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# **Putting one's best foot forward: Finnish prospective adoptive parent's strategic interaction in statutory pre-adoption services**

**Pia K Eriksson**

## **Abstract**

Research on the relationship between prospective adoptive parents and professionals in adoption processes is scarce. This qualitative study is based on 19 narrative interviews with persons who have embarked on an inter-country adoption process with the aim to become parents. It scrutinizes the strategies used by prospective adoptive parents to navigate the controlling institutional setting of statutory pre-adoption services. These strategies are explored using concepts presented by Erving Goffman. The study shows that prospective adoptive parents play on different teams than the professionals, and utilize information control and inhibition of expressions in reaching a favorable outcome in the pre-adoption services.

**Key words:** inter-country adoption, pre-adoption services, prospective adoptive parents, clienthood, strategic interaction

## **Introduction**

In statutory pre-adoption services the private issue of becoming a parent takes place within a regulated institutional setting, hence becoming public. In the statutory services of suitability assessment, preparation for adoptive parenthood and matching with a child, the often middle-class (Eriksson et al. 2015; Hjern, Vinnerljung & Lindblad 2004) prospective adoptive parents are subjected to control by the welfare state, which is justified by looking to the best interests of the (yet absent) child. For prospective adoptive parents that often have powerful positions in other areas of life (Simmonds & Haworth 2000, 261-263), entering the services brings the new situation of an unequal power relation with the professionals. Suddenly, these persons who often are powerless in their inability to have children without help become objectified, and through institutional practices, become socialized into clients (Foucault 1983; Juhila 2009, 52, Jones & Alcabes 1985). In social work in general, clients are usually seen as being in need of empowering and participatory actions (Uggerhøj 2014; Siisiäinen 2014) and hence power relations are acknowledged (e.g. Healey 2000; Dominelli 2002). In adoption on the other hand, since prospective adoptive parents are seen as the most powerful party in the adoption process in relation to the child and the biological parents (Simmonds & Haworth 2000), the power inequality between them as clients and the professionals has hardly been of interest in research. This paper makes a contribution in filling this gap by considering the relation, interaction and power dynamics between the clients and professionals.

Two informants who were previous clients within pre-adoption services, described their sense of their own agency in the pre-adoption process as follows:

“...it was in a manner a little like that, that you just follow and walk behind.”

“They (the professionals) have the power to make your whole process empty, to draw the carpet from under your feet at any time”

Prospective adoptive parents often describe experiences of powerlessness intertwined with straining emotions (Author 2015a; 2015b; Högbacka 2008; Daniluk et al. 2003; Sandelowski, Harris & Holditch-Davis 1991) in the pre-adoption services. These accounts of powerlessness when faced with the bureaucratic system invites one to explore the power negotiations displayed in the agency of the prospective adoptive parents in their interactions with professionals. According to Foucault (1982), power is not essentially repressive but productive, and hence the individual is not powerless in front of institutions. Even if the power distribution between the professionals and the client is unequal, the client has the ability to act in a way that he chooses and that serves him best in the situation (Goffman 1970).

The professional discourse and texts which guide adoption work (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013) often neglects this power inequality, and calls for co-operation and mutual decision making between the client and the professional in a controlled gatekeeping setting. Meanwhile, the desire of the prospective adoptive parents of having a child and the aim of professionals to find the best possible homes for children in need are inherently different driving forces. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the clients and professionals play on different teams, with different aims, but in pre-adoption services they are expected to play on the same team with a common goal. In interactions power is negotiated between the parties, and in this study it is scrutinized as the strategic interaction of the prospective adoptive parents as clients. Earlier resistance and strategies by clients in child welfare have been identified by Smith (2008) and Dumbrill (2006), and in prospective adoptive parents by Noordegraaf, Nijnatten & Elbers (2010). Dumbrill (2006) names three strategies as “playing the game, co-operate, or fight”, all of which are connected to the different perception of the power usage of the professional.

