

Jan de Wit

- Born April 20, 1928; died May 18, 2000
- Spouse: Heiltje de Wit
- Doctorandus (1953) and Ph.D. (1962) from Free University at Amsterdam

Major Employment

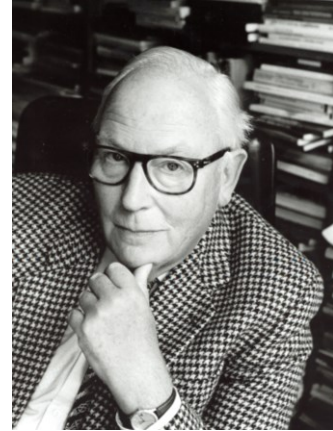
- Director of the Paedologisch Instituut: 1961-1993
- Professor of Developmental Psychology, Free University: 1967-1993

Major Areas of Work

- Youth psychotherapy, attachment, imitation

SRCD Affiliation

- Long Range Planning Committee member



SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Jan de Wit

Interviewed by Willard Hartup
At the University of Nijmegen
October 19, 1993

Hartup: I'm sitting in my office at the University of Nijmegen on the 19th of October 1993 and my guest is Professor Dr. Jan de Wit, who was for many years professor of developmental and clinical child psychology at the Free University at Amsterdam as well as the Director of the Paedological Institute there. Okay, Jan, I think we are interested in a great many details about your intellectual and professional history, as well as your relationship with the Society for Research in Child Development, but let's begin by asking you to talk a little bit about your family background, any early experiences that you had that may be relevant to your later work, anything in your early history that you think might be of interest.

de Wit: I am a farmer's son; I was the only child. My parents were rather old already. I have the best memories about my childhood because living on a farm means that there's quite a lot of opportunities to play around and to have friends. On the other side, living on a farm was nice but I was never really interested in farming, as such. I think rather early, already, I had a vivid interest in books and I read quite a lot. The story goes, and I think it is true also, that my grandfather living in the family was always reading from the Bible at our meals and I was quite interested in what that meant. That you, from a book, could detect some sentences and so on. So I was asking my grandfather what kind of things were in it and he said, "These are letters." Later on he explained to me that at the beginning of a chapter you had a very nice letter and it was a *G* or an *E* and so on. So I started reading; it was not perhaps according to the principles of learning to read, but at the age of two and a half years I already was able to identify the letters. From that time on my mother helped me a little bit with books from the first grade and I think I was able to read at the age of three or something like that. I went to school, according to the rules, at six years of age. I had a quiet time because I knew everything about reading and spelling. However, writing I had to learn in the first grade and it was rather difficult for me. It's some relationship with my motor equipment or something like that. Perhaps I like to be receptive perhaps more than projective in some way. There were important experiences from my younger childhood. I think it cheered me a little bit that I was always very interested in getting knowledge about everything. So I went to an elementary school and I learned that you don't have to do too much to follow teaching and so it was rather a disappointment when I came to secondary education

that I had to work hard to understand about Latin and Greek and to learn quite a lot by heart and so on.

Hartup: There were no teachers or educators in your family?

de Wit: No, not at all. But I think my parents were very enthusiastic about my performance at school. They were not urging me to become a farmer. No, I think my father had always had some hidden hopes but it was not able to be discussed, to become something different from a farmer perhaps. I don't know. Anyhow they were very positive about my interests.

Hartup: Did you have any exposure or interest in psychology or behavioral science prior to the time you were at the university?

de Wit: Oh that's a quite interesting story, because at that time I was at The Hague—*Den Haag*—where I got a “classic” education in the gymnasium. *Gymnasium* means a form of secondary education that prepares for all studies at the university and includes also study of the classics. The school had very high standards and considered Latin and Greek as the most important topics and mathematics were of course important, but not so important as the classics. It was the style of the old Dutch gymnasium and I got there quite a lot of cultural education. At that time you could make a choice among either the mathematics or the sciences or the arts. At the end of the gymnasium I was a little bit in doubt. Like I say, I chose already for the option arts which gave admittance to the university studies of theology and law and literature, liberal arts. I wasn't interested in going into physics or mathematics or to become a medical doctor. Then, in time, I was also not very satisfied with the opportunities in the field of liberal arts. So I got quite an interest in psychology as such, because it seemed to me to be a nice combination of the more anthropological, philosophical things and, at the other side, still rather concrete and dealing with people.

Hartup: What works had you read at The Hague of a psychological nature?

de Wit: Oh only one or two books written by Professor Waterink who became my teacher later. When I was in the last grade I went to him after some misunderstanding that an assistant of his thought that I would like to be tested. However, I wanted information about the field. He was a man who could make people very enthusiastic, so he made me also very enthusiastic. Then at that time I chose for the study of psychology at the university because—you know, the Dutch system is different from the American system. We don't have the “College-system.” You have to choose after your secondary school either theology, law, psychology, and so forth, so I chose psychology. It was just five or six years of full academic study.

Hartup: And the university that you went to was?

de Wit: The Free University at Amsterdam, which was also related with my background because in Holland the school system is—at that time at least—organized according to your outlook on life. I always attended a Protestant Christian school because I myself and my family were Protestant—Christian Reformed Church. So I think it was no point of discussion to go to the university that had at that time the same roots and strong connections with the whole philosophy and atmosphere of the Reformed Churches and so on. Although it was formally independent of church, the whole outlook, the world outlook—world view—was Calvinistic, so there was no point of discussion to choose that university. So I went to the Free University at Amsterdam.

Hartup: What were the origins of your interest in child development?

de Wit: Oh, I think that I was asked when I was in my second year, something like that, I was asked to become an assistant and at that time I think some Dutch universities—the Free University especially—were very much oriented to the applied fields. So connected with the university was a “laboratory,” they called it, and at that laboratory they tested children to give advice about personal or educational

problems, but mostly about what would be a good choice for school after the child left elementary school, that type of question. So they asked me to become an assistant and the work of the assistant was mostly to investigate children, that means testing them using different kinds of tests as they were at that time.

