



‘Of course you will succeed warrior 🧡’: Sensitive closings of WhatsApp conversations by professional foster parents

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ABSTRACT

Good collaboration between professional foster parents (PFPs) and birth parents (BPs) is of great importance for the well-being of out-of-home placed youngsters in family-style group care. Previous studies have shown that WhatsApp has become an important medium in the professional communication between professional foster parents and birth parents as it offers the possibility to send movies and photos in addition to text. This research has identified two ways in which professional foster parents are closing WhatsApp conversations in a sensitive manner. Professional foster parents are setting boundaries by *encouraging* and *making a reference to the future*, often accompanied by emoji: (1) Encouragements are apparent in expressions that compliment, comfort and invite to ‘let it go’. (2) Professional foster parents make reference to the future in a wish, proposal or promise. Furthermore, the asymmetrical nature of the relationship becomes clear in the coaching role adopted by professional foster parents, and the observation that solely professional foster parents at times remain silent or do not respond in closing interactions. In short, sensitive boundary setting in closing sequences demonstrates how the institutional character of the relationship is embodied in the WhatsApp communication between professional foster parents and birth parents.

1. Introduction

In 2018, over 25,000 out of home placed children in the Netherlands resided in foster care families or in family-style group care (Wunderink, 2019; Pleegzorg Nederland, 2020). This number is growing, as government legislation favours a family based setting as the preferred form of care for out-of-home placements in the Netherlands (Ministry of Health, Welfare & Sport and Ministry of Justice and Security, 2014). This is in line with trends in foster care in the Western world (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). In family-style group care children live in home-like settings with professional foster parents (cf. Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2017). Family-style group care in the Netherlands differs from regular foster care in the complexity of the children’s behaviour and the professionalism of the group home parent(s), known as professional foster parent(s) (PFP). Typically, four to six children on average, mostly from different birth families, reside in the professional foster parent’s home. At least one of the professional foster parents (PFP) is socio-pedagogically educated, and is, due to this full-time position, in paid employment. This differs from regular foster care in the Netherlands, which is volunteer work and does not require any special education. For

Dutch out-of-home placed youth professional foster care is the preferred option over residential care.

An important task of foster parents in general is to establish good collaboration with the birth parent(s) of the out-of-home placed child (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2020). Even more communication and collaboration skills are required from the professional foster parent due to institutional demands of foster care organizations (Kernteam Kwaliteitscriteria Gezinshuizen, 2019). Therefore, from the perspective of conversation analysis (CA), their communication can be considered as ‘institutional talk’ (Heritage & Clayman, 2011). Professional foster parents are responsible for being in touch with the birth parents, for example in simply telling how the child is doing, but also in discussing daily issues and arranging the children’s meetings with birth parents on a regular basis. For birth parents, in daily life on a distance of their child, approachable communication lines with the professional foster parents are essential (Hedin, 2015; Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018; Kernteam Kwaliteitscriteria Gezinshuizen, 2019). When foster parents share information, the birth parents can interpret this as a ‘sign of trust’, which reinforces and equalizes the co-parenting relationship (Hedin, 2015, p. 188).

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Currently, in family-style group care WhatsApp use (an application, mostly used on smartphones, that facilitates digital communication between parties, offering a mix of typed messages, audio/video messages and visuals, including photos and emojis) has a growing impact on the daily life of professional foster parents and birth parents, because the use of this medium is unlimited in time and place (cf. Mols & Pridmore, 2020). In general, WhatsApp has proved to be a useful medium for daily communication, probably because of the option of sending photos and videos (Hospes et al., 2019). However, this medium can pose challenges in daily use, because of the asynchronous nature of the interactions (Petitjean & Morel, 2017). This means PFPs are facing new challenges in their communication with birth parents. In this article we will focus on the way professional foster parents close WhatsApp conversations, in particular with regard to sensitive boundary setting, in their collaboration with birth parents (BP) of out-of-home placed children. The study of closings provides useful insights about the establishment and maintenance of the relationship of the parties involved, based on empirical data derived from the communicative practice of family-style group care.

1.1. Co-parenting relationships in family-style group care

The concept of ‘co-parenting’ originally describes the situation of ‘parents working together in childrearing’ (Feinberg in Cooley & Petren, 2020, p. 2). The relationship between professional foster parents and birth parents can also be seen as a ‘co-parenting relationship’ (Hedin, 2015; Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). Järvinen and Luckow (2020) examined role conflicts between foster parents and birth parents in co-parenting relationships. On the one hand foster parents are in charge of the child’s daily care, but can be seen as a threat by the birth parents at the same time. On the other hand the birth parents can be viewed as ‘failed parents’ who cannot raise their children, but are also positioned as important for their child’s well-being by the same institutions (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). Hedin (2015) discovered that foster parents can also function as role-models for birth parents in childrearing. Family-style group care shows many similarities to foster care, because professional foster parents are responsible for the daily caregiving, and the birth parents do not reside with their child for most of the week.

A central issue in the Netherlands in both foster care and family-style group care is that placements are vulnerable to instability resulting in breakdown (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2017; Konijn et al., 2019). Recent Dutch research however shows that a laborious relationship with birth parents is one of the reasons foster parents quit fostering; and those who quit for this reason are least inclined to reconsider foster care in the future (Abrahamse, Gardeniers & Werner, 2019). One of the risk factors for breakdown is conflict between birth parents and foster parents (Vanderfaellie et al., 2018). Similarly, in a review study on breakdowns, Konijn et al. (2019) recently pointed out that a good relationship between the child, birth parents and other family members may be a potential moderator of (in)stability of foster care placements, helping a child and their birth parents to accept the placement. Van Holen et al. (2019) demonstrate that ‘willingness to cooperate with foster care workers and parents’ is one of the characteristics of successful foster families.

