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To cite this article: Madeleine Wirzén & Cecilia Lindgren (2020): 'It shouldn't just be these kinds of sunshine stories': social workers' discussion of 'past difficulties' as a key theme in adoption assessment interviews, *European Journal of Social Work*, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2019.1709160](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1709160)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1709160>



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Published online: 27 Jan 2020.



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'It shouldn't just be these kinds of sunshine stories': social workers' discussion of 'past difficulties' as a key theme in adoption assessment interviews

'Det ska inte bara vara dom här solskenshistorierna': Familjerättssekreterares diskussion om lämplighet och trovärdighet i adoptionsutredningar

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ABSTRACT

According to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, the receiving state must determine that prospective parents are suited to adopt, and it is up to each State Party to identify the criteria and methods by which suitability is determined. The present study focuses on social workers' accounts of the assessment practice, and offers insight into the complexity of the assessment task as well as what is expected and required of adoption applicants. More precisely, it explores why talking about past difficulties and crises is considered to be crucial when assessing prospective adoptive parents. The analysis of social workers' discussions of their work demonstrates how 'talking about difficulties' in assessment interviews serves two primary institutional purposes, as it relates to both the examination of suitability for parenthood and the credibility of the assessment per se. Furthermore, the study points to how social workers' professional discourse on the significance of past experiences holds and reproduces the ideal of a reflective confessing subject, the hallmark of a therapeutic culture.

SAMMANFATTNING

Vid internationell adoption är det, enligt Haagkonventionen, mottagarlandets skyldighet att utreda huruvida de som ansöker om att få adoptera är lämpliga som föräldrar. Det är dock upp till varje konventionsstat att bestämma utifrån vilka kriterier, och med vilka metoder, som lämplighet ska bedömas. Denna studie fokuserar på familjerättssekreterares beskrivningar av bedömningspraktiken och bidrar med kunskap om såväl utredningens komplexitet som de krav som ställs på adoptionssökande. Mer specifikt undersöks varför samtal om svårigheter och kriser anses avgörande i bedömning av presumtiva adoptivföräldrars lämplighet. Analysen av familjerättssekreterarnas diskussioner visar hur samtal om svårigheter fyller olika syften och kopplas till både bedömning av lämplighet för föräldraskap och utredningens trovärdighet i sig. Studien belyser hur familjerättssekreterares professionella diskurs om betydelsen av tidigare svårigheter rymmer och reproducerar den terapeutiska kulturens ideal om ett reflekterande och bekännande subjekt.

KEYWORDS

Adoption; assessment; parenthood; social work practice; therapeutic culture

NYCKELORD

Adoption; det sociala arbetets praktik; föräldraskap; medgivandeutredning; terapeutisk kultur

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Introduction

Social work practice involves a range of professional tasks, one of them being the assessment of clients' parenting capacity. Family assessment has been described as 'one of the most controversial and complex areas of social work' (Holland, 2011, p. 1), especially when there are concerns about a child's welfare. In relation to adoption, and intercountry adoption in particular, this is a truly delicate matter as social workers must examine the suitability of *future* parents with regard to the welfare of an *unknown* child (Lind & Lindgren, 2017). In complex practices such as these, social workers' understanding of their undertakings, i.e. their professional assumptions and taken-for-granted knowledge, influences the performance of social work (Blomberg, Kroll, & Meeuwisse, 2013; Taylor & White, 2000). Therefore, this is an important focus for research on assessment policy and practice. The present study focuses on professional social workers' accounts of the assessment practice and explores why talking about past difficulties and crises is considered to be crucial when assessing prospective adoptive parents.

Adoption assessment and the significance of past difficulties

According to the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, the receiving state must guarantee that prospective parents are suited to adopt, i.e. that they comply with 'the necessary socio-psychological requirements needed to guarantee the success of the adoption' (HcCH, 1994, article 15, paragraph 1, item 294). It is, however, up to each State Party to identify the criteria and methods by which suitability is determined (HcCH, 2008). In Sweden, those who want to adopt a child transnationally apply to the social services in the municipality where they live. An assigned social worker evaluates their suitability through register checks, interviews and home visits and, based on her/his report, the local social welfare committee makes the final decision. Recommendations of how applicants can be assessed are provided in the handbook for social services (National Board of Health and Welfare, hereafter NBHW, 2009¹). The handbook does not prescribe or recommend a certain method but identifies broad areas of inquiry, suggests questions to be asked and defines what constitutes resources and risk factors in relation to adoptive parenthood.

