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WILEY | CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

"Nothing goes as planned": Practitioners reflect on matching children and foster families

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Abstract

Matching children with foster carers is an important step in every nonkinship family foster care placement. Although guidelines for matching are provided in several studies, the case-specific context of the decision can influence the practitioners' ability to adhere to these guidelines. Therefore, this study answers the following question: "How does the case-specific context influence the practitioners' decision-making process regarding matching in family foster care?" Using a qualitative design, 20 semistructured interviews were conducted with practitioners matching children with foster families. Three themes emerged representing different layers of practitioners' everyday decision-making: matching as planned, matching being tailored, and matching being compromised. The results show that exceptions are part of practitioners' daily work, either due to the belief that it might benefit those involved or because of obstacles presented during the decision-making process. When the decision is compromised, matching practitioners lower their standards, while at the same time safeguarding the quality of the match. This proves that matching in practice is more than choosing a family, and guidelines are needed to determine what "good-enough" matching should entail.

KEYWORDS

assessment, child care planning, empirical research, family placement, foster care (family), organizations

1 | INTRODUCTION

Nonkinship foster care placements start with a matching decision, in which a practitioner decides which available foster carer will look after the foster child (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001). A suitable match between foster carers and foster children is considered essential to ensure successful placements in family foster care, whereas a mismatch is associated with an increased risk of placement endings (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Thoburn, 2016). Unplanned placement endings affect both the child (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007) and the foster family (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2011; Sloan Donachy, 2017). Therefore, understanding the decision-making process of choosing the best available foster carer for a child can improve the well-being of foster children and carers.

Studies on matching, which link together children and family characteristics, have shown a negative predictive value on placement success for the following variables: a narrow age difference between the foster child and other children in the foster family (Boer & Spiering, 1991), a mismatch between child's behaviour and carers' parenting style (Doelling & Johnson, 1990; Green, Braley, & Kisor, 1996; Strijker & Zandberg, 2001), and a discrepancy between carers' expectations and the reality after the child's placement (Doelling & Johnson, 1990). Furthermore, some studies provide guidelines for making matching decisions: Van Dam, Nordkamp, and Robbroeckx (2000) provided practitioners with a comprehensive list of characteristics found to be important in matching decisions; De Maeyer (2016) developed the Assessment Questionnaire Foster care Situations - Revised to assess the willingness and preparedness of foster carers to care for different types of children; Ter Meulen and Vinke (2017) developed a matching manual; and Moore, McDonald, and Cronbaugh-Auld (2016) created a computer algorithm to assist matchers in their decisions. However, a major finding from the literature review of Zeijlmans, López, Grietens, and Knorth (2017) was the recurrent mention of

obstacles hindering the ability to implement these findings into practice. A shortage of foster carers caused practitioners to settle for a less optimal match (Hollows & Nelson, 2006); the effect of limited time resulted in less child-centred matches (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001), and not knowing some information, such as experiences with sexual abuse, enhanced the chances of a mismatch by underestimating the risk of a placement breakdown (Farmer & Pollock, 1999). Furthermore, Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, and Doreleijers (2007) hypothesized that time–pressure and a lack of information on the history of children at first placement predict breakdowns. Thus, matching as theorized might be different from matching in practice.

This difference between decisions as they *ought* to be made and as they are happening in practice reflects the modes of thought between analytic decision-making models and the more intuitive approach to decision-making. Analytic decision-making models describe how a rational person should make a decision, whereas descriptive models reflect decision-making behaviour in the real world (Taylor, 2012). One decision-making model that incorporates time and resource constraints is the bounded rationality model as described by Simon (1972) and Gigerenzer and Selten (2001), which argues that people use simple but effective heuristics to make their complex decision. Decision-makers choose their heuristics based on characteristics of the decision and adapt to different decision environments (Dieckmann & Rieskamp, 2007). This adaptation to the decision environment has been described by the Decision-Making Ecology introduced by Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, and Kern (2011). In this exploratory model, four different contextual clusters are distinguished that influence the decision: case, organizational, external, and decision-maker factors. Furthermore, Baumann et al. (2011) incorporate the General Assessment and Decision-Making Model (GADM), which indicates that the threshold for decisions can be influenced by the four different clusters.