A relational understanding of power sees it as something which is exercised, not possessed, but present in all social practices on all levels of society (Foucault 1982). According to Foucault (1982), the most accessible level of power is that between people and local practices, which is manifested through everyday social micro-practices. The most tangible contact the user has with the institution and the welfare system is through their relationship with the social worker and other professionals. Since Foucault has been criticized for leaving little space for agency (Chambon 1999, 70), the work of Goffman (1959, 1970, 1983) is utilized for this empirical study of social interaction. Goffman is not traditionally regarded a power theorist in his observations of the presentation of self in the interactions with others (Jenkins 2008; Rogers 1977), regardless of his having made human agency visible. Based on micro-sociological studies of face-to-face interaction, Goffman (1983; 1959) argues that always when other people are present, man strives to find a conduct and means of impression management for achieving individual or social goals. According to Goffman (1970, 10), social interaction has calculative aspects which include "expression games" (Goffman (1970, 10) in which the information conveyed to the other party in an interaction is both controlled and managed.

This article shows how prospective adoptive parents as clients within social services engage in strategic interaction. Clients respond to the power inequality and controlling practices of the professionals with strategic actions in order to enhance the outcome of the adoption process. The empirical analysis is based on 19 narrative interviews with Finnish women and men who have been clients in statutory pre-adoption services, with the wish to adopt a child from abroad. The analysis utilizes Erving Goffman's (1959; 1970; 1983) dramaturgical metaphors and concepts of strategic interaction and expression games in scrutinizing the strategies that prospective adoptive parents use to navigate the pre-adoption services. This strategic interaction

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by the clients can at a certain point come to hinder a trustful relationship with the professionals, and thus make the assessment troublesome and inhibit their reflective preparation and self-evaluation. This especially appears to be the case when the aim of the professionals is clearly perceived by the clients to be different or conflicting with their own.

### **The setting of statutory pre-adoption services**

The inter-country adoption process is governed by national and international laws, and by regulations carried out by the professionals involved with the rights of the child as a guiding principle. The process for prospective adoptive parents in inter-country adoptions in Finland consists roughly of three stages: the pre-adoption counselling (assessment and preparation), applying for an adoption permit, and a waiting period which if successful ends in a child proposal, taking the child into care and finalizing the adoption.

The aim of the first phase, pre-adoption counselling, is to secure the rights and best interests of a future adoptive child by an assessment of the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents, and by offering them preparation for adoptive parenthood (Finnish Adoption Act 22/2012). In Finland, the processes of evaluation and preparation have not been separated but remain intertwined elements of support and control in the pre-adoption counselling. Hence the social worker is made both a gatekeeper and a supporter (Adoption Act 22/2012). Compared to other family assessments in social work, the suitability assessment is made before the child is placed into the family and therefore becomes an evaluation of parental potential, not performance. As with family assessments in general (Holland 2000), it is mainly based on verbal interaction and discussions between the prospective adoptive parents and social workers. Ideally the assessment of suitability takes place in a complex interaction between the clients and the professionals, and as such form a relationship-based setting (see e.g. Ruch 2005) which expects

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honest, open and reflective interaction. According to Finnish guidelines issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2013), the practice should furthermore support the prospective adoptive parents in their personal process of preparing for adoptive parenthood through the provision of information, and by offering tools for self-evaluation through reflection.

In the home-study report which is based on the assessment of the social workers, the circumstances and readiness for adoptive parenthood of the applicants is described and evaluated. With this report, a permit for adoption is applied for from the Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health. Following that, during the second phase – the waiting period – the prospective adoptive parents are customers of a mediating adoption organization that assist them in adopting a child from abroad through accredited contacts. The final decision about the matching and placement of a child, as well as the finalization of an adoption in the third phase, is usually made by the authorities in the sending country when the prospective adoptive parents travel to the birth country of the child to be united as a family.