As part of a larger research project, we conducted group interviews with professional social workers about their experiences of working to establish whether people who want to adopt are suited for parenthood. When analysing the data, it became evident that all groups emphasised one particular aspect of assessment as crucial, namely talking to the applicants about their past difficulties and crises. The handbook states that 'previous crises and painful experiences, if they have been properly processed, can be an asset later in parenting' (NBHW, 2009, p. 75). It recommends that social workers talk to prospective parents about these issues, ultimately to eliminate some of the risk factors listed, namely unresolved grief, troubles or crises that have not been properly processed, and problems in coping with difficulties. Even though this is only one of many aspects of applicants' lives and personalities to be scrutinised, it stands out in social workers' discussions about their assessment task. Apparently, from their perspective, investigating troublesome experiences is essential to the evaluation of prospective parents' socio-psychological qualifications. Why is that? What can information and discussions about people's past problems be expected to offer in the process of deciding whether or not they should be able to adopt?

Aim of study

The present study aims to analyse social workers' professional discourse on the assessment of adoption applicants, and, more specifically, to examine what purposes are ascribed to 'talking about difficulties' in the process of determining who will become a good parent to an adopted child. It will hence contribute to the understanding of how a State Party to the Hague Convention may define and assess suitability, and of the norms of parenthood that inform social work and intercountry adoption practices.

By adopting a social constructionist perspective on how knowledge and meaning are produced and reproduced (Taylor & White, 2000), and by interviewing professional social workers, the current study is placed in a research field concerning norms, knowledge and discourses in professional practice. What constitutes suitability for parenthood is not a universal given, but is dependent on norms and knowledge that are formed and reproduced in specific contexts (Lindgren, 2015; Selwyn, 2015). Social workers' ways of describing and reasoning about their work can shed light on the complexity of assessing parenting suitability, as well as the explicit and more underlying notions and premises informing society and social work practices (cf. Blomberg et al., 2013; Taylor & White, 2000).

Previous research

It has been argued that the social work profession in general is permeated by the notion that an individual's past is central to understanding his or her current situation (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). In a British context, Woodcock (2003) and Holland (2011) point to how child welfare is influenced by, for example, attachment theory and how parental capacity is evaluated with reference to parents' own childhood experiences. In her study of social workers' views on biographical approaches in social work practice, Björkenheim (2016) demonstrates that talking about clients' past is described as a way to gather information, but also to stimulate reflection. For example, talking about the past can be useful when social workers want adoption applicants to reflect on things they have experienced and their motives for becoming parents.

Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, and Elbers (2009), who have studied adoption assessment in the Netherlands, show how applicants' life stories, and stressful events in particular, are used as a means to test coping qualities. Being able to handle and process life's adversities in a sound manner is considered to be a major protective factor. Further, they illustrate how assessment interviews offer an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their skills, and also to be open and disclose their thoughts, in order to gain the social worker's support and advice (Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, & Elbers, 2008). In a Swedish context, Lind and Lindgren's (2017) study demonstrates how social workers portray prospective parents whom they consider suited for parenthood, as mature, open and 'good at reflecting on themselves, life and parenting' (p. 58).

This highlights the relationship between the social worker and the client, which has been emphasised as crucial to the quality of social work in general and assessment practices in particular (e.g. Holland, 2011; Sjögren, 2018; Trevithick, 2003; Turney, Platt, Selwyn, & Farmer, 2012). It is not only that the social worker's ability to gain relevant and trustworthy information depends on the relationship with the client, but also that a trustful relationship is required if clients are to open up about themselves and share their life experiences in dialogue with the social worker (De Boer & Coady, 2007; Sjögren, 2018). Consequently, clients' participation and cooperation in assessments are fundamental to the quality and credibility of their outcomes (Holland, 2011; Woodcock, 2003; cf. De Boer & Coady, 2007).