Hartup: Intelligence tests?

de Wit: Intelligence tests, personality tests as far as they were at that moment developed, and also quite a lot of observation and giving your conclusions from behavior during the testing.

Hartup: And what year was this?

de Wit: That was 1948. So I started to become an assistant for many years and they always selected me for the children. They thought I was just good for testing children; I had some gifts perhaps in that direction they thought. So after a couple of years I became ill rather severely—tuberculosis—and it was at that time a very serious illness. But after that I recovered and I decided I wouldn't like to go back to the laboratory to become an assistant for the last one or two years.

Hartup: Was your illness some sort of turning point do you think in your early development?

de Wit: No I don't think so, although I wrote my thesis—*scriptie*—about experiences being a patient and also about the hospitalization that was connected with it and the existentials you are confronted with. I think it was not without influence, but I can't say it was a turning point. The only turning point was perhaps very pragmatic, that I thought now I can't learn anything more about testing of children and now I go further on studying to see that I finish my studies as soon as possible and, in the meantime, I would like to have more clinical experience. I deliberately chose clinical psychology, which was at that time and still in The Netherlands was mainly oriented to adults and not to children.

Hartup: Were there particular individuals, faculty members and/or others who were important to your development as a clinical psychologist?

de Wit: Like I said, the only professor at the Free University at that time was the man I mentioned already, whom I visited to get oriented about my professional possibilities. At that time many teachers at the gymnasium at The Hague said, "Jan, why would you do that, it's an uncertain future to become a psychologist and it is not such an important job and function, and you could do perhaps better in something else, to become a lawyer or something like that." Anyhow, I was inspired by Professor Waterink, he was a pragmatic man. He was not a great scientist perhaps, and I think his intuition he trusted sometimes more than science.

Hartup: How do you spell his name?

de Wit: W-A-T-E-R-I-N-K. So he was a very inspiring man, he did everything. He was a consultant to industry, to the royal family, he did everything.

Hartup: Was he your early research mentor?

de Wit: I think there was not much research at that time.

Hartup: I see.

de Wit: It was just training for applied fields. At that time the applied field was all kinds of testing and giving advice about problems that parents had with their children and he was very famous in that respect, already, before the war. After the war he got so many opportunities that he spread himself out on everything. But I think, before the war especially, he wrote articles to make people sensitive to psychology, what actually psychology could offer to parents. He was also very good in giving advice to

parents. At first he combined intelligence and knowledge of the field with quite a lot of intuition and he was a very outgoing person. Sometimes he was totally wrong and sometimes he was perfectly right, because his intuition came through. But I think I was very critical about the way he sometimes dealt with scientific findings. He was not very well grounded, sometimes he referred to empirical data but he was also very pragmatic and theoretical—theories of personality. For example, he said “Yes, I have nice testing questions but if I get a young child coming from the countryside you can’t ask the child what to do in the cinema when a fire is detected, because there are no cinemas at all,” that kind of remark.

Hartup: Did you succeed in obtaining an emphasis on children and applied clinical problems with children while you were still a student? Or did you do most of this yourself?

de Wit: No, no, no. I think the whole atmosphere at the laboratory of the university—laboratory was not the right name perhaps, but anyhow, it was the common name at that time—was infused with applied knowledge about personal problems, psychopathology of children and so on, that was all included in the testing activities.

Hartup: What was your thesis about?

de Wit: My thesis was in the doctorandus—or do you mean—

Hartup: Well both.

de Wit: Yes, I mentioned already my minor thesis when I finished my Doctorandus degree in 1953; that was about the experiences being a patient. My thesis later—my Ph.D. was in 1962 and that was rather theoretical. You see, the Dutch tradition at that time was not just doing a piece of research and writing a thesis about that. I was already working in the field at that time, first at a mental health service in Alkmaar and later on at the Paedological Institute at Amsterdam. I will talk later about that. Besides that, I was writing a thesis which was both theoretical and analytical. It was about the mother-child relationship. At that time the attachment theory of Bowlby and the investigations of Spitz became more and more famous. I wrote a thesis in which I analyzed more or less the theoretical background of these people, the differences between the psychoanalytic object-relations theory of Spitz and the attachment theory which was just developing at that time. Also, the empirical evidence I discussed. I was very critical about the theory because it suggested too much predetermination. And I was very happy with the first empirical publications at that time. I remember Jack Gewirtz who was rather critical and I read some of his publications. There was also a very good review by Leon Yarrow at that time. Just at that time I wrote my dissertation so when he published his review article and I published my dissertation it was parallel, but there were many points in common. I think that was the type of thesis I wrote. So no empirical research—at that time one was just starting in Holland to do research according to the American way. But I think you should also realize that the first few years after World War II there was not much communication yet between science at both sides of the ocean in the field of psychology. There was also in Holland a tradition that a lot of empirical research was too superficial and not giving many important things and “America” was the same as behaviorism.

Hartup: That's right.

de Wit: And I think it was perhaps also because I remember the first time I read an American handbook. I preferred the older German textbooks because the American one was very boring. Just an enumeration of facts. But then after my dissertation and after I got the job at the Institute—later perhaps—

Hartup: Well why don't you describe your first position after you completed your work and what that work presented in terms of continuities in your interests?

de Wit: Okay. When I completed my studies—with the Doctorandus degree then you go into professional practice. So I worked for three years at a very interesting institute, I could say foundation. It was a non-profit organization so the word *foundation* can be confusing for Americans. But I think it was a good group of people and I think the ideas behind that organization were quite interesting. They combined at that time, and it was much ahead of its time, the child guidance work and school psychology. So I worked in both sections. There was also some adult psychiatry, social psychiatry but that was not so much integrated, but the school psychology and child guidance work were quite well integrated and I liked it very much. It was a nice job at that time. It was in the province of North Holland not too far from Amsterdam; it was in the provincial town of Alkmaar. I learnt quite a lot for several reasons, because, first of all, it was not in the tradition of my university but it was in the tradition of the University of Amsterdam, which was quite different at that time, certainly, from the tradition of the Free University. The University of Amsterdam was a little bit more psychoanalytic and, at the other side, very empirical. So I already had some contact with that tradition during my training in clinical psychology because I had an assistantship or an internship at the clinic where also both of the Universities were present, but mostly the University of Amsterdam. So I learned quite a lot from another tradition which was a little bit more empirically oriented and that was not the strongest point at our university. I mean empirical research, I think, was very pragmatic and practically applied at our university but empirical orientation was not always as it could be. So I learned quite a lot over there from the integration of both.

