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Losing control in pre-adoption services: Finnish prospective adoptive parents´ emotional experiences of vulnerability

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This article argues that the institutional context of pre-adoption services in inter-country adoptions put prospective adoptive parents in a vulnerable situation through controlling practices, which foster straining emotions. The article analyses power dynamics and emotions involved in the relationship between the client and the professional, based on nineteen narrative interviews conducted with former prospective adoptive parents in Finland. The results of the study suggest that prospective adoptive parents perceive a power asymmetry through three types of professional controlling practices: support for emotional readiness, entitlement to professional interpretations, and time and information control. In combination with the broader social setting of the inter-country adoption process, these practices give rise to a dependency that fosters emotions of anger and fear at differing levels of intensity. The implications of the study call for an acknowledgement of power and emotion as important issues in pre-adoptions services, and prompt changes to be undertaken in professional practice and discourse, through collaborative definitions of aims and needs within the services to enhance participation.

1   Introduction

The right of a child to be placed in an adoptive family requires control by the designated authorities. From this it follows that becoming an adoptive parent depends upon an adoption process where private family life is exposed through suitability assessment for adoptive parenthood and prospective adoptive parents are faced with relinquishing important personal decisions into the hands of professionals.

Power is an integral part of social work, and the inevitable power inequality between the client and the professional has been acknowledged (e.g. Healy 2000; Dominelli 2002; Appel Nissen 2007), and also studied in the context of child protection (e.g. Ryburn 1997; Dumbrill 2006; Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman 2009; van Nijnatten 2010). However, Uggerhøj (2014, 203) still argues that power is one "of the least reflected-on issues in social work". Since social work clients are often either at risk individuals or stem from disadvantaged groups in society, issues such as participation and dependency are recurring themes in social work (Fargion 2014; Uggerhøj 2014; Siisiäinen 2014). Prospective adoptive parents on the other hand, usually have powerful positions in society by way of their education and economic resources (Simmonds & Haworth 2000), and hence they are not a client group that is traditionally seen in social work. Therefore the power dynamics between prospective adoptive parents as clients and the professionals in the adoption process have rarely been of interest. One distinct feature of pre-adoption services compared to other child protection practices, is that control, justified in the best interests of the future adoptive child (Lind 2008), is exercised before the child is actually in the family. Although the concept of power has been addressed in adoption, it is rather hidden in a discourse of partnership and

joint decision-making (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2013) which is also promoted in child welfare literature (e.g. Platt 2012; Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie 2011; Ryburn 2006).

Client dependency and vulnerability have been acknowledged in social work research, but the emotions of clients in their encounters and relationships with professionals have largely been overlooked (e.g. Gausel 2011). Still, a loss of control in regard to existential issues such as parenthood is closely connected with our emotional life. For example a recent study by Thrana and Fauske (2014) shows that encounters between clients and child welfare professionals are highly emotional. The process of adopting a child often signifies hope, joy, fulfilment and happiness. At the same time however, for many the journey of becoming an adoptive parent is long and emotionally challenging, with emotions of powerlessness, anxiety and even despair (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell; 2003; Högbacka 2008; Berástegui Pedro-Viejo 2008). Professionals are important facilitators in this adoption process, and make crucial decisions about the creation of families, however with the exception of studies by e.g. Noordegraaf, Nijnatten & Elbers (2010), their practices have seldom been focused upon (Palacios 2012).

In sum, power and emotions are important intertwined forces in all social interaction (Layder 2004) and hence also in social work practices, but the relationship between the client and the professional has seldom been of interest in adoption research (Palacios 2012; Willing, Fronek & Cuthbert 2012). Yet the relationship between the client and social worker is of great importance for both the quality and outcome of social service provision (e.g. Holland 2000). This article shows how prospective adoptive parents perceive the power asymmetry between them as clients and the professionals involved in the institutional context of pre-adoption services, and how they respond with straining emotions to the context of controlling practices and dependency. Furthermore, the consequences of these emotional reactions are considered, as well as their implications for professional practice. These issues are addressed by way of a qualitative analysis of 19 narrative interviews with Finnish women and men who pursued an adoption process in order to adopt a child from abroad into their family during the 21st century.

