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## The key situation revisited

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### 1. Introduction

This paper is very much an opportunity to share some thoughts on the *key situation* (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982) or *gatekeeping encounter* (Erickson, 1975) concepts drawing from: (a) my own occasional theoretical ramblings and; (b) more especially, how I have either drawn on or have been drawn to these analytical concepts in my own research across very different social settings and topics. To advance the main argument, I focus on two relatively recent research experiences discussing how key/gatekeeping situations became an important part of the theoretical apparatus. This happened for two reasons: (1) against my expectations or hypotheses the identified "key situations" did not point towards analytically relevant or socially consequential interactional events; or (2) when I did not expect the premises of a gatekeeping encounter could come into operation they emerged quite forcefully and visibly. This, in turn, opened the door to re-considering some basic assumptions behind the classic micro-ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic research program regarding the organization of "complex" bureaucratic societies, the role of meritocracy in contemporary (post)-industrialized social life and the place of the interactional encounter in the organization of social inequalities.

The paper is organized in three parts. First, I outline what I see as crucial (and perhaps implicit) assumptions in the research agenda around documenting key situations / gatekeeping encounters - and some of the reasons why this research agenda is so analytically powerful and seductive. Next, I discuss how the *key situation/gatekeeping encounter* construct emerged in two of my own contrasting research experiences, one on immigrant students in Spanish Secondary Compulsory Education and another on the experiences of single-parents-by-choice in the Spanish Adoption System. Finally, I use these research cases to (hopefully) contribute to recent revisiting and rethinking of the micro-ethnographic / interactional sociolinguistic research agenda and of key events/gatekeeping encounters as critical analytical concepts.

## 2. Key situations and gatekeeping encounters in 'socially relevant' interactional research

*Gatekeeping encounters* as proposed by Erickson (1975) in the 1970s or shortly after as *key situations* in Gumperz's (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982) terms provided interactionally oriented research -for the purposes of this paper, irrespectively labeled as ethnography of communication, ethnographic microanalysis or interactional sociolinguistics- with powerful arguments for, at least, two central theoretical concerns for sociolinguistic research. First, respond to critiques regarding the irrelevance of the micro-interactional research agenda to understand structural processes in contemporary societies. Second, in fact, not only respond to this critique but propose an alternative explanation and analytical apparatus regarding how social inequality is produced and reproduced in modern/industrial bureaucratic societies.

Early interactional studies, Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (EMCA) quickly gained respect in sociology, linguistic anthropology and other fields of social research for their analytical rigor, attention to detail in their analyses and their theoretical vocabulary. Studies within these traditions quickly developed a rich and alternative approach to unpack, describe and discuss the interactional order (Goffman, 1983). EMCA emerged as a research program that primarily drew from and militantly put at the center "naturally occurring" interactions, rather than socially "manufactured" data obtained through interviews or surveys (Silverman, 2007), as data. Finally, these approaches privileged fieldwork drawing from emerging and developing audio/video recording technologies to document interactions and detailed systems of transcription to theoretically re-inscribe these recordings, rather than "traditional" field-notes and field-diaries (which, at most, could complement and contextualize these corpus of recordings). In short, this family of research programs helped put the interactional order in the spotlight and create a niche of conceptual and theoretical contributions. However, it apparently responded poorly to a major line of criticism and commentary from "mainstream" social theory, that is: How was this research program socially relevant? How did it help understand how social structuration and inequalities were created and reproduced? - In other words, how could it connect the interactional order to the institutional order and to the social order? (Heller and Martin-Jones, 2001).