Hartup: How long were you at Alkmaar?

de Wit: Three years.

Hartup: Three years, and after that?

de Wit: After that I got the job at the Paedological Institute. That was also quite a story since, at that time, the Institute was not in a very prosperous condition. I think my predecessor and my teacher Waterink was already between sixty-five and seventy. And he was interested in quite a lot of things. He founded the Institute in 1931, but after World War II he was not very much involved with it anymore. I think at that time there was not much money and there were few people who were professionally well trained. So the first ten years afterwards were not too easy for development of the field. It was just a new field; nobody knew what a psychologist was.

Hartup: Did you go there as director?

de Wit: Yes, in fact I could say I went there and just immediately became the director. Officially I was called Co-Director and Professor Waterink was the Director. When he introduced me he said, “Jan, you will know what you have to do and I'll give you the names of a few people who are not very well doing their job. I guess you could better try to get rid of them, and further on, I trust you and you will do your job.”

Hartup: You were in that position of course for a very long time, just retiring from it earlier this year. But maybe this would be a good time in our conversation if you were to describe the Paedological Institute. Describe perhaps what you think were the major contributions that you made to that program over the long period in which you were Director and summarize what your relationship was to the Paedological Institute here. Then we can come back to your research and other professional activities.

de Wit: I think a very important part of my life was at the Institute. When I came there, very informally I applied for the job; it was quite a story.

Hartup: Now this would have been in 1960—

de Wit: No, 1957.

Hartup: Fifty-seven. OK.

de Wit: In '54 I graduated, I could say, as Doctorandus. I was three years in Alkmaar; in 1957 I came to the Institute.

Hartup: So you became Director of the Institute before you took your Ph.D.?

de Wit: Oh, yes. The European doctor's degree at that time was very much a private "enterprise" and very highly qualified. Now it is more internationally the same, but at that time it was a traditional doctorate, so it was not immediately after you finished your Doctorandus. You did it also in your spare time and I got one half-day off to write my thesis or something like that, and on the weekends and in the evenings. When I started to work at the PI the issue at that time was emotionally disturbed children, children with all kinds of behavioral problems, severe behavioral problems, who got residential treatment combined with special school education. But I think treatment was at that time not very much developed. There was scarcity of staff, scarcity of money, but I think it was a nice place for children to live. There was, of course, some professional knowledge but it was not according to the standards that were just developing at that time. So I had a good start because at that time some legislation was changed which gave more money to the Institute and also professionals were just coming. I think psychology students just became available at that time. Before that time there were not many students of psychology. So I could build up a very young staff, and at the same time I was able to set higher professional standards and to make the organization more professional. There was already some traditional child psychotherapy but we had to build it out, child psychotherapy but also more multi-disciplinary work, the social workers and so on. But because of my psychological background from the beginning behavioral professionals, psychological professionals were predominant and I liked that. I tried to give some new directions with respect to the professional practice of child psychology and later on perhaps more clinical child psychology. Our clients were very complicated families and children. It was also very nice to pioneer at the Institute, for example, by integrating the school which was special education with the mental health approach, the child guidance approach.

Hartup: One of the major achievements that you consider yours was the creation really of a professional staff as the profession was defined in the years after the 1950s?

de Wit: Yes, to help it define, to develop the profession as such, by means of the training of students. Also I think the issue was, at that time and perhaps always a very interesting issue, getting a good combination of theory and practice. But the training of university students was an important part of the work of the Institute.

Hartup: Is it possible for you to describe briefly the major changes that took place over that thirty-year period in the actual approach to the diagnosis and treatment of the children?

de Wit: Yes, quite a lot of developments I think. When I became a full professor at the university, before that I was already senior lecturer, I discussed with the university authorities the necessity of having a good institute in analogy with a medical hospital, or a university hospital. They were, I believe at that time, very positive about that idea. So I said, "I have to train students primarily for the profession, so I need the analogy of a medical hospital and medical school. The residential part of the institute"—at that time the institute was only residential—"is not enough. We also need outpatient services," so we got some money to have an outpatient clinic, in terms of today *ambulatorium* as we say here sometimes. And so to have also the opportunity to council parents and also to do therapy with children who are not in a residential setting. So that was one of the first things I tried to give some form. The pattern of the applied activities of the Institute should be representative for the general professional practice in clinical child psychology.

So that was a very good expansion of our professional activities and at the same time we decided or suggested that adolescents would be a very interesting topic. Our residential setting was only up to

twelve years, but the outpatient unit was up to eighteen years. So it has been developed at that time a very good adolescent unit and I think at that time it was also very new. I remember in my first years of teaching it was the most difficult topic to give lectures about because there was nothing to find about the whole topic. So that was one of the reasons that I wrote, together with one of my students, the textbook on adolescence which has been highly successful in The Netherlands. So that was one of the first things, to get a good covering of the field, also to get a multi-disciplinary staff, including especially psychologists, paedologists, educators, and social workers. Psychiatry was always a little bit a love/hate relationship, I could say. At that time psychiatry was very psychoanalytically oriented. We preferred to have a pediatrician on the staff, not a psychiatrist. That was also not very easy, but I'll tell you later on. I can say the Institute developed itself into a very good institute within the professional field, one with special expertise for difficult cases and so on and so on. But when legislation changed again, and that was around the '80s, we had to choose in which direction we would like to develop the Institute. The degrees of freedom we had up to that time were a little bit restricted.