2   Clients within statutory pre-adoption services in inter-country adoption

The inter-country adoption process is governed by national and international laws and regulations, with the rights of the child as the guiding principles. In Finland, a completed pre-adoption process for such adoptions consists roughly of two stages: firstly there is pre-adoption counselling followed by the application for an adoption permit, and then there is a waiting period which ends in a child proposal and finally taking the child into care.

The aim of pre-adoption counselling is to assess the suitability of the prospective adoptive parents, and to offer them preparation for adoptive parenthood (Adoption Act 2012). These two aspects remain intertwined with elements of support and control, as the social worker acts as both gatekeeper and supporter. According to Finnish guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (2013), the service should further support the prospective adoptive parents in their personal process of preparing for adoptive parenthood, by way of providing information and by offering tools for self-evaluation through reflection.

Since the child is absent during the assessment, it becomes an evaluation of parental potential instead of performance. Potential is not only evaluated through measurable indicators such as their socioeconomic situation or childcare experience, but also through the social worker's subjective evaluations of the family relations, their capacity for reflection, and their emotional

readiness for adoptive parenthood. This assessment is mainly based on verbal interactions and discussion between the prospective adoptive parents and the social worker. A pre-requisite of this process is for prospective adoptive parents to engage in a trustful relationship with the adoption professionals, who at the same time control the creation of the family.

In Finland, this first phase of the adoption process is handled by either the social services of the municipality concerned, or by social workers employed in one licensed organisation (Save the Children, Finland) designated to handle the statutory task. The practices derive from a psychodynamic tradition which in combination with the traditional motive for adoption (that of infertility) expects a change in the client through their acceptance of infertility and reaching an emotional level of readiness for adoptive parenthood (see e.g. Kirk 1964; Triselotis, Shireman & Hundleby 1997, 43; Prochaska et. al. 2005; Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2013). Among clients with other motives for adoption, the change expected is one of emotional readiness. This includes making an informed decision about adopting, having an understanding of adoptive parenthood being different to biological parenthood, and also having knowledge about the challenges and special needs that adopted children entail (Prochaska et al. 2005). The pre-adoption counselling results in a home-study report which describes the circumstances and readiness of the propsective adoptive parents, with an evaluation of their suitability for adoptive parenthood. With this home-study report, a permit for adoption is applied for from the Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health in Finland.

Upon receiving the permit, the second phase follows, consisting of a waiting period which usually lasts several years. During the waiting period the prospective adoptive parents become clients of a mediating adoption organization that assists them in adopting a child from sending countries through accredited contacts. At this point the professionals function as mediators between the prospective adoptive parents and the sending country in terms of handling all contacts and information. The final decision about the placement of a child and the finalization of an adoption is usually made by the authorities in the sending country and not by the agency which provides the mediating service for them.

3   Power, emotion and client socialization

The theoretical concepts utilized in this study are power, emotion and client socialization. In this study, power and emotions are seen as intertwined relational, dynamic and situational processes influenced by perceptions of social reality on different levels (e.g. Layder 2004).

Power is anchored in micro-practices and operates in everyday social practices and relations, hence it is always present within the institutions of our welfare state (Foucault 1983). Through social control, society conforms individuals and groups into normative forms which are expected in society (Mäntysaari 1991, 172). In institutions, individuals are either turned or encouraged to turn themselves into certain types of subjects (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013, 11) or "institutionally preferred personas" (Loseke 2001, 121). In social work, change into this strived for normative person has to be achieved voluntarily, and hence there is a constant tension between the issues of control and support (Juhila 2009). Getting close to the client and creating a trusting relationship is one of the gateways for the implementation of pastoral power (Foucault 1983). When the aim is to create a self-reflective dialogue with the client, there is always a strive for change at some level (Juhila 2009, 54). However, this change is only possible with those who acknowledge they need help and legitimize the professional to help them. This has been conceptualized as client socialization (Alcabes & Jones, 1985).

Alcabes & Jones (1985) argue that one is merely an *applicant* for something until a working agreement between the applicant and the helper has been established. Thus, an applicant has to be socialized into the *client* role and be motivated to receive the social work "treatment". The aims of the pre-adoption services call for the socialization of the prospective adoptive parent into the client role, and for them to go through an emotional maturation process supported by discussion, information and self-reflection.

