

Becoming an Adoptive Parent: A Qualitative Analysis of the Experience of Prospective Intercountry Adopters

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Introduction

Intercountry adoption can be understood as a nexus of local and global practices which are mediated in talk, text and other modalities of discourse. We use qualitative methodologies such as mediated discourse analysis combined with virtual ethnography to investigate the cross-cultural similarities and differences in transnational adoption practice and representation. Our aim is to better understand how discourses and contingent practices of care and 'kinning' (Howell 2003) are assembled in order to 'translate' a child from one familial 'place' or nexus of practice in the world to another, while crossing linguistic, sociocultural, kinship, racial, class and national boundaries in the process. In our research presented at the conference, we are concerned with finding answers to the following questions:

- How and why do adoptive parents construct and share family *archives* before they make physical contact with the child-to-be-adopted?
- What connections are there between the popular adoption archive and *memory work*?
- How does the mass media actualise and virtualise the *experiences* of those adoptive families whose lives they document in a fragmentary fashion?
- Thus, in what practices do prospective adoptive parents become legitimate subjects who can be scrutinised and acted upon, but more importantly, who can take on the care of the adoptive self as an ethical project?

Ongoing research projects

In our research on adoption, we are fundamentally interested in investigating how adoption is mediated and governed as a nexus of practice. Our research to date has focused on transnational adoption from several perspectives, most of which focus on the experiences and practices of prospective parents before contact with the adoptive child.

1. *The discursive transformation of transnational adoption.* Discourse and talk are pervasive sites for doing categorical work with and against others, and as an ethical project of the self, for example in self-help books and guides to politically correct language use for adopters and family or strangers (McIlvenny & Raudaskoski 2005b).
2. *Identity work and transnational adoption.* On the one hand, we have investigated the discursive representations of the 'adoptive-parent-to-be' in the mass media (Raudaskoski & McIlvenny, in press); on the other hand, we have also looked at the discursive construction of the figure of the 'child-to-be-adopted' in the pre-adoption stage (McIlvenny & Raudaskoski 2005b).
3. *Traversing multimodal websites of adoptive families.* We analyse the identities and the development of the family and its members as part of public presentations of family life on the Internet. We focus on what sorts of resources are used in the construction of these 'sites of memory' and how these are used to establish continuity and change (McIlvenny & Raudaskoski 2005a, 2005b).

Mediated discourse analysis

Following mediated discourse analysis (MDA), we investigate mediated action, action that is always mediated in significant ways for the participants (Scollon 2001, Norris & Jones 2005). It is urgent that we develop ways to move beyond the analysis of spoken and written texts to consider questions about the actions people take with texts and other cultural tools and the social consequences these actions have. In one of the defining works, Ron Scollon (2001b: 3) argues that by looking at *mediated action* the focus is on “social actors as they are acting because these are the moments in social life when the Discourses in which we are interested are instantiated in the social world as social action, not simply as material objects”, though action is materially grounded in persons and objects. For him, a *site of engagement* is “the real-time window that is opened through an intersection of social practices and mediational means” (3-4). And a mediated action is carried out through material objects — including the materiality of social actors (bodies) — in dialectical relation with structures of bodily *habitus* (Bourdieu) or the *historical body*. Actions carry with them historical affordances and constraints, so they are inherently polyvocal, intertextual and interdiscursive. *Cultural tools* are the technologisation of practice. In fact, there is “a necessary intersection of social practices and mediational means which in themselves reproduce social groups, histories and identities” (4). And, lastly, *nexus of practice* is a constellation of linked practices: “a number of social practices may intersect, never perfectly, never in any finalised matrix or latticework of regular patterns, but as a network which itself is the basis of the identities we produce and claim through our social actions” (142). Most recently, Scollon & Scollon (2004) develop their theory of *nexus analysis* in order to analyse *cycles of discourse* — to look beyond the nexus of practice to examine the discourses present and how they relate to past discourses as well as to discourses which anticipate the future and extend beyond the site of engagement.