Due to the potential impact of context on the matching decision and the resulting family foster care placement, it is remarkable that the influence of context on matching has not received more attention. Existing literature on foster care matching decisions comes mainly from Western countries, such as the Netherlands (Strijker & Zandberg, 2001; Ter Meulen & Vinke, 2017), Belgium (De Maeyer, 2016), the United Kingdom (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001), and the United States of America (Moore et al., 2016). In the Netherlands, where this study is conducted, foster care is the main type of out-of-home care. Foster care organizations are non-profit foundations, funded by the municipalities, to which children are referred when in need for a foster family. These organizations are free to determine their own method for making matching decisions as long as the Youth Care Inspection, a government agency, considers the quality of care satisfactory. The only regulatory statement applicable to the matching context is in the Dutch Youth Act of 2015 and relates to the religion, belief, or cultural background of the child and parents, which need to be considered within reason and whenever possible. Adoption of children from care and the related matching in adoption, as described by Quinton (2012) and Dance, Ouwejan, Beecham, and Farmer (2010), does not exist. Permanency for foster children is created through long-term foster care instead of adoption.

This paper aims to improve the knowledge on matching by focusing on the case-specific context of decisions on which Dutch practitioners adjust their day-to-day decisions. The case-specific context of a decision consists of case information but also includes the availability of resources at the time that or in the specific situation wherein a decision has to be made. The following research question will be answered: "How does the case-specific context influence the practitioners' decision-making process regarding matching in family foster care?" Descriptions of practitioners' everyday work are deemed essential in answering this research question. Their views generate an in-depth analysis of matching in practice, including the differences between matching as intended and actual practice.

2 | METHOD

An inductive qualitative methodology was considered best for approaching the research question. The qualitative approach allowed a more detailed account of practice than questionnaires, and the inductive methodology helped to approach the subject with an open and exploratory stance.

2.1 | Participants

There are 28 foster care organizations in the Netherlands. In these organizations, the matching decision is often made by distinct practitioners, called "matchers." Our sample (for selection strategy, see below) consisted of 22 matchers from 17 foster care organizations. Two interviews were held with a pair of matchers, because these matchers wished to be interviewed together to be able to complement each other's knowledge. There were 19 women and 3 men in the sample. The participants were between 26 and 61 years old with an average of 46. All but one matcher had previous work experience in child welfare before becoming a matcher. The participants' years of matching experience at the time of the interview ranged between 1 and 15 with an average of 9 years.

2.2 | Instruments

A semistructured interview scheme was developed to explore the reflections of matchers regarding the matching process. The four categories of the Decision-Making Ecology (Baumann et al., 2011) were used as a heuristic framework during the development of the interview scheme to ensure correspondence between our questions and the complexity of decision-making in practice. The questions, therefore, focused not only on case factors but also on organizational, external, and decision-maker factors. Examples of questions are the following: "What do you look at while making a match?" (case factors), "How does matching in this organization work?" (organizational factors), "Which factors hinder your decision-making?" (organizational and/or external), and "Do you see differences between yourself and other matchers?" (decision-maker). Furthermore, an example of a recent match was asked and discussed, and participants filled out a short questionnaire on demographics and work experience. Two pilot interviews with matchers were conducted to test the interview scheme, that is, to find out whether the questions generated enough response from practitioners and whether the interview did not take too much time. No changes to the interview scheme were deemed necessary; hence, the pilot data could be included in the analysis. The interviews took approximately 90 min and resulted in in-depth information on matching in the Dutch foster care context. This

paper will focus on a detailed account of the influence of the matching context on the decision-making process, allowing a more nuanced description on this particular topic.

2.3 | Procedure

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling (Flick, 2009). As described by Sandelowski (1995), purposive sampling in qualitative research is often focused on including information-rich cases. In our sampling, the purpose was to include organizations from different regions in the Netherlands, which were likely to work in a different way. This was done to achieve a deep understanding of the matching decision-making in the Netherlands. However, the first organizations were included based on convenience sampling. Practitioners in the researchers' network and participants of a symposium on matching were approached. Furthermore, we distributed a call on a foster care forum and on social media. The response to these recruitment strategies was monitored and, after the initial response, the recruitment strategy was adapted to a more purposive approach to achieve the recruitment aims. After noticing the repetition and lack of additional information when interviewing a second matcher from one organization, we decided not to continue interviewing multiple matchers from the same organization. When multiple matchers from one organization were willing to cooperate, we discussed which matcher would bring in the most unique information. Additional emails were sent to organizations with a different approach to matching or in other parts of the Netherlands to urge these organizations to participate. The recruitment of new participants stopped when the first author, who conducted all interviews, concluded that interviewing did not appear to yield new information on matching.