Emotions are not triggered in a mental vacuum, but their formation, interpretation and functional dimensions are always shaped and defined in an interaction between the person concerned and their environment, and elicited by their evaluation of the situation (Lazarus, 2001; Roseman & Smith 2001; Turner 2009). As dynamic and situated processes, the appraisal also involves the social, political and cultural aspects of emotional experience and expression (Loseke 2009, 500-501). In adoption research, emotion has often been viewed from a psycho-dynamic perspective (e.g. Verrier 1991; Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig 1992) and hence the situation of the prospective adoptive parents has been interpreted within this framework. However, this individual-level view overlooks how the institutional and social settings shape emotion (Hochschild 1998, 5; Loseke 2009, 499). My study is therefore concerned with the impact of the institutionalized setting of social work and pre-adoption services on emotions, and hence takes into account the impacts of power and position in the social structure (Clay-Warner 2014), in addition to personal psychobiography (Layder 2004).

4   Data and methods

4.1 Narrative interviews

The empirical data comprises of 19 narrative interviews with Finnish women and men who have pursued an adoption process with the aim to adopt a child from abroad. The 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 question was "Would you please tell me about your adoption process?" Thereafter, questions were asked about issues raised in the narrative and other experiences of the process. Some interviews consisted of long complete narratives, whereas others turned out to be more in the form of informal conversations about the adoption process. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and Swedish (1-2 hours each), and were recorded and transcribed. The excerpts in this article have been translated into English after completion of the analysis.

Prospective adoptive parents are a very heterogeneous group with various backgrounds and motives for adoption. In Finland, most adopters are childless and a majority have a background of infertility (The Finnish Board of Inter-country Adoption Affairs 2009; 2010). However, families with biological children also adopt either due to secondary infertility or by choice. This study includes adopters from all of these backgrounds. The data includes eight different sending countries, each with different adoption policies. All of the respondents who had become adoptive parents had adopted a child less than four years prior to their interview. Of these, 12 came from abroad and one was a domestic adoption. Individual adoption processes that ended in adoption lasted from around three to nine years. Of the six women with an adoption miscarriage (a terminated process), 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 was a single applicant. Of those interviewed, five men and one woman had biological children prior to the adoption. None of the persons interviewed were from the same family, thus the interviews concerned 19 different adoption processes.

The interviews contain retrospective accounts of past experiences that are organized and made meaningful in the narrative. Narratives themselves are socially situated and actively told for a specific audience and for a certain reason (Chase 2005; Holstein & Gubrium 1998). The interviewees knew I had an interest in improving professional practices within the adoption process, and that I had earlier worked as a social worker in pre-adoption services. Having this experience but not currently being involved in adoption practices helped in enabling me to tune into and understand the narratives, but did not adversely affect the degree of trust present in the researcher-interviewee relationship. Having professional experience of numerous adoption processes, in my opinion the data consists of very honest and personal accounts, and describes common issues and experiences related to the adoption process.

4.2 Qualitative analysis

The analysis was twofold. Several inductive readings of the data showed that emotions were tangible in the narratives and these were chosen for analysis. Secondly, the power asymmetry which manifested in the narratives were analysed and conceptualized as controlling practices. The emotions were coded and categorized into four categories of primary emotions: fear, anger, sorrow and happiness (e.g. Turner 2009). In the data, a range of straining emotions stemmed from the primary emotions of fear and anger. These emotions associated with a loss of control in the institutional setting were chosen as the main focus of this article, whereas those associated with the fear of losing a desired child are reported elsewhere (Eriksson 2016).

All of the narrated actions of professionals in the institutional context were coded and categorized according to the perception of power as a means of support and control as perceived by the prospective adoptive parents. The qualitative analysis can be characterized as a thematic narrative analysis where the narrative is kept intact, but the focus is on "what" is said and themes across the narratives are sought (Riessman 2008, 53-58). Both narrative (within case) and paradigmatic theorizing (across case) were utilized (Chase 2005, 663; Riessman 2008; Polkinghorne 1995, 21). The complete narratives were kept attached to the coded excerpts and used in the interpretation of the narrator´s social situation.