Although previous research shows that children benefit from a good relationship with their birth parents, it is not clear how (professional) foster parents and birth parents concretely act in successful collaborations. Most characteristics of constructive co-parenting relationships are based on foster parent’s and birth parent’s self-reports in qualitative interviews (Noordegraaf & Van de Koot, 2018). Especially interactional skills will not easily become visible in self reports (cf. Antaki, 2011) and run the risk to be overlooked. Furthermore, professional foster parents may be unaware of their own skills and not report them.

1.2. Communication in co-parenting relationships

Good communication skills, so-called ‘empathic but purposeful

talking and listening’, are very important in social work practice (Hall et al., 2014, p. 1). Among the elements highly appreciated by birth parents in successful collaborations are openness and accessibility in their communication with the professional foster parents. This facilitates birth parents and foster parents in sharing information, making arrangements and discussing daily issues (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018; Höjer, 2009). Professional foster parents and birth parents meet each other in evaluation meetings twice a year, but also in facilitating home visits, joint activities and phone calls.

Next to *synchronous* communication (face-to-face interaction, phone calls), professional foster parents and birth parents do have *asynchronous* communication tools available, like e-mail and text messaging. Like divorced parents (cf. Russell et al., 2021), professional foster parents and birth parents have to maintain ongoing communication about the care for a child/children. In a study focussing on multi-method communication among divorced parents, Russell et al. (2021, p. 3763) identified four classes of communicators. One of these classes, *text and e-mail communicators*, used minimal synchronous communication and prefer text messaging and/or e-mail.

A contextual factor that influences these communicators seems to be the relationship between divorced parents; for example, parents having difficulty adjusting to their divorce tend to avoid face-to-face contact (Russell et al., 2021: 3769). Furthermore, the use of communication technology to facilitate the relationship between (foster) parents and children has been studied (Alford et al., 2019). Based on in-depth interviews and focus-group interviews, Alford et al. (2019, p. 215) focussed on the role of smart phone technology to facilitate healthy and positive connections between (foster) parents and children. Both studies shed light on the use of new communication technologies in co-parenting relationships (Alford et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2021), however, these insights are only based on reports of participants and do not provide insight into the actual, empirical use of these communication technologies.

In a research of 13 case studies that focussed on cooperation between BP and PFP via phone calls and WhatsApp conversations, of which this study emerged, Hospes et al. (2019) found that PFPs generally set boundaries in a sensitive way. They define ‘sensitive boundary setting’ as ‘setting a boundary and maintaining the relationship at the same time’ (Hospes et al. 2019, p. 31).

Professional foster parents have their limitations in communicating with birth parents since they have to organize the daily caregiving of usually more than four children in their homes and at the same time maintain contact with all the birth parents. The communication with BPs is embedded in the everyday social lives of PFPs; the interaction is not restricted to office hours and affects their private lives (cf. Mols & Pridmore, 2020). In previous research the importance of foster parental boundary setting is mentioned as an emotional coping strategy (Geiger et al., 2016; Gerdes et al., 2011). Also, empathy is seen as an important feature in successful foster parenting, especially in demonstrating resilience in overcoming difficulties in foster care relationships (Geiger et al., 2016). Shklarski (2019) reports that as a form of self-care it is essential for foster parents to establish boundaries with birth parents, to avoid becoming overwhelmed. For example, Järvinen & Luckow (2020) report foster calling in the middle of the night. In short, PFPs face the dilemma of setting boundaries and meanwhile maintaining the relationship with BP, also in WhatsApp communication.

In this study, the practical dilemma of setting boundaries and maintaining the relationship with birth parents is analysed in *closing-sequences* (closings) of WhatsApp communications.

1.3. Closings in WhatsApp communication

In this study, the practical dilemma of setting boundaries and maintaining the relationship with birth parents was analysed in *closing-sequences* (closings) of WhatsApp communications. As an interactional phenomenon, closings provide insight into interactional mechanisms

and relationship management between participants; the organizational features of the closing sequence enable participants to align and to shape their relationship (Lebaron & Jones, 2002; Raymond & Zimmerman, 2016). In conversation analytic studies, closings are described as “a sequential movement to conversational termination” (Button & Casey, 1984, p. 171). This is a mechanism by which participants co-ordinately mark the ending of their encounter (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

Previous research of closings in WhatsApp interaction shows that the move towards the exit of a WhatsApp conversation demands relationship management from the participants. In the first instance, a social action that exemplifies the orientation of participants to their mutual relationship is a “gratitude expression” (like: ‘thank you’): Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez (2018) found that the majority of non-institutional WhatsApp conversations are closed with gratitude expressions (90 %), and just a minority are closed with farewell expressions like ‘good evening’ (10 %). Second, an interactional device that seems to be related to alignment of the participants, is the use of laughter in closing sequences. In a study that focussed on laughter in WhatsApp interaction among friends, Petitjean and Morel (2017) point out that laughter is used at interactional moments that are delicate to manage, like closing sequences. Posts can be accompanied by laughter in order to mitigate a closing sequence or closing topic within a chat session (Petitjean & Morel, 2017). Third, in conversational openings and closings in WhatsApp interaction, the use of emojis is common practice (Al Rashdi, 2018; Sampietro, 2019).

In general, the combined use of text messaging and emoji enriches the message that is conveyed. This can contribute to perceived playfulness between the interlocutors and facilitates social connectedness (Hsieh & Tseng, 2017). Interactionally, emoji function as “contextualization cues” (Gumperz, 1992); emojis can help in signalling a closing (Al Rashdi, 2018). For example, the use of kissing faces [😘] and waving [👋] are typically - though not exclusively - used as farewells. Also, emojis can downgrade or upgrade speech acts (Sampietro, 2019). A bold speech act for example can be mitigated by a blushing emoji [😊]. In short, in line with studies of closings in phone calls (Button & Casey, 1984; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) studies of WhatsApp interaction indicate that closings are delicate social actions (Al Rashdi, 2018; Sampietro, 2019), which are relevant to be scrutinized as an interactional phenomenon.