The interviews were conducted at the foster care organization at a time appropriate for the participant. The participants signed an informed consent form and were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. All interviews were recorded with an audio device with permission of the participants. These audio recordings were transcribed and anonymized for data analysis. The Ethics Committee of the Department of Pedagogical and Educational Sciences of the University of Groningen approved the study in January 2015.

2.4 | Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analysis of the anonymized transcripts was conducted using the thematic analysis guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial codes were generated using principles of open and inductive coding, wherein each relevant extract about matching was selected and coded using a descriptive label on the essence of the extract. These codes were clustered and sorted into potential themes. These themes were based on prior memos made during the familiarizing and initial coding phases. The main author was primarily responsible for coding the interviews and discussed with the research team any findings or major decisions.

Three distinct themes were identified: "Matching as planned," "Matching being tailored," and "Matching being compromised." Furthermore, during the analysis, it became clear that a distinction could be made between two components of the matching decision: content

and process. *Content* refers to the characteristics of the foster child, parents, and foster families that interact in the placement decision, whereas *process* reflects the steps that matchers take during decision-making, such as meetings with the child, discussions with other practitioners, or the gathering of more information. Where possible, this distinction is used to assess the influence of the case-specific context on the different components of the matching decision.

3 | RESULTS

The three themes identified reflect the different layers at which practitioners were talking about matching. The first layer is *matching as planned*, which consists of the standardized matching being used as a framework for daily practice. This matching as planned is based on rational thinking, empirical evidence, work experience, existing procedures, or agreements between practitioners. The second layer is *matching being tailored*. Practitioners described how matching as planned could be adjusted when encountering a case requiring a different approach. This second layer is considered by practitioners as a necessary step to ensure the well-being of children in decision-making. *Matching as compromised* is the final layer and consists of the obstacles which practitioners face in decision-making. These obstacles hinder a practitioner's ability to follow the way of working described in the matching as planned layer and diminish the possibility to tailor the decision. This final theme is divided in two subthemes: lowering matching standards and safeguarding quality. This process can be seen as the matching in practice framework and is visualized in Figure 1.

3.1 | Matching as planned

Although there were vast differences between organizations in the process used to make the matching decisions, all practitioners described a matching as planned. This matching as planned is characterized by the generalizing nature of the statements made by practitioners. Reading their statements, it feels as if this is daily practice in all cases, for example, the following practitioner who described:

> We look at cultural background, we look at the pedagogical qualities of foster carers.... Ehm yes, we basically go through all those points. (Matcher 4)
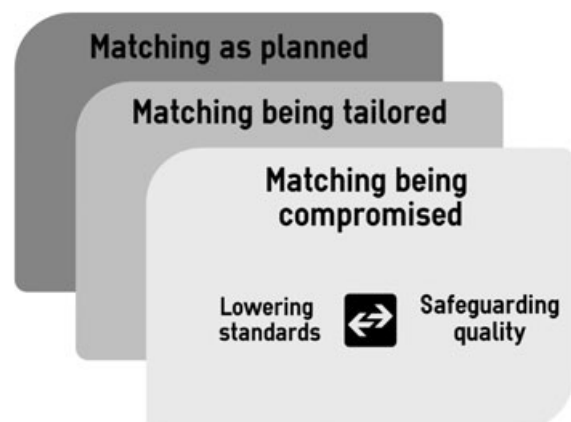

FIGURE 1 Matching in practice framework

Other statements characterized under the matching as planned theme already make the distinction between the ideal practice and the day-to-day practice. The ideal practice portrayed the matching as they make their decision when there are no compromising obstacles. An example is provided by the following practitioner:

> The most ideal situation is that, after the question comes in, I read the information available on the request for help, so about the child and the family. All information available, I will read it. (Matcher 17)