A discourse studies approach, such as MDA, to transnational adoption can investigate how the social issues and discourses of adoption are mediated in the actions and practices of different actors, for example of adoptive parents, institutions, birth parents, private agencies, and the child-to-be-adopted. With MDA, for example, we can ask the following questions:

- What discourses and actions are consequential in the everyday lives of adoptive families?
- How do sites of engagement open up to afford particular sorts of interventions in the life of the adoptive family?
- How do parents and families negotiate or resist ‘help’? With what mediational means?

Following Scollon (2001), Foucault (1980), Rose (1999a) and Latour (2005), we are interested in how the adoptive couple and family are composed, assembled and governed as individual actors and certain kinds of persons. How do they gain agency from the “shower of subjectivities” (Latour 2005: 208)? How do certain bodies, desires, gestures and discourses come to be identified and constituted as adoptive individuals (cp. Foucault 1980:98)? How is the agency of the adoptive family distributed across actors, time, space, modalities and materialities?

Memory work

Since adoption is a traumatic and stressful life changing event, we find many instances of the mediation of emotional experience in the lives of adoptive parents. Thus, there are many opportunities to study different practices of *memory work*, such as remembering and forgetting infertility, biological kin and ‘roots’, etc. This memory work is often managed in and through a *mnemotechnology*, such as the documentary or autobiography, as well as offline and online archives and databases. Additionally, transnational adoption involves a variety of important boundary objects, such as gene, kin, race, blood, money and rights, which provide important loci for memory work.

In recent years, fields such as discursive psychology have paid attention to the social, instead of solely individual, character of emotions, bringing to the fore the interactional

organisation of affect displays. In the same vein, other 'inner' processes, such as memory, are studied from the perspective of the kinds of work that talking about the past does in a specific interaction. Middleton & Brown (2005) extend this interactional perspective to include, on the one hand, the experience of being in the world (ie. duration), and, on the other hand, the use of mediational means (eg. language, signs, artefacts) to actualise this experience and enable action in the world. Middleton & Brown argue that "the communicative acts by means of which remembering is expressed are not secondary to 'personal memory' but are, by contrast, intrinsic to our awareness of the past. Moreover, the invocation of the past is not confined merely to those occasions where 'remembering' and 'forgetting' is explicitly flagged as such, but occur instead as routine features of all manner of interactions" (101). They argue that we need to examine how issues of succession and change are threaded through practices of remembering. In this way, something of the past is always already 'inbuilt' in a given act of recollection. Punctualisation, on the one hand, is "the work of gathering together past actions and events in order to create the effect of something 'memorable', and the simultaneous work of erasing, or 'forgetting', complexity and heterogeneity in favour of projecting the simplicity and unity of experience" (107). On the other hand, canalisation is "projecting forward the likely consequence of present circumstances in such a way that the future becomes 'antecedent to itself'" (116).

In order to understand the memory practices of adoptive families, we investigate how adoptive parents construct and share multimodal family archives. Furthermore, we begin to unravel how the televisual mass media actualise and virtualise the experiences of those whose lives they document in a fragmentary fashion. We argue that:

- The past is built into the present through memory work.
- The past is folded into the 'now' through embodied affect and alignment.
- The adoptive parents do 'virtual' memory work to align the irreducible durations of the child and themselves:
 - Kinning, eg. non-biological kinshipping (Howell 2003).
 - Building the archive, eg. websites, photos and diaries.

Experiencing adoption

Our concern is with how experiences of transnational adoption are mediated, negotiated, shared and maintained – indeed, made durable or even forgotten – in and through a diversity of multimodal resources by actors distributed across time and space. There are many ways in which the experiences of adoption are remembered and forgotten. As a result, their lived experiences of adoption are discursively localised, appropriated, collected and dispersed in new forms of association. We investigate how an experience of adoption – for instance, a memory of infertility, the spectacle of the emotional receipt of official news about permission to adopt or about a child in referral, or the long awaited event of contact with the adoptive child – is remembered. How is that experience recollected as memory and how is it habituated and implaced?