When using retrospective data there are two issues that have to be considered. Firstly, studies of autobiographical memory (Levine 1997; Levine et al. 2001) show that the mood of the situation when a story is told influences the recalled emotion, and that accounts are therefore told in light of the narrators´ current evaluation of the situation. Secondly, the expression of emotions is very individual, and whilst some of the narratives were full of emotional expressions, others were less emotional. Researchers (e.g. Scheff 2006) have earlier noted a gendered difference in expressing emotions, which indicates that women are more prone to expressing vulnerable emotions such as fear, whilst men are more prone to expressing anger. Therefore, all sections of the interviews where the narrator either talked about emotions or expressed them during the interview, or where the account was interpreted as carrying emotional content were treated as equally important, and no conclusions about gender differences should be drawn.

5 Controlling practices and dependency

Controlling and gatekeeping functions of professionals are present throughout the whole pre-adoption process. The power asymmetry associated with these functions is perceived by the prospective adoptive parent through three types of practices. These take the shape of both support and control, and can be roughly divided into 1) supporting the client towards

emotional readiness, 2) the entitlement to professional interpretations, and 3) the controlling of time and information.

5.1 Supporting clients towards emotional readiness

Many of those interviewed had experienced social workers as being empathic, trustful and having engaged them in thought provoking discussions which triggered self-reflection. One adoptive father described the benefits of the process:

> "I think pre-adoption counselling was a great process...//... we thought the process lasting a year was really good for our marriage, something that everyone should take part in...//…A really nice and insightful process about oneself and our relationship...//… it was focused on our family, the two of us and our relationship, so it was really enlightening."

As illustrated here, the client accepts the client role and the aim of the service, having been socialized into the client role (Alcabes & Jones 1985). Hence supporting them in their preparation and emotional readiness for adoptive parenthood was achieved in this case through enhanced self-awareness and finding strengths in their relationship.

But for some, the needs definition made by the professional might not be agreeable to the client, and therefore the ´help´ offered is not appreciated. One adoptive mother expressed a differing view between herself and the social worker when she was expected to account for her childlessness as part of her displaying her emotional readiness for adoption:

> "What was annoying was this stressing of certain truths, or like single right answers …//… stressing maternity, and expectations like: "have you dealt with this maternity trauma of yours?" It was like I have to have this trauma somewhere, but I couldn't find it. Like a stereotypical picture of: "If you are a woman you must have the urge to give birth to a biological child…"

This reflects an expectancy of change within the client which was not displayed as expected. Here the professional expects a common expression pattern of sorrow and trauma in relation to a process accepting infertility - a pattern that the client does not feel comfortable with. This situation created a sense of anger and resistance in the client that inhibited further reflective discussions. The practice intended to be supporting, yet demonstrates control wrapped in pastoral power (Foucault 1983). Thus, the change expected in a normative process feels constraining to some prospective adoptive parents.

In the first phase of the process, the whole issue of proving emotional readiness is based on the professional having the right to make a subjective decision on whether readiness is satisfactorily displayed. If client socialization (Alcabes & Jones 1985) has not taken place in accordance with jointly defined needs, then only the outward behaviour is adapted in order to prove one´s suitability to the professionals. In pre-adoption services the "institutionally preferred persona" includes a "humble client role" (Eriksson 2007), and in a rehabilitation context, Mik-Meyer (2006) has showed that it is not desirable for clients to act as being without needs. From this follows that if there is no jointly agreed needs definition an acceptance of the professional´s definiton is called for in combination with the display of a front of well-prepared and emotionally ready adoptive parent to be.

5.2 Entitlement to professional interpretations

The entitlement of professionals to define the situation and the strived for normative requirements of adoptive parenthood is another practice that the participants more strongly associated with control. For example, one woman was offended by the social worker questioning her and her husband's suitability, and appearing to try and find reasons for them not to be suitable by, according to the woman, drawing incorrect conclusions about them:

> "… I worked hard and we were both making a career, and you could say that she [the social worker] was trying to monitor our time-management and prove that we didn't have time for a child; that it would not fit into our lives. Since we are career-persons and we make money, according to her we could not adopt …//… and when I said that life will change, she didn't believe it at all."

Another adoptive mother described a situation where the social worker was offering her own interpretations of her and her spouse´s background, based on their narratives about their childhood. Professionals draw conclusions about their clients that might not always coincide with the client's own interpretation of the situation. Through their expert-status and professional knowledge, professionals might spot risks in the future adoptive parenthood that the client does not view as agreeable conclusions. In this case the women did not agree with these interpretations, but chose not to oppose the social workers but hid her anger and frustration during the interactions.

