



# Building on precarious knowledge: The governing of family formation through matching practice in transnational adoption

Britta Buschmann

To cite this article: Britta Buschmann (2018): Building on precarious knowledge: The governing of family formation through matching practice in transnational adoption, Transnational Social Review, DOI: [10.1080/21931674.2018.1427665](https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2018.1427665)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2018.1427665>



Published online: 28 Jan 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Building on precarious knowledge: The governing of family formation through matching practice in transnational adoption

Britta Buschmann

Department of Education, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz, Germany

## ABSTRACT

This article explores matching as a psycho-pedagogical technology of child placement in transnational adoption. Drawing on empirical data and theoretical linkages to governmentality and biopolitics, I argue how the production of transnationally powerful knowledge becomes a crucial strategy in attempts to bridge contingencies, to manage risk and to legitimize action and decision-making. Professional judgment builds on knowledge produced through classification, categorization, flexibilization and redefinition of categories applied to govern bodies and family formation. This entails ethical interventions such as regulating the possibility to choose a desired (ethnicized, gendered, non-/psychologized, non-/medicalized) child available for adoption. Thereby, technologies of guidance are geared towards the assessment of parenting and coping capacities, moral conduct and “intercultural qualification” for adoption. As will be shown, matching becomes a matter of knowing for both professionals and prospective parents.

## KEYWORDS

Transnational adoption; knowledge; governmentality and biopolitics; ethics and morality/ethical practice; risk; social work

## 1. Introduction

How can one reflect on the powerful and weighty act of joining a child or set of siblings with their new parent(s), and maybe further siblings, specifically chosen for each other to create or to “complete” (Yngvesson, 2004) this very family through adoption? How can we understand a placement decision analytically when it is accomplished by multiple actors across national borders and world regions, supposedly accommodating various potentially conflicting interests, desires and needs? Internationally, practices of matching children with parents seem to be driven by different motives, ethics and strategies rhetorically anchored in the language of the child’s best interest in variable ways. As a professional measure in social work, all matching practices represent a form of institutional governance of the private sphere also functioning to regulate demand and desirability. Dynamics of redefinition and (de-)regulation play out, for example, when the number of healthy and young children put up for adoption decreases or children are increasingly adopted domestically. In this context, the professional reframing of special needs and medical conditions can shape prospective parents’ openness to be matched with a “harder-to-place” child

(Raleigh & Katz Rothman, 2014) and creates a new moral economy of the somatic (van Wichelen, 2014). At a time in which a growing number of older children and children with “special needs” is placed internationally (relative to the total figure, see Selman, 2015), and interpretations of “best interest” need to become more complex, scrutinizing matching and related “expert” knowledge take on greater significance.

Considering the scarcity of studies on such knowledge notably in Germany, I attempt to offer a critical insight into the topic through the analytical lens of a *governing* social work practice. I suggest that inquiring into the role that knowledge plays, even in its absence, helps in understanding mechanisms of governing individual subjects and families through the practice of matching for transnational adoption<sup>1</sup>. As Miller and Rose (1990) emphasize, government

“is always dependent on knowledge, and proponents of diverse programs seek to ground themselves in a positive knowledge of that which is to be governed, ways of reasoning about it, analyzing it and evaluating it, identifying its problems and devising solutions (p. 6 f.)”

In line with Foucault, Miller and Rose (1990) employ the term “technologies of government” to analyze ruling as an activity and to draw attention to the mechanisms authorities operate with when they intervene in, instrumentalize and normalize the conduct of subjects to accomplish what they consider a desirable end. Examination, assessment and professional consultations are examples of such mechanisms to generate knowledge for both guidance of others and the self (e.g. Kim, 2015), and are of key concern in the discussion of my data.

Drawing on empirical data gathered during my PhD research<sup>2</sup>, I consider how different forms of knowledge – legal, medical, psychological, pedagogical, “intercultural” and experiential – are brought into play in the context of defining and managing risk, needs and desires involved in matching parent and child in transnational adoption. In the discussion of selected interviews and online data retrieved from organizational internet presence (homepages), I take the view of two German adoption agencies and several new parents into account. The cited parents adopted a child aged six months to five years in the late 2000s and early 2010s through one of these organizations. As state-approved private agencies, the organizations are accredited to intermediate adoptions from individual collaborating countries in South America, South East Asia, Central Europe and other regions of the world. One of the agencies’ main roles in child placement is to gather and to provide professional knowledge about prospective parents, so they can be matched with a child in her\*his country of origin or be considered for the adoption of a “chosen” child with “special needs.” During this process, the organization collaborates and consults with both the foreign professionals and the local and central – i.e. federal state – adoption agencies of the German youth welfare authorities. Yet, the regulation of parental “choice,” the evaluation of their proficiency to adopt from a selected country, and the final approval of the child referral lie with the private adoption agency (details in Paulitz, 2006).