The social worker–client relationship is however characterised by asymmetrical power relations (e.g. Sjögren, 2018). Clients are dependent on the social workers' decisions for their future life, and this affects the process of establishing openness and trust. The complexity of the relationship is particularly evident in adoption assessment. For instance, Selwyn (2015) states that the social worker often takes on several, potentially conflicting, roles, acting as the assessor who decides whether or not the clients are suited to adopt, but also as an educator who helps them to prepare for parenthood and a friend who supports them throughout the process. Noordegraaf et al. (2008) discuss this in terms of an intersection of justice and welfare discourses, in which social workers combine their role as gatekeeper with that of a helper.

The interest in adoption applicants' life experiences and their ability to open up and reflect on themselves and their life situation can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century (Herman, 2008; Lindgren, 2006). As part of the professionalisation of social work, and with influences from

psychodynamic theory, the scrutiny of prospective parents came to focus on their personality, their motives for adopting, their emotional health, and their relationships etc. Hence, mental processes rather than living circumstances formed the basis for suitability assessment. Following from that, adoption applicants had to show willingness to share their inner thoughts and feelings and to participate in them being scrutinised.

Herman (2004, 2008) relates this change in adoption practices to the broader emergence of a therapeutic culture in the Western world from the inter-war period and onwards. It is characterised by an interest in individuals and their understanding of themselves (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Furedi, 2004; Nolan, 1998) and, as Furedi (2004) puts it, the idea 'that human experience is best understood through the prism of emotion' (p. 27). As personal experiences and emotions became central to understanding and helping people, the individual's ability and willingness to verbalise feelings was emphasised and encouraged. What had traditionally belonged to the private sphere – relationships, emotions, desires – became a public matter engaging welfare institutions and their experts.

Accordingly, in a therapeutic culture, and a confessing society, individuals are expected to understand themselves through self-scrutiny and self-reflection, and to share with others what they find. They are also expected to cooperate with experts in exploring and assessing their inner selves (Aubry & Travis, 2015; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013; Furedi, 2004; Nolan, 1998). Furedi (2004) has pointed out that professions working with family and parenthood issues were early in establishing therapeutic practices. Herman's (2004) work illustrates how this was played out in the context of child adoption, as new assessment standards called for clients to be open and self-reflecting, and for experts to interpret their deeper feelings and motives.

Given the focus on clients' life experiences and their self-reflection, as indicated in previous research, we aim to explore what institutional purposes are ascribed to talking about difficulties in assessment interviews and how this can be understood in relation to ideals of parenthood, clienthood and a therapeutic culture.

Material and method

This study is part of a larger research project that focuses on the assessment process and highlights questions about norms of parenting and notions of suitability for adoptive parenthood. The project data include audio-recorded assessment interviews, written assessment reports, and group interviews with social workers who have, or have had, a professional role in assessment of adoption applicants. The substudy reported in this article is based on data from group interviews with a total of 16 social workers at four social services units in different parts of Sweden.

Adoption assessment is performed in different ways in different municipalities. Regardless of the method, the main part consists of interviews with the applicant or applicants (NBHW, 2009). Most social services units conduct individual interviews with each applicant, as well as interviews with both spouses together (the majority of applicants are married couples). Some use strictly formatted interview guides, while others work with more semi-structured approaches. Three of the four social services units represented in this study use semi-structured interviews, and one applies a more standardised model with a fixed set of questions.

The four groups are pre-existing teams in which the social workers meet and work together on a daily basis. Pre-existing groups were chosen in order to facilitate discussion, to enable the social workers to use their daily work as a reference, and to make them feel more relaxed during the interviews (cf. Willig, 2013). Each group consisted of two to five social workers and one interviewer (the same interviewer in all groups). Each interview lasted for about 60 min and was audio and video recorded. To prevent the participants from being identified, the material has been anonymised and all names have been changed. All participants are female, which is why we use the pronoun 'she' when referring to the social workers. When quoted, individual social workers are also referred to by numbers 1–16.

The interviews were semi-structured with an overall theme of the assessment process for prospective adoptive parents. As suggested by Willig (2013), the interviewer was prepared with an interview agenda which contained questions aimed to trigger and encourage the participants' discussions, such as 'Can you tell me about the first time you meet with the applicants?' The agenda supported the interviewer in following up on participants' comments and asking questions to encourage further elaboration. To obtain social workers' descriptions of the assessment process, the interviewer tried not to steer the conversations in any particular direction, but asked open-ended questions and allowed for broad and free discussions. As a result, various topics concerning the assessment process were raised and talked about, as the participants described their work.