Broadly speaking there have been two ways of responding to this critique. One way, the "EMCA -Ethnomethodology/Conversation Analysis- response" which I will not discuss much here, is to retreat from this critique by redefining the terms of the objection within an EMCA perspective. That is, by arguing that

social categories and social process can only be incorporated into the analysis if they are demonstrably relevant to participants in interaction, EMCA manages to, in fact, most often avoid dealing with structural processes which might configure the interactional order. Another way to proceed, is to confront the critique "head on", which is the response developed by ethnographic microanalysis (Erickson, 1992; Bloome and Carter, 2014) or interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982; Schiffrin, 1994). These researchers achieve this by proposing that a certain class of interactional events, typical and constitutive of modern institutionally/bureaucratically organized societies, play a critical role in access to and the distribution of social goods and social mobility. These particular types of social events are singled out as *key situations/gatekeeping encounters* and the interactional sociolinguistic/micro-interactional research toolkit is put into motion to unpack and document in detail how access to sought after or positive social outcomes (i.e. employment, quality legal counsel, appropriate legal status, good educational tracking, etc.) is interactionally managed and produced. Note here that the definition of a key event/gatekeeping encounter is circular: a social event can be pre-defined as a gatekeeping encounter if it is explicitly connected to access to some social advantage (e.g. a job interview or an asylum seeking interview - Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz, 2002; Blommaert, 2001) and/or can be labeled as a key situation if analysis/fieldwork suggests it has played an important role in the production of social inequalities of some sort (e.g. certain type of communicative and literacy events in classrooms - Michaels, 1981; Poveda, 2002).

Yet, postulating the critical place of key situations in the construction of inequality is associated with a perspective on the organization of social life that, as seen from the current historical moment, either was under-articulated and/or does not seem to have kept up well with the increasing complexity of post-industrial social life. On the one hand, the implicit portrait of the social order in classic interactional sociolinguistics/ethnographic microanalysis seems to represent social mobility as a path through clearly bounded and institutionally organized encounters that define and constitute the social trajectories of individuals, including the junctures at which inequalities and upward/downward divergences in their social courses are materialized. On the other hand, each of these key situations/junctures is construed, at least at a formal/legal level, to operate under a strict meritocratic/rational logic.

This last assumption is the cornerstone of the contribution of micro-interactional/ethnographic research agenda to social analysis. The premise is that in modern, industrialized, democratic and schooled societies individuals will be judged and valued in terms of their merits, earned credentials and the "objective evidence" around them rather than on their social origin and characteristics (i.e. race, gender, social class, etc.). Further, and more crucially, institutional agents involved in key situations cannot legitimately and explicitly claim to make decisions and/or define the experience and outcomes of an individual in the institutional system they represent based on anything that does not strictly adhere to this meritocratic logic. Yet, the aggregate evidence shows that the social origin and characteristics of individuals (i.e. gender, class, ethnicity, race, linguistic and geographical background, age, etc.) are very relevant in the outcome. In this context, micro-interactional analysis claims to make (and has made) two very important contributions. First, a basic research contribution, as it has been able to identify and describe the implicit ways in which the social characteristics of individuals become interactionally consequential, without participants being aware of this connection (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999). Second, an applied contribution: by bringing into participant's awareness these dynamics, changes can be implemented in the organization of the key interactional events so certain individuals are not systematically discriminated against or placed in disadvantage - as institutional agents are supposedly committed to acting and making decisions based on meritocratic principles.

From my perspective, both of these intertwined assumptions can and should be revised. This update is tied to both keeping up with socio-political, economic and technological changes over the past few decades and to questioning some of the perhaps more "naive" assumptions about the organization of social life. Here I will briefly outline these objections, rather than develop them fully conceptually, as I will try to show a particular realization of these concerns with the data and experiences of the two research projects I discuss in the following section. Schematically there are two problems to consider:

- (a) Contemporary post-industrial / information-based societies do not seem to fit the "neat" social and institutional paths outlined above. Rather, social trajectories and identities, often discussed as constitutive of the contemporary social order, are configured simultaneously in multiple social spaces, operating synchronically and playing a complex summative

role in individual's social experiences and outcomes (e.g. Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Consequently, perhaps rather than focusing on identifying and isolating high-stakes critical key events, we might need to consider how collections of critical interactional encounters, in the aggregate, configure actor's subjectivities and social trajectories (cf. Martín-Rojo, 2015).