## 2. Matching as a practice of government in transnational adoption

In the professional rhetoric of transnational adoption,<sup>3</sup> the term matching represents the process of selecting adoptive parents for an adoptable child across national borders, emphasizing a central focus on the child’s needs and best interest rather than on parental imaginations and desires. Adoption studies suggest that matching is widely considered a pivotal strategy of child placement and an important precondition for a stable adoption relation

(e.g. Randall, 2013; see Bovenschen, Bränzel, Dietzsch, Zimmermann, & Zwönitzer, 2017; for a summary of international studies with relevance to the German context). The Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe (2011), defines a professional matching practice as necessarily “based on comparison between the fullest possible information on a child’s needs and characteristics and the appropriateness of the capacities of prospective adopters, as described in their file” (p. 16). In various assessments procedures, psychologists, medical experts and social workers generate knowledge about the applicant and the child to compile this file in line with national and international requirements. Matching becomes a process of navigating decision-making (Forkby & Höjer, 2010; Laakso & Pösö, 2014) between these forms of knowledge to determine individual fit and to place the child accordingly.

How, then, is matching accomplished and which kinds of knowledge are used in the governing of family-making? Criteria that determine or shape professional judgment and decision-making in matching are formally established and deployed in the countries of birth (given that the adoption placement is effectuated on a professional and legal level, for other accounts see e.g. Abreu, 2009). From a broader perspective, however, they are subject to and the product of negotiations in transnational spaces where potentially conflicting interests, desires and pressures intertwine with social inequalities and (postcolonial) power relations. With the growth of psychology-related knowledge and professions (see also Rose, 1996), Western moralities and expertise have globalized and fostered the consolidation of governmentality in transnational adoption (Howell, 2014, 2006). In Western countries, notably the USA, matching criteria historically included general categorizations often referring back to the child’s (presumed) origin and body, such as skin color, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, health, and other physical features.<sup>4</sup> Because of increasingly professionalized placement practices in the twentieth century, these categories were applied in matching to naturalize the adoptive family and to make it appear authentic, so it could function (Herman, 2008). Today, they raise critical questions of essentialization, normativity and power particularly in ethical terms, but remain an issue under different premises.

Categorizations relating to the adoptee’s “origins” persist in transnational adoption in obvious or more subtle forms, for example in applicants’ preferences for a country and their (self-)assessment of individual capacities and limitations (see chapter 3; Quiroz, 2007; Khanna & Killian, 2015). Matching, then, will in most cases not create families fully perceived as natural, but takes account of personal capacities to integrate difference and to normalize the adoptive family. Although ethics and practices of matching have altered over time, the contemporary professional “call” for an inter- or transcultural and transnational conduct can foster the inscription of difference in novel ways. As Yngvesson (2010) points out, adoption, in its original “mimicry of “natural” families and the genealogical grids for which they stand, inscribes the borders of the genealogical “real” (p. 37) belonging to a family and nation state. The rationalities of matching itself can function both to mimic and differentiate across categories.

Similarity in terms of compatibility is also assessed and constructed by psychological matching techniques. Because a stable adoption remains associated with successful attachment, matching continues to be a technology of therapeutic government “to engineer families whose emotional relationships would be as subjectively real as those in natural families” (Herman, 2008, p. 133) were believed to be. Contemporary techniques and tools to assess the attachment styles of prospective parents and children aim at matching those with similar patterns, prompting a supportive family environment (e.g. Bifulco & Jacobs, 2008). In the

context of attachment theory (notably Bowlby, 1969, and related publications), matching means considering not only traumatic experiences in the child's early life and associated attachment problems. It also means understanding adoption as a traumatic event (chapter 3), making adoptees a risk group and secure bonding a treatment option. Other forms of knowledge about compatibility relate to more individual needs and parental strengths. They are derived from the assessment of both the child's and the parents' personality and family history, and can include categories like temperament, behavioral patterns, problem solving, family expectations, individual interests and talents etc. However, the production and handling of matching knowledge can be highly flexible and may depend on factors which remain unknown outside the professional paradigm.

### **3. Governing the individual and family body through matching: risk/needs management and the production of knowledge across national borders**

Viewing matching as a professional practice presupposes that it must be accomplished by professionals governing the formation of the family as experts, and cannot be replaced by the future parents' personal choice of a favored child. In this logic, professional matching and parental selection of a child are perceived differently, drawing a clear line between supposedly ethical (because expertise based) and unethical (e.g. commodifying) practices in adoption (Tribowski, 2015). However, as my data suggest and as will be elaborated upon in this section, both matching and personal choice are interrelated in potentially conflicting ways: While clear demarcations are necessary to secure the professional self-conception and agency, matching decisions are also grounded in the production of knowledge about the parents' personal capabilities and boundaries, comprising the exclusion of "risky" children. To examine how parents may intervene here, it will be of interest to identify at which instances parental power over the professional conduct is granted and how this is made a legitimate interference in professional judgment and decision-making. This, I argue, not only serves the accumulation of knowledge in assessing the risk of a "mismatch," but also reaffirms professional competence rooted in the statutory ethical motive of the child's best interest. The international nature of the process poses additional challenges to the reasoning and governing of responsible ethical practice.