The analysis draws on the principles of thematic analysis, as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical procedure started with listening through the recorded interviews and making notes about the various topics discussed by the social workers. In all interviews, certain patterns of issues and arguments recurred, which were not related to local practices but to more general ways of thinking about the task of assessing prospective parents. We hence identified a number of topics that were discussed in similar ways in all group interviews, and those parts of the data were transcribed verbatim.

The transcriptions were then coded, based on what was discussed in specific dialogues or utterances. This generated several different, but partly overlapping, codes. In the next step, the codes were re-evaluated, refined, reorganised and clustered together in themes such as 'the adopted child's needs and rights', 'the role of parental education in the assessment process', and 'adoptive parents as ordinary, yet particularly resourceful people'. The themes constitute the core of the data which corresponds to questions about *how* and *why* prospective adoptive parents are scrutinised. Surprisingly, 'talking about past difficulties' emerged as one of the overarching themes. Even though the interviewer had not prepared any questions about this, it was brought up by participants in all groups and discussed, in a very consensual way, in relation to various aspects of the assessment process. This indicates that it is of particular significance to the meaning of suitability for adoptive parenthood. Given that, we decided to make this theme our focus for further analysis.

The interview sections concerning this theme were analysed in detail, with a focus on how the social workers describe their ways of talking to applicants about 'difficulties', and further, what purposes are, explicitly or implicitly, ascribed to 'talking about difficulties' in assessment. In the analysis, we combined a semantic and a latent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which means we paid attention to what the social workers actually articulated, but also to how their ways of reasoning can be understood in relation to broader societal conceptions and ideologies.

Purposes of talking about difficulties

When the social workers raise the importance of talking to applicants about past troublesome experiences, they use words like 'difficulties', 'crises', 'troubles', 'problems' and 'hardships' to describe such experiences. They refer to various kinds of troublesome experiences that are brought up in assessment interviews, such as marital conflicts or crises, infertility, a parent's alcohol or drug abuse, or other difficulties during the applicant's childhood. They do not, however, elaborate on how they evaluate certain kinds of troubles in relation to suitability for parenthood, or on what could automatically disqualify applicants from becoming parents. What they focus on in their discussions is why and how past difficulties can be addressed and talked about. Throughout the article, we will use 'difficulties' as an umbrella term, but for the sake of variation other words will also serve as synonyms. In the following, we analyse data from the group interviews in which social workers (SW) describe why and how past troubles and crises must be explored in adoption assessment.

Ensuring parent suitability

The overall aim of the adoption assessment process is to decide whether or not the applicants are suitable for adoptive parenthood (NBHW, 2009). In the group discussions, talking to applicants about difficulties is presented as a means to investigate just that. In their discussions, social workers associate having had troubles in life with being prepared for parenthood. This is exemplified in excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

SW 16 (...) a person may have gone through difficult things, and had difficult experiences, but that it could - . If someone has gone through it, and worked through it and all, then maybe someone has become stronger in that way. And that someone ...

SW 15 because that can be something positive (overlapping talk)

SW 16 can be even more suitable. That it is something positive.

Social worker 16 explains that applicants who have had difficulties may have become stronger, given that their experiences have been worked through. As her colleague chimes in to say that this can be something positive, she confirms, not just that it can be, but that it *is*, something positive. Furthermore, she suggests that applicants, as a result of such processes, may have become 'even more suitable'. Here, an interesting chain of arguments is established: Having troubles and being able to process them can make people strong, and that kind of strength can make them better prepared for adoptive parenthood. This way of reasoning is in line with what the Swedish guidelines (NBHW, 2009) state, namely that being able to deal with stressful events in life is a protective factor for adoptive parenthood.

One of the participants in another group elaborates on why talking about difficulties is relevant. She refers to what the Swedish adoption handbook cites as important when assessing suitability, and explains how this is related to talking about troubles and crises.

Excerpt 2

SW 9 And one of the main things that I perceive that the National Board of Health and Welfare's handbook points out is precisely this personal maturity of the parents. And I think it is basically almost impossible to mature in a responsible and adult way if one does not go through a crisis. It is, well it is basically a way to mature, I think. So that it becomes a natural part of talking about crises and difficulties, basically based on personal maturation and personal characteristics. Because there are a lot of things that are important for how a person gets through crises, how a person can reflect, how a person can think in a bit of a more nuanced way about themselves.