(b) Simply stated, our societies are hardly as meritocratic as they would like to think they are. Further, I would even claim that in some aspects post-industrial late-capitalist societies are turning less meritocratic as neoliberal ideologies policies and practices take hold. From this perspective this does not mean simply stating that social actors generally have become more "ist" (sexist, racist, classist, ageist, etc.) -or are simply less guarded about expressing these beliefs- since the 1970s (which they might or might not have). Rather, it involves understanding the discourses and rhetorical moves that explicitly legitimize displacing (apparently) meritocratic principles to a secondary place in favor of other arguments and concerns that the particular institutional/social order under investigation seems to foreground, as I try to show in the following examples.

### 3. Working through gatekeeping/key situations in two research projects

The first research case I want to discuss stems from a two-year long ethnography in a secondary school in Madrid (that we called ICA) which focused on the educational experiences and trajectories of immigrant students. In this intensive study of students' life in a public secondary school in south Madrid, a team of ethnographers observed activity in classrooms, staff meetings, students' activities outside the classroom and collected multiple artifacts and audio-visual materials from the school. In addition, they interviewed students, teachers and members of the counseling department (Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2009; Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo, 2012; Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2014).

We paid particular attention to the work of the counseling department - a multi-professional unit of the secondary school that included a psychologist/counselor,

a social worker, an intercultural mediator and remedial education teachers- for two intertwined reasons:

(1) Since the 1990s, educational reforms in Spain have ascribed an increasingly important role to counseling departments in the Spanish educational system. This change is particularly visible in secondary schools, where counseling departments are an intramural unit inside the school. Spanish educational legislation in the 1990s established a comprehensive compulsory secondary education tier for students between 12-16 years of age (ESO). This meant that 'streaming/tracking' into different educational paths (i.e. pre-university baccalaureate, TVET, early entrance in the labor market, etc.) was intended to take place after the age of compulsory schooling was reached (16 years of age in Spain). Also, it was understood that this change would involve educating a student body much more diverse than in the past, so counseling departments were set up as a key resource to provide support to teachers and students or develop curricular adaptations and diagnostic recommendations aimed at helping all Spanish students complete ESO.

(2) However, the implementation of this reform effort - written up and conceived in the 1980s- coincided in Spain with the growing influx of migrant students into the Spanish educational system and counter-policies and educational ideologies that favored streaming and tracking within the ESO tier and/or the development of different educational programs and measures for students facing social, educational and/or linguistic difficulties in ESO. The result is that, over the last two decades, ESO education has been layered with different educational programs and streams (i.e. pullout Spanish language support for immigrant students, compensatory education, pre-TVET education, diversified curricular programs, etc.) designed to meet the needs of students at risk of not graduating successfully from ESO and/or with a variety of socio-educational difficulties.

Critically for our research interests, management of these programs was allocated to secondary school counseling departments; which were, then, staffed with additional professional figures such as social workers, intercultural educators or Spanish L2 instructors. More importantly, decisions regarding what students access or are proposed as candidates for particular programs was

centralized through counseling department. Under these conditions, our initial expectation and hypothesis was that we would be able to identify and document key situations in the work of counselors and professionals in the counseling department in which crucial (and maybe irreversible) decisions regarding the educational paths of immigrant students in the system were taken, such as academic/skill examinations, crucial meetings with students or parents or decision-making staff meetings, etc. Further, we had secured a field-work plan that would allow us to document these encounters; not to mention that the possibility of replicating/updating well-known research by Erickson and Shultz (1982) or later Mehan and collaborators (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbart and Lintz, 1996) made this effort especially appealing. In short, we were "on the look-out" for gatekeeping encounters in the counseling department.

However, fieldwork and our interpretation of the data suggested that things did not quite work as we had initially hypothesized. Educational decisions, and tracking/streaming of immigrant students to "non-academic educational paths", were not resolved in particular discrete social encounters. Rather, how and why particular students ended up in specific programs outside ordinary ESO was a decision progressively co-constructed in multiple social events and encounters involving students, teachers, members of the counseling department, parents and other professionals. During research we documented multiple episodes that gravitated around this decision-making/taking work, in a variety of settings inside and outside the school. For example:

**Example 1: Meeting with a mother and a student (from field notes, June 16, 2008) (in Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2014, p. 192):**