For some matchers, the process as planned entailed speaking with children, parents, and foster carers, whereas others made an assessment based on written information from other practitioners. Other differences in the matching process could be found in the scheduled amount of consultation with other colleagues or senior staff members, which differed from once per week to only when facing difficulties. On content, some organizations used lists compiled of distinct characteristics, such as age, religion, location, and so forth, and other organizations did not have their matching as planned written down. However, the reported content of the matching decision did not show major differences between organizations. Age of the child, distance between the family of origin, and the foster family and type of care needed were mentioned by all as starting variables. Furthermore, religion or cultural background, behaviour and the pedagogical skills of foster carers, and the other children in the foster family were recurring matching elements mentioned by the practitioners. Differences could only be found in the details. For example, one organization required the age of a child to differ from the other children of foster carers with a minimum of 2 years, whereas another organization used a minimum of 1 year.

3.2 | Matching being tailored

Practitioners encountered situations in which the matching decision was tailored to the wishes, needs, circumstances, or characteristics of those involved. Both the content and the process of matching could be adjusted by the decision-maker. This happened when they assessed that circumstances required an approach different from matching as planned.

Related to content, matchers determined what is most important for their decision based on the unique characteristics of the child and the parents. Therefore, the matching decision is different from case to case and assessed anew for each child.

> What I do first is to "read" the child, so to say, gather information about the type of child and then the child's question will arise: "I ask for...." and that can be anything. And then I will search for families that have an answer for it. (Matcher 13)

The interpretation of different elements of a match, such as the child's behaviour in accordance with the skills of the foster carers, the geographical distance between the foster carer and the parents, and the child's age and the foster family composition, also differed per child. For example, for some children, it was better to be as close to their birth parents as possible, whereas for others, a place further away was preferred to guarantee safety.

> Is it a child who likes to sit behind the Gameboy all day or is it a child who enjoys being active? And if you find a family that also enjoys being active, then it is often a better match than a passive family and that the child is full of energy that cannot be released. Yeah, that cannot be the aim. (Matcher 5)

Participants adjusted the matching process when they believed this was in the best interest of stakeholders, for example, when they noticed the process was going too fast for a child, or parents needed another conversation to accept their child being placed in a foster family.

> It very much depends on the age [of the child] and whether we are the right person to talk to the child in the first place. Children often have to deal with lots of different care workers, and I always try, I try [to have a conversation with the child]. Children of 12 years and older, but beforehand I think about whether it is desirable or if it would only be more confusing for a child. Optionally, I go together with the foster care worker, for example, and I can be introduced. (Matcher 8)

Furthermore, different circumstances required participants to change matching, for example, the incarceration of parents, a sudden incident that requires a quicker placement, or sickness of a colleague. Therefore, matchers tended to be flexible and look for solutions to guarantee the best possible matching process when the standard way of working was not possible.

> Well, sometimes it does not succeed. This all sounds ideal: parents cooperating and thinking it is fantastic, well, that is sometimes not the case. Sometimes they are in prison or are simply not able to cooperate. Then we will check whether, for example, the children are in a foster family and if that family can tell something. Or the guardian who knows much about the child, is he or she available to fill in the form or whoever? (Matcher 16)

Thus, both predictable and unpredictable characteristics of a specific case urged practitioners, with the best interest of those involved in mind, to be flexible when matching, and the matching decision is tailored to fit the case-specific situation.

3.3 | Matching being compromised

When obstacles occurred, practitioners deviated from their intended or desired matching practice while simultaneously being aware that this could decrease the matching quality. According to the participants, the main obstacles to matching were time–pressure, lack of options, and incompleteness of information. To deal with these obstacles in practice, practitioners described two strategies in cases of less optimal

matching contexts. It consists of two subthemes: (a) lowering matching standards and (b) safeguarding quality. The first subtheme is a strategy to ensure that despite the obstacles, a matching decision can be made. The second subtheme relates to the efforts of practitioners to assess and increase the quality of the decision despite the obstacles.