In this process which usually stretches over several years, the institutional roles of client and professional are set, and hence the rules, routines and expectations (Goffman 1959) are presupposed to some extent. In every institution there are official expectations about an actor's duties in relation to it (Goffman 1973), and when taking on the role of a client, the front for that role is already established. Foucault (1983) also argues that clienthood defines the user of service as being in need of help, and the professional as the person to provide help and support. This social order is powerful and we try to maintain it by all means (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2012, 38). But always, when observing a social institution we will find a resistance to this, and something that Goffman (1961) calls a "secondary adjustment" and a "hidden life". Whenever people are forced into a certain world, they will also adapt conscious strategies.

According to Author (2015b), the inequality in power relations and the dependency of the clients is manifested and perceived by the prospective adoptive parent through micro-practices of controlling and gatekeeping functions of the professionals handling their case, and who are present throughout the whole pre-adoption process. These take the shape of both support and control, and can be roughly divided into: supporting the client towards emotional readiness, control through the entitlement to professional interpretations, and the control of time and information (Author 2015b). Professionals use controlling and supporting practices in order to screen clients for suitability, to minimize risks in parenthood by assessment, as well as to prepare and foster client self-reflection. The ultimate aim is to have families who are suitable for adoption, emotionally ready for children in need, and who have made an informed decision about adoption.

### **Data and methods**

As Goffman studied face-to-face interaction, my empirical data consists of narrative interviews, i.e. retrospective oral accounts through which the strategies that prospective adoptive parents use in pre-adoption services is scrutinized. Through these interviews, we can to some extent access the social worlds that lie behind the narrative where they are reconstructed (Miller & Glassner 2004).

### ***Data collection***

The narrators had pursued an adoption process with the aim to adopt a child primarily from abroad. My aim with the interviews was to get the participants to share their story about their own adoption process in their own way and words, without steering them too much with questions based on my own experiences as a social worker in adoption work, since there I have



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had the privilege to share in hundreds of stories of adoption processes. Based on those experiences, I rate these narratives to be more honest and less polished accounts of the user's experiences than most clients usually share with professionals who are handling their cases.

The recruitment was made through one user organization for adoptive families, one child welfare organization supporting and educating adoptive families, two mediating adoption agencies, and one organization for involuntarily childless persons. Finally, 6 adoptive mothers, 7 adoptive fathers (all from different families), and also 6 women who had experienced a terminated adoption process (adoption miscarriage) took part in individual interviews. The 13 adoptive parents had adopted a child (12 from abroad, 1 domestic) together with their spouse less than 4 years prior to the interview. The narratives about the adoption processes included eight different birth countries for the desired or adopted child. The adoption processes that ended in adoption had lasted from around 3 years up to 9 years, counting from when the application to start pre-adoption counselling was made. Of the six women that had experienced an adoption miscarriage, three had been rejected at some point in the process, two had become pregnant and one had had a major change in her family situation. Of these women one had been a single applicant. Five men and one woman interviewed had biological children prior to the adoption, and the others were expecting their first child through adoption.

The 19 interviews were conducted in 2009 and 2014 in the way proposed by Rosenthal (2004), where the narrative interview consists of one period of narration, followed by a period of questions by the interviewer. The triggering invitation from me was "Would you please tell me about your adoption process?" Thereafter, questions about issues raised in the narrative were asked and lastly some questions about their experiences of the different phases of the process, important events and important persons during the process, their service experiences and their

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encounters with professionals. Some interviews consisted of long complete narratives, whereas others turned out more as informal discussions about the adoption process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were aware that I had an interest in the professional practices involved within the process. They were also aware of my position as a researcher and a social worker who had formerly worked with adoptions. This was important in taking into account that every narrative is constructed in the interaction for a specific purpose (Holstein & Gubrium 2004).

### *Analysis*

Several readings of the data and an inductive analysis highlighted the importance that power had in the adoption process. Since powerlessness related to the controlling setting was present in the data, this article focuses on the strategies of the prospective adoptive parents as responses to the controlling setting. Firstly, the data was coded descriptively identifying all sequences of narrated actions or thoughts about actual, intended or considered actions within the institutional setting. This was then followed by a coding which utilized the conceptual frameworks of Goffman (1959; 1970; 1983).