Hartup: What was involved in that choice?

de Wit: We got some advice from outside, from the mental health inspectors, from the ministry, from that side, and also from my staff; my co-director at that time, Hans Heiner, was very sensitive about these things. I myself was a little bit reluctant, but on the other side it was a good solution, that the Institute could survive on a high professional level. So formally from 1981 or something like that it became part of the psychiatric system or the mental health system, being a "clinic of psychiatry," but its two directors were psychologists, which will be understandable in the United States.

Hartup: When you say it became part of the mental health system do you mean the mental health system of the entire country or more regionally?

de Wit: No, Holland is a small region in itself, so it's just the legislation of the whole nation. State legislation is perhaps a little bit misleading. So you see, up until that time you could get the money to do your work from the social services. There were not many regulations, it was rather free and if you produced good work, okay. But then there was that part of legislation, social legislation, that had to be revised, and also parents could not get money any more from social services if the children were in the Institute, but after that they had to be in the medical insurance system, so if we were not part of the medical system we didn't get children, only from very wealthy parents. So that was a real necessity, so to survive we became part of the mental health system. I think it has been very successful and I think further developments have been positive. The first child psychiatrist we got was very happy to learn a lot more than he learned in traditional psychiatry because we had that interaction between psychopathology, psychology, education and so on. He was very happy to work with us and he was a very enthusiastic staff member from the beginning.

Hartup: So in addition to expanding the program to include adolescents as well as children and to expand the services available—

de Wit: Expand and make it better on a professional level. Not too big, not too large, but expansion anyhow.

Hartup: But to increase the professionalism of the staff as well as the disciplinary representation. You also had, I remember, a research department.

de Wit: Yes, indeed. I started rather early already with it because I had the feeling from the beginning—I myself I'm not a very well-known researcher—let me say well-known is not the right word, but I am not a researcher myself, but I like to stimulate research and to supervise. To supervise and to stimulate, I think, with respect to it. So, indeed, the research department of the Institute and also the research at the university are integrated but not totally. They have each their own objective. However, the research group at the university and the research at the Institute are stimulating each

other very much. A few branches of research are doing very well and have already a long history. I could mention the reading research with special attention to the neuropsychological base of reading problems. Dirk Bakker, who was a co-worker of mine from the beginning, is now an international authority in the field. He was one of my first Ph.D.s, but at that time you had to be supervisor of every type of Ph.D. At that time I was also interested in neuropsychology. I had to be interested in everything because I was the only professor. Now we have about five or six people who are doing parts of the job that I did alone in the beginning, so it is a very successful outcome. From the beginning I had quite a lot of personal interest in behavioral modification and, also from the beginning, the more cognitive type of behavioral modification, as far as it was available at that time. And there is a strong group still working in that field.

Hartup: How large is the research staff of the Institute now? How many positions totally are devoted to research? I realize that some of the people have other responsibilities.

de Wit: Yes, of course, teaching mostly. It is very difficult to combine professional practice and research. It was one of my life-long objectives to get people who are skillful in both, but that is still a problem. I wrote quite a lot about it, I gave my farewell lecture about it, and I think I have expressed my thoughts about it at least.

Hartup: Well you're not alone.

de Wit: But I think there are some positive results because the focus of research and also doing research in the Institute where you see children and not only go to a place where you can find children who are adapted to your research but you have to adapt your research to the Institute, towards children and so on. I think there are now about five, six, seven, senior positions; I don't know exactly. There are assistants, of course, writing Ph.D.s, more now the international way: four years, then you must finish. But I think the main interests in research are still representative for the Institute. There is a large group doing reading research and neuropsychological research related to reading. The second group is doing behavior modification studies with young delinquents, with deaf children, with all kinds of cases. There is a nice project especially with delinquent young children; it is very successful. A topic I was interested in the last year has been follow up studies because the methods of longitudinal research have improved very much. In the beginning it was nearly impossible to do good longitudinal research because there were no good methods, but now I think it's much more sophisticated so we do some longitudinal studies with children who are treated at the Institute, a special clinical group; there are many data and we are analyzing that.

Hartup: One of the things I think that might be interesting to put on the record here, at least it seemed to me always interesting, that although the Paedological Institute is a separate institution, nevertheless there has been a very close relationship with the university, beginning with your own occupancy of two professorships at the university as well as the directorship of the Institute. But also many of your staff simultaneously hold positions in both places. Could you describe that a little bit?

de Wit: Oh, I think psychologists who are working in clinical practice have to spend at least 20% of their time teaching university students to introduce them into the field, to give seminars on diagnostics, seminars on therapy, seminars about how you do the kind of steps that are involved in the process of working with children and parents at the same time. So the students of the Free University have many opportunities to get involved in clinical work. In The Netherlands, our university is the only one that has such a strong connection with a professional institute that's working both in the field of mental health and special education. So the last years of the students' training are rather strongly connected with the field because their teachers are not only university people but also highly qualified professional people in some climate that has something to do with university. So I think it is good for practitioners to be involved in training students and giving seminars and those kinds of things, and professional training sessions. Students like it and I like it also very much that, in such a way, you combine professional work with university teaching and also the research department is involved, and

so you try to find ways to integrate, as much as possible, training, research, and professional work. I think training of students is sometimes underestimated, but you learn quite a lot from it. Also it is a good link with students who are critical; they help you to realize what you are doing. So the professional people are asked about their profession, what is the meaning of your research, what is your relationship with psychological practice as it has developed?

Hartup: Great. Maybe we can come back to this, but I wonder if you could talk about your role as a professor of clinical child psychology at the university and some of the contributions and activities you made through the university primarily: what your life was like there, what projects you were involved with, what your experiences as a teacher of child and adolescent psychology were like. A little bit later I would like to come back, actually, to what your appraisal of your professional contributions have been in your life and in your research and other kinds of things. I think it might be interesting to have on this tape a brief history of your work as a professor.

de Wit: First, I must say that my work as a professor I have always seen as very strongly connected with the work at the Institute, like a medical professor—at least in Holland, but also in the United States—this means not only teaching at the university or doing research, but also helping clients, patients or something like that or supervising that. So that is also as a professor I felt myself a little bit as a medical professor, not with respect to content but with respect to the philosophy of how to train students and how to work at a university. Never work at the university without having also some experience as a practitioner. So I think it is very difficult to separate what I did as a professor and what I did as a professor-director of the Institute, which was the official title. There are some points that are interesting indeed, because at that time my predecessor liked my teaching task to be formulated as paedology because it was the old name and included much more than developmental psychology as such. But at the same time some new professors came and said paedology is a very old name and it should be developmental psychology. “You can have different opinions about the right nomenclature”—but I’ll not go into that.