#### **3.1. Adoption as a matter of coping?**

##### **3.1.1. The boundaries of coping: classifying bodies and assessing ethical positionings**

The adoption placement office (APO) I primarily focus on cooperates with countries which do not only carry out the assessment of adoptability, but also the matching of parents and children after both sides have been assessed by concerned professionals in the respective countries (see subsequent sections for further details about the assessment). After receiving the referral, the final decision about the child's placement with the selected parent(s) is made by the APO in Germany. The way the application is designed allows the applicants to limit the scope of children they might be matched with through criteria such as number of children, maximum age (partly, see the following chapter), and physical and mental health. This points to the question whether potential parents are willing and "able" to adopt a child categorized as one with special needs or characteristics (see 3.2). At the same time, it casts doubt on the notion of stability and verifiability of "solid fact" categorizations: The applicants

also must reflect on whether they consider themselves capable of adopting a child with – diagnosed or undiscovered – traumata, potentially challenging behaviors or backgrounds that do not necessarily classify the child as “special” by standards of definition set through the involved authorities. The director of the APO further explains:

“For example, there are couples who say, a sexually abused child, we are not able to cope with that. Or couples who say a child, product of an incestuous relationship, we cannot cope with that, okay? One has to consider that. It’s always a balancing act, because working with the countries we collaborate with, we learn a lot about the child’s background, but we surely don’t get to know everything. Perhaps we get to know everything the authority knows, but the authority doesn’t know everything. And insofar you have to be quite open (Interview Professional A).”<sup>5</sup>

As the quotation illustrates, the professionals take the applicants’ self-assessment, i.e. their self-governing knowledge about themselves and their own limitations, into account beyond the question of clear “special case” categorization. It is at this intersection of professional and self-judgment that governmentality, biopolitical knowledge and morality come into play in a particularly interconnected fashion: The sexually violated and the unethically conceived body are reified and marked as being different, essentialized as being an ethical, psychological or medical challenge, and become a matter of coping for adoptive parents.<sup>6</sup> Assuming a context of discursively produced and widely distributed legal, medical, psychological, ethical and moralizing “common sense” knowledge contextualizing sexual abuse and incest, the (national or global) society and its entrusted authorities intervene “at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 1990): They render these bodies problematic, govern the applicants’ self-assessment, provide guidance for self-judgment and the acceptance of this very judgment by the professional. The very availability and awareness of a range of related knowledges makes this kind of risk-oriented (Rose, 2001) (self-)assessment necessary.

### ***3.1.2. The primacy of coping: managing precarious knowledge and assessment tools***

However, considerations like the above can only be acted upon, if pertinent knowledge is available or can be produced. Certainty can never be fully achieved, because knowledge about the children’s biographical experiences and their psychological impact is, by nature and through interposed structures of transmission, limited. Therefore, matching is framed as a balancing act between accessible knowledge or reliable judgment on the one hand, and the unknown or inaccessible on the other. As both the general conditions of abandonment and the care and welfare systems of sending countries differ and change over time, accessing and accumulating knowledge, and thus reproducing professionalism and professional sovereignty, is a highly relative enterprise. The limits of calculability and predictability stretch into the future, when the final handing over of a child to the new parents is framed as “a very traumatic experience” (Interview Professional A) and another instance of risk to the child’s well-being and social behavior. This way, it becomes a risk for matching, too: because “it may be that that which was in the child’s life is very different after this experience” (ibid.).

Under these circumstances, gaining sufficient knowledge about the applicants in order to judge their parenting capabilities and limitations seems to become a pivotal strategy of professional adoption intermediation and risk reduction.

“Insofar in matching, one tries to make you as an applicant happy, or at least to decide in a way that one assumes you’ll feel you can manage. [...] Because it’s a big mistake to place a child with you who you are unable to cope with (Interview Professional A).”

In this sense, a “good” matching practice presupposes deciding on the basis of the applicants’ assessed ability to cope with possible challenges ascribed to a child they are chosen to adopt. Hence, first and foremost adoption professionals employ technologies of governing, such as psychological assessment, screening tests, questionnaires and written reporting (tools of authorities in both countries), professional counseling, peer consultations and preparation seminars. The notion of assessment tools and consultation encounters as “intensifier[s] of ethicality” (Rose, 2001, p. 10), of introspection, disclosure, moral judgment, inner conflict and risk-oriented decision-making, helps to understand how both professionals and particularly parents may experience such technologies of guidance. Besides prompting and “forcing” immediate exchange with others, they can generate what Rose (2001) terms “multiple “virtual” entanglements with parties [physically, B.B.] not present” (p. 18), but present in inner dialog or object of open disclosure. Prospective parents find themselves involved in “ethopolitics” (p. 18), developing techniques of self-judgment and self-improvement. In some interviews, adoptive parents reflect on the task to write about their upbringing, their family relations, ideas of child-rearing, partner relationship and sexuality as useful for reappraisal, but also “indiscreet” (Interview H. Lorenz/mother) and emotionally and socially distressful (Interview L. and K. Jansen/parents). A mother describes these reflections as reaching into the (re)manufacturing of one’s own conduct of child-rearing (L. Jansen/mother, *ibid.*), and, at the same time, doubts upon their transformational potential for parenting: “Then I think about it briefly, how was it for me back then, but this endless contemplation about our, what’s it, our past, well that doesn’t make us better or worse parents” (*ibid.*). Similarly, she and her husband frame their matching with their child as a double-sided process in which the individual qualities “experience with children,” “musicality” and “sportiness” were deployed, but are interpreted as rather arbitrary categories making criteria “underhand” (Interview L. and K. Jansen/parents) likely.