As Aurora, a school counselor and psychologist, and I are walking towards her office we meet Yolanda, a 17 year-old Ecuadorian girl who is in her third year of ESO. She says that her mother is here so Aurora can explain how PCPIs work and she can sign the papers. As we walk to the office, Aurora says that what she will do is go through the presentation she prepared for the meeting that took place the other evening. Aurora tells the mother that Yolanda did not seem too convinced but that after talking to her and listening to the explanation Yolanda is more set on it. Aurora already knows that Yolanda wants to do the "electronics program," which happens to be offered at IES Aluche-West. Once in the office, after a detailed explanation about the alternatives inside and outside ICA, Aurora gives Yolanda's mother a paper form to complete where she has to express her opinion. The form was generated by the regional government as an annex to official documentation on the PCPI. Yolanda's mother looks at the



form, talks to her daughter, and asks what she should write. After thinking about it for a few seconds she writes: "I agree" (*Estoy de acuerdo*).

**Example 2: Summary of field-notes of a visit to an ACE (5 June 2008) (adapted from Poveda *et al*; 2012, p. 47):**

After a visit to another secondary school in the district that at the moment specializes exclusively in alternative educational programs, on the bus-ride back to the school, we ask them what they think about the modules. Jimmy (Latin American student, over 15 years of age) says that it's OK and Roger (Latin American student, over 15 years of age) says that he definitely does not want to go. Then they say that if they go they will go together. One of the ethnographers asks how they arranged the visit, if they volunteered or were requested to go, they answer that the teachers 'convinced them to go'. Aurora, the school counselor, asks them if they have an idea now of how ACEs work and tells them that when they get to the school they can go to her office and take a look at all the modules that are offered in the district. She insists that the important thing is not if they liked or not this particular school and program but to think if they would like to enroll in a program of this type, even if it's in another area such as culinary arts, which seems to interest Roger more. When they get to the school several of teachers they meet in the halls ask them what they thought of the visit and if they were 'convinced' by the program. Aurora in her office shows them a list of the different programs that exist in the area and tells them that they can think about it and talk about it next week. Then Roger says that what they want to do is 'kick them out' of this school and Aurora replies that they don't want to kick them out, that what they want to do is 'find a place where they are well'.

In other words, these events -alongside students multiple experiences in the classroom, with their peers, with teachers, with their families, etc.- seemed to progressively configure students' subjectivities (Foucault, 1988; Youdell, 2006) and allow them to acquiesce to an educational decision that involved measures such as moving to another school (when students were generally "happy" at ICA) and/or being placed in a path that closed many doors to further education in the Spanish educational system. That is, the eventual decision seemed to be consensual -as it formally requires the approval of students and/or parents if the student is a minor- and professionals in the counseling department define their work as helping students and families make decisions (with their "best interests" in mind).

Indeed, this is how counseling work is explicitly -and legislatively- defined in Spain and confers Spanish (secondary) education its "particular" character in the context of neighboring countries. On one hand, it permits defining ESO as a relatively comprehensive tier in which, in contrast to other central/northern European countries, students are not involuntarily placed in different educational tracks based on aptitude tests or examinations at different points in their education. On the other hand, the accumulated ethnographic record of Spanish educational research shows that immigrant and minority students are streamed into programs, schools and classrooms outside the mainstream ESO educational track (García-Castaño, Rubio and Boucharna, 2008). Consequently, Spanish educators and the Spanish educational system have managed to sustain an assimilationist mono-cultural ideology in which critical discussions about the construction of immigrant students' identities, culturally responsive curricula or the role of the educational system in the production of social inequalities are noticeably absent (Dyrness and Sepulveda, 2017).

In short, while the construction of these socio-educational trajectories was not determined in any particular key event, educational institutions played a crucial role in crafting student's socio-educational subjectivities and experiences. Thus, certain assumptions regarding the nature of institutions could be revisited through this data.