Through a series of associations, the social worker creates a strong connection between going through crises and being suited for parenthood, and furthermore, she specifies what the concept of suitability entails. First, she states that maturity is one of the most important aspects of suitability. She then establishes a connection between crises and maturity, by saying that it is almost impossible to mature without having crises, and that having crises is a way of maturing. She also associates maturity with 'responsible' and 'adult'. According to this way of reasoning, a person who has not experienced crises may lack one of the most important prerequisites for adoptive parenthood. Having had difficulties is hence not just 'normal' or expected, but a merit and a requirement when it comes to being perceived as a mature individual and a suitable parent.

The social worker also points to what is considered to be an important part of processing and getting through crises, namely 'how a person can reflect, how a person can think in a bit of a more nuanced way about themselves'. The talking per se thus indicates whether or not the crises have been processed in a sound manner. It also, however, says something about reflexivity, another quality that is cited as important in the assessment guidelines to which she refers.

According to the social worker's way of reasoning, talking about past difficulties accomplishes two things: It displays the applicant's experiences of and ways of handling troublesome events, and it

displays his or her capability to reflect upon such experiences and processes. This corresponds well with research on assessment in social work, showing that the clients' past is important when deciding about their future (e.g. Woodcock, 2003), and with Noordegraaf et al. (2009), pointing to how a capacity to deal with troubles in life is associated with suitability for adoptive parenthood. Furthermore, given that Lind and Lindgren (2017) show that maturity and reflexivity are qualities ascribed to suitable parents, we can conclude that one of the purposes ascribed to talking about troubles in assessment interviews is to offer means to assess two key aspects of suitability: maturity and reflexivity.

Ensuring assessment credibility

As demonstrated above, talking about difficulties in assessment interviews is connected to finding out about the applicants' experiences and their ways of handling and reflecting upon them, and, in turn, to ensuring parent suitability. In the close reading of the interview data, however, we found an additional explanation for why this is such an important topic. Interestingly, this was something we did not recognise from previous research. It was connected not only to the assessment of suitability, but also to what we call assessment credibility.

In the following excerpt, one of the participants explains what the consequences of *not* talking about past troubles would be.

Excerpt 3

SW 9 It is mainly that one- that we, don't get at talking about those things that are actually difficult. Then it becomes just superficial, like yeah, if we can't even explore that, then we can't basically guarantee that a child will be placed in sufficiently good circumstances. (Other participants mark their alignment through supportive tokens) That's just how it is.

According to her reasoning, if a social worker does not get to talk to the applicants about things that are difficult, the investigation will be limited to external circumstances. And further, if the investigation cannot go beyond external circumstances, there is no guarantee that the child will have a good home. Consequently, if applicants *do* talk about their difficulties, it indicates that the social worker has managed to go beyond what is obvious and come closer to what really needs to be assessed, which would be people's inner thoughts and experiences. Here, the subject of difficulties is linked to parent suitability, but also to what is required for the social worker to say she did her job. If past difficulties are not talked about, the assessment will not fulfil its purpose.

The importance of getting beyond external circumstances is elaborated on by participants in other groups as well. The next excerpt is part of a discussion on how applicants tend to present themselves in the most positive light.

Excerpt 4

SW 1 (...) many give a very rose-coloured image of themselves, their childhoods, their paren-, yeah that they had a really 'white picket fence' upbringing when they describe themselves. Because they think that's what you have to do in order to be approved. And then, when you like start to

SW 5 scratch

SW 1 poke at it, scratch the surface a little, and yeah, it starts to get a little ticklish for a lot of people, then you have to like help them over the hump. And say like, the most important thing is being able to talk about it, problematise it, and describe how you got past it.

As applicants try to present themselves as suited for parenthood they tend to idealise their life, the social worker explains. This is what they think they need to do to pass. Therefore, when the investigator starts to 'scratch the surface a little' she needs to assure them that it is important to talk about things that are difficult and how one has moved on. Getting past idealised images, and reaching beneath the surface, is thus emphasised as crucial to the investigator. In the next excerpt,

however, another participant explains that it is important, also from the sending countries' perspective, that the investigator is able to form a realistic image of the prospective parents.