As the representative of the system and the authorities, the professional has the power and obligation to make decisions about the suitability for adoptive parenthood. In holding this right to make such a crucial decision about adoptive parenthood, an entitlement to professional truth is manifested. The professional is entitled to authoritative knowledge about a specialized field of practice that has developed over time, and this gives rise to what Foucault (1983) calls the institutional licensing of knowledge, and further argues this knowledge to be power. This knowledge not only resides in the professionals, but also in the manifesting requirements which are placed on prospective adoptive parents by the laws and policies of the sending and receiving countries. Ultimately however, the requirements stem from society´s ideals of families and of normative parenthood, and these are further enforced by the professionals.

5.3 Time and information control

As the first two practices described are more characteristic of the first phase of the adoption process, when the suitability assessment is made, the concepts of time and information control were associated with practices seen throughout both phases of the pre-adoption process. These were often exemplified through minor things in the professional´s actions, but which became perceived as symbols of control by the clients. What to the professional might have constituted a missed e-mail, a forgotten phone-call, or a delay in forwarding information became crucial to the emotionally involved clients.

In the first phase of assessment and preparation, time-control is displayed in the social worker's evaluation of the situation as dictating the time-frames. Thus, the professionals decide the most suitable pace at which to proceed in accordance with their evaluation of the client´s emotional readiness. In the second phase however, during the waiting period the pace of the process is mainly dictated by the sending countries´ policies, thus making the mediating organizations in the receiving country almost equally as dependent as the client.

One woman talked about the clash between the perceptions of time of the professional and the client:

> "Social workers don't like to be pressured. And adoption applicants are always in a great hurry, and there is this huge discrepancy, like between everybody…//… then when you should calm down, still all the time in the back of your mind you have this urge to see the process proceed and finish, and one wants to do whatever it takes"

Since the process of inter-country adoption is usually long, then time is a crucial matter. Prospective adoptive parents often have the feeling of time running out (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003) and their agency is temporally directed towards the future, whereas the professional's perception of time and agency can be very different. Since there is an excess of adoptive parents to be in relation to adoptable children and the waiting times are long (e.g. Högbacka 2008), then professionals might not consider the situation as equally urgent as the prospective adoptive parents.

Issues of information-control were especially present in the waiting period. One adoptive father described the relationship between getting information and reduced anxiety in the long process:

> "The communication was slow and passive, and let's say that it was scarce...//... it really calms one down in that situation when one is getting no-nonsense or precise information. But you get even more anxious when you get too little information and then you have the feeling that they are not telling you everything and you lose trust in them..."

In the waiting period, the adoption agency functions as a mediator of information about the applicant's case and changing adoption policies, hence also deciding on the amount of information that is disclosed and the pace at which it is delivered. In this phase of the process, the client is more or less passively waiting for up to several years for a matching and the following child proposal, and therefore information becomes a crucial issue. Also, in terms of information the organizations are often as dependent as the clients on the sending country's authorities or agencies. This often creates a situation when no new information is available, but even though the knowledge of "no news" is of interest to the clients, it is not often delivered. Problems in delivery of information can partially be seen as a staff resource problem, but information control also stems from an expert-guided view where the professional sometimes protects the client from emotional distress or disappointment. An example of this can be a situation where a child proposal arrived at the agency but it was not immediately forwarded to the prospective adoptive parents, but was first translated and reviewed in order to make sure that the child met their specific expectations and capacities. As such, the unfulfillment of expectancies of immediate delivery of any information, which have developed in our fast information society, sometimes create feelings of anger in the client.

Another challenge connected with information concerning the client´s case in relation to other waiting prospective adoptive parents is related to the issue of the clients not being litigants in any child´s case until a placement is made into their family. This situation causes frustration and experiences of unfairness if other families are matched earlier with a child:

> "Feelings of unfairness. That is probably the emotion that comes when things are always secret, that the decisions [concerning matching] cannot be accounted for to us.

> When we are not part of these cases, we cannot have any explanations why the decisions are made as they are."

As Foucault (1983) argues knowledge to be power, Goffman (1983) considered information as a prime resource of power in interaction. As some scarcity in information is explained by the intermediary position of the agencies, also social workers are seen to have withheld information in the first phase of the process in relation to either their evaluation of suitability or the expected duration of the assessment phase for longer times than needed.