The idea of using Goffmanesque theatrical metaphors and concepts of expression games in the analysis initially came from some of the narrator's word choice in my data. One woman described the setting of assessment as something that is "not really real", it felt like a 'performance'. Another was talking about "planning the performance" with her husband the night before an encounter with the social worker, and a third did not feel comfortable in playing an 'insincere role'. The interviewees were using expressions like "playing a game" and "giving a good impression".

### **Staging pre-adoption services**

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In everyday life, strategic acts unfold and every act as part of a play has an audience, regardless of the audience being present or not (Goffman 1970). The main performers in pre-adoption services: the prospective adoptive parents and the professionals, both have their own performance, and also act as the audience for each other's performances (Goffman 1959). The aim of the professionals play is to undertake an assessment of parental risk and potential, and to prepare suitable families to be matched with adoptable children. On the other hand, the client's aim when entering the stage is to become a parent, often as fast as possible within a slow bureaucratic process.

The front stage of the play scrutinized in this study is the encounters between the clients as actors and the professionals as audience, mainly in an office setting and on home-visits, but also over the phone, e-mail and other communication. The backstage for the clients are areas where the professionals are not present.

“(we considered) should we try to be something else here, somehow, to behave in a certain way? But then we immediately noticed that when the meetings (with the social worker) are long, two hours, that we are not able to act for that long...”

This woman was describing, in her and her husband's opinion the best strategy in pre-adoption assessment, i.e. to be oneself and not play any role “since one is not able to act for that long”, as she puts it. A decision to be open and honest was a conscious choice and a strategy found to be suitable for her that coincided with the ideal relation between the client and professional, and thus benefitting the information exchange and the space for reflective discussions which are strived for in the service.

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Here the client perceived the aim of the professional to be the same, i.e. to help them acquire a child, and in this context the aim defines which team the players are on. The rhetorical device of "being on the same side" was used and then the interests of the family to adopt a child into the family was perceived to be shared with the professionals. Many prospective adoptive parents trusted the professionals and felt supported during their pre-adoption process. One example shows a woman who places full trust in the social worker to judge her suitability, and compares it to a job-interview where the recruiter probably knows whether one is suitable for the job or not:

"...it is good anyway that in case one would not be suited as an adoptive parent, then it would be good that you are rated out in that stage and don't get the child and then destroy it..."

She felt the performance was joint, that she was on the same team as the professionals, and the aim was truly, at least in the way she expresses it here, common for both the professional and herself. Another woman and her spouse had decided to 'play the game', i.e. to be open and honest in the assessment as desired:

"... but we also decided right from the beginning that we would be honest, and not try to hide something, that we are not going to hide anything nor try to be something we are not. We are going to be who we are, and then it is either good enough or not, because you can't do more than that".

To play the game includes not only the sense of being on the same team with the professionals and performing at least partially in the same play, but also the emotional experience of not being truly on the same team but to accept playing together at least cognitively. The primary goal and underlying aim of the pre-adoption service differs between the client and the professional. Still,

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the aims become intertwined as the client's secondary aim usually is to offer a home for a child and the secondary aim of professionals to help the prospective adoptive parents in becoming parents.

Being cognitively on the same team and accepting the public control that the professionals exercise was common, but often with some emotional resistance to the setting that inhibited true team play. When playing the game, the client accepted the agenda of being evaluated, of receiving training for adoptive parenthood, as well as the waiting for a suitable match with a child. They basically adapted (Siisiäinen 2014) to the situation and were compliant (Fargion 2014; Littell 2001) in order to reach their goals. One woman said they accepted and tried to benefit from the situation of suitability assessment and preparation:

“... we related to the pre-adoption preparation and assessment as a giving experience, and not just like it is something one has to pass as obligatory, but that it can seriously offer lots of useful things for the future”

Adaptation is the state of involvement or participation when the agent is passive but the driving force comes from within the agent and not from the outside as in coercion (Siisiäinen 2014, 32). When playing the game, the clients know that the pre-requisite for the process to proceed, is to co-operate, be open and humble, and to accept the client role. One strategy not coinciding with the ideal according to these expectations, is when the client takes an active stance when one is trying to control the situation or maximize the odds of the process to proceed according to the prospective adopters wish. This happens for example by way of information control, expression games (Goffman 1959), or by attempts to manipulate the social worker to do as one hopes or by using the same rhetoric about adoptions as the professionals to make your case convincingly.