Hartup: I had a brief contact with paedology as a term years ago when the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station was searching for a new name. The senior professors at the institute, and I was not one of them, proposed that it should become an institute of paedology but when that went forward and it had to go to the state government the response was just as you said: “What is that? It sounds like a foot disease.”

de Wit: I think the word wasn’t very successful, only in Russia until 1936 when it was forbidden by the Communist Party. Yes, quite interesting because it was “too biological.” Vygotsky wrote text books about development and when you see them in Russian they are called *Paedology of Childhood*, *Paedology of Adolescence*. It’s quite interesting, and in Holland where the concept has survived it is mostly used not as a noun but as a pronoun: paedological, paedologisch as an adverb. But I think in fact it has the same meaning as “child study” in the Society for Research in Child Development; its meaning is not confined to one discipline although it is mostly behavioral.

Hartup: That’s why I think it had an appeal; it was inter-disciplinary.

de Wit: I think in Holland it has developed a little bit further and it became more specially oriented on children with problems, having educational, behavioral, emotional problems. So at the time I was the only one, in 1962, to cover developmental psychology, clinical child psychology, and special education. And special education in the Dutch way also includes some child welfare.

Hartup: Your title was what? I mean, your chair?

de Wit: It has been always “developmental psychology, paedology, and special education”. But I had to build it up, so if I come back to my university experience again, the pioneering aspect was to cover the field and to give it its shape; that was one of my first responsibilities as I felt it. Also I started some research and I was quite interested in social development from the beginning. One of my first

Ph.D.s, Suzanna Van Hekken, for example, wrote about imitation and social cognitive factors in imitation. So I had to build up from the beginning, there was no tradition at all of child development research.

Hartup: Was there a *vakgroep* in that area?

de Wit: Not yet, at that time, I think *vakgroep* was a phenomenon that started around 1967 or something like that. So it was just a chair with some assistants. So I had to build that up and train some people in developmental psychology. I'll come back later with my American experience in this respect perhaps. I had also to develop paedology as clinical child psychology and also to build up special education a little bit as well. So the first years of my profession I tried to find intelligent students who were able to write a Ph.D. and were able to take over some of the work. So at the moment there are about five professors doing together the same as I did alone at that time. I don't suggest that I was doing it that well.

Hartup: But the thing is that you had responsibilities in a great many different areas. Most professorships now in this country, as I understand it, are defined more narrowly.

de Wit: Oh, yes. So it was just historical, but I think it was fun, it was nice. So my career is not the usual career just working in one field, for example, going further with one special topic and well defined theories. No, I had a lot of other options.

Hartup: Let's talk a little bit about your career as it relates to research, as it relates to training, professional issues, and writing. We'll come back a little bit later to your work with professional organizations like SRCD and ISSBD. What do you think are the most important continuities in your professional work, I'm thinking now about the research and writing and student?

de Wit: As I told you, first I had to cover the whole field, but later on I was happy that I could come back to my first and long standing interest, and that is indeed treatment of children with different types of problems. I never wrote, on this topic, a textbook. I should have done, but I wrote a textbook about adolescents as I told you. My research was mostly supervising the research of Ph.D. students. But these Ph.D. students were not joining a project I was already involved in, no it was more that we had to cover the field and find new relevant topics. If there was a good Ph.D. student I said to him or her, "You should do this and I will supervise you and I hope later on you will go further on your own and I will go to the next Ph.D. student to train him in perhaps another different field."

So my research started, and I think I had much profit from my first traveling to the United States. I got a fellowship, I could have spent one year there but because of my responsibilities at home I couldn't be away from home more than three months. Developmental research was just booming. But I learned quite a lot in those three months in 1964. Also about how elections of American presidents took place. I learned quite a lot about American culture. So I started my research interest in the field of developmental psychology, social development. Then—I mentioned already the type of research I tried to do, more empirical, some fundamental: attachment theory, imitation theory, all the stuff that was at that time in the social field. That was and is still my primary interest. But, also at the same time, I supervised a thesis about Piaget because that was also part of the story. I liked to cover and I still like to cover knowledge from different viewpoints. This is one of my consistencies, that I never liked to adhere to one theory but I liked to be, not eclectic—I hate that word—but to be pluralistic. There is a selection process you can sometimes make explicit, sometimes not. Anyhow it should be grounded as much as possible empirically, but you should believe in your own intuition in making choices.

Social development was one of my first research interests. I think one of the stories behind it is that it was much simpler to do developmental research because the standards are more explicit. Yes, you could abstract from reality, you could make an experimental situation, you could formulate your research question, but to get good clinical research was, at that time, nearly impossible. I think there was not so much available in the clinical field. I think the last ten years are excellent but before that I

think it was rather scarce, good clinical research in the children's fields. So my first Ph.D.s were in developmental and special education and a neuropsychological reading study.

Hartup: Well, the 1960s was a period, at least in the United States, in which normative research was making very heavy use of laboratory paradigms and work on basic processes when contextual validity came to be questioned somewhat later. So I suppose the same kinds of things were happening with you and your students, that is, you were conducting research with Suzanna Van Hekken, using essentially hypothetical paradigms or laboratory paradigms that were of the time.

de Wit: Yes, I think that I learned quite a lot, as I said already, from my three months' stay in the United States. I visited several places, NIMH for example, and some universities. That type of experimental research was at that time very popular and I think it was at least related to the research that was going on at that time in The Netherlands. First you had the old European tradition phenomenological, but that became less and less interesting because it was too intuitive and subjective. But then the more empirical research was just only experimental laboratory with rather fundamental things, perception and so on, or testing. Test research. That was a long tradition in Holland, but developmental research of the type we were mentioning was new and—although it was related to experimental paradigms and perhaps the contextual validity was not that as it could be perhaps.