Despite various strategies to optimize judgment and decision-making, the professional scope remains contingent and stays within the confines of limited knowledge about the applicants, too (“There are things you simply don’t tell,” as a parent conveyed). Disregarding the applicants’ capabilities, however, represents a professional error, because it falls outside the realm of both the parents’ and consequentially the child’s best interest. What is viewed as the priority principle of responsible matching, i.e. maximizing the likelihood of (parental) coping, would be violated through measures understood as unethical and unprofessional. Such measures include, for example, strategies of manipulating or withholding information about potentially “risky” features of the child’s biographical history by either foreign or domestic authorities involved (Interview Professional A). In this logic, coping and knowledge are firmly interlinked in the organization’s discourse, according to which knowledge about perceived risk factors makes risk manageable through coping-oriented matching procedures.

### **3.2. Matching as a matter of flexibilization and normalization?**

#### **3.2.1. Flexibilizing and naturalizing risk-/needs-conscious decision-making in health contexts**

Although it is usually not possible to choose a child, certain “cases of hardship” are seen as requiring a reconsideration and adjustment of the ethical conduct regulating the applicants’ agency of “choice” and detailed knowledge about adoptable children. One mother told me:



"We didn't consciously decide on Czech Republic, but we decided consciously for him [the son]" (Interview D. Koch/mother). She elucidates that she and her husband decided to adopt their second child after reading about him and the urgent search for parents in a circular letter of the adoption organization. To be able to imagine the child with a severe medical condition, and to find out whether they felt capable of adopting this child, the boy was introduced to them through a video first. According to the mother, "nobody wanted to have him with his disability, because it wasn't clear what it is actually about" (ibid.) – how the condition would further develop and how it could be treated best. "And we said okay, we wouldn't ask either if it was a biological child" (ibid.), she explains. Reframing the child as a biological one is presented as a way of coming to an evident and "natural" decision, based on a scenario which doesn't put the decision into question, or doesn't raise the possibility of deciding against the child. In this vein, a difference between biological and non-biological kinship is stated to be undone subsequently. The quasi-equation of biological and social kinship serves to reason, deconstruct and normalize the decision as a rather "natural" ethical consequence of engaging with the idea to adopt (conceive and bear) a (this) child. Similar to questions raised in connection to reproductive technologies, genetic testing and the individual "responsibilization" (Rabinow & Rose, 2006, p. 209) in decision-making, the decision either for or against an unhealthy child becomes a highly conscious one, albeit on a different level of experience, tangibility and moral judgment. The physical presence of a potential future child is not incorporated into the family through the mother's body, but intermediated by means of the fully human (non-embryonic, non-fetal) and individual subject, audio-visually and intersubjectively tangible. This might mark significant differences between both approaches, which, however, cannot be reconstructed and discussed in more detail here.

In the specific example outlined above, matching as a processual task and responsibility of adoption professionals is partly replaced by parental "agency" and risk-/needs-conscious decision-making. A positive assessment and an early familiarization with the child and his condition in both countries secure this proceeding professionally. During the application process, the mother reports, the authority in the sending country "put us through our paces" (Interview D. Koch/mother) after handing in the usual documents. The professionals demanded further psychological assessment in Germany, personal consultation with the authority itself and additional medical assessment to evaluate the couples' individual suitability to parent this child. Despite the parents' opportunity to "choose," the authority maintained control over the process. Here, the government of placement both points to an individualization of decision-making through the authority of the sending country, and to a strong reliance on psychological and medical standardization in both states involved.

On the other hand, the meaning ascribed to the lack of reliable medical prognosis and indication of successful treatment underlines the social relevance of medical knowledge about the child. It facilitates more conscious and knowledge-based, but on the downside also discriminatory forms of judgment and decision-making. In transnational adoption, illness can have multiplex meanings, as it can sometimes be "undone," cured or alleviated through medical intervention in the country of destination. This in turn has consequences on the classification of the child (van Wichelen, 2014; Raleigh & Katz Rothman, 2014). Different medical norms in the assessment of health and development can pose challenges to categorizations and the translation of categories in the collaborating country in terms of its (medical) knowledge system. Transnationalizing biomedical standards in the assessment of children and birth families, however, does not necessarily present a solution and can create