“... somehow we decided that there (in the meetings with the social worker) we would do and say and steer the situation in a way - sure we did what we were asked to, but somehow we had this feeling that we have to be pretty strict so that things would go as we ourselves wanted them to”

Individuals sometimes behave in a calculative way to get desired responses from others, yet at other times they are sometimes doing it without them being aware of it (Goffman 1959). It does not always mean being “cynical actors” (Goffman 1959) that trick the audience (the professionals) in order to gain something, but that a humans' temporal agency is guided towards the future and the goals they have (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), and these might differ from those of the professionals. Strategic actions are taken by the clients for maximal gain. Trying to take control of the process is not only happening in relation to the professionals, but also through planning for example the choice of sending country and maximizing the possibilities of having the desired child as smoothly and fast as possible. In this context, a play is being performed on the global level of inter-country adoption.

### ***Team management***

Often the performance is given by a team of actors, usually a couple wanting to adopt and a number of professionals. Then, team management becomes important. One couple said that “the night before (the meeting with social worker) we decided what role we would play”, hence setting up their performance at home, i.e. backstage.

Couples hoping to adopt feel a need to present a united front in their performance. This can need either rehearsal or contracts back-stage to make it a convincing performance. In a play, the actors on the team can face possible disruption (Goffman 1959). Examples of this were for example a woman who had forbidden her husband to make any further jokes in the presence of

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the social worker, since the social worker did not seem to have got the first one. Another woman was ready the entire time to kick her husband on the shin in case he said something stupid and “took the wrong line” during the meetings with the social worker.

Some teams also had to settle things back-stage before entering their interaction with the professionals. One man had to make sure his wife was still going to agree to apply for a new adoption permit when the first one expired and not express wishes to terminate the process. Another man was himself the one who was hiding his insecurity about adoption, in favor of his wife's desire to adopt. Men expressed they had handled the negotiations backstage before entering the stage, while the women tried to be more in control of the situated activity. There were also accounts of negotiations about whether to proceed with an insecure or long-spun process, and the showing of a united decisive front to the professionals. Also were negotiations about hiding one of the spouse's insecurity about adoption as being the right choice for them overall. These types of team-management actions might inhibit true reflection, or at least move the reflective discussions backstage and out of reach of the professionals.

## **Showing your best side – expression games**

The performance in a situation where one is in the vulnerable position of being assessed includes showing ones best sides, and hence being honest up until a certain point and to “gloss over things”. As one man said, he “gives the professionals as much trust as they deserve”. Actors in Goffman's (1959; 1983) texts “want to make a good impression on others”, and hence this behaviour is part of the play. Through a performance, the actors make an impression on the audience and also assert to themselves and others about who they pretend to be. Performances can also be idealized, whereby the actors give a better impression of themselves than reality would suggest (Goffman 1983).

### ***Information management***

In the interactions the agenda of the client is to show a picture of themselves that is as good as possible, whereas the social worker tries to see behind this façade and verify the accuracy of the picture presented. Again, one woman compared the situation to a job interview:

“... in that way one was selling oneself, all the time, it was kind of like a job interview ...//... that if I had discussed the issues with a therapist or with my husband or alone handled the issues, it would have been different. But there, you really had to pretend and act a little bit, somehow like here and now we have to convince this person that we are good adoptive parents.”

Here the inhibition of reflection in the client is visible, and trust is not fully present.