5.4 Perception of limited agency

As a backdrop to these professional practices, the whole context of the inter-country adoption process fosters a sense of dependency. This excerpt from an interview with an adoptive father illustrates the very common accounts of perceptions of limited agency within this professionally driven, strictly regulated and institutionalized process:

> "This is the kind of process in which one feels that one's own possibility to influence [matters] is almost insignificant. Or it doesn't exist… in any of the parts of the process - that you are just stuck in the cogs of the machinery and hope that they will turn in the right direction…"

The clients have a sense of having few possibilities to influence a process that lasts for years and where the outcome is uncertain, and this is illustrated through the practices which are seen to form a machinery, and where the professionals appear as cogs in the mechanism. In some phases of the process, decisions are made by "faceless" people that the clients never meet (e.g. the adoption council that grants permissions for adoption, or the decision making authorities in the birth country of the child). It is then that the chain of professionals making crucial decisions becomes perceived as almost a "bureaucratic being", and the target of emotions is undefined.

Although the client's perception of the possibility to influencing the adoption process are limited, the stake of losing the desired child through professional decisions is also ever present. As one adoptive father expressed:

> "No, not really. I don't think so [that one can influence the process]. One is faced with such delicate issues all the time; that someone else is always leading the process. Someone else. Always there is a person who can, at any point pull the carpet from under your feet."

The uncertainty which is part of the adoption process concerns everything from the expected waiting time, the actual success of the process, and the unknown child. One major issue that commonly fostered frustration, irritation and annoyance was the length of the overall process. One man stated: "Of everything, the most annoying thing is the unbelievable length of the process", and a woman said that the frustration she experienced was combined with the insecurity of not knowing when something was going to happen. They both chose to limit their expression of emotions, as during the waiting period, a preferred client seems to be one who contains negative emotions up to a certain degree, as an indication of emotional readiness for going through a long and uncertain process, commonly perceived as stressful (Sandelowski, Harris & Holditch-Davis 1991).

6 Emotional reactions to dependency

In the previous sections, the emotional reactions of clients have been intertwined with examples of perceived controlling practices. In this section, the emotional reactions and responses to control and dependency are further scrutinized. Dependency is to be seen on two different levels. On one hand, the vulnerable situation and the dependency on the system foster emotions of *anger* and *fear* as the client faces an inability to create a family or expanding their family without help. On the other hand, in relation to the dependency which exists in the relationship between the prospective adoptive parent and the professionals, being subjected to controlling practices triggers anger at lower levels of intensity such as *frustration, annoyance and disappointment*. The vulnerability of being dependent on professionals in an important matter also fosters emotions of anxiety and fear. The fear of social workers having the power to decide upon their suitability for adoptive parenthood through their evaluation, and the fear of them not being professional enough to handle the case was also identified in the interviews. As one woman said, she is used to "cruising her own life" and was uneasy with letting go of the power to make decisions in an important matter.

The vulnerable position of clients in relation to the professionals acting as gatekeepers inhibits them from expressing any dissatisfaction with the services. A re-occurring theme was that hardly any complaints were expressed until the child was in the family, and the threshold for showing ones dissatisfaction was high. However, after the child was acquired many felt that there was no longer any point in complaining. As one woman said:

> "The adoption agency nevertheless exercises power on us as applicants, so we didn't kind of want to complain with the promptness that we usually would have - frankly speaking, we did not dare in case our process would become more complicated and we had already had so many hardships within it."

In addition, prospective adoptive parents are often powerless in their inability to have children without help due to a background of infertility. Thus also their personal position can be seen as vulnerable. In relation to the loss of control, as reflected in the excerpt above there is a fear of losing the wanted child. The gain or loss of a wanted child is clearly in the hands of the professionals, and the possible loss of a wanted child often signifies a loss of parenthood in general (Eriksson 2016). This shows that the issues of vulnerability and dependency are not only connected to clienthood, but also to the overall feeling of helplessness in not being able to have a wanted child. The hardship experienced in having a child through adoption is often compared by clients to others having biological children. In such cases, emotions of anger and frustration can occur as "nothing is demanded from normal parents, no permits and no extra explanations". Unfairness and a feeling of unwarranted examination were common experiences. Having one's capability for parenthood assessed by the authorities might feel unduly harsh. Usually these emotional expressions were linked to a cognitive acceptance of the fact that future adoptive parents need to be screened in some way are exemplified in the following woman´s narrative:

> "Why are we examined, when all kinds of drunkards and junkies can make as many babies as they like, and no one asks them anything, and why, why are normal people being examined? Of course, it is understood that it is best for everybody that it is like this. That it is regulated, and that permits [to adopt] are not granted just like that."