3.3.1 | Lowering matching standards

The matching obstacles, time–pressure, lack of options, and incompleteness of information, influenced the decision-making process in various degrees, either only the content of the decision or both the content and the process of decision-making. Time–pressure influenced both the content of the matching decision and the process. Related to content, participants expressed that the quality of the matching decision decreased. When matchers were unable to gather all necessary information or talk to colleagues and stakeholders, decision-making became less refined. Furthermore, the sense of urgency resulted in lower standards being applied to the matching decision.

> But he also competed [with other children], and we actually knew that, that he should not go to a family with children of his age. But because you do not have anything else, he had to leave that foster family. They went on holiday, so he had to leave. Yeah, you go, then you depart from the risk factors. And that was indeed not a smart move. It really clashed. (Matcher 16)

However, the clearest consequence of feeling pressured or a lack of time was a less comprehensive matching process, according to matching practitioners. Time–pressure resulted in skipping or shortening different steps of the matching process, such as gathering information, meetings with stakeholders, allowing time for foster carers to reflect on the proposed placement, reporting or evaluating the placement, and consultation with colleagues. Furthermore, one matcher emphasized how a shortened matching process could result in a more traumatic experience for the child.

> And in an emergency, you take the child [from their parents] and you pop it into a family. Well, that can never be good for a child, of course. So, that is an obstacle [for matching]. And then the child has already, well, you actually provide the child with a trauma and then you still have to place the child into another family. Well, if you can prevent that, it would be very nice. (Matcher 2)

The lack of families made that matchers were faced with a decision with limited options, which resulted in lowering standards on the quality of the match and not being able to take into account all elements of the match. Thus, matching with limited options often involved taking more risk or being less certain about the possibility that the placement was good for the child.

> And the shortage [of carers] means that the ideal picture, as far as that ever was, well, more and more... resembles very little from what we actually manage to achieve in the end. And that sounds very negative in terms of, well,

> maybe the child would be better off going back to his or her parents, but no. However, it is true that you in fact always start with downsides. (Matcher 7)

Furthermore, matchers had fewer possibilities to tailor their decision and comply with the wishes of stakeholders. In addition, they sometimes approached foster carers with a placement request outside their described preference. Thus, the lack of options resulted in a match with less agreement from those involved.

> His own wish was to live in (location) or surroundings, because there his friends, lot of his friends live there and, I think, his biological father and grandma. But well, I already explained that we did not have that [family]. Then you see that a child does not have much to say about it, because eventually it [the placement] has to happen attuned to what we have available. (Matcher 3)

From this quotation, it also became clear that time–pressure decreased the lack of options. When practitioners faced less time pressure, they could decide to delay placement until a better foster family was available. The lack of foster families, therefore, affected the matching content but initially not the matching process. However, when no family was available that matched the needs of a child, the matching process ended, or a different alternative had to be found.

Finally, practitioners described the incompleteness of data as an obstacle for making a thorough decision. Missing, outdated, distorted, or incorrect data demanded them to make a superficial match, only focusing on those characteristics that were known. Furthermore, it could influence the priority or direction of the matching elements as described in the *matching as planned* or *matching being tailored* themes. The incompleteness of information led to more uncertainty about decisions and increased the role of intuition.

> And often you do not, sometimes you have no information. Well, then you actually match on nothing. A little on intuition. (Matcher 12)

The process of matching did not change by the incompleteness or incorrectness of information.

3.3.2 | Safeguarding quality

In their decision-making, participants looked for ways to decrease placement risk. One strategy was to enhance the matching process or the trajectory *after* placement. During the matching process, for example, the downsides were discussed with foster carers to prepare them for the potential challenges. Focusing on the trajectory after placement, the downsides were communicated to the practitioner guiding the placement. Extra support, such as intensive supervision or trauma therapy, was arranged when deemed necessary and beneficial. However, some participants hesitated to make a match for which support would be immediately necessary.

> And can foster carers handle this [placement] or do they need to learn or develop something first? And I think

that is risky, because too often one says: "Yeah, but then we will just teach them," and mention extra support, but well, we also know that the extra support is never there on day one. And you also notice that foster carers... well, organizations think that those people are eager to get extra support, really enjoy daily or weekly supervision in their house... but it asks a lot of them. (Matcher 6)

Another strategy for dealing with matching obstacles was to find a foster family able to handle a compromised placement. For example, when faced with limited information, participants searched for a family that was not easily overwhelmed and was considered to be able to handle a wide range of behaviours. Less capable families or new foster carers were preserved for the more clear or straightforward placements.