1.4. Purpose of this study

In short, WhatsApp is a relatively new medium that has become embedded in the institutional practice of social work. Studies of closings in (WhatsApp) communication prove that this interactional phenomenon provides insight into interactional and social mechanisms between participants. Currently, the amount of studies on mediated and/or digital interaction (like WhatsApp) is rapidly growing (for example Al Rashdi, 2018; Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018). In foster care, there is a valuable body of knowledge about collaboration between foster parents and birth parents. In addition to these studies, which are often based on perceptions (interviews) of the various participants (Höjer, 2009; Said Salem & De Wilde, 2021; Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021) empirical studies of communication within this type of social work are relevant to shed light on the construction and maintenance of social relations between (professional) foster parents and birth parents.

Therefore, in this study, we focus on the unexamined digital social interaction in this institutional setting of family-style group care. We aim to contribute to research on communication and the establishment or maintenance of social relations in social work. From the perspective of *Conversation Analysis* (CA), the interaction between professional foster parents and birth parents can be classified as *institutional*: the interaction is shaped by the context and/or particular institutional tasks (Heritage, 2005; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). The framework of the

interaction between PFP and BPs is the shared pedagogical responsibility for a child or children and a detailed analysis of their communication via WhatsApp can provide insight into the specific interactional practices of family-style group care.

In the next section, we describe the method of analysis (Applied Conversation Analysis) and the focus on two cases within our data collection (section 2). In the results we present the main types of closings, of which we provide some examples to illustrate our findings (section 3). Finally, we formulate our conclusions about closings in WhatsApp data within family-style group care (section 4) and implications/limitations of our study (section 5).

2. Data & method

In this study, we focus on two sets of WhatsApp interactions between professional foster parents and (PFPs) birth parents (BPs). The sample of WhatsApp interactions is part of larger data corpus of 13 collaborations of out-of-home placed adolescents and their caregivers and birth parents, which also includes taped phone calls, interviews, videos of institutional and informal meetings of professional foster parents, birth parents and occasionally the children. The aim of that research was to develop an approach for establishing constructive collaborative relationships between BPs and PFPs, based on both theory and practice.

Informed consent has been obtained from the PFPs as well as BPs. For every data collection technique the informed consent of every participant is obtained, in case of the adolescents also their guardian had to agree. All participants knew that they could withdraw from participation in the research at every moment, without any explanation, which sometimes happened. The professional foster parents in this article have sent their WhatsApp conversations, but group family home 2 for example did not succeed in recording phone calls. In a diary they could also mention what happened what they were discussing in phone calls. During the interviews, not included in this article, the professional foster parents were explained by the first author how to send the WhatsApp conversations. For publication, all conversations used in this article were translated from Dutch into English. All names of the participants in the conversations were anonymized with fictitious names.

The sample consists of naturally occurring WhatsApp-conversations during a period of three months involving two family-style group homes. Both family-style group homes exist of a foster mother and a foster father and their biological children, besides the 4–6 foster children. In family group 1 the foster mother is in paid employment as a foster parent, where in family group 2 the foster father is in paid employment as foster parent, but the foster mother is active in contact via WhatsApp. In both cases the contact is solely with the birth mother, because the birth father passed away or is not allowed to see his children due to maltreatment and stalking behaviour. Both adolescents (15 and 16 years old) have a history of placements in foster and residential care before they entered their family group home.

2.1. Data collection

We started studying the WhatsApp data of one family-style group home with a view to conducting an in-depth analysis. This has been extended by the WhatsApp data of another family-style group. The WhatsApp data of these two family-style group homes consist of multiple WhatsApp conversations: in total, 325 posts/23 pages of transcript. Posts of participants are studied from a multimodal perspective, in which written text and visual aspects like emoji are examined as interactional devices. Both sets of WhatsApp conversations are derived from family-style group care homes that were at an early stage of collaboration (the child placed in the family group for no more than two years). This initial period of collaboration gives insight into how participants start to construct collaboration. In both cases the nature of the existing collaboration was described as ‘constructive’ by the organization, which has been confirmed in separate interviews with professional foster

parents and birth parents. Scrutinizing WhatsApp conversations between PFPs and BPs in good collaborations can provide insight into the interactional mechanisms and details at an early stage of the relationship.

2.2. Data analysis

In our study of WhatsApp interactions between professional foster parents and birth parents, we used the method of *Applied Conversation Analysis* (Noordegraaf et al., 2018) to analyse the data. Conversation analysis (CA) is a qualitative and data-driven approach that enables researchers to study patterns of social actions in human interaction (Sidnell & Stivers, 2012), also when it is mediated (Giles et al., 2015). Research on everyday interactions between social workers and clients provides an in-depth and detailed understanding of communication (Hall et al., 2014). In particular, the dataset of WhatsApp interactions provides an empirical view of communication between PFP and BP in their collaborative care of the youngster. Compared to other types of data, WhatsApp interactions provide the unique opportunity to see what professional foster parents *really* say or type; whereas, for example, interviews with foster parents run the risk of the bias of social desirability as foster parents may want to be perceived as highly committed and well-functioning (Cooley & Petren, 2020, p. 7). Moreover, it is possible to distinguish interactional skills that professionals are not aware of, like listening skills and awareness of how they talk and act (Lamerichs & Te Molder, 2011, p. 184). While traditional conversation analysis is focused on fundamental interactional procedures and the construction of interactional theories, *applied* conversation analysis aims at gaining insight into interactional practices of specific institutional settings, in order to be able to transfer these insights to professionals working in these settings (Antaki, 2011; Noordegraaf et al., 2018). Applied CA ranges from the description of foundational insights to more diagnostic or intervening practices and has been used to improve institutional practices, for example in medical consultations and psychoanalysis (Antaki, 2011). In our case, applied CA is useful for revealing the interactional characteristics of communication between PFPs and BPs via WhatsApp and for formulating practical implications of these insights with regard to the co-parenting relationship in family-style group care.