In this excerpt, the gap between the emotional experience and cognitive understanding is very visible. Most prospective adoptive parents agree that a control of prospective parents is needed to secure the best interest of the child, even if they would rather keep control in their own hands. The same notion was raised by von Greiff (2004) among Swedish adoptive parents, but even if there is a cognitive acceptance, it does not reduce the emotions which are aroused by the situation.

As well as others having biological children, seeing other families gaining their adoptive children faster than oneself triggered feelings of jealousy, and this was seen as a mix of fear and anger (Turner 2009) at someone else acquiring something which was desirable. The length of the adoption process is dependent on numerous factors (e.g. the policies of the sending countries, the children which are available, and factors associated with the applicants). Hence, the length and outcomes of the process cannot be equal. The process does not strive for equality from the adult´s point of view, and this gives rise to feelings of jealousy among some prospective adoptive parents:

> "And we had these friends who adopted a toddler from China and it happened about a year before our adoption, and it was very difficult to handle because they started their process about five years later than us, and they got one [a child] much earlier. And we didn't even know if we were going to have one. That felt unfair…"

In this excerpt from an adoptive father, the fear of not receiving a child is also present, so it was difficult to be happy for someone else, when it was not certain as to whether one might face either a loss or gain of one's own wanted child.

7   Discussion and conclusions

This study has dealt with pre-adoption services and highlighted prospective adoptive parent´s emotional experiences of dependency and controlling practices in the context. In the studied context, professionals control otherwise resourceful people, who have seldom previously been subjected to the controlling power of the welfare state, but are "clientified" through their desire to have a child. Letting go of control and being subject to the terms of others when having been used to handling one's own life are tangible issues giving rise to anger and fear at different levels of intensity. I argue that prospective adoptive parents are vulnerable in their client position and that the straining emotions that the situation gives rise to might have consequences for both the interactions and delivery of pre-adoption services, and the adoptive family's well-being in the post-adoption phase.

The dependency discussion in social work related to traditional groups of clients and phenomena such as poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and delinquency, centres around a dependency on the state (e.g. Dean & Taylor-Gooby 1992). In pre-adoption case-work on the other hand, the client group's dependency is primarily on the professionals in a single albeit existential aspect of life. Being dependent in the pre-adoption setting means that the consequence of an exit from the service would be the loss of the wanted child. The dependency and powerlessness commonly felt by clients within social services (e.g. Holland 2000) is further strengthened by the fact that prospective adoptive parents are clients in a service where the main aim of the entire process is not solve their "problem", but the situation of the child. Since prospective adoptive parents have no legal entitlements in the process of matching and creating families, they fall into a doubled position of powerlessness: firstly in terms of the common vulnerability of a client within social services in general (Svensson,

Johansson & Laanemets 2008), and also in the position of "non-clients" who have no rights in relation to their desired service outcome, i.e. to adopt a child.

All prospective adoptive parents have the right to service on the same terms, and also the right to receive a fair assessment and professional service. Still the qualification for adoptive parenthood does not automatically mean an entitlement to a child, since no-one has the right to claim a child for themselves. Hence in adoption and child protection, the professional foremost advocates for the child in line with the UN declaration of children´s rights. A shift towards the privatization of adoption services seen in many countries easily leads to a stronger advocation for adults, which is problematic from the child´s point of view. In such matters, it can be argued that there needs to be public control, as society has the responsibility to foremost safeguard the rights of vulnerable children.

Power is an integral part of child protection, but Parton (2006) argues that child protection in general, has moved towards a discourse of early intervention and risks. The governing of families through risk assessment (Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie 2011, 76) is similar in pre-adoption services, but is conducted even before the family creation takes place. According to Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie (2011), expert-centred practices have been criticised and are yielding in the field of child protection as the focus of control is turning towards emancipatory practices and support. As the researchers argue though, this does not remove the issue of control and power, but might in fact serve to hide it. Still, the client´s perception of support instead of control sets a base for good service provision.