The second research example I want to discuss focuses on the experiences of single men and women (primarily women, but not only) in the Spanish adoption system and the discourses of professionals in this system. Data on this issue is drawn from a three-year multi-sited ethnographic project on single-parenthood-by-choice in Spain (Jociles and Medina, 2013). In this project conducted in three Spanish regions, we interviewed women and men who had decided to start family projects on their own (either through ART-D or adoption/fostering), we observed many of these women in virtual and organizational spaces for single-parent-families-by-choice, interviewed children from these families, collected recordings of family daily life and interviewed multiple professionals involved in the formation of these family projects (from fertility clinics or the adoption system).

Becoming an adoptive parent in Spain is a complex institutional/bureaucratic process - especially in the case of international adoptions, which constituted the vast majority of adoptions in Spain at the time of our research. The process can be seen as a trajectory through clearly defined institutional-legal hurdles, each of which requires managing successfully different

events, as summarized in the following table (reproduced from Poveda, Jociles and Rivas, 2013, p. 40):

**Table 1: The Adoption process in Spain**

	<b>Step in the procedure</b>	<b>Institution / Agency involved</b>
1	First informative meeting	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
2	Request for a 'suitability assessment'	
3	Parenting workshop	
	Parents choose a country for adoption	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
4	Psycho-social assessment	TIPAI / OUT-SOURCED AGENCY
5	Suitability certificate is issued	
6	Filing with the country of origin begins: Parents may choose using a 'collaborating agency' or the 'public child protection authority'	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY / ECAI
7	Pre-assignment of a child	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AUTHORITIES
8	Approval by Spanish authorities	CHILD PROTECTION AUTHORITY
9	Preparation of the trip to country of origin	ECAI / CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
	Trip(s) to country of origin	
10	Adoption in country of origin	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AUTHORITIES
11	Legal recognition of adoption by Spanish authorities	SPANISH CONSULATE SPANISH CIVIL REGISTRY
12	Mandatory follow-up assessment(s)	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY TIPAI / OUT-SOURCED AGENCY
13	Voluntary post-adoption activities	ECAI PARENTAL ASSOCIATIONS POST-ADOPTION CONSULTANTS

Thus, the adoption process, and in particular all the work connected to obtaining a "suitability certificate", can be seen as involving multiple gatekeeping encounters - as already pointed out by Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, and Elbers (2008a, 2008b). International adoptions also contain an additional layer of complexities, as the adoption process has to meet the legislative requirements and guidelines of both Spain -the receiving country- and the country of origin of the adoptive child. In the field of adoption, the critical issue centers on what constitutes a legitimate adoptive family/parent and, while there is little that "adopting" countries can do about the policies, preferences and restrictions that "sending" countries establish (Briggs and Marre, 2009), Spanish guidelines have - at least on paper- attempted to establish clear parameters in terms of the family models that can legitimately opt for adoption and the "technical considerations"

that might need to be taken into account - in line with changes in the Spanish civil code and the legal definition of family in the mid-2000s.

For example, in the particular case of single-parent candidates, the *Suitability for Adoption Assessment Manual* published by the Madrid regional child protection agency (Casalilla, Bermejo and Romero, 2008) explicitly states that a single-parent family is a perfectly legitimate family model and equally good destination for adopted children, but then goes on to make the following considerations (Spanish original and translation into English):

Respecto a la valoración de las personas que se dirigen a la adopción de forma individual, tenemos que detenernos en las circunstancias que rodean la aparición de su deseo de tener hijos y de adoptar, cómo van a transmitir al niño la figura correspondiente al otro sexo, el posible riesgo de que se desarrolle una relación de dependencia excesiva, el grado de independencia y autonomía respecto a la familia de origen, los recursos educativos, las estrategias de afrontamiento, la capacidad de adaptación, los sentimientos de autosuficiencia, la capacidad de relacionarse con el otro sexo, etc. También es necesario valorar los modelos de identificación a transmitir, la percepción del hijo como una dificultad para encontrar pareja, el estilo de vida, la situación económica y la disponibilidad de tiempo. Por último, debemos explorar la historia vincular de los solicitantes individuales, para descartar que su vida se haya caracterizado por un estilo de apego inseguro y una incapacidad de relacionarse de manera duradera con los demás, ya que sería un error buscar esa seguridad en el hijo adoptivo y presuponer que se podrá establecer con él un vínculo seguro (Casalilla, Bermejo and Romero, 2008, p. 146).