Excerpt 5

SW 8 And this is something that has been heard from certain sending countries and such, that it is what they want from the assessment report. That it shouldn't just be these kinds of sunshine stories. But, there should be something about the issues that the couple has worked through or gone through, and how they dealt with them and how they worked through them and moved forward. That there is a more credible portrait of the family.

Here, talking about difficulties is associated with the credibility of the information sent to children's representatives abroad, and thus also the credibility of the applicants' self-presentation. Success stories are set against what applicants have actually gone through in life, and how they have processed their experiences. The term 'sunshine stories' works, just like 'rose-coloured image' in excerpt 4, to dismiss narratives that do not include problems, as being superficial. Accounts of difficulties are presented as more realistic or true. Such reasoning relies on the presumption that everybody has problems and that people who deny having problems, or who do not want to talk about them, are not completely honest. Given that, applicants who talk about their difficulties are more trustworthy. Talking about troubles thus indicates honesty and credibility, and, by extension, that the information on which the assessment will be based is reliable.

We can conclude that in the participants' reasoning, talking about difficulties is linked to assessment quality. That applicants account for past troubles indicates that a good working relationship has been established and that the investigator has come close enough to them to assess their capacity in relation to the needs of a child. It also guarantees that the applicants' self-presentation, and hence the information that lays the foundation for assessment, is realistic and trustworthy (cf. De Boer & Coady, 2007; Sjögren, 2018). Talking about difficulties thus works to guarantee the credibility of both the applicant and the assessment. It serves as a lockpick for the social worker who wants to reach beneath the surface of the client, to find an authentic and genuine representation of a future parent.

'And this is the kind of picture that we want'

In the above sections, we have demonstrated how talking about difficulties is described as part of ensuring that applicants are suited for parenthood, and also that such a conclusion is based on reliable information. When analysing the social workers' discussions, however, it became evident that having had difficulties, and being able to talk about them, is not enough. It is also of great importance *how* such difficulties are talked about. In the following, we will look more closely at two interview excerpts in which the participants use examples from their own professional practice to illustrate how assessment conversations can turn out. The contrast between the two can be used to scrutinise how difficulties should be talked about and reflected upon, in order for social workers to be able to assess suitability and ensure credibility.

In the first excerpt, the social worker describes an assessment interview that did not turn out well. It involved a female single applicant, and the conversation was about past difficulties and potential problems in the future.

Excerpt 6

SW 1 (...) it didn't turn out so well, the kind of conversation that you would have hoped to have. Because she was so very- well that she wanted us to do the asking. Well, she just answered. She answered, and every time that we problematised or tried to get her to reflect, she got even more like that. And, then we should try to help her put words to what we were experiencing, like we usually do, and we still didn't get any-, we just couldn't connect.

Here, the informant states that this was not the kind of conversation she wanted, and she explains why: Because the applicant wanted the social workers to ask questions and because she 'just

answered'. Even though this was an interview, it is obvious that answering questions was not enough, but that something else was required. The social worker describes how she and her colleague(s) 'tried to get her to reflect' and how they wanted to help her to verbalise her thoughts and experiences, but failed. Despite all their efforts they 'couldn't connect', as she expresses it.

It is clear, from her way of describing this conversation, that it is not having experienced problems per se that is most important, but that the applicant is willing to talk about them and *reflect* upon them and upon himself or herself. Unless he or she speaks more freely and reflects on past and future problems, he or she is perceived as being hard to reach. And, as shown before, reaching beyond external circumstances and underneath the surface is seen as fundamental to the assessment process. This corresponds well with Holland's (2011) finding, that parents in child welfare investigations are judged on the basis of their ability to be articulate and give extended accounts. Parents who do not live up to this are regarded as passive and as lacking insight.

How, then, do social workers expect applicants to talk about difficulties, so that the conversation can serve as a basis for ensuring suitability and credibility? In the next excerpt, an informant from one of the other groups describes what characterises successful assessment conversations.

Excerpt 7

SW 15 (...) people are really open and are willing to offer information about this and that, just about anything you could imagine, 'Oops, well maybe this is something you shouldn't really say,' or -. But it is, now we, we now have had a really wonderful couple who told us about a number of hard things that they have worked through and that have shaped who they are as people. And this is the kind of picture that we want. How did you end up becoming the people you are? Where they are really reflective and have thought through how things have been for them, the good parts and the parts that are less good.