The WhatsApp data, collected over a period of three months, were sent by de professional foster parents to the researcher. They anonymized the text messages and made descriptions of the included photos and movies and numbered them. Then, the text files were uploaded in the data-analysis software of Atlas-ti (Friese, 2019).

The first, deductive, step was to establish a data collection of conversational closings by coding all the closings. The second, more inductive step was the open coding of these closings. For example, in this step we distinguished wishes and compliments, which we examined by axial coding. In the third step we looked for overarching themes, as encouragement. This step can be seen as selective coding to structure the codes (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Initially, the first author coded the data and subsequently the second author critically examined both the data collection and the allocated codes. Once the data collection and coding was a subject in a three-hours data session with 6 fellow researchers, a common practice in CA-research, which increases the validity. With regard to privacy and ethical standards, the participants of a data session are only allowed to view the anonymized data collection during the session on paper, which must be returned to de researcher at the end of a session.

2.3. Closings in WhatsApp interactions

Based on the data-driven approach typical for conversation analysis, we started with an explorative analysis of WhatsApp conversations among all family-style group homes that participated. Based on this data-driven approach inherent to the conversation-analytic perspective, we observed that interesting interactional patterns are embedded in the

way participants concluded or ended their chats. In other words: via a procedure of inductive analysis (Silverman, 1993, p. 161), we decided to focus on the way participants conclude or end their chats (closings). These interactional moments are quite informative since participants have to fulfil multiple tasks: (1) setting boundaries, making clear that they are going to end the conversation (for the time being), (2) relationship management: taking care of their (long-term) relationship. In other words, the interactional analysis of closings illuminates how PFPs and BPs interactionally in construct their professional cooperation.

Inspired by the work of Schegloff & Sacks (1973, p. 299), we defined ‘closings’ as follows: “interactional moments in which both participants co-ordinately work towards the end of their chat”. Methodologically, this is measurable because components of a closing sequence (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) can be identified, like *pre-closing items* (for example: ‘okay..’, ‘well...’, Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 303) by which participants indicate final exchanges of their conversation at that moment. In the two cases (consisting of 325 posts/23 pages of transcript), we identified 49 closings. All instances were analysed from a conversation-analytical (CA) perspective, since CA has proven to be a valid and useful method for examining how participants construct social actions via (mediated) interaction, specifically instant messaging (e.g. Hutchby & Tanna, 2008; Spagnolli & Gamberini, 2007). The analysis of instances of closings, resulted in a set of labels/categorizations of social actions that participants perform in these closing sequences, like ‘encouragement’. Variations of this *type* of social action, like ‘compliments’, via an iterative analysis, were categorized as *sub types* (see Table 1 Type of closings and sub types). In the next section, we present our findings about the interactional and social construction of the institutional cooperation between PFPs and BPs in WhatsApp closing-sequences.

3. Results

In the analysis we demonstrate how professional foster parents set boundaries, while maintaining the relationship with birth parents in *closing-sequences* of WhatsApp communications.

The analysis of closings in the WhatsApp interactions between PFPs and BPs shows how PFPs set boundaries in their collaboration with BPs and maintain the relationship at the same time. The PFPs close conversations in sensitive ways. Two kinds of sensitive boundary setting are observed in the closings: encouragement and reference to the future (see Table 1). First, PFPs show three ways of encouragement when closing an interaction: 1) giving a compliment, 2) comforting and 3) inviting the parent to ‘let it go’ (worries for example). Secondly, PFPs often make a reference to the future in their attempt to close the conversation. Three ways of referencing the future are observed: 1) expressing a wish, 2) making a proposal and 3) making a promise towards the parent. The interaction may close at that moment, but the PFP ensures the parent of her commitment to their relationship by referring to the future.

In our data, we see interactional differences and patterns that seem to be inherent to the role of PFP versus BP (independently of personal characteristics). In the first place, PFPs empower and comfort BPs (see Table 1), which demonstrates how PFPs perceive and construct the relationship with BPs. In the second place, PFPs mainly initiate closing by referring to future moments to communicate; an action that is both

Table 1
Type of closing and sub types.

Type of closing		Sub types	
Encouragement	25	Compliment	14
		Comfort	8
		Invitation ‘to let it go’	3
Making a reference to the future	23	Wish	12
		Proposal	4
		Promise	7
Non-response	18		
Total amount:	48		66

boundary-setting and relationship-oriented. Also, non-responding is mostly reserved for PFPs and uncommon for birth parents.

In this section we demonstrate how the PFP uses different types of closings in WhatsApp conversations and how the PFP, with sensitively designed utterances, maintains the relationship with the BP and is setting boundaries at the same time.

3.1. Encouragements in closings













A typical way for PFP to close a WhatsApp conversation is to provide an *encouragement* to BP that functions as a pre-closing item. This reflects the asymmetrical relationship between PFP and BP, since these encouragements are directed at BP (and not the other way around). The relationship and cooperation between PFPs and BPs is based on the (professional foster) care of the child(ren), but these utterances show that, to some extent, the PFP is also caring for or coaching the BP.

3.1.1. Compliment

Excerpt 1 illustrates how the coaching role of PFP towards BM becomes apparent in closing sequences. In this excerpt PFP compliments BM (see posts 1 and 2):

Excerpt 1 (F8).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	20:45	PFP	You are doing well!! Really, keep it up like this. [Je doet het goed!! Echt ga zo door]
2	20:46	PFP	You've taken such great steps forward, quite literally  [Je hebt zulke grote stappen gezet, letterlijk zelfs 
3	20:46	BM	I always say 'each home has his own cross to bear, if you throw it out on the street to swap it... you will take back your own cross... [Ik zeg altijd 'dat kruisje van elk huisje, als je die op straat gooit om met elkaar te kunnen ruilen.....pak je toch je eigen kruisje weer terug...']
4	20:47	BM	So, I can do this [Dit kan ik dus]
5	20:47	BM	Love you too    [Hou ook van jou   
6	20:50	PFP	That's a good one. You can do anything' [Dat is een goeie. Jij kan alles!]
7	20:50	PFP	Sweetie  Lieverd 
8	20:56	BM	Only thanks to the love from you guys! Last word  [Alleen met hulp van jullie liefde! Laatste woord 