new ethical and practical problems (Leinaweaver, 2009). At the same time, illness conceptions might be crucial in decision-making, and the categorization of a country's medical "capacity" to care for the child. This holds true whether it relies on actual knowledge about (lacking) treatment opportunities and their consequences for the child in the country of origin – e.g. placement in separate institutions for otherwise handicapped children, as it would have been the case in the above example – or on social, professional or individual perceptions and constructions. Adoption placement offices try to increase the children's chances of adoption and to reduce uncertainties about the applicants' capacities through individual disclosure of more information. Such information can be conveyed personally in conversations, in written form, by visual means or can be accessed on the internet. Despite aiming at confidentiality through personal communication, log-in requirements and passwords, these measures certainly entail the risk of unveiling sensitive data and of appearing to advertise, commodify and market children, while categorizing and stigmatizing them as "special," i.e. hard to place and less wanted.<sup>7</sup>

### *3.2.2. Extending the normal through redefinitions of the age regime*

In adoptions from Czech Republic and the South American country referred to above, the definition of special needs or characteristics is determined by the country of birth and seems to be adjustable according to the country's need of adoptive parents from abroad. Likewise, studies show that prospective parents' willingness to adopt a "special" or formerly "special" child changes depending on the likelihood of adopting a young healthy child (Raleigh & Katz Rothman, 2014). In an official letter, the adoption placement office explains recent changes in the definition undertaken by the sending country's family welfare institution, such as raising the children's age limit for adoption by two years. Changing procedures and new measures in the assessment of adoptability prolong the process and result in extended wait times for both applicants and children. Furthermore, as criticized by the APO, they increase the risk of re-traumatization because of leaving and entering institutional care anew. Here, the category of the special appears to be a very relative and flexible one interwoven with dynamics of a national need for prospective parents and the applicants' own, albeit restrictable, demands and desires. In general, the label "special" seems to be given to children who are, for various reasons, understood as being less "adoptable." As younger children are increasingly adopted nationally and older ones outgrow the category of normal, in terms of matching rhetoric, a growing number of increasingly "special" children would require a higher proportion of particularly special or "specialized" parents. However, raising the age limit allows for an extension of the category of normal and enables the readjustment of matching according to age as one variable in decision-making. Applicants who were already approved and classed with a certain age group can allow or refuse a reclassification, while they might simultaneously approach another age group of parents "naturally" due to prolonged wait times. Usually, and anchored in international conventions, national laws and guidelines, the age difference between parents and children should not exceed about forty years (for a critical discussion of norms of intergenerational difference in transnational adoption see Leinaweaver, 2015). Similar to the previous example, these measures can be interpreted as an attempt to increase the chance of a child considered to be disadvantaged (either by age or some other "disability") to be adopted in what is deemed an "ethically sound" way.

### 3.3. Matching as a matter of ethical conduct?

#### 3.3.1. Articulating and enacting organizational ethics of anti-discrimination

While, in my data, the above mentioned forms of categorization are presented in the light of coping and conscious decision-making and only hint at issues of discrimination, others such as gender, ethnicity and skin color are framed differently in the context of matching and articulating preferences. Concerning these categories, the director points out:

“It depends, there are APOs that allow you to choose a gender. We don’t allow that, because otherwise 99,99% would want a girl. [...] In the early days, we allowed for that because [the sending country in South America] does by the way and that’s why we did it, too. Until we realized that, felt for us that we do NOT tolerate this kind of discrimination, concerning neither gender nor skin color (Interview Professional A)”

The collaborating authority’s “concession” to choose a child according to gender and skin color does not obligate the professionals in the receiving country to adopt the same strategy. In contrast, the adoption placement office retains a certain scope to reshape and reduce opportunities of parental choice and can thus diminish what might be regarded as commodifying effects of provided structures of decision-making. The quote highlights the possibility to decide and to act against specific preferences and practices judged as discriminatory in favor of the organization’s own ethical “conduct of conduct” (and, perhaps, in order to manage the unequal ratio of demand and availability, as hinted in the beginning and reformulated in ethical terms). Here it appears to be not the authority in the country of birth, but the organization in the receiving nation which resists a commodifying framework of the possibility to choose – initially set up under conditions of a racially economized international demand/desire for children. Although gender and skin color are not to determine a child’s adoptability and matching with prospective parents, the quote reveals the experienced existence of a hierarchical structure of desirability. The director explains how she counteracted some applicants’ ideas about which kind of child matches best and why:

“And when a couple tells me we wouldn’t have anything against an Afro-Latin-American, but where we live, and then this phrase comes up, the world is still alright and I don’t know how the neighbors react. Then I say in what an awful place do you live? That’s terrible. In that case you have to move when you adopt a child. You can’t expect anyone to put up with this. How do you bear that? And suddenly they are confronted with another perspective that makes them disagree sometimes. Meaning they think I’m absolutely incredible, as to my statement. Actually it’s quite nice there. On the other hand, they also realize quite often that through these statements, they support a kind of racism they hadn’t thought about at all. Then I say, consequentially, if your neighborhood has a problem with an adoptee, I won’t place a child with you, that’s for sure” (Interview Professional A).”