In relation to the evaluation of people who approach adoption individually, we should examine the circumstances surrounding the desire to have children and to adopt, how they will transmit to children figures corresponding to the opposite sex, the possible risk of developing an over-dependent relationship, the degree of independence and autonomy of the candidate in relation to his/her family of origin, educational resources, coping strategies, capacity to adapt, sentiments of self-sufficiency, the capacity to relate with the opposite sex, etc. It is also necessary to assess the identification models that will be transmitted, the perception of the child as an obstacle to finding a partner, life-style, economic situation and the availability of time. Finally, we must explore the affective history of individual applicants, to rule out that his/her life has been characterized by insecure attachments and an inability to relate to others in significant ways, given that it would be a mistake to look for that security in the adoptive child and presuppose that he/she will be able to establish a strong attachment with the child.

In this context, our findings show how several single candidate adoptive parents feel openly discriminated against during the suitability assessment process, perceptions that are shared both during research interviews and between candidates families in on-line or organizational spaces (Jociles and Charro, 2008; Jociles, Rivas and Poveda, 2012). Further, professionals such as psychologists or social workers involved in suitability assessments can also be very explicit in relation to the suitability of particular family configurations and adoption candidates, such as single-mothers who want to adopt children (Poveda, Jociles, Rivas and Villaamil, 2013). In the context of the opening discussion in relation to gatekeeping encounters in complex "modern" bureaucracies, these dynamics raise new questions: if institutional procedures and decision should rest on universal and rational decision-making rather than preconceptions/assumptions/prejudices around particular social identities, why do these discriminatory discourses emerge so openly? Further, these discourses seem to persist even when legislative research in Spain shows that candidates who are turned down in the adoption system can legally contest the decision and often judicially reverse this technical assessment (Bermejo and Casalilla, 2009).

The "official answer" is that, within the Spanish adoption and child protection system, the suitability assessment is not considered a procedure that bears on the rights of candidate parents (adults). Rather, it is a procedure that explicitly aims to promote and protect the rights (i.e. best interest) of adopted/adoptable children and, thus, in this context discriminating among candidate parents is not seen as harming their individual rights. A position explicitly stated in the following, yet not uncontroversial, legal assessment (Spanish original and my translation):

Los adoptantes capaces e idóneos no tienen "derecho" a adoptar; son los niños en situación de abandono los que tienen derecho a una familia en la que crecer. El establecimiento de estos criterios no supone una discriminación contraria al principio de igualdad consagrado constitucionalmente entre potenciales adoptantes, sino la legítima elección de quienes a juicio de la administración responden mejor al superior interés del niño. En virtud de este criterio, la administración puede preferir la adopción por una pareja a la adopción por solteros, la adopción por una pareja sin hijos a la adopción por una familia con hijos biológicos, la adopción de personas de cuarenta y cinco años a la adopción de personas de sesenta, o la adopción de una pareja heterosexual a la adopción por una pareja homosexual. (Adroher, 2007, pp. 986–987).

Capable and suitable adoptive parent candidates do not have a "right" to adopt; it is children who have been abandoned who have a right to grow up in a family. Establishing these criteria does not involve a discrimination that is contrary to the constitutionally granted right to equal treatment among potential adoptive parent candidates but the legitimate selection of those who, as judged by the public administration, respond better to the best interests of the child. In light of this criterion, public administrations may prefer adoptions by couples rather than by single-parents, adoption by childless couples more than by families with biological children, adoption by forty five year old people than by sixty year old people or adoption by a heterosexual couple rather than adoption by a homosexual couple.

In short, the suitability assessment constitutes a complex gatekeeping encounter in which professionals have to find a "balance" between different complex sets of rights and obligations (of adults to form a family, of children to be raised safely in families) and scrutinizing or supporting parental projects (Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, and Elbers, 2008a, 2008b; Scherz, 2011). In the Spanish case, the weight seem to be clearly in favor of the "rights / best interest of the child" which emerges in the suitability assessment process as an imagined referent and future project - given that at that point of the process, there is not an "assigned" child with particular needs and characteristics.