Noordegraaf, Nijnatten & Elbers (2009) have shown that Dutch prospective adoptive parents portray their lives as “normal” as possible with a focus on the positive. Through information control, the prospective adoptive parents put their best foot forward:

“... not really like lying, but yeah maybe...//... the main motive of the discussion was not that I wanted her (the social worker) to help or cure me, but to show this person that I am what I am and I can be a good adoptive mother”

“... anyhow we got along well (with the social worker) and we had decided that we were not going to be difficult , but we tried to make the meetings proceed in good co-operation and that it was to our own advantage ... and it was”

One woman said that she realized that “they (the social workers) are not your friends” and the discussions in the pre-adoption services are “not some kind of get together club”, which leads to the development of more conscious strategies of information management.



The client can utilize information control (Goffman 1959) in order to maintain their character. Then, the client does not share any more information than necessary. This happens when control is perceived as undue, or they are critical or distrustful of either the social workers or the whole context of the assessment of parental potential. For assessment to succeed, the professionals need truthful information based on the verbal accounts of the clients. Withholding or giving false accounts always remains a weak spot and presents a risk in verbal assessments. In the assessment period information is actively gathered by the professionals, while during the waiting period the withholding of information can take the shape of not informing the agency about e.g. major changes in one's life, or even the loss of motivation for adoption.

### *Adopting the adoption discourse*

When entering the pre-adoption counselling, the client is pre-supposed to use the discourse of "wanting a child" congruent with their primary motive, however the process is to shape the clients discourse and attitudes into accepting the aim of adoption as "offering a home for a child". In the interactions, clients need to marry the child welfare discourse with their own selfish wish for a child. This shift is expected by professionals during the process. To adopt this professional discourse is also a strategy used by the prospective adoptive parents, both intentionally and unintentionally. The use of the same discourse as the professionals gave a signal to the professionals about being on the same team with a common goal. In addition to using the discourse of "offering a home", by signaling the child welfare aspect of adoption the clients adopted a discourse of adoption (adoption talk) that helped them sound more convincing to the ears of professionals and enforced the representation that was asked for. This includes for example vocabulary associated with the birth family and country, the adoption process, and also the special needs of adopted children.

### *Emotion management*

Emotion management as one form of expression management can be “inhibiting or fabricating expressions” (Goffman, 1970, 10). In the adoption process some emotions are accepted and even expected, like the sorrow related to infertility which is expected to be displayed in some way, and can hence lead to its fabrication (see also Author 2015a). However, emotions like anger and disappointment are often hidden, at least until triggered by either the service or the professionals in the client interactions.

In the pre-adoption phase, insecurity about adoption as being the right choice is sometimes hidden, in fear of it either prolonging or ending the process. For the process to proceed to a home-study being written and beyond, a united front has been shown in relation to being sure about adoption. Here, expression management takes the form of hiding negative emotions in the interaction and avoiding the expression of e.g. dissatisfaction or insecurity.

In the waiting period (after the adoption permit is granted), ‘the game’ consists of passively waiting and the most common strategy is to be seen as passive, even if emotional support from the professionals might be needed. In many narratives, the feeling of not wanting to bother the professionals during the waiting period (which may stretch over years) was common. Among the interviewees, it was felt that one did not want to be categorized as one of the “hysterical” adoptive parents who were calling the agency all the time, and exposing ones insecurities or anxieties was not perceived as being accepted or desired conduct.

One should play along by not confronting the professional with complaints or by expressing negative emotions of anger in the interaction. The clients either hide or do not talk about their

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negative feelings associated with envy, irritation, anxiety etc. (Author 2015a). If clients are dissatisfied with the service, they do not complain until occasionally later when they have adopted the child. The clients in pre-adoption counselling are vulnerable because their dream of becoming parents to a child is at stake. They commonly expressed tendencies of not wanting to influence the process in a negative way by expressing dissatisfaction with professionals:

“... one had this kind of fear that if one would not get along and disagree with the person handling our case, that it would influence our case, that it could influence our process. ... reason said that it's not like that, but the emotions said that it might be best not to become opposed to her anyway”

“... well you are pretty helpless, and on their terms...//... just trying to get along with everybody not to destroy one's chances to get that child. So in that way it's not something one constantly thinks about, but if one feels dissatisfied, then one thinks twice about how to formulate the dissatisfaction.”