When you know very little about the child, then I search for experienced foster carers. And I will say: "Yes, I know it is a 6-year old boy, but nothing more. I just know the name and I know nothing about the behaviour." And nine out of ten times they say: "Bring it on." And then they just wait and see. (Matcher 1)

Furthermore, matchers assessed the strengths and weaknesses of each decision to predict the possible risk for a negative placement experience. If the possible matching decision was not feasible, they decided not to place the child in the family concerned. Thus, matchers have a notion of "a good-enough foster family," which they use to assess whether the foster child can be placed in a family despite compromises. A matching decision is considered "good enough" if the risk is low enough to make the placement, even though not all matching criteria have been met.

When we have a family that we consider "good enough"... and "good enough" might sound very negative, but it really has to be "good enough." We have to have confidence that, OK, this can be something. And it might not be ideal, for example in location when one would have to travel quite far for visitation with parents, but there are enough strengths in the parenting situation. That, such a notion should be present. (Matcher 9)

The level of risk that participants were willing to take depended on the expected duration and intensity of the placement. For short placements, the match was less intrusive and, as a result, more downsides of the match were tolerated. The same was true for part-time placements, for example, when a child needed a foster family for the weekend.

Yes, it's because 24-hour [care] is more intense, has a much bigger impact, it is about actually living there. Then I think that, well actually you assess a little more carefully. You really want to know all information in

advance, on the child and what parents have been through for example. While in part-time care, I do not need to know everything. And the foster carers do not need to know everything, because they are a supportive family, they are complementary to the parents. (Matcher 18)

According to the participants, young children required a more thoughtful match compared to older children who stayed in foster care for a shorter period of time. Thus, matchers were more likely to deviate from the ideal matching content or process when placement was less intrusive and of shorter duration. If placement was not considered good enough to expect good results, matchers looked for alternatives. They approached a different family foster care organization, redirected the child to a different care setting, or used other methods to try to find a foster family, for instance, a more intensive network search, social media, or an advertisement in a newsletter for foster parents.

4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of our study was to analyse the influence of the case-specific context on the decision-making process of matching in family foster care. The overarching finding was that the matching decision in practice consists of three layers: planned, tailored, and compromised. Exceptions are part of matching practitioners' everyday work, whether to do "what is best" by tailoring the decision to the case or because obstacles limit the decision-making process. When the decision is compromised, matchers lower their standards, while at the same time safeguarding the quality of the match by compensating the lower standards and assessing whether the placement would still be good enough.

4.1 | Main findings

Although research on matching clearly describes guidelines (see, e.g., De Maeyer, 2016; Moore et al., 2016; Ter Meulen & Vinke, 2017; Van Dam et al., 2000), matching in practice is far from a standardized procedure. Similar to previous studies (Boer & Spiering, 1991; Farmer & Pollock, 1999; Hollows & Nelson, 2006; Van Dam et al., 2000; Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001), our research shows that the matching decision is adjusted to fit the needs of a specific child and can be compromised by time–pressure, shortage of families, and incompleteness of information. Thus, matching in practice appears mostly pragmatic rather than systematic. Current existing guidelines do not fit the complexity of decision-making; there is a large gap between theory and practice. The existing theory is mainly normative, whereas the practice of matching is more likely to follow the bounded rationality model: practitioners adjust their decision-making process to deal with the complexity of the matching decision and are likely to use simple but effective heuristics to choose a foster family for a child.

Second, a clear distinction could be made between the process of the matching decision and the content. All themes were applicable to both, but the influence of obstacles on process or content differed. Time had the most profound compromising influence on decision-

making. Although all obstacles influenced the matching content, time–pressure also influenced the decision-making process. Furthermore, the compromised matching process due to time–pressure increased the role of other obstacles, because, for instance, steps for gathering information were shortened or skipped, and time to wait for other foster families to become available was lacking. However, due to the nature of foster care as a measure for children referred to the child protection system, time–pressure due to the child's hazardous situation is inherent to foster care (Waterhouse & Brocklesby, 2001). Thus, one could argue that matching is a balancing act: one should make time to act carefully while simultaneously speed up to remove the child from a potentially harmful situation.