Instead of simply dismissing the argument, she conveys how her reaction irritates the applicants’ reasoning and induces an intended learning effect. Her response demonstrates the uncovering of a coded articulation of ethnic preferences and racist thinking which are objected as unacceptable and require “disciplinary measures.” The social environment has to be adjusted to the child rather than choosing a child that supposedly fits to this environment and doesn’t “unsettle” it. This confrontation can be read as a disciplinary means both to probe parents’ attitude and capacity of critical reflection and reconsideration, and to reduce the risk of their stereotyping a potential future child. In this sense, it shows how contemporary pastoral (Foucault, 1990, p. 67 ff.; Rose, 2001) and disciplinary techniques are intertwined as they juxtapose “the ethics of care and the ethics of guidance” (Rose, 2001, p. 10) in a particular fashion. According to the professional, the organization does not sacrifice

its ethics of non-discrimination for a kind of risk management that is applied to minimize risk by meeting the applicants' desires "at all ethical costs." For the organization, gender and ethnicity do not legitimately generate a risk in parenting which has to be considered in matching. Therefore, if judged to be (too) discriminatory, the applicants are rather sanctioned through a rejection of their application.

### *3.3.2. Color vs. culture? Regulating choice and managing racism*

Reading the above quotation in the context of its preceding and ensuing interview paragraphs, one finds that it is not about denying racist mindsets in the social environment of adoptive families or about the parents' power to change them. It represents a critique of an oblique and codified racism shifted to a Third and utilized to argue personal preferences. Concurrent with the professional's body of knowledge, this strategy is identified and categorized as such a discriminatory practice in interactions with some of the applicants. Nevertheless, its theme also alludes to the dilemma of "color-blind" versus "color-conscious" approaches in social work and notably transnational adoption, including matching (see chapter 2). Practical forms of assessing and addressing both foreign institutional and local parental constructions of difference and ethnicity are largely situated within the national system of social work, especially through collaboration with and intervention of local youth welfare offices and psychologists. The range of pre- and post-adoption services offered by the organizations explicitly includes, in some cases, anti-racist workshops and empowerment trainings for both parents and children. Here, governmentality is anchored in the idea of self-government and small-scale collectivization, intended to empower individuals and to enhance their self-esteem as a human technology of the "techne of psychology" (Rose, 1996, p. 87), or to reduce the risk of "ethical mismatches." While bearing the risk of privatizing or confining social problems and strategies of coping to distinctly constructed groups, anti-racist workshops in particular can foster awareness for social and political dimensions of racism and link the personal with the structural.

On the other hand, depending on the adoption placement office's philosophy and by means of choosing a birth country, the child's alleged culture of origin can be decided upon very early or later during the application process (and might provide a detour to the question of ethnicity or race). An approach that initially minimizes the expression of ethnic preferences, or the pressure to decide for a country, is pursued by another adoption placement office. At the beginning of the application process, its policy requires a complete openness for any country they collaborate with: "The choice of a country takes place through our agency according to professional considerations and with reference to the needs in individual countries, whereas the applicants' preferences are considered, if possible" (homepage, translated). Rather than directly linking the justificatory figure of the child's needs with the applicants' desires, this rhetoric spatializes and territorializes them constructing what could be termed a geography of needs opposed to a topography of social acceptability. Differently, the previously cited director explains: "That's a very important precondition, this openness towards other cultures. An affinity for the country of origin is very important as well. At least that there is a chance to develop this affinity." A sense of connection and previous experiences with the selected country or culture are emphasized as an important factor in assessing the applicants' "(inter)cultural qualification" to adopt transnationally. An affinity for a distinct region or nation state is understood to be an advantage to support the application for a desired country and is harmonized with the notion of openness as a requirement and

epitome of good self-conduct. Nevertheless, both technologies point to the thinness and fuzziness of the line between culturalization, essentialization, and cultural or geographical liking, which challenge such “indicators” of parental suitability. The second approach also indicates that the child’s origins (should) matter – both in the assessment of parents including their decision for a country, and regarding the future family life. However, despite intensified technologies of assessment, some parents’ racist attitudes only surface after the adoption, as another adoption professional states. She insinuates that it’s only possible to minimize risk, such as the risk of misjudging parents’ proficiency, and thus the risk of questionable placement, while one can never be fully assured of doing the right thing (conversation Professional P).

#### 4. Conclusion

(Transnational) adoption constitutes a site where the neo-liberal idea of the self-governing autonomous individual clashes *and* is reconciled with the intervention of both states involved and the authority given to international policy and legislation. This is maybe reflected best in the technologies of granting and restricting possibilities to choose a child. As shown above, choice is made possible under contested, narrowly defined and ethically justified premises which require specific ways of coding and reasoning. Legal frameworks and “truth discourses” based on transnationalized expertise provide a powerful foundation for this and led to a “shift from child as object of welfare to child as a subject of rights” (Yngvesson, 2010, p. 57), most prominently the “right to a family” and increasingly the “right to health” (van Wichelen, 2014).