Hartup: Am I correct in summarizing what you said earlier that in the last 15 years you have been more heavily involved in clinical research than you were in the first 15 years?

de Wit: Yes, you could say that. I was always involved in clinical practice but the opportunity for clinical research at that time was rather dependent on the interest of the students you could find and would like to go in that direction and in “the state of the art” in the clinical field. I think really it was “easier” to do developmental research because there was already a tradition and there was good work. I think the '60s were very important in the United States to build a developmental research tradition.

Hartup: Well now, looking back across all that activity what—this may be an impertinent question, but I hope you can answer it in the spirit that it's asked—what do you believe are the two or three most important contributions you have made to the field? I'm thinking primarily of things either in your writing, that is, things you've written, or things that you have established by the way of program or the training of students. For example, what among the things you've written do you regard as important, that you are proudest of?

de Wit: Well, it's very difficult to say because I didn't do much writing.

Hartup: You wrote the textbook on adolescence.

de Wit: Yes, I think the history is quite interesting, again, from my personal life-span development perspective. There was no good textbook. I had to give lectures. Some students said, You should write a textbook, otherwise it never would have happened because I have some phobia of writing too much. So there developed with the help of one of my students quite a widely-read textbook on adolescence. I could also bring in some experiences, giving a comprehensive viewpoint, and letting come through some clinical-experiential knowledge; knowledge from your professional career and so on. Yes, that book—I'm very happy it was so successful and now I have to revise it for the fourth time or something like that and I'm not so happy that I have to start this difficult work again. It has been translated recently in Italian, so why not? It is rewarding. Writings about the fundamentals of the field, about the fundamental problems that you can have, are mostly in Dutch. They discuss the interactions between developmental science and clinical science, that kind of thing. I think I wrote quite a lot about it from the beginning and when I gave my valedictory lecture somebody analyzed my writings and I think it was to my surprise because I never realized to have written so much on that topic.

But indeed I have a very consistent way of thinking about the relevance of developmental findings and other findings and the relations between academic research and professional practice. And the application not only in professional practice but also—the word *application* is too mechanistic—how to make use of it in clinical practice. Then the other side, I am also interested in the way clinical practice can influence developmental science. Also some basic thoughts about what it means to apply the right methodology, because the traditional scientific methodology is just one way of thinking. Testing our hypotheses, it is quite right, but it could be too much one sided and I'm always—as you can see in my last writing—interested in the question: which kind of methodology is necessary to make professional practice, as such, more understandable? How can you build up a methodology from practice to science, not only from science to practice, but also practice to science? I think the topic is becoming more topical; I think there are some recent publications from American psychologists about how can you practice—that is, see as a problem solving activity—and how can you make that more communicable to the field of science. So a mutual relationship. I have written about it always in Dutch but I think that is one of my favorites and I think it had also some influence on other people. The third point I am interested in is what is called now protective factors. I like that concept very much because it is in line with my previous thinking that, in clinical practice and in dealing with children in one way or another, you always have to look at the positive assets. Not only at the history of how it went wrong. Psychoanalysis always went back to what happened in early childhood. That was one of my reasons that I was interested in adolescence. Things are happening during the whole life span and not only in the early years. So that I think that is one of my topics and favorites. Also the protective factors, how can you make profit from the assets? I think those are my main orientations.

Hartup: Well from where I sit, I would regard those as your major contributions as well. So it's nice to hear you talk about them in a sincere and personal way. You know, the interview schedule here has one question which is rather interesting but it is also rather difficult, it's to ask, looking back over all the activities that you have been involved in—in teaching, research, and professional activities, and program in development—could you name any that you wish you hadn't done, or any as we say in English "blind alleys," that is, where you spend a long time working on something that turns out to be misguided or wrong-headed?

de Wit: Yes, I have been thinking about it before, because of my becoming an Emeritus. Then I sat back and I just read it a few days ago again, an interview about my professional life story. I can't say it was always good, what I did perhaps—but anyhow I don't have the feeling that there were many blind alleys. No, no, I don't have that feeling. I think most of the things I have developed in one way or another were appropriate. Perhaps they developed not always as you thought they should or that you were mistaken one way or another, but generally speaking I've been happy with my professional history, also the freedom I had in my position. I had a rather good nose for future directions in the field. Also perhaps I have profited from my international contacts. But to say it again, to come to your question, yes I think I'm somebody who is operating step by step and not making designs ahead over a long time, but a pragmatic step by step approach, guided by I guess the background of the integration I talked about, professional practice-science and that kind of thing.

Hartup: Well let's turn briefly to the history of your activities with professional organizations. This oral history, of course, is being done by the Society for Research in Child Development and I want to touch on your history of activities with that group, but I think it might be better if you very briefly began by talking a bit about ISSBD or other international interests, because as I know it, you came to participate in SRCD from a background of work in international relations and so it might be better to talk about that first.

de Wit: No, that is not true.

Hartup: That's not true?

de Wit: That is not true.

Hartup: Oh, I stand corrected.

de Wit: I think during my visit, my fellowship in 1962—no, 1964—I got in contact with the SRCD especially through Marian and Leon Yarrow at NIMH. They invited me to become a member of SRCD and so I applied on the spot.

Hartup: So you've been a member since 1964?

de Wit: Yes, I am. I think I liked, at that time already, the way of doing research in SRCD and also the way people were communicating with each other.

Hartup: When did you attend your first biennial meeting?

de Wit: I tried to find it out with them, I'm not quite sure. I remember Denver and Boston, but I don't know which one was earlier.

Hartup: Oh, Denver I think was earliest; that would have been in 1975.

de Wit: Yes, perhaps earlier already. It has been a tradition for me to come to SRCD for a very long time.

Hartup: I know that you were there almost every time.

de Wit: Yes, perhaps already in the '60s; it was always a highlight I could say, because there was so much information about what was going on in the field. When I came back from the United States I realized that what you are reading in professional journals is at least one or two years behind.