First, she points out that people, i.e. adoption applicants, are generous when it comes to talking about themselves. By describing how they sometimes wonder if they are telling too much, the social worker forms an image of people who are spontaneous and willing to share their thoughts with no regard for what would be appropriate or strategic. As an example, she mentions one couple that she has been working with. They were 'a really wonderful couple' she says. They volunteered to tell her about various things that had been difficult, how they had worked through them and how that had affected them. She describes them as 'really reflective', with a capacity to contemplate the ups and downs in life. And, she declares, 'this is the kind of picture that we want'.

Through her description, the social worker constructs an image of the ideal applicants. The couple referred to as a good example are ascribed a series of characteristics; they *want* to talk about themselves and their problems, they are *open*, they *share* their thoughts and experiences, and they *reflect* upon them and upon themselves. This stands in stark contrast to the female single applicant who wanted to answer questions rather than sharing her thoughts, and who was unable or unwilling to reflect upon her life experiences.

This makes it clear how troubles and difficulties must be talked about in a certain way. Spontaneous telling indicates reflexivity, reflexivity indicates maturity, and both these characteristics indicate suitability for parenthood. Further, spontaneous, open and thoughtful narratives testify that the social worker has managed to make contact, to reach beneath the surface and to gain an authentic image of the applicant(s). Accordingly, both suitability and credibility are displayed.

It is worth pointing out that the woman who is described as not being very open or talkative *was* willing to talk about herself. Apparently, she wanted to be asked questions, and she answered questions. But, according to the participants' ways of reasoning, reporting on difficulties when asked about them is not enough. Instead, engaging in conversation by sharing troublesome experiences, and one's thoughts about them, demonstrates the kind of transparency that social workers call for. Consequently, talking about difficulties is about *sharing*, not *reporting*.

And, to take this analysis one step further, we would argue that the ideal of sharing also points to how talking about difficulties can serve to show that applicants are willing to submit to, and engage

in, assessment. This is something that previous research (Herman, 2008; Holland, 2011; Woodcock, 2003) has pointed to as crucial in assessment practices, in the late twentieth century as well as today. The 'wonderful couple', described in the interview as a good example, do not talk about their past difficulties just because they have to, but because they *want* to. Not only do they accept being assessed, but they engage in the assessment for their own sake, as part of a self-reflective process. Consequently, in the situation described as ideal, the applicants assess their own troublesome experiences and let the social worker help them do so.

Concluding discussion

Based on our analysis of the social workers' ways of reasoning about their work, we can conclude that talking about difficulties is described as serving two primary institutional purposes; namely to ensure applicants' *suitability* for parenthood, and to ensure the *credibility* of their self-representation and of the assessment per se.

Adoption applicants are expected (i) to have experienced difficulties and worked through them, (ii) to be able to talk about them, and (iii) to talk about them in an open, trusting and self-revealing way. If they do, they fulfil what emerges in the social worker's discussions as key socio-psychological requirements for passing as suited for adoptive parenthood:

- being a mature and responsible individual, prepared to handle problems in a sound manner
- being willing to engage in assessment as an explorative, self-searching process
- being able to reflect on past experiences and one's own personal development
- being able to verbalise, and wanting to share, one's inner thoughts about life, relationships, troubles, the past and the future

If applicants meet these expectations, it further proves that the social worker has gained their trust and that her/his judgement is well-founded. If they, on the other hand, are unable or unwilling to open up and speak freely about their troubles, the social worker may question their self-presentation and hence their suitability for parenthood. Accordingly, ensuring suitability and credibility are two sides of the same coin, and talking about difficulties cuts to the core of what needs to be established to say that someone is suited for parenthood.

Our analysis has illustrated how the social work discourse on assessment is permeated by certain norms of parenthood, but also of personhood and clienthood. There is a clear correspondence between those norms, and what has been described as the hallmarks of a therapeutic culture and a confessing society, i.e. that people, in their encounters with authorities, welfare professionals and other experts, are expected to express and verbalise their emotions, to open up about their private life, to submit to assessment and also to engage in self-scrutiny (e.g. Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013; Furedi, 2004; Nolan, 1998).