This rhetorical move is complex and makes the suitability assessment an especially contentious space and very particular type of key situation (Jociles and Charro, 2008). It involves protecting the rights of what, in practice, is an abstract/imagined entity, while scrutinizing concrete material and psychological characteristics of candidate adoptive parents and attempting to project future parenting "outcomes" by crossing these two referents. Nevertheless, it could be argued that if this were strictly the case and that "the best interests / rights of the child" guided every step of the process, the adoption system and path to becoming an adoptive family could be, at least, seen as institutionally rational or equitable.

However, the evidence -especially in the Spanish context- suggests this is not the case and that given the multiple institutions, social actors and parties involved in (international) adoptions, the adoption process is laden with contradictions and responds to multiple often-conflicting interests. In short, a diversity of family projects and adoption candidates participate in the system - which as we have seen are not judged as equally "eligible"- and adoptable children are also very different - and more or less "desirable" in terms of their gender, health, age, life-circumstances, etc. As a result, the international

adoption system and the transnational circulation of adopted children works very much like a "market", in which candidate parents -given their personal and family characteristics- can mobilize varying amounts of social/parental capital to exercise choice in the system (e.g. Howell, 2006; Quiroz, 2007; Yngvesson, 2012).

The outcome is a scenario, in which, if we strictly applied the "best interest of the child" logic enshrined on paper above, certain recurrent dynamics would be highly questionable or would have to be reversed. A psychologist working with an international adoption agency in Spain explains matters as follows (from Poveda, Jociles and Rivas, 2013, p. 46):

**Example 3: Single-parent candidates in international adoptions in Spain (original in Spanish and translation into English)**

*Psicóloga:* En Filipinas ahora mismo no se pueden presentar expedientes de monoparentales porque como la normativa ha ido variando (...) No sé si en este año ha cambiado porque ha habido una moratoria para la edad. Espera, que sí se puede presentar de monoparentales pero para niños de más edad o niños de la lista de necesidades especiales (...)

*Entrevistadora:* Ah, niños más mayores

*Psicóloga:* Sí, o niños de la lista de necesidades especiales. Va variando. Cuando los países sacan una nueva normativa, normalmente es para restringir a las monoparentales (...) en Vietnam sí que pueden adoptar monoparentales y todo. En China, en "pasaje verde", no pueden adoptar monoparentales a no ser que su expediente ya esté registrado en China y cambien el procedimiento de un año a "pasaje verde" (...)

*Psychologist:* In the Philippines right now single parents can't present requests because the rules change from time to time (...) I don't know if this year it has changed because there was a moratorium in relation to age. Wait, yes, single parents can present requests, but for older children.

*Interviewer:* Ah, older children.

*Psychologist:* Yes, or children on the list of special needs children. It changes. Normally when countries put out new rules, it is usually to restrict single parents (...) in Vietnam, single parents can adopt and everything. In China "green passage", single parents can't adopt, unless their case was already registered in China and they change the procedure within a year to "green passage" (...)

In other words, in our particular case single-mother-by-choice are seen as a less desirable and less equipped recipient adoptive family, yet sufficiently suitable to participate in the adoption system. But they have easier access to children who, by any formal criteria, have more developmental and parenting challenges (e.g.

older adopted children, children with complex medical conditions, etc.) - when, strictly speaking from the standpoint of the above logic, these children should be matched with the "more equipped" candidate families, that is two-parent heterosexual childless families to these professionals.

In summary, these two research examples show how examining institutional dynamics through the lens of the gatekeeping encounter approach may bring into the discussion a variety of conceptual issues. Such a discussion is possible within a sufficiently open-minded analytical approach capable of incorporating constructs and conditions that move beyond the traditional interactional sociolinguistic/micro-ethnographic framework. In the final discussion, I turn to how these concepts and frameworks can be rethought.

