care’, Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2020). Another example of an update on the youngster’s experiences using images is Excerpt 4. Here, PFP initiates an update sequence about a day at an amusement park:

(4) Excerpt: Amusement park

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, BM: Birth Mother, BF: Birth Father

Post Time

- | | | | |
|---|-------|-----|--|
| 1 | 17.24 | PFP | <i>((photo of sleeping girls in the car))</i> |
| 2 | 17.24 | PFP | tired but satisfied after a day at [amusement park] Zzz

Zzzz

<i>moe maar voldaan van een dagje [pretpark] Zzz Zzzz</i> |
| 3 | 17.25 | PFP | <i>((photo of girls at the entrance of the amusement park))</i> |

- 4 18.10 BF Nice pictures. 👍 Looks like they had fun.

Leuke foto's. 👍 Zo te zien hebben ze het leuk gehad.
- 5 18.14 BM Nice that they had fun. 👍

Fijn dat ze het leuk hebben gehad. 👍
- 6 19.04 PFP Yes they really had fun and with each other also nice

😊😊

*Ja ze hebben het echt leuk gehad en met elkaar ook
gezellig 😊😊*
- 7 19.21 BM Very nice [toch]* 😞 ((* =untranslatable, ~ “it is”))

Heel fijn toch 😞

In the first place, PFP initiates the interaction with two photos of the children (post 1-3): the girls sleeping in the car and the girls at the entrance of the amusement park. Given the timing of the posts (between 5 and 6 pm) the first image of sleeping girls seems to be a ‘real time’ update providing quasi-primary access, while the second at the entrance can be inferred to be taken upon arrival at the park earlier that day. The first image is accompanied by a description of the children including a vocalization of their snoring noise (Zzz). Thus, the children are “staged” in agent position both in the image and in the description and PFP positions herself as reporter or the deliverer of real time/very recent news (cf. Terasaki, 2008). Thereby PFP orients to the institutional task to share responsibility for the child, which means to keep BPs informed.

Focusing on BPs participation in such sequences, it can be observed that they interactively construct themselves as involved and empathic parents: they respond to every update about their child and align with the update’s valence. In Excerpt 4, both BPs respond to

the update of PFP with an assessment (cf. Hutchby & Tanna, 2008), in which they show their appreciation for the update as an action (“nice pictures” and thumbs up, post 4) and in which they evaluate the event in the images as “fun”. Both BF and BM package their positive evaluation both verbally (“fun”) and visually (emoji, 👍 *thumbs up*, see Sampietro, 2019). Interestingly, BM’s response mimics BF’s post in terms of word choice and emoji, clearly aligning with BF. Also, BF and BM refer to the girls, aligning with PFPs positioning of the children as agents, and make explicit that they only have indirect access to the event using an evidential (“looks like...”) (cf. Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987, p. 27). As mere spectators, they are able to catch a glimpse of the girls’ day out.

PFPs response to BPs (post 6) confirms their positive evaluations, stressing the good news (“really”). Moreover, this post again focuses on the children using “they” rather than “we”, and thus excluding herself as a participant in the event. This avoids an orientation to PFP as having primary access which BPs lack. This, PFP displays sensitivity to the relationship with BPs (see Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). The sequence is closed by BM post 7), ambiguously referring to the whole event or to the girls having had a nice time together. The final kissing emoji indicates the interactional closing (Al Rashdi, 2018) of the update sequence.

To conclude, updates are used to provide BPs with quasi-primary and quasi-immediate access to their children’s experiences. It is particularly the use of images as an affordance of instant messaging technology which serves quasi-direct visual access. Thus, BPs are engaged as spectators to the event. Throughout these update sequences, PFPs position themselves, and are treated, as intermediary between BPs and their children.

4.3 Updates in case of a problem

A third type of update we identified were updates in the context of a prior problem. In these cases, the participants more or less overtly orient to the relevance of updating in the context of

a prior problem, (Excerpt 5 & 6). In Excerpt 5, BP reports PFP about the past day with her two children, which includes reference to difficulties:

(5) Excerpt: Short update

PFP: Professional Foster Parent [Mariska], BM: Birth Mother [Rebecca]