Third, matchers have a threshold for deciding if a match is good enough. Comparable to the GADM (Baumann et al., 2011), this threshold determines whether one takes action or not. In this case, the threshold dictates whether the foster child will indeed go to the foster family or whether the risk for negative placement experiences is too high. This matching threshold is, similar to the GADM, influenced by external influences, which are the duration and intensity of the placement. However, there is one major difference between the matching threshold and the threshold from the GADM. Although the GADM implies that the decision-maker decides whether action is needed, the decision not to take action in matching is only seen as a last resort and equals a failed matching process. The decision to place a child in a foster family comes prior to matching. Only when no good-enough foster family is found, matchers have no other choice than to find an alternative for family foster care.

4.2 | Strengths and limitations

The reality and complexity of the matching in foster care have become clear through the stories of professional matchmakers about their daily practice. These valuable insights contribute to our understanding of the complexity of decisions to be taken. Because our sample consisted of a diverse range of organizations in the Netherlands, the results are not related to a specific matching procedure. Furthermore, matchers differed in experience, age, and gender, making the sample heterogeneous within this specific field of expertise. Despite the heterogeneous range of participants, there were no clear distinctions based on characteristics. This confirms the frequent occurrence of deviations in matching practice. The transferability of these findings from the Dutch context to cultures in which the standard practice is regulated with more procedures or methodologies is not known; yet it could be hypothesized that all three layers are occurring in every decision albeit in different magnitudes.

Our study also has some limitations. Results represent subjective experiences of professional matchers. Self-serving attributional bias, described as the tendency to attribute positive events to oneself and dismiss negative events as attributable to other causes (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), might cause an overestimate of the influence of context by matchers. However, the effect of context on matching could also be underestimated due to the inherent desire of practitioners to make a positive impression (Collins, Shattell, & Thomas, 2005). Rational decision-making is often considered as best practice and the norm for decision-making.

4.3 | Implications and recommendations

Pragmatic constraints often dictate current matching practice. Especially, pressure to make a decision has a negative impact on the matching process and content. Although in some situations, time–pressure might be needed, for example, when a child is in severe danger, sometimes more time could be provided when there is a lower workload or more efficient collaboration between parties. In addition, the quality of information could be improved by thorough documentation or communication before the need for placement exists, whereas a more elaborate recruitment strategy could result in a wider and diverse foster family pool. Although the practical constraints might be part of everyday practice, organizations should aim to minimize the effects of these constraints on the matching decision.

Although current guidelines are applicable to ideal circumstances or the matching as planned, this study shows that matching practice is more complex. Therefore, instead of ideal practice, guidelines should also consider good-enough matching and help matchers assess whether certain compromises are acceptable or come with risks for the child and/or the foster family. Future research should not only look whether a certain characteristic is related to successful placements, but also whether there are variables interacting with the characteristic to decrease or increase placement risk. This will allow practitioners to assess whether a characteristic should be leading in their decisions or whether issues with the characteristic could be compensated. Furthermore, more research is necessary to understand how the compromised reality of matching decisions affects the decisions made by practitioners. The bounded rationality model describes how their decisions are based on simple but effective heuristics. In matching research, to the best of our knowledge, these heuristics have not been studied. One way of analysing these heuristics would be to conduct a think-aloud approach, as described by Lundgrén-Laine and Salanterä (2010).

4.4 | Conclusion

In sum, matching entails more than finding a foster family for a child. During the matching process, practitioners go through a process of tailoring the decision to the specific needs and safeguarding a good placement start by assessing whether the family is good enough and trying to compensate concerns. Therefore, the current definition often provided when talking about matching, which consists of only choosing, does not cover all components of the matching decision. Even if only one foster family is available, a decision needs to be made. A new definition could bridge the gap between research and practice and help to find a way of dealing with the complexity of matching. We propose to describe matching in family foster care as the process that involves both deciding on the most compatible foster family available for a child and forging a strong foundation for the foster care placement with the goal of maximizing the chance of placement success.

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How to cite this article: Zeijlmans K, López M, Grietens H, Knorth EJ. "Nothing goes as planned": Practitioners reflect on matching children and foster families. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2018;1–8. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12437