In a therapeutic culture, feelings are to be expressed openly, and, as James Nolan (1998) puts it: 'To fail to express is to be in denial or to be dishonest [...] because the basis for honesty becomes one's willingness to be in touch with and to express one's feelings' (p. 6). This is also what the social workers in our study say they expect from prospective parents. If applicants talk openly about their problems and how they feel, they show themselves to be honest and trustworthy. They also prove they are not in denial, but are able to recognise and reflect on troublesome experiences and on themselves, which is a protective factor for adoptive parenthood.

Furthermore, in therapeutic contexts, reflection and verbalisation are crucial, as individuals are encouraged to explore their 'true inner self' (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2013, p. 34), to talk about it and make it visible to others for scrutiny and assessment. We have pointed to how social workers describe questions about past crises as a way of 'scratching the surface' in order to find a genuine image of adoption applicants. Talking about difficulties is, thus, an invitation for the prospective parents to present their true selves. And, to meet the social worker's expectations, they must talk about

themselves and their experiences in a self-revealing, self-reflecting and trusting way. As is made clear by the social workers, and pointed out by Fejes and Dahlstedt (2013) as significant for a confessing society, just stating facts about the past is not enough. Confessing rather than testifying, or sharing rather than reporting, is required.

This, in turn, points to some interesting parallels between past and present adoption assessment discourse. Herman (2004, 2008) has described mid century assessment as a prime example of therapeutic practices. When scrutinising prospective parents, who were expected to talk casually about their problems, social workers were 'digging below the surface of consciousness' (Herman, 2004, p. 210) to reveal any possible fears, neuroses or abnormalities. Even though the social workers in our study do not try to unveil suppressed fears and desires, they too strive to go beyond what is obvious. What they describe, however, is a digging below the surface of self-presentations. They want prospective parents to confide in them, to analyse themselves and to share a 'true' image of their inner selves. We can hence conclude that the advice given in a 1960s guide for adoption applicants (Herman, 2004) – to cooperate with the investigator and to be relaxed, unguarded, honest and self-searching – are still valid. Talking about difficulties offers an opportunity for the social worker to test, and for the applicants to display, precisely those characteristics.

Implications for practice

Given our analysis and argument, we want to emphasise the importance, for individual social workers as well as for the profession as a whole, of thinking critically about what is required of clients and why. What are the explicit purposes of assessing certain topics and asking certain questions, and does it also serve other, more implicit, ends? Such an analysis can further help to explore and review the norms, ideals and taken-for-granted truths that underpin the practice of social work. As Taylor and White (2000) have argued, acknowledging the complexity of assessment, and destabilising what is taken for granted, is part of critical thinking and reflexive decision making in professional welfare practices.

Holland (2011) has pointed out that assessment based on verbal questioning can be discriminating to those who, for various reasons, are less talkative. In the context of adoption this means that people who would be good enough adoptive parents might be perceived as ineligible because of their incapability to perform in a desirable way. As our study demonstrates that applicants' display of certain qualities is related to their ability to be articulate and elaborate in sharing their thoughts with the social worker, this is one of the aspects that calls for further discussion. A critical examination of adoption assessment, and the norms of parenthood and clienthood it involves, is crucial to the understanding and long-term development of the professional practice. It is also, however, important to consider how the current procedures may be improved.

For example, Selwyn (2015) has reported on complaints from adoptive parents that the aim of the assessment was not clearly explained to them but that they, in fear of affecting the social worker's decision, refrained from pointing that out. Our study does not include the applicants' perspectives but it does illustrate that past difficulties are talked about for several reasons, not only to eliminate the risk factors associated with handling stressful events, but also to test more general qualities, such as maturity, openness and reflexivity. We would therefore suggest that social workers explain to applicants why it is important to talk about this, and other topics, and that they are clear about what kind of conversation they aim for. It may be helpful if the applicants know that they are supposed not only to answer questions but also to engage in conversations and share their thoughts so that the social worker can get to know them and evaluate their qualities.

Finally, this could also have implications for the social worker–client relationship. In line with De Boer and Coady's (2007) argument, that clear communication enhances cooperation, we believe that transparency regarding the assessment rationale can clarify the preconditions for, and thereby strengthen, the relationship. This, in turn, would have a positive impact on the quality of the assessment.

Note

1. The latest edition with English translation is from 2009. An edition from 2014 is available in Swedish. In the new edition, a few additions have been made regarding legislation, court cases, clarifications etc., but the content that is referred to in this article is the same in both editions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare: [grant number 2015-00542].

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