Hartup: That's right.

de Wit: So it always has been a splendid opportunity also to find out in which direction the field is moving. I think this also has been, from my position and for my personal interest, just try to get some feeling what's going on the next two or three or four years. So SRCD was very helpful and also the very good friends I met there and the people with whom I became friends there. Also the whole atmosphere, I liked it very much. So I think that, really from the beginning, I was interested.

ISSBD started in the late '60s, now more than 25 years ago. In fact, it started because of my colleague Franz Monks contacted me. His teacher was Hans Thomae and Hans Thomae liked to found an international society, but also liked it not to be from German origin, perhaps because of political reasons. He liked to have somebody from Holland. So some way or another I became involved in founding the international society. I think the founding session was in Bonn. There was also a meeting in Amsterdam.

Hartup: Also you met, did you not, in London?

de Wit: Yes, in London before. Yes, the beginnings are always very difficult to trace but I was there from the beginning and especially because of Hans Thomae he liked to have somebody from The Netherlands and Franz Monks was a good person to make contacts, I think. So that was quite interesting and I was very fond of the idea because at that time there was nothing. So we developed the first conference here in Nijmegen and a second conference in Ann Arbor and the third in Guildford and so on. Oh yes, I happened to be the first secretary and the second president. I liked it very much because of the possibility for good personal contacts and I think it has contributed quite a lot to my personal development. I think from the beginning we were very happy because many societies had started in Europe.

Hartup: Now your term as president of the ISSBD was between 1974 and 1979, or about then, in 1975?

de Wit: It was '73-'79 that I was president.

Hartup: It was about that same time that you participated in the Long Range Planning Committee for the SRCD.

de Wit: Yes, that was a very nice committee. It should have been a long standing committee because it was such a nice group.

Hartup: Perhaps this is the time for you to talk a little bit about what that committee did.

de Wit: Yes, I'm not very sure about the particulars but I remember talking about summer schools, about international cooperation, about inter-disciplinary matters, and so on.

Hartup: It was a committee, as I remember—I was not on it—which was asked to review a great many different issues that the Society is still discussing. But this was one of the first organized times that happened and it included members of the Society who were from other countries than the United States.

de Wit: I think I was the only one.

Hartup: Were you the only one?

de Wit: Yes, I think I was the only one. Yes, I'm sure I was the only one, but there were many disciplines and it was a good group. Excellent people, nice people. Yes, it was a process of two years or something like that. You learn to know each other very well and you were able to discuss everything very openly and very efficiently.

Hartup: Could you identify the major contributions that came from the work of that committee?

de Wit: Now I think the summer schools were a very concrete result of it.

Hartup: That's still going.

de Wit: Yes, they are still, as far as I could follow them in the beginning, they were successful. Second point: inter-disciplinary matters—always a difficult issue in SRCD but there was progress.

Hartup: Oh, I think definitely.

de Wit: Yes, quite a lot of progress.

Hartup: I think the work of that committee began at a time when inter-disciplinary activities had reached a low point, and after that committee the Society changed its procedures in election of president, the appointment of members of the governing council, and a number of other ways that work in inter-disciplinary affairs.

de Wit: The group itself was also inter-disciplinary.

Hartup: That committee was very important.

de Wit: I loved it. I was really very enthusiastic about the possibility of traveling, of course. Once upon a time, of course, they liked to come to Amsterdam and we have also very nice stories about that. It was quite nice. I think inter-disciplinary affairs, I think social policy already—it was just in

the beginning but it was there—and also international contacts, because from that group I think in Guildford [1975] there was a combined session, not formally combined, but some way of interaction between this long range committee and the planning of our international society in international contacts.

Hartup: I don't know the exact dates, but I think within the next ten years after that committee worked SRCD had appointed standing committees in each of those areas that you mentioned. Then there was a connection between the activities of the Long Range Planning Committee for SRCD and some of your ISSBD activities. Could you talk a little bit about that?

de Wit: I think SRCD has always been very much oriented to make international contacts, give it more content than just having at their meetings people from different countries. But I think there was some coincidence between what was happening in the Long Range Planning Committee and some goals and objectives of ISSBD at that time and still being a main interest of ISSBD. I remember at that time, I think in Guildford, there was a joint meeting of some people from the Long Range Planning Committee and some people from ISSBD, but anyhow it was just a meeting of the ISSBD committee with some persons of the Long Range Planning Committee present. But, anyhow, I think at that time there were two initiatives. I was very fond of it and I also tried to stimulate them, to develop them further. I think it was just two sides of the same coin to come into contact with countries who at that time were not very easy to get contact with. Colleagues from such countries couldn't join very easily the international forum. We tried at ISSBD to stimulate and also to support people to come to our conferences, for example, from Eastern Europe and Russia and from Asia, Africa, Latin America a little bit less. So first of all that we shouldn't only invite people who are always invited to come to international conferences, the happy few, but also people from developing countries or just developing countries but from regions in the world who are not so easy to get contact with because of money problems, traveling problems, political problems. So we started with the idea of summer schools, but then international summer schools, which was to bring in contact people from isolated regions of the world to help them to come into contact with people from other countries, from Western countries. In fact, I'm thinking about the first summer school that was held in Poland. It happened to be that we had good contacts there and our colleagues there were also in good contact with the government. So we started the first summer school in Torun, Poland, and the formula was interesting: fifteen students from the West, fifteen from Poland, and fifteen from the East and teachers from both sides. I think that was the formula, but in the end I think it was not like that, there was still also a problem to get teachers from Russia, for example. It was also difficult to get students from other East European countries. But still the formula worked and there were quite a lot of contacts developing and also some teachers from the West; Americans and Europeans were there. It has become a tradition to have this East European summer school once in two years in all countries nearly: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany.

Hartup: There have been a lot of them.

de Wit: Yes. The same with Asia, Southeast Asia. I think the development was there a little bit different.