Again here, the inhibition of emotion can inhibit reflection and also any support which is needed in fear of negative emotions influencing the process in an undesired way. One should not show insecurity or fear, so negative emotions and possible dissatisfaction is expressed on other stages to other audiences such as in peer groups.

## **Discussion**

Since prospective adoptive parents are not used to being clients within a controlling context, to some degree they have hardships fitting into the expected client role, which fosters powerlessness. On the other hand they are used to being agents in their own life and hence they consciously choose what to their understanding are favorable strategies for navigating this context.

In the light of social work literature and studies showing that a good working relationship with the professional influences the outcome of assessment and service (e.g. Holland 2000; 2011; Platt 2007; Yatchmenoff 2005; Littel 2001), the strategies adopted by clients seem plausible. The process and outcome of assessments based mainly on verbal interaction is seen to be closely connected to the interpersonal relationship between the user and professional. A good relationship like this requires trust, but also compliance, hence adapting and conforming have been shown to be favourable strategies from a client's point of view (Littell 2001; Holland 2000). According to Holland (2000), clients in child welfare assessments who are co-operative, motivated and articulate in their service relationships are in general ascribed the same attributes, thus having an impact on the result of the assessment. However, resisting clients can be seen to lack the needed motivation for parenthood. Alcabes & Jones (1985) view that passive clients can in fact be considered as non-clients or applicants, which suits well if pre-adoption services are seen merely a means for the applicants to become parents, and without the elements of child protection. In this case, non-clients do not benefit from the services in an ideal way, but this is not necessarily a major problem if the client shares the required amount of truthful information needed in the assessment and actively prepares themselves for adoptive parenthood, e.g. by attending voluntary preparatory courses.

Strategies used in the adoption services resemble those found among other child welfare clients, but can be used more consciously by these resourceful clients. When comparing adoption services with child welfare, it is important to acknowledge the difference of voluntariness in the clients' participation in the services. Much of child welfare deals with non-voluntary clients, whereas pre-adoption services are voluntary and the clients are contrastingly eager to enrol. In child welfare, open resistance among clients is often present (e.g. Mirick 2012), but in pre-adoption services this resistance is neatly hidden. The presence of what Dumbrill (2006) calls

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“fighting” among child welfare clients, is very subtly perceived in pre-adoption services since the service is voluntary and the users are very aware of the consequences that their actions will have. The adoption of a child is a voluntary choice, but the pre-adoption service is a mandatory component of the process. If dissatisfied, an exit from the services is possible but the price to be paid for this is often a termination of the adoption process, which frequently means giving up the hope of having a child. Hence, the user has to navigate the situation in the best possible way. Of course, a means of total resistance would be to adopt a child independently, and without agency involvement, which is illegal in Finland.

Given the fact that these clients are often powerful and influential in other areas of their lives, they will consciously think about the strategies which will gain them the most. As Goffman (1970) puts it, “our ability to act rationally and thus strategically maximize our own gains pointedly depends on our ability to assess and predict the thoughts and actions of the other persons involved”. The prospective adoptive parents possess this ability to a higher degree than many traditional client groups in social work. But at the same time, as clients in pre-adoption counselling they are vulnerable because their dream of becoming parents to a child at stake.

In the light of the global forces which influence inter-country adoption, these client strategies are understandable. The micro-level performances of the professional and the prospective adoptive parents are but a small part of the global game of inter-country adoption, and involve market elements (e.g. Högbäck 2008, Yngvesson 2002; Triselotis 1997). The dependency chains are complicated, with powerful forces influencing on macro-level issues of the market driven demand and supply of children, and also the relations between nations. On a meso-level, the adoption agencies in the receiving countries are dependent on the sending countries

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authorities, policies and institutions, and these are reflected in the interactions on micro-level which are seen in the play of social workers and clients.