Mediating adoption

We present the results of our analysis of how the experiences of adoptive parents are (re)mediated in a Danish television documentary series following five prospective adoptive couples, not all of whom succeed in their 'quest' to adopt from abroad (Raudaskoski & McIlvenny, in press). One key feature of the series was the unobtrusive use of consumer video cameras to record the emotionally charged moment when one or both of the partners receive news regarding their case over the telephone in their home (or workplace). The documentary and its ancillary materials give us a marvellous perspective on the mediation of adoption. Following Henri Bergson, it is a 'cinematographical' translation of the adoption experience, in which we find edited and remediated 'experience claims'.

A popular archive in formation (Lynch 1999) is created from the documentary episodes and ancillary materials organised around the official website and the websites of two of the

couples featured in the documentary. Middleton & Brown (2005) ask how selfhood is constituted around a management of the 'burden' of the past. They examine family websites as technologies for taming the past through its spatialisation. Family websites are *doing* history (or *making* others *do* history). We can see the television documentary we are studying as enrolling the adoptive couples in doing history, an "interiority without intimacy" (Lury 1997), for a displaced mass audience.

Traversing adoption online

We trace how adopters publicly narrate their own experiences and problems with fertility and with adoption, as well as how adoptive parents mediate adoption while traversing their personal websites, as they share experiences online, as well as in their orientation to other 'sites' of information. We have focused on prospective adoptive parents as they navigate through the complex process of transnational adoption, and we have mapped the ways in which 'the child-to-be-adopted' is resemiotised up until first physical contact between the adoptive parents and the adoptive child. We have identified that many prospective adopters, for instance in Denmark, use the Internet to garner information, advice and contacts to help them through the adoption process and the institutional procedures. Some adopters establish semi-permanent web sites, which can be quite extensive. A corpus of personal websites and online discussion forums from different 'receiving' countries has been collected, with a focus on their relationship to particular 'sending' countries from a comparative perspective. It is particularly interesting to trace how adopters publicly narrate their own experiences and problems with adopting their children, as well as how they construct their personal websites, network with others locally and internationally, orient to other 'sites' or sources of information, share advice and create immaterial and communicative 'public goods'.

The (minority of) prospective adopters who start a website at some point in the adoption process may do it in the so-called 'pre-pregnancy' or 'pregnancy' phases (Howell 2003), or it may even appear in the form of a travelogue (or 'blog') during the trip to the sending country to pick up the child. On their websites, many adoptive parents create a bricolage of images, photographs, music, texts, documents, layouts, navigation systems and links, borrowing from here and there to create a semiotic aggregate. The home(page) is not so much a place/space, but it consists of regular patterns of activity and structures in time. The practice of keeping websites, and especially diaries or blogs, is part of a patterning, a nexus of practice, which also involves reporting on the home's patterns and structures.

Following Middleton & Brown (2005), we can trace the distributed labour of managing the transfer of a child from one environment of (absent or temporary) care to another. With transnational adoption, what a child is when he or she becomes 'available' while under the care of an orphanage in a sending country is subject to continual negotiation by social workers, carers, state officials, judges, adoption boards, agency operators, etc. However, from the perspective of the prospective adopter much of the work of adoption in the receiving country is to pre-figure the 'child-to-be-adopted' and the 'adoptive family' before physical contact is made. Prospective parents engage, and are engaged by various institutions, in virtual affective labour, all of which renders the child in particular ways (McIlvenny & Raudaskoski 2005b). Doctors who report on the child's health, however, render the child in other ways under different constraints. These are all examples of 'scaling' the child. Hence, for instance, the child can be scaled *down* as a set of medical symptoms or behavioural indicators on a medical record, or scaled *up* as a social child — a complementary addition to a heteronormative family unit — or even as a representative of a 'race' (eg. Asian adoptees) or a member of a notional kinship or national group (eg. "our China girl"). Whichever scaling is negotiated, the virtual 'child' circulates as an 'intermediary' with particular forms (or a lack) of agency. What is fascinating is how the 'child-to-be-adopted' and the 'functioning adoptive family' are 'scaled', 'shifted', co-materialised and resemiotised over time for practical purposes.