In the first two posts, PFP provides several statements in which she praises BM: 'you are doing well', immediately followed by an intensifier ('really') and encouragement ('keep it up like this'). In the next post (no.2) she elaborates on the compliment by writing that the mother has taken great steps forward, followed by the emoji of a flexed muscle. Simultaneously with the first post of PFP, BM was typing her message that is published as post 3 (see timing), which is a continuation of her prior story and is not linked to the complimenting post of PFP. However, almost immediately BM responds to the compliments and encouragement with an expression of empowerment: 'I can do this' (post 4). Then,

BM directs her utterance to PFP: she strongly expresses her appreciation to PFP (accompanied by emoji of a heart, smile and kisses), which she intends as a reciprocal move ('love you too'). Thus, BM demonstrates how she interprets the compliments: as an acknowledgement, a positive evaluation. In response, PFP first opts to continue the encouragement ('you can do anything', post 6) and secondly, she replies to the statement of affection by BM (by typing 'sweetie' + emoji 'kissing lips' in post 7). The final post of this chat session is provided by M, in which she gives credit to PFP (post 8). This remark also highlights the mother's dependency. Also, BM makes explicit that this sequence can be characterised as a closing-sequence, by stating "last word + emoji").

In short, this example shows how the participants themselves create an asymmetrical relationship: PFP is directing encouragements to BM, which are accepted and appreciated by BP. A common response to a compliment is to downgrade or weaken the compliment (Pomerantz, 1978). In our data, BM does not downgrade compliments at all; instead, as in excerpt 1, BM embraces the encouragements of PFP. Thus, both participants show an orientation to an institutional relationship in which PFP does the coaching and BM is being coached. In line with the study of Rettinger (2011) on coaching interactions, PFP and BM create situated identities as *guidance giver* (PFP) and *guidance seeker* (BM). Also, a common pattern of closings is the reciprocal and symmetric nature: participants often use the closing items that were initiated by the other participants (Al Rashdi, 2018; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In this example, the non-symmetrical selection of the closing items reflects the asymmetrical relationship between PFP and BM and how they both maintain their institutional relationship.

3.1.2. Comfort

Another example that illustrates how PFP initiates closing of chat sessions with BP and how PFP is encouraging BP, is seen in excerpt 2. Just like complimenting (excerpt 1), comforting (excerpt 2 and 3) seems to be a social action performed by PFP towards BP. In the chat session preceding excerpt 2, PFP and BM have discussed the troubles BM experiences in life and her grief about the children being placed out of her home.

Excerpt 2 (F8).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.



Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	08:17	BM	Everything needs to find its place [Alles moet een plekje krijgen]
2	08:17	PFP	We will support you [Wij zullen je ondersteunen].


In post 1, BM concludes that she has to cope with some issues. In response, PFP is promising that BM can count on the support of the PFPs (post 2). Characteristic of these utterances in our data is that they are given by PFP and not vice versa; it is never BP who says he/she will support PFPs. Thus, the participants themselves make explicit how they perceive their institutional roles (Heritage & Clayman, 2011): PFP shows that she perceives it as her task to provide support and encouragement to BM. The institutional setting requires PFP to maintain a good relationship with the youngster's parents, however, PFP is not explicitly expected to coach them. In sum, these micro-analyses of chat instances between PFP and BM make transparent how they construct their cooperation: BM is the one who needs help and PFP is offering help. In other words: PFP is encouraging and supporting BM, which shows how PFP fulfils the institutional relationship with BM. Another characteristic of comforting utterances provided by PFP in WhatsApp closings, is that they are often accompanied by emoji. Excerpt 3 shows an example of a closing section in which PFP is comforting the mother. This excerpt is derived from a chat about a court hearing (in which the father of her son was accused of stalking and threatening his children and former wife). In the preceding interaction, BP elaborates on the hearing, the verdict and her emotions. The father of her son is found guilty and he has to pay all damages. However, they have to wait two more weeks due to the

possibility of an appeal being lodged to the Supreme Court:

Excerpt 3 (F7).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	16:05	PFP	Well, it will be all right. Happy for you, that the worst of this case is over now, and you can breathe again! Now you have some more space to think of yourself  and get things done Nou dat komt vast goed Blij voor je dat nu het ergste rond deze zaak voorbij is en je weer wat meer adem kunt halen! Heb je weer wat meer ruimte om ook aan jezelf te denken en de dingen te doen 
2	16:06	BP	Yes, it's about time now. [youngster's name] does not realise how much energy it has taken from me, but some day he will understand. Ja dat word ook wel hoog tijd ja [naam jongere] heeft niet echt beseft hoeveel energie me dit allemaal gekost heeft maar ooit zal die het beseffen.



In response to all of this, PFP does acknowledge the burden it must have been for BP by writing 'the worst' and by stating 'you can breathe again'. At the same time, PFP stresses the advantages and possibilities the judgement brings for BP: 'more space to think of yourself and get things done' . While BP is still pre-occupied with the negative aspects and full of emotion, PFP offers a different stance on the actual situation and tries to empower BP to 'get things done' (symbolized by the emoji of a flexed muscle). In post 2, BP aligns with PFP's comment ('Yes it's about time now'), but also emphasizes the impact (which is not yet not understood by her son) on her personal life. Considering the institutional context in which BP is not fully able to take care of her child, the chat illuminates how PFP urges BP to take care of herself, while BP makes explicit what excuses/circumstances hinder her in that process. Again, BP is the one who is encouraged and PFP is the one who is providing the encouragement; in the way they communicate via WhatsApp they establish and maintain their relationship asymmetrically.