Post Time

- | | | | |
|---|------|-----|--|
| 1 | 9.05 | BM | <p>[Mariska]aaa just a short update from my side haha</p> <p>yesterday was an exhausting day some struggles and some patterns that were held on to but it went well for 90% both went to sleep delightfully I'll keep you posted every now and then big hug</p> <p><i>[Mariska]aaa even een updatje van mij af haha</i></p> <p><i>gisteren was een vermoeiende dag wat strijd en wat patronen die vast gehouden werden maar het ging voor 90% goed zijn allebij heerlijk gaan slapen ik houd je af en toe op de hoogte dikke knuffel</i></p> |
| 2 | 9.28 | PFP | <p>Good morning [Rebecca]</p> <p>Good to hear!</p> <p>Enjoy together 😎🌈☀️</p> <p><i>Goedemorgen [Rebecca]</i></p> <p><i>Goed om te horen!</i></p> <p><i>Lekker genieten samen 😎🌈☀️</i></p> <p>[posts omitted for reasons of space; images from PFP, return image from BM, closing]</p> |

The update of BM (post 1) is designed as a package text (Hutchby & Tanna, 2008): it consists of an announcement of the update (“just a short update from my side haha”), the update itself (“yesterday....delightfully”) and a closing (“I’ll keep you posted....big hug”). The preface is an action description (cf. Sidnell, 2017, p. 324) “just a short update from my side haha” (post 1). In terms of the *dimensions of contrast* of action descriptions (Sidnell, 2017, p. 326) this action description marks the scope of the action as a single, recognizable activity. Updating/reporting to PFP is thus constructed as relevant for the relationship with PFP and for the current situation.

By announcing a brief report only (“just a short update”), BM orients to the normative aspect of keeping each other posted, while also mitigating the implication that the news is necessarily major or even bad news. The vocalization “haha” further mitigates the load of the news. The news itself is built up of negative aspects (“an exhausting day some struggles and some patterns that were held on”) and positive ones (“it went well for 90% both went to sleep delightfully”), in that order. As a result, the overall valence is relatively positive. This portrays BM as coping despite difficulties. BM’s promise at the end of the post (“I’ll keep you posted every now and then”) orients to a continuous engagement and shared care for the children.

PFP’s response is aligned with the update in the sense that it reflects the structure of BMs post with opening, body and some kind of closing. PFP displays her appreciation of the update *as* an update (“good to hear”, post 2). Thereby, PFP’s post orients to the sequential implicativeness of assessing the update as news. But this response simultaneously assesses the update as “good”, thus highlighting the positive rather the negative aspects. Also, she does not enquire the negative aspects, but highlights positivity in her closing wish “Enjoy together!” followed by emoji that suggests BM will spend time with her children by the sea (“😎🌊🌟”). Hence, PFP does not confirm BMs orientations to of the normativity of regular updates. While

BM works to display responsibility, PFP subtly empowers BM as a parent by focusing on having a good time rather than on the difficulties.

Excerpt 6 illustrates how PFP elicits an update about the well-being of the child. Three days before this exchange, there was a conversation between PFP, BM and the child to solve tensions at BP's home. In post 1, PFP elicits an update about the effect of that conversation on the child:

(6) Excerpt: Relieved

PFP: Professional Foster Parent [Gerard], BM: Mother [Yvonne], Youngster [Anne]

Post Time

1 12.09 PFP Good afternoon [Yvonne], I was just curious whether you notice that [Anne] is relieved since our conversation last week. Whether it helped her.

Goedemiddag [Yvonne], ik was even benieuwd of je merkt dat [Anne] opgelucht is na ons gesprek afgelopen week. Of het haar geholpen heeft.

2 15.04 BM Hi [Gerard] yes I certainly notice that she is singing again and is much more cheerful

Hoi [Gerard] ja dat merk ik zeker bij haar ze zingt weer en is veel vrolijker

3 15.06 PFP Great. Good to hear.

Top. Goed om te horen.

PFP asks for an update about the child as a follow-up of the conversation they had last week (“since our conversation last week”, post 1). The reference to last week’s conversation is also an account for asking. In contrast to the syntactical form of the update-request in excerpt 6 (“will you still”), “I was just curious” displays low entitlement of PFP to ask for it (Curl & Drew, 2008). However, it clearly is action-implicative (Stivers & Rossano, 2012): it makes relevant an update by BM about the issue. Also relevant is that the update elicitation focuses on BM’s noticing (“do you notice”), with “you” in agent position rather than the child (cf. the alternative formulation: “I was just curious whether Anne is relieved etc.”). Thus, PFP shows involvement as a caregiver, while respecting BM’s autonomy as a parent.