When social workers feel they know the needs of the client better than the client, the feeling of them exercising control is felt only by the client, and not by the social worker (Mäntysaari 1991, 206), whereas in a joint needs definition the client might better accept the support offered. In the interviews, those who saw the self-reflective preparation process as a productive experience and adapted to the situation (i.e. they were socialized into clients according to Alcabes & Jones 1985) were less prone to negative emotions, while those who saw themselves as merely applicants and felt to be without rights expressed more anger and frustration. In some cases the client had felt the service was unnecessary and felt to be in no need of the professional´s help and support in terms of preparation. In these cases the common aim of the professional and the applicant had not been established and the applicants felt frustrated in being forced to demonstrate their capability for adoptive parenthood to the professionals. In this applicant position, these well-educated, verbally capable and informed prospective parents can chose their strategic actions (Goffman 1959), in a way that is favourable to them. In some cases where no other aim than their desire for a child was expressed by the applicant, the services only become a stage for displaying suitability and to gain the approval of the professional. This can lead to a containing of emotions in order to present a desired front, thus hindering reflection and enhanced self-awareness (Eriksson 2016).

In this context of assessment and preparation for adoptive parenthood this calls for a professional focus on the capacities and strengths to meet a future adoptive child´s needs to be favoured to a more risk-oriented assessment and discourse. By co-defining needs of both the adoptive children and the future adoptive parents, participation can be enhanced. As the practices in adoption draw on a psychodynamic tradition it is prone to expert-centeredness and risk-management, instead of engendering more empowering practices and promoting a co-creation of needs within the service. Questions can be raised as to whether there is a hesitancy among social workers in forming partnerships with these powerful adult clients,

when (as Bar-On 2002 argues) social workers themselves often feel powerless? Also, does the absence of the child pre-adoption challenge participatory practices in fear of the inter-country adoption process becoming even more adult-driven, thus making the professionals hold onto their expert status in safeguarding the primacy of the invisible child´s right?

Control is needed in order to ensure the rights of the child, but can be channelled productively in order to lessen the emergence of straining emotions. To positively influence the responsiveness of clients to their preparation, stressful emotions; especially those stemming from the client-professional relationship; should be minimized as it has been found that preparation of adoptive parents in inter-country adoptions enhances parental satisfaction (Paulsen & Merighi 2009) and is associated with an enhanced emotional readiness (Farber et al. 2003). Even if most adoption processes finish with an adoption, the straining emotions which are experienced during these processes might reflect far into the life of the adoptive family (Viana & Welsh 2010; Simmel 2007). Negative experiences do not only influence the pre-adoption service experience, but also client's willingness to co-operate in the post-adoption phase.

Explicating the aim of the pre-adoption services as to not providing children, but to prepare and mediate families for children in need sets a common ground for the services. But having a cognitive understanding of the aims of the services on the part of the prospective adoptive parents does not always fully take away straining emotions when the desire for a child is strong. Further the context and nature of the adoption process itself will continue to foster straining emotions. As inter-country adoption processes will always be unsure and unpredictable, to some extent, the role of professionals in making the road less bumpy is of great importance. Through either their actions or passivity, the emergence of negative emotions can be positively or negatively influenced in the client interactions and relationship. Even if straining emotions are common, the majority (82%) of Finnish adoptive parents are satisfied with the statutory pre-adoption services they receive, but any dissatisfaction is often related to their relationships with the professionals involved (Eriksson et al. 2015). The lower intensity emotions of frustration, disappointment and annoyance are often connected to service provision that could be improved through small changes in practice. The results of this study also suggest that space should be made for the expression of emotions in a separate forum from the statutory services, for example in peer-support groups or independent preparatory courses.

Dependency and participation issues should be discussed to a greater depth also in adoption services. In the same way as other users of social services, prospective adoptive parents request what Uggerhøj (2014, 206) calls "everyday democratic acts" within the service setting and process, as well as calls for recognition as parents involved in child protection services (Thrana & Fauske 2014; Palmer, Maiter & Manji 2006). When acknowledging dependency, vulnerability and emotions, then small considerations such as the client's participation in creating common understanding and more dialogical practices can make a big difference in the emotional experiences of the prospective adoptive parents.

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