Hartup: The first model there was the training.

de Wit: Yes, it started with the training model, but I think that was not so well received because it was a little bit the idea of the old colonialism or something like that. But then I think there was another more independent development; the regional Southeast Asian conferences on developmental psychology or human development, I think they called it. But I think that's also an initiative stemming from ISSBD, because at the first meetings some people from Indonesia were present. So it worked out a different way, but also a fruitful way. I think Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe were the main contacts. I cannot say that we were especially interested in these, but it happened to be that there were opportunities in Eastern Europe and in Indonesia because of personal knowledge about situations and so they developed in an informal way. I think it was very fruitful for international contacts and I'm

still glad that ISSBD is not just a group that organizes international conferences of a high scientific level, but that they are also doing this type of thing.

Hartup: Well I can perhaps say, just for the record, a little bit more easily than you can but the period in which you were president of ISSBD was a very important period for that organization, but also for international activities in our whole field. It was during that time that the ISSBD took the decision to engage in some of its most important activities. You mentioned the summer training workshops but also there was the journal—that decision was also taken during the time you were president. The nature of the biennial meetings took shape. So that really it was an important formative period in ISSBD that helped to create the program of activities that it still encompasses. A lot of that, as you say—and this is an interesting point I think to make—links that to the discussions that took place with SRCD.

de Wit: I'm also very happy that the main objectives that were formulated during that period are still alive and that still this international organization is doing more than just organizing conferences.

Hartup: Speaking of SRCD, what seemed to you to be the major changes in the organization over the time that you have known it, other than the obvious one that it's much bigger?

de Wit: That is first what I would like to say. Yes, there are some changes I am very glad about. I remember I was attending I think the Denver conference, and I came back and I thought they're all infants and they're all babies and I am not interested at all. That's quite nice, but it's such a baby boom in research. Also a part of it, rather experimental laboratory work. So one of the main changes is that the topics are much more related now to developmental psychopathology, for example; now that is one of my favorites. But also less biased I can say that I think the topics are—I guess there's much more involvement in all kinds of problems related to children, social problems and those kinds of things.

Hartup: But are those changes in SRCD or are they changes in the field that are reflected in SRCD?

de Wit: I think certainly SRCD is reflecting the developments in the field. I think there is no other option. There are things special to SRCD compared to the developments in the field. Anyhow I think that they are more perhaps inter-disciplinary than before.

Hartup: Yes, I think that is true.

de Wit: I think the kinds of topics that are chosen during conferences and all there's quite a lot of commitment to, I would like to say public policy, because I think that's perhaps the term you are using, but I would like to formulate a little bit broader: there's quite a lot of commitment to developmental problems that are happening because of living circumstances, poorness, and so on. But also with respect to problems children face during their life course, I think that life span perspectives are also present. Also adolescence came to SRCD, now there's a separate society, but still I think topics on adolescence are present at SRCD, which also wasn't there 20 years ago. So these are the changes, and the atmosphere is still open and friendly.

Hartup: Yes, I think that's the most important constant in SRCD, is that it has been open. One of the reasons that you can detect these changes over decades is that it is so open to new developments and to changes in emphasis.

de Wit: That's correct and also the atmosphere is friendly and open. I think that's one of the reasons I got a lot of information when I attended meetings, but also it is nice to see colleagues and there is also some atmosphere of openness and so on.

Hartup: Well looking forward, what are your hopes and your fears for the future of the field and child development research and child and adolescent development?

de Wit: My hope is that the recent trends of more interest in developmental psychopathology will develop further and perhaps also the trend to discuss more complicated problems and to research them. I'm rather impressed by the remarks of Ross Parke at APA that this time developmental psychology is coming back to questions that were the main questions one century ago, but at that time they were too complicated to be researched in a nice way and now we are able to do that. In that respect you see the word and concept of paedology is also one century old, and I have the feeling indeed that what I read in the earlier publications of paedology—not only Stanley Hall but also others—the kinds of problems that were identified then are of more interest now after the experimental period in child psychology which was necessary to develop the field methodologically. The interests of child developmentalists were a little bit limited for a while. Now I think there is interest in more complicated problems, more real-life problems that can be researched in a nice way. I hope that these developments, together with the development of developmental psychopathology, will have a good future.

Hartup: Do you have any fears for the future?

de Wit: Oh, I think the climate at the moment—I think one of my fears is that perhaps the quality of care for children will decline as fewer students are interested in the field. I'm not quite sure about that but there is such a lot of attraction to do business and law and economics, and so on, rather than psychology. In the '60s very good students were interested in developmental science. I think they are still interested, but the career possibilities, the opportunities for work on a rather well qualified level are not expanding but just the opposite. And I think if I was at this moment the age of twenty years, perhaps I would take another look to the possibilities in the field of psychology compared to economics and so on. I think perhaps the selection of students will be a bit different. I'm not mentioning whether they are women students or male students, female or male students, I think that's not so important, although male students are becoming scarce. That's not so important, but I think that just highly qualified students will choose, because of their earnings later, another field.

Hartup: I share your concern very much. Well, are there any other things that you would like to add? Personal notes—how has your family regarded your career in child and adolescent development? I know your family is very proud of you.

de Wit: I always had the feeling that when I was at home, I was free, I was not a professional. Just an ordinary parent, I didn't talk too much about my Dutch committees.

Hartup: That's right, you have been very active here in this country.

de Wit: Yes. I should briefly mention that I'm a member of some councils who give advice to the Dutch government in the field of health and education. Then I'm, of course, especially interested in mental health, especially now the whole mental health system is changing all the time. And the insurances that can be paid and that cannot be paid and so on. Also development of schools especially special education. So I like to do that and I'm doing that already quite a lot of years and on that. The age limit is 70 so I have a few years ahead.

Hartup: You have a few years to do that. Well on behalf of the SRCO History Committee I want to thank you for taking the time to do this. We appreciate it very much.

de Wit: I still hope—I don't know if it is for the record or off the record, but I do—that there sometimes will be some nice committee as we had before. Internationally thinking about the future, I would like to have a rehearsal, but I don't know if that's possible. But it was a good experience, really. It was one of the highlights.

Hartup: Very good. All right, thank you.