3.1.3. Letting it go

Excerpt 4 demonstrates another way in which PFP is encouraging BP in their chat sessions and how PFP uses encouraging utterances ('letting it go') as pre-closing items. By providing different types of encouraging utterances, in excerpt 1–3, PFP is implicitly closing the WhatsApp sessions. In contrast, excerpt 4 shows how PFP is *explicitly* setting boundaries by making a reference to the future. In our dataset, several chat sessions between PFP and BP deal about feelings of sorrow and guilt. In the preceding interaction of excerpt 4, M expresses that she is fed up with herself, not being able to communicate effectively with her child. Excerpt 4 contains the response of PFP to this personal disclosure by M:



Excerpt 4 (F7).


PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	22:47:32	PFP	Just let it go now, you can't do anymore! First, off to Spain  Laat het nu maar even voor wat het is en meer kun je ook niet doen! eerst naar spanje 
2		PFP	After that, when we've all returned, we will see how it goes, and I will probably know more about [Frank]. Perhaps we can take it up together with [Frank] and get [Karen] involved. Now, first the holidays and let everything be, and

(continued on next column)

(continued)

Turn	Time	Person	Text
			we'll see how things land 
			Daarna als we allemaal terug zijn kijken we wel weer verder dan weet ik wellicht ook meer mbt [Frank] Dat hij het na de vakantie misschien eerst weer gaat oppakken en dan misschien samen met [Frank] later ook [Karen] erin gaan betrekken Nu eerst vakantie en alles even laten en laten landen 

In post 1, PFP responds with an advice ('just let it go now') and refers to the scheduled holiday ('first, off to Spain' + emoji); thus, PFP is proposing to postpone the discussion about the issue that M brings up. Taking into account the timing of the chat session, quite late in the evening, PFP's post can be considered as a move to set her boundaries; to indicate it is of no use to elaborate on the issue now. In post 2, PFP provides reasons for postponing the issue: she needs more input from social workers Frank and Karen. After that, she promises the mother that the problem may be solved easier after the holidays and encourages the mother again to enjoy her holidays, and using a travel metaphor, 'to see how things land'. The PFP explicitly means 'let it settle down'. As in the first two posts, this post is also ended with an emoji (flexed muscle, ). In all posts (1) the emoji visualizes content that has been verbally expressed and (2) the emoji marks the end of the post and the ending of the chat session (see Al Rashdi, 2018; Flores-Salgado, 2018; Sampietro, 2019). Just as in excerpt 3, the ending of the chat session is initiated by PFP and presented as an empathic action towards BP. Again, BP accepts the closure initiated by PFP: BP does not respond again. In short, in excerpt 4, PFP is providing encouragement (letting it go) towards BP and PFP is also explicitly setting boundaries by making a reference to the future; thus, PFP gives a reason for ending the WhatsApp conversation temporarily. In the second part of the results section, we will provide more examples of (explicit) boundary setting by PFP.

3.2. Making a reference to the future in closings


As we have demonstrated in the first part of this paper, the closing sequences in WhatsApp interactions between PFP and BP demonstrate how they establish and maintain their relationship in the setting of family-style group care. As described in the literature review, WhatsApp is a very accessible medium for BPs to keep in touch with their child via PFPs; but PFPs are unable to have endless conversations with all BPs of the children in their care. In this section, we will provide insight into boundary setting by PFPs: how do they sensitively work towards closing WhatsApp sequences with BPs?

3.2.1. Wish

As shown in excerpt 4, a PFP can explicitly account for non-responding by making a reference to the future. Another practice that illuminates how a PFP is setting boundaries/working towards closing WhatsApp interactions with a BP, while being empathic at the same time, is shown in excerpt 5. In this chat session PFP and BM are discussing the BM's feelings of guilt for not being able to take care of her children fulltime. Moreover, BM is involved in EMDR therapy sessions that she experiences as very intensive.

Excerpt 5 (F7).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	21:40:44	BM	Yes, luckily. I've been bothered by it a lot, was really not nice, Monday again  but we'll go for it, I will survive this stupid thing.

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Turn	Time	Person	Text
			Ja gelukkig wel heb er flink last van gehad was echt niet fijn maandag weer
			😓
			maar we gaan ervoor ik ga dit stomme gedoe gewoon te boven komen
2	21:42:19	PFP	Of course you will succeed! Warrior
			💪👊
			Natuurlijk gaat je dat lukken! Vechter
			💪👊
3	21:45:28	MM	👊

In post 1, BM strongly expresses how much burden she experiences from the EMDR sessions and supports this with the sweaty emoji [😓]. She concludes with a more positive statement ('I will survive this stupid thing'). As a response, PFP enforces this positive statement: 'Of course you will succeed, warrior' (post 2). Note that, in contrast to excerpt 2 where PFP shows a shared responsibility ('we will support you'), PFP now posits BM as the agent of success ('you will succeed!'). With this post, PFP is empowering BM and she intensifies her statement with an emoji that expresses power (flexed muscle). Also, the emoji in the PFP's post can be related to the BM's post: they visualize the final part of BM's post (*stupid thing* = rain cloud, *will survive* = flexed muscle). By characterizing BM's negative aspects with the emoji (👊), PFP addresses and (minimally) acknowledges that part of BM's story, while avoiding elaboration of the story. As we have shown in other extracts from our data, it is a recurring pattern that PFP does not elaborate on the negative and emotional report of BM and instead focuses on how to move forward. BM accepts the pre-closing item of PFP and responds with a typical closing item (kissing lips, post 3) as a farewell expression (Al Rashdi, 2018). Again, the closing sequence between PFP and P is non-symmetrical, which reflects their different institutional roles. In short: in excerpt 5, PFP refers to future behaviour of BM; she encourages BM to move forward (showing an orientation of their relationship, providing encouragement) and at the same time PFP is setting boundaries by avoiding an elaboration of the BM's emotional report.