In response, BM provides an update by stating that she indeed notices that the conversation had a positive effect on the child (post 2). So, BM aligns with the focus on her observations (“I notice”). The response consists of an up-graded assessment (“certainly”), further unpacked by evidence for this assessment in comparison with the situation before the conversation: “*much more* cheerful” (italics added by us) “singing *again*”, italics added by us). Thus, BM presents independent epistemic access to her daughter and her ability to notice and assess her daughter’s behavior. This way BM implicitly presents good parenthood.

Then (post 3), PFP provides an assessment of the update (“Great”), treating the matter as sufficiently discussed. He adds an explicit appreciation of the news (“Good to hear”), without going into further detail and thus proposing sequence closing.

In sum, updating also occurs in the context of prior problems with the young people. By eliciting and providing updates PFPs and BPs display involvement with the child and shared care even outside their own family home. They do shared parenting by asking BPs (rather than the children) about the problem, thus acknowledging BPs’ role (Shklarski, 2019, p. 56) and empowering them (cf. Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). In their responses to the “problem updates”, PFP emphasize positive news, thus encouraging BPs in parenting.

5. Conclusion and discussion

We analyzed instant messaging between professional foster parents (PFPs) and birth parents (BPs) with a special interest in the co-parenting relationship. Although a good relationship is considered a crucial factor in a successful care-process (Ainsworth, 2018; Konijn et al., 2019; Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2020), this relationship is also generally considered complicated and difficult (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; Nesmith et al., 2017; Vanderfaellie et al., 2018). We focused our analysis on *updates*, used by PFPs and BPs to share information on the young people. Like in spoken interaction, updates are organized sequentially making a response relevant and they can be both self- or other-initiated.

We identified three types of updates in the data: 1) updates to do with the transfer of the young people from PFP to BP or vice versa; 2) updates on the youngster's experiences and 3) updates in the context of a prior problem. Across these update types, we found that update sequences may include multiple semiotic devices (text, emoji, images) and that the participants treat updates as relevant social actions (cf. Sidnell, 2013), thus co-constructing the co-parenting relationship (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2020).

In the post-by-post unfolding of update sequences, the relationship between PFPs and BPs is constructed in several ways. Through transfer updates BPs display responsibility in caring for their children as well as responsibility towards the PFP in keeping them posted or eliciting the update. In response, PFPs orient to the BPs as good or responsible parents by appreciating updates and highlighting positive aspects. Hence, BPs orient to “doing being a good parent” (Sacks, 1992; Lyons, 2020), while PFPs indirectly affirm BPs as a good parent. Even in updates in the context of a prior problem, BPs display “good parenting” such as noticing things about the child (Excerpt 6) and reporting that “90% went well” (Excerpt 5). However, the invocation of “good parenting” by BPs also orients to the fact that the BPs are

unable to take care of the child(ren) themselves for the moment which may be seen as casting doubt about their parenting skills and putting them more generally in a vulnerable position. This omnipresent concern in their co-parenting relationship is being oriented to in the interaction.

On the other end of the spectrum, we saw that PFP manage some of the implications of this position of the BPs. By sending BPs images on important events in the lives of their children, PFPs minimize discrepancy in access to the young people and create an interactional environment that allows BPs to virtually participate in the event. BPs are invited to view and assess their child, treating the PFP as the intermediary. PFP thus display sensitivity to, and to some extent overcome, the inherently unequal position of the BPs in relation to the remote living of their children.

In relation to the specific setting of family-style group care, our analysis makes tangible how PFPs and BPs balance their relationship and the goal of co-parenting together. This paper describes just one aspect of instant messaging: the use of updates. More aspects of this instant messaging are worthy of further investigation to provide insights in the affordances of the communication technology of instant messaging, including multimodality in terms of vocalizations (Koning, 2019), the use of emoji (Al Rashdi, 2018) and images (Thelwall & Vis, 2017).

To conclude, instant messaging in family youth care is an environment in which, and through which the participants construct their relationship and professional collaboration. Centrally, while BPs work to display responsibility and good parenting, PFP subtly empower BPs as parents. The fine-grained insights in how BPs and PFPs carefully calibrate this involvement with each other from post to post in instant messaging updates provides a more complete understanding of the general qualification of this relationship as complex and frail. It

is this type of insight that a study of actual, naturally occurring interactions using a conversation analytic approach is able to provide.

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