These discourses and narrative figurations are translated to the meso and micro level of transnational adoption placement. For the organization I focused on, matching means inter-mediating and navigating between the child’s “best interest,” parental desires, professional ethics, and structures established in the countries of origin. Understood as a professional practice, it could be reconstructed as a psycho-pedagogical technology of child placement involving the production of knowledge between various forms of social categorization, psychological, pedagogical and medical assessment, and political context. Matching becomes a discursive site on which professionalism is established in opposition to unethical practices of adoption intermediation at the intersection of multiple powerful and practically translatable truth discourses. However, professionals do not appear as mere executors of structures targeted at classifying, regulating, controlling and ruling their clients. Rather, they act as professional subjects carving out spaces for organizationally defined ethical judgment and action to meet what are understood to be the child’s needs and best interest. In line with that, being professional means being part of a powerful knowledge system and producing, reproducing and being produced by its structures at the same time. This holds true for waiting parents in a comparable way.

Despite its professional framing, the modes of producing and operationalizing knowledge, as well as the forms of generated knowledge themselves, can be termed as precarious: They comprise significant gaps, fluid (re)definitions, multiplex dependencies and forces, and ethical pitfalls; or standardization, pragmatization and manufacturing in manners which did not surface in the analysis. In this sense and because of its limited data basis, this article has to remain tentative. Turning this productively through the lens of theory, questions of neo- and postcolonial conditions, subjectivization, family-making and resistance may stimulate

further research about (1) transnational knowledge production with a sensitivity to the colonization of discourses and expertise, the imposition of knowledge and the dynamics of “truth” and practice; (2) the relationality of “government at a distance” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 10) with regard to the co-generation of the figures of the professional, the parent and the child, and their subjectivization; (3) technologies of “expertizing” parents for adoption, and (4) forms of governmentality “from below.” Above all, however, further insight into matching discourses and practices of sending countries is needed to contextualize the topic more precisely.

## Notes

1. By “transnational adoption” I refer to intercountry adoptions involving parents and children of different nationalities. While the placement itself is rather international in its formal legal and practical nature, adoption as a social and biographical process entails transnationality (see also endnote 3).
2. In my dissertation project, I examine the construction and meaning-making of origins in transnational adoption to Germany, using Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) and ethnographical approaches as methodological frameworks. These data are drawn from 17 semi-structured interviews and several ethnographic conversations with adoptive parents, children and professionals, as well as participant observation on a “roots trip” to a group of children’s country of birth. Further online and ethnographic data serve as a source for contextualization and background information. During the circular process of data collection and analysis between 2014 and 2017, the topic of matching and child placement emerged as a relevant one within and beyond the original focus of the study.
3. I use the term transnational adoption to refer to a form of international intercountry adoption of non-relative children which points to moments, practices and structures of transnationalization. Research about contemporary transnational adoption finds that adoptees and families engage in (potentially) transnationalizing activities e.g. through culture work, return visits, transnational relationships and (activist) networks of adoptees (e.g. E. Kim, 2010; De Graeve, 2013; Howell, 2006). The Federal Association of the States’ Youth Welfare Services in Germany expects parents to be able to identify as bicultural and to integrate corresponding relationships into their social environment (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Landesjugendämter, 2014, p. 64). Nevertheless, transnational adoption also goes along with processes of internationalization, globalization, and (re)nationalization especially of professional procedures in adoption intermediation, when the demand for domestic adoption rises.
4. See Briggs (2012) for a critical discussion of placement politics and “race matching” in the USA. Robust data on historical as well as contemporary practices of placement and matching and their local, institutional or organizational differences seem to be missing in German adoption research. However, it can be stated that the professionalization of US-American adoption also influenced practices in Germany (e.g. the home study, post-adoption services, cf. Paulitz, 2006).
5. The data presented in this article was anonymized and translated from German into English.
6. This is noted by no means to deny or to diminish the violence of the abusive act and its psychological impact. Rather, I follow the logic of reconstructing modes of producing, interlinking and actualizing discursive knowledge.
7. See Cartwright (2003) for a critical examination of the use and impact of images and visual classifications in transnational adoption to the USA, including the discernment of developmental and medical information.

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on my doctoral research funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), research training group 1474 “Transnational Social Support” (University of Mainz and University of Hildesheim,

Germany, 2014-2017). I would like to thank Barbara Yngvesson for her very valuable comments and support, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their fruitful suggestions and critical remarks. I also thank Edward Omeni for the helpful exchange and the theoretical inspiration he provided.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