#### 4. Conclusions

At this point in time, I can only close this paper with some roughly sketched thoughts regarding how this revisiting of the key situation could be done and in what direction a revised theorization might develop. With the two research examples I discussed, I hope to have shown the following:

- Having gatekeeping/key situations under the analytical radar proved useful regardless of what the available data allowed me to conclude.
- High-stakes key situations might not work as "originally" predicted, yet paying attention to the details of how decisions are managed and discursively constructed in an array of interactional spaces is critically relevant to understanding the social and institutional trajectories of individuals.
- The discussion here is broadly compatible with a micro-ethnographic research agenda, and its bottom-up logic in relation to understanding and documenting how social processes, identities, inequalities and opportunities are interactionally created on the ground and become consequential in particular social and institutional settings (cf. Heller, 2014; Rampton, 2014).
- It might be right to assume that institutional dynamics have become increasingly complex and multifaceted over the last decade, in the context of broader socio-historical and economic changes.

So, in this context, one tentative alternative would be to rethink the terms under which a gatekeeping encounter is thought to become socially relevant. The traditional assumption is that individuals "bring into" these key encounters social identities and communicative histories that, given how they are interactionally managed during the key event, are consequential to their subsequent life-projects and social opportunities. However, alternatively we could assume that these identities are co-produced and "brought into existence" in *critical encounters*, that these critical encounters are multiple, distributed across institutional and social settings and have cumulative effects. From my interpretation this perspective is compatible and finds points of convergence with recent proposals that claim to draw from a Foucauldian (Martín-Rojo, 2015) or even neo-Marxist/Gramscian perspectives (Collins, 2014) This does not mean disregarding the relevance of institutions, or state structures, it means seeing them "as an open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity, needing to be conceptualized at more than one level, and needing ethnographic study in order to document and analyze the diverse contexts in which state effects operate, as forms of power shaping social subjects" (Collins, 2014, p. 20). Complementarily, it puts the focus on subjectivation (Martín-Rojo, 2015; Rose, 1999) as an outcome of an accumulation of critical encounters, on how identities and personhoods (Holland and Lave, 2009) are configured through social practices and how these identities open or close different social opportunities and make certain social paths more feasible than others.

Further, this focus on how subjectivities are produced across a conglomerate of critical encounters, assembled into a network of power relations (Martín-Rojo, 2015)-, may also shed light in relation to how subjects can act upon (i.e. resist, embrace, accept, transform, dismantle, etc.) the identities and social trajectories that the particular social/institutional context is attempting to shape for social actors. Critical encounters are one social arena in which social structures and inequalities are materialized but they also always allow for some "wobble-room" (Erickson, 2004, p. 178) which may be taken up by social actors to subvert, transform or (at least) protest the social paths which are being laid out for them. This has two implications which I will briefly sketch out to close the paper. On one hand, it involves revising the implicit portrait of the social actor embedded in the key situation notion - which, as sketched above, might be too naive in seeing interlocutors as voluntarist and meritocratic in their management of institutional encounters. In contrast, it assumes social actors have and bring into interaction social histories, expectations and repertoires that will be put into action in these encounters. On the other hand, this perspective

underscores once again the critical relevance of an ethnographic perspective. To understand how interactional (critical/gatekeeping/key) events are managed we need to understand (through ethnographic documentation of some sort) how these are configured in relation to other spaces and encounters within broader institutions and structures. We also need to know something about the various relevant interactional spaces in which the identities and repertoires of participants are shaped and how they connect to the outcome of the critical encounters identified through fieldwork<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Returning to the two research examples discussed in this paper illustrates some of the considerations I have in mind in relation to the relevance of an ethnographic perspective - although discussing these in detail would lead to a new paper in itself. In relation to additional institutional and organizational spaces that need to be taking into consideration issues such as the curricular organization of secondary education, the total provision of educational services in the district, how legislation and norms change in relatively short periods of time, etc. or how child protection is organized at the policy and administrative level in Spain, the web of social actors involved in child adoptions, the paths to single-parenthood-by-choice in Spain, etc. In relation to other spaces where social actors build/display their identities, for example, immigrant adolescents social relations and interactions outside school, social relations in "informal" situations inside the school, classroom interactions across a variety of curricular situations, etc. or single-mothers on-line and associative activities, support networks for adoptive families or the additional legal/professional resources adoptive candidate families might mobilize, etc.

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