Employing some degree of strategic behaviour can be seen as one of the few possibilities the client has to influence the progress and outcome of the process. In relation to the institutions and the bureaucratic process, prospective adoptive parents who for example want to shorten the waiting time or hope for a child with certain characteristics, choose and change their preferred birth country of the child according to the fluctuating situation. At the same time, the professionals in the receiving country often perform on the same team as their clients in relation to the sending countries, process requirements and home-study reports, as well as the clients applications which are written in co-operation with the professionals to achieve a preferred outcome for the prospective adoptive parent that have been accepted and found suitable in their home-country. The client and the social worker form a team in an advocacy performance, where the audience is the adoption council granting permits for adoption and the sending country are matching children based on the applicant's home-study reports. Written home-studies are suited to the requirements of the sending country, and Noordegraaf, Nijnatten & Elbers (2009) have shown the formulation of biographical information into home-studies as presenting a positive picture of those being recommended for adoptive parenthood.

## **Conclusion**

The strategies used are understandable and adequate in the context of the global inter-country adoption game, and with social work assessment in general. The strategies in pre-adoption services resemble those of risk management used by users in mental health, and identified as "playing the game of containing frustration and demonstrating compliance" (Reynolds et al. 2014). The same risks of crucial assessment information being hidden, and a reluctance to

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express dissatisfaction lest it possibly becomes a barrier to good relations with the professionals that were pointed out by Reynolds et al. (2014), exist in pre-adoption services. Thus, the strategies of information control and emotion inhibition might present a challenge to achieving optimal pre-adoption service outcomes.

Strategic actions are part of our social interaction, and present in everyday life. But when is the line crossed in not sharing enough truthful information, or hiding emotions that are important for the assessment or for reflective preparation? There is an incongruence when the need to have open and honest communication exists in a matter where the two teams involved have different aims and there is a power imbalance in the relationship. The question is how the drive of the adults involved in the global adoption process could be decreased in favour of the perspectives of the children, and how the pre-adoption process can be made most beneficial for all of its clients, and consequently improve the future wellbeing of adoptive families?

An adoption process can usually stretch over several years. It is a highly emotional and straining process (Daniluk, Hurtig & Mitchell 2003; Högbäck 2008; Author 2015a), and hence the strategies of adaptation, compliance and the inhibition of negative emotions or feelings in relation to the adoption can be stressful and negative for the future adoptive parent. The aim of the service is to foster a reflective self-evaluation about suitability in the prospective adoptive parent, and promote joint decision making between the professional and client (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013). The institutional setting might inhibit the achievement of a state of honest reflection in the interactions with the professional, which has also been noted by Nijnatten (2010) in the context of child welfare. As Ryburn (2006) points out, partnership is a relationship that requires equal power positions.

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According to earlier research (Corby et. al. 2002; Platt 2007), the key to success in child welfare services is to find some level ground or form of congruence in the views between the clients and the professionals. In the study by Dumbrill (2006), clients either perceived professionals to exert power over them, or as form of support. It seems that the client's perception of the professional as either playing on the same team or on the opposite team is important, or as Dumbrill (2006) puts it, perceiving the power to be exercised either *over* or *with* the client. Child welfare will always need to balance this power tension between support and control, where the general perception of support seems to shift to control when the team that the professional plays on is seen to shift. It is this shift from *with* to *over*, that professionals need to balance. Still, the negotiating of power relationships in a narrow institutionalized space will not go away. This means that prospective adoptive parents need to perceive that the professionals are at least partially playing on the same team as themselves, and that they have a shared goal, indifferent of the fact that their primary aims and goals are in fact not fully shared. It is also important not to make these interactive performances adult-driven and to forget the priority of the needs of the children. These approaches make the interactive stage less prone to information control and expression games, and fosters trust in the relationship between client and professional.

Professionals as key actors in the adoption process have rarely been a focus of interest in adoption research (Willing, Fronek & Cuthbert 2012; Palacios 2012), and even less-so the power dynamics between clients and professionals. As such, this empirical study contributes to this field by analysing the relationships and power negotiations between adoptive parent and professionals in pre-adoption services, by analysis of their strategic interactions.

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