One experience of great import, and a source of anxiety for many prospective adopters, is the long process of gaining approval from the relevant authorities, and thereafter the

experience of waiting for the allocation or referral of a specific child, and, if all goes well, for their first physical contact with that child. For those couples or individuals who can browse the web or create their own websites, the Internet can serve as a forum for self-reflection on this temporal and affective process. Of particular interest is how cultural and discursive technologies such as diary journals and waiting lists — and their diverse cycles, scales and trajectories — are maintained, anticipated, aligned, translated and circulated by different actors in their virtual practices, and thus how different knowledges and agencies (eg. institutional versus 'lay') are mediated and translated.

The printed and online literature produced by the state, the local authorities, the adoption agencies and the support groups — amongst others — shapes adoption as a process punctuated by a timeline of milestones and associated expectations. Much of this literature also finds its way in a mediated form onto the adoptive parents' public websites. There is a tension, however, between the agency's provision of general information for all clients and each client's demand for more specific information about what they can expect when they join the adoption process with a particular agency (for a selected country) and about the progress of their specific case.

One important phase for the adoptive parents is the wait to be allocated a child from the 'sending' country they have chosen, for which procedures vary. The waiting list kept by the adoption agency, and made public by some agencies, is one crucial mediational means for adoptive parents in this phase. Depending on the procedures of the receiving country, the waiting list is usually a simple stack or queue comprising the anonymised ciphers of those approved clients who are waiting for the agency to match them with a 'child-to-be-adopted' in the sending country. Case numbers are assigned to every client so that they can be processed by the agency, but of more interest to us is the practical reasoning that clients engage in to recover information about their case, as well as its history relative to others, from information gleaned from the list and other sources. The online public waiting lists that parents can 'browse' on the Internet at their leisure, which some agencies in Denmark provide as a service to their clients, are crucial mediational means for particular actors. Some adoption support groups or associations re-mediate and personalise the lists for their own purposes. These lists are an evolving mediational means — a cultural technology sustained by practices that interface or 'translate' between the practices of the adoption agency and their 'clients' — which serves as a resource for mediated action in such virtual spaces.

Governing the adoptive soul

By combining this qualitative approach with studies of governmentality (Bratich et al 2003, Foucault 1991, Rose 1996, 1999a, 1999b) we can map out a set of analytical tools to examine the practices and micropolitics of adoptive parents and families, especially those practices which may precipitate a 'call for help' to distant non-professional as well as professional actors, such as social welfare provision or counselling services. Prospective parents and adoptive families cannot help but engage in fashioning a legitimate adoptive parent identity and thus in *doing* 'becoming' an adoptive parent. We tentatively hypothesize that adoptive parents are called upon to fashion themselves as particular kinds of care-givers as well as recipients of care. One way to do this is for parents to align their practices with those of institutional and professional agents (*proto-professionalisation*). Another is to develop a parallel, indigenous nexus of professionalised practices (*para-professionalisation*).

Future research projects

We are interested in developing projects on the following topics:

- *Adoption documentaries and reflection on experiences.* A comparison between the original five-part documentary with a two-part documentary made two years later that followed both the adoptive families featured in the first series and another couple making their second attempt to adopt.

- *Adoptive parent preparatory courses.* We feel that there is much to investigate when there is a provision of preparatory courses that open up a space for the government and care of prospective adopters, eg. to instil the responsible, autonomous adoptive family (Rose 1999a).
- *The first year after contact.* Given that many 'problems' with adjustment arise in the early period after adoption as a result of the fact that the child has already been habituated to a diverse set of caring practices in the sending country, we wish to explore the relationships between embodied interaction, habitus, emplacement, mediated action, domesticity and learning in the everyday life of adoptive families after contact with their adoptive child(ren).
- *Post adoption support.* To analyse the provision of human services – such as 'therapy', counselling and advice – for adoptive families with 'problems'. How are adoptive families problematised and what role do adoptive parents play in that problematisation? What is the role of therapeutic language, techniques and scenarios in inculcating and normalising certain kinds of adoptive families and adoptees?

If you are interested in working on a cross-cultural project on one or more of these issues or topics, then please contact us.

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