3.2.2. Promise

Interactionally, in our data it seems to be accepted practice that PFP does not respond to all posts of BP, while BP seems to give reasons for not responding. In WhatsApp conversations it is common to have a pause in conversation, deliver a delayed response or no response at all, because of other occupations. However, in our dataset of chat sessions, it is uncommon for BP to end a conversation by not responding or pausing. It seems BPs are not permitted to do so. By contrast we often see a PFP disappearing in WhatsApp conversation, without saying goodbye or making an announcement. Apparently, due to her professional duties, only PFP allows herself to not respond. An exception of this pattern is shown in excerpt 6. This chat session was started because both PFP and BM are worried about a teenager who did not come home for the night. The situation when youngsters do not return home is seen as a very stressful crisis situation for both parents and foster parents (Van de Koot & Schep, 2014). During the youngster's absence, PFP and BM keep in touch via WhatsApp: their chat session started at 12.13 PM and comprises 52 turns (PFP: 18, BM: 34). The youngster was spending the weekend at her mother's home, but did not come home for the night. She stayed at her boyfriend's home, which was not in line with the agreement she made with the professional foster parent and her mother. The youngster has only known the boy for a short while. BM starts the WhatsApp conversation: she is telling PFP that the girl slept at her boyfriend's place. She is excusing and blaming herself for not being able to get her to come home. PFP contacts the girl and her boyfriend during the WhatsApp-conversation and together they return the Foster Parents'

family home. Excerpt 6 shows how PFP, as soon as the (shared) urgency and worries about the youngster have been resolved, ends the chat session with BM:

Excerpt 6 (F8).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	14:59	PFP	Still in the garden talking/chatting. I'll try to sleep for a while, because of my night shift. We'll keep in touch. [Zitten nu nog in de tuin te praten/kletsen. Ik probeer nog ff te slapen ivm nachtdienst. We houden contact.]

In post 1, PFP announces that she is not available anymore since she is now occupied with her task as care-taker of the youngster and secondly, she has to take a rest before her night shift (=pre-closing item). As the final closing item, PFP promises BP to keep in touch, which is a conventional way of closing a conversation (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The mother accepts the closing by not responding again. The next day she will contact the PFP again and the PFP invites her for dinner at the foster family home. This section clearly demonstrates how the PFP is setting a boundary and how she manages her spare time; instead of continuing the chat session with BM, she prefers to spend time with the youngster. In other words, PFP prioritizes her institutional task as care-taker. By saying 'we'll keep in touch', PFP ends the current chat session and promises to catch up with BM very soon (however, the moment of catching up is as yet undefined). In short, in one post PFP is initiating and performing the closing (*unilaterally terminated*, see Raymond & Zimmerman, 2016) and setting boundaries, while taking care of her (long-term) relationship with BM.

3.2.3. Proposal

Another example that shows that PFP is setting boundaries with regard to her availability in chat sessions between PFP and BP, is seen in excerpt 7. Here, BM tells PFP that her daughter's grandfather, not her own father, has died (post 1):

Excerpt 7 (F8).

PFP: Professional Foster Parent, M: Mother.

Turn	Time	Person	Text
1	15:55	BM	Grandfather passed away last night. Opa is vannacht overleden
2	15:58	PFP	My condolences!! Shall we call tomorrow? Gecondoleerd!! Morgen maar even bellen?
3	16:06	BM	Yes, [youngster's name] wanted to call you Ja [naam jongere] wilde je bellen

First of all, PFP reacts by expressing her condolences, emphasised with exclamation marks. She does not elaborate on the issue and just proposes a time to call, which she makes more specific by saying 'tomorrow' (post 2): she refers to a concrete moment in the near future when she will be available to have more (extensive) contact about this. At the same time, she presents the utterance as a proposal (shall we....?), thus involving BM in the ending of the current conversation and in arranging another (more convenient) time to discuss the topic. BM accepts this proposal (post 3) and mentions that her daughter in fact wishes to call the PFP. This can be interpreted as a subtle hint to the PFP or as a reason for informing PFP about the sad news. PFP does not respond further (via chat). In short, the analysis of closings in WhatsApp interaction between PFP and BP provides insight into the multiple and complex situations the participants deal with. Excerpts 5–7 illustrate how the PFP is setting boundaries during chat sessions with BP(s). On the one hand, PFP implicitly works towards closing by providing minimal empathic response to emotional reports from BP (excerpt 5). On the other hand, in some cases, PFP explicitly directs her availability via WhatsApp (see excerpt 6 and 7), which is accepted by BP, and at the same time PFP softens the directive utterances by referring to future opportunities for contact.

4. Discussion

Our study of closing sequences between PFPs and BPs has provided insight into the interactional characteristics of their WhatsApp communication, in particular the establishment and maintenance of their institutional relationship and collaboration (cf. LeBaron & Jones, 2002; Raymond & Zimmerman, 2006). The WhatsApp closings can be understood as institutional talk (Heritage, 2005), reflecting asymmetry at both sequential and action level.

At a sequential level, asymmetry is visible in the WhatsApp interactions between PFPs and BPs. In our data, it is striking that almost in all closings it is the birth parents who send the last message. Apparently, BPs do not allow themselves to stop responding, whereas PFPs do this regularly. In other words, in contrast to PFPs, BPs are orienting towards the conditional relevance of adjacency pairs. In contrast to the study of Gibson (2020), who experienced an inversion of the power relationship between researchers and young participants while using WhatsApp as an interview tool (Gibson, 2020), the asymmetry in the relationship between BP and PFP is still visible. BPs can send messages at any time they wish, but it remains uncertain when a message from PFP will return. Furthermore, the different roles remain: the foster parents in an encouraging and coaching role, that also allows the foster parent to stay silent in the WhatsApp conversation. Interactionally, BP has a more dependent role in the collaboration.