- Abreu, D. (2009). Baby-Bearing storks: Brazilian Intermediaries in the adoption process. In D. Marre & L. Briggs (Eds.), *International adoption: Global inequalities and the circulation of children* (pp. 138–153). New York, NY, and London: NYU Press.
- Bifulco, A., & Jacobs, C. (2008). The Attachment Style Interview (ASI): A support-based adult assessment tool for adoption and fostering practice. *Adoption & Fostering*, 32(3), 33–45.
- Bovenschen, I., Bränzel, P., Dietzsch, F., Zimmermann, J., & Zwönitzer, A. (2017). *Dossier Adoptions in Deutschland. Bestandsaufnahme des Expertise- und Forschungszentrums Adoption* [Dossier Adoptions in Germany. Survey of the Expertise and Research Center Adoption]. München: Deutsches Jugendinstitut e. V./.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss, vol. 1: Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Briggs, L. (2012). *Somebody's children: The politics of transracial and transnational adoption*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Landesjugendämter (Ed.). (2014). *Empfehlungen zur Adoptionsvermittlung* [Recommendations for adoption intermediation]. Mainz. Retrieved from [http://www.bagljae.de/downloads/120\\_empfehlungen-zur-adoptionsvermittlung\\_2014.pdf](http://www.bagljae.de/downloads/120_empfehlungen-zur-adoptionsvermittlung_2014.pdf)
- Cartwright, L. (2003). Photographs of “Waiting Children”: The transnational adoption market. *Social Text*, 21(1 74), 83–109.
- Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory. Introducing qualitative methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe. (2011). Adoption and children: A Human Rights Perspective. *Issue Paper*, 2011, 2. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/issue-papers>
- De Graeve, K. (2013). Festive gatherings and culture work in Flemish-Ethiopian adoptive families. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(5), 548–564.
- Forkby, T., & Höjer, S. (2010). Navigations between regulations and gut instinct: The unveiling of collective memory in decision-making processes where teenagers are placed in residential care. *Child and Family Social Work*, 16, 159–168.
- Foucault, M. (1990). Politics and reason. In L. D. Kritzman (Ed.), *M. Foucault: Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings 1977–1984* (pp. 57–85). London & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Herman, E. (2008). *Kinship by design: A history of adoption in the modern United States*. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Howell, S. (2006). *The Kinning of foreigners: Transnational adoption in a global perspective*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Howell, S. (2014). “The best interest of the child”: Global governmentality and transnational adoption. In D. Neubert & C. Scherer (Eds.), *Agency and changing world views in Africa* (pp. 137–150). Berlin & Vienna: LIT.
- Khanna, N., & Killian, C. (2015). “We Didn’t even think about adopting domestically”: The role of race and other factors in shaping parents’ decisions to adopt abroad. *Sociological Perspectives*, 58(4), 570–594.
- Kim, E. (2010). *Adopted territory: Transnational Korean adoptees and the politics of belonging*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Kim, H. (2015). The biopolitics of transnational adoption in South Korea: Preemption and the governance of single birthmothers. *Body & Society*, 21(1), 58–89.
- Laakso, R., & Pösö, T. (2014). Matching children and substitute homes: Some theoretical and empirical notions. *Child and Family Social Work*, 1–10.



- Leinaweaver, J. (2009). The medicalization of adoption in and from Peru. In D. Marre & L. Briggs (Eds.), *International adoption: Global inequalities and the circulation of children* (pp. 190–207). New York, NY, and London: NYU Press.
- Leinaweaver, J. (2015). Geographies of generation: Age restrictions in international adoption. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16(5), 508–521.
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (1990). Governing economic life. *Economy and Society*, 19(1), 1–31.
- Paulitz, H. (Ed.). (2006). *Adoption. Positionen, Impulse, Perspektiven* (2nd ed.). München: Verlag C. H. Beck.
- Quiroz, P. A. (2007). *Adoption in a color-blind society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Rabinow, P., & Rose, N. (2006). Biopower today. *BioSocieties*, 1(2), 195–217.
- Raleigh, E., & Katz Rothman, B. (2014). Disability is the New Black: The rise of the 'cleft lip and palate program' in Transracial international adoption. In V. B. Treitler (Ed.), *Race in transnational and transracial adoption* (pp. 33–48). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Randall, J. (2013). Failing to settle: A decade of disruptions in a voluntary adoption agency in placements made between 2001 and 2011. *Adoption & Fostering*, 37(2), 188–199.
- Rose, N. (1996). *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose, N. (2001). The politics of life itself. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 1–30.
- Selman, P. (2015). *Twenty years of the Hague convention: A statistical review*. England, UK: Newcastle University. Retrieved from <https://www.hcch.net/de/instruments/conventions/publications1/?dtid=32&cid=69>.
- Tribowski, C. (2015). *Kinder kauft man nicht. Die politische Ökonomie von Auslandsadoptionen in Deutschland und den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* [You Don't Buy Children. The Political Economy of Intercountry Adoptions in Germany and the United States of America] (Dissertation). University of Cologne.
- van Wichelen, S. (2014). Medicine as moral technology: Somatic economies and the making up of adoptees. *Medical Anthropology*, 33(2), 109–127.
- Yngvesson, B. (2004). National bodies and the body of the child: 'Completing' families through international adoption. In F. Bowie (Ed.), *Cross-Cultural approaches to adoption* (pp. 211–226). London & New York: Routledge.
- Yngvesson, B. (2010). *Belonging in an adopted world: Race, identity and transnational adoption*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.