At an action level, the closings in our study differ from WhatsApp conversations in everyday interactions, since the closings in our study go beyond thanking and farewell expressions (cf. Flores-Salgrado & Castineira-Benitez 2018). On the one hand, PFPs can be more direct on the one hand, by not responding at all sometimes, but on the other hand they are reacting positively and showing support. In our data, PFP performs a coaching role towards BP; it seems PFP is the professional who is not only taking care of the child, but also coaching the parent. The coaching role is tangible in the encouragements and empowering expressions of PFP. Thus, the PFP creates an interactional and situated identity of guidance giver, while BP aligns with the role of guidance seeker (see Rettinger, 2011). PFP's coaching utterances are often endorsed by emoji use (for example: flexed muscle 🦵). Text and emoji are used in a complementary way to convey social connectedness, see Al Rashdi, 2018; Hsieh & Tseng, 2017).

In brief, PFP is more dominant in the initiation and performance of closing-sequences, in setting the boundaries, no matter how sensitively they act. The institutional asymmetry found in the WhatsApp interactions reflects the finding of Höjer (2009) that birth parents' feelings of inferiority can lead to asymmetrical interaction patterns. Where Höjer (2009) based her conclusions on self-report by the birth parents, this study of WhatsApp conversations confirms the asymmetrical character of the relationship, even when the conversations reflect warmth, humour and fun. It seems that even in constructive collaborations, where birth parents may feel recognized in their parental love by the foster parents (Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021), there still remain elements of asymmetry in their communication.

4.1. Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is that it provides insight into the collaboration of PFP and BP based on 'real life' practice; the studied WhatsApp posts occur naturally, in spontaneous/everyday communication between participants of family-style group care. Applied Conversation Analysis is an adequate method for providing insight into user experiences. Despite the emphasis on reciprocity in the BP-PFP-relationship (Van de Koot & Noordegraaf, 2018), there is still asymmetry in that relationship, because BP is dependent on PFPs willingness to share information. Hence, demonstrating the different ways conversations are effectively closed by PFPs, for example by doing it sensitively, makes communication skills visible and accessible for future PFPs. In this

study, we focused on a detailed analysis of WhatsApp communication derived from two constructive collaborations between PFP and BP. In the context of family-style group care, good practices of communication can provide more insight into the characteristics of constructive collaborations. Constructive collaborations are important, because this often implies that BPs are having good contacts with their child (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020; Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021).

This study has some limitations. In the first place, since it is a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to closings of WhatsApp conversations for all foster parents. Second, in studying only *good* collaborations we were not able to identify interactional characteristics of *ambivalent* collaborations between PFPs and BPs. Based on the study of Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson and Karmsteen (2021), it can be concluded that good collaborations cover just a small amount of all collaborations. They conclude that 16 out of 22 collaborations can be identified as 'ambivalent cooperation', 'diminishing cooperation' and 'lack of cooperation', while only 6 collaborations are viewed as 'constructive' or 'improved' (Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021). A comparison between constructive and ambivalent collaborations might be interesting in order to gain an understanding of the ingredients for constructive collaborations.

4.2. Implications for WhatsApp communication in professional foster care and future research

Our findings indicate that even constructive collaborations in family-style group care reflect elements of institutional asymmetry. Professional foster parents should be aware of the asymmetry in the relationship, and even reflect on the possibly dependent position of the parent. This awareness might help them assess whether or in what situations the coaching role may or may not be preferred. After all, in an ideal situation a constructive collaboration between professional foster parents and birth parents reaches a level of symmetry, in a way that both the parent and professional parent can flourish.

For professional foster parents it is important to have a good relationship with the child's birth parent. Openness and accessibility in the communication with the professional foster parents, such as in WhatsApp conversations, constitute an important feature of good collaboration between professional foster parents and birth parents (Järvinen & Luckow, 2020). This does not mean that professional parents are always available on WhatsApp, because they need to take care of several (foster) children, are maintaining contacts with birth parents of other foster children and are in need of leisure time. After all, foster parent satisfaction and retention are important for the stability of the placement (Mihalo, et al., 2016). Therefore, professional foster parents need to set boundaries in WhatsApp conversations (Hospes et al., 2019), by finishing them in a satisfactory way. By identifying these ways of closing an interaction, both encouraging and referencing the future, PFPs can be provided with concrete examples/practices (cf. Lamerichs & Te Molder, 2011; Stokoe, 2014) of how to stay aligned with birth parents in WhatsApp conversations, while setting a boundary. The use of emoji can bolster their encouragements and references to the future.

For future studies, we recommend to investigate more concrete collaborations of PFP and BP in WhatsApp, face-to-face and/or phone call conversations, to be able to extend the range of examples based on actual communicative events. Also, in a future study, we recommend to include more types of collaborations to represent the variety of collaborations (Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021), like ambivalent collaborations. Furthermore, qualitative interviews with birth parents and professional foster parents can be helpful to understand their collaboration in a broad sense. First, to examine whether in constructive WhatsApp communication the birth parents feels recognized in their parental love (Thorbenfeldt Bengtsson & Karmsteen, 2021) and to what extent they view themselves as 'failed parents' and interpret their parenthood (Höjer, 2009; Said Salem & De Wilde, 2021). Second, in

qualitative interviews birth parents can be asked how they have experienced the specific WhatsApp conversations, and moreover, the way of closing them.

4.3. Conclusion

This research provides insight in communicative practices in family-style group care, in particular in the sensitive ways professional foster parents set boundaries in their WhatsApp conversations with birth parents. Even in good collaborations of birth parents and foster parents asymmetrical elements are tangible in their WhatsApp conversations. The institutional character of the professional foster parents is visible in their coaching remarks and their skills in sensitive boundaries setting when closing Whatsapp conversations, but also in their privilege not to respond or remain silent in the WhatsApp conversations. In constructive collaborations, we distinguished these varieties of conversational closings, for example in encouraging and future referencing, reinforced by positive emoji. Sensitivity is expressed in responsiveness to messages of birth parents, tact in answering and the hopeful or practical reference to the future. For children in family-style group care a good collaboration between professional foster parents and birth parents is crucial for their wellbeing and the stability of the placement.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Danielle van de Koot-Dees: Conceptualization, Investigation, Software, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Data curation. **Keun Young Sliedrecht:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Validation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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