

# “Making families”: parenting and belonging in transnational adoption in Flanders<sup>1</sup>

Katrien De Graeve

Department of Comparative Sciences of Culture, Ghent University, Belgium

## Introduction

Most research on the transnational adoption of children from countries of the metaphorical South or East, to so-called Western countries, has been conducted within fields such as psychology, paediatrics, social work and educational theory and focuses on the psycho-pathology and the emotional and behavioural problems of children involved (e.g. Hoksbergen 2000). These studies most often use quantitative methods, which as Willing (2010) argues, seem to be ‘incongruent with many of the themes and issues in transnational adoption’. Moreover, the often ‘pathology oriented’ perspective of these studies tends to ‘take an individuated view of adoptees’ (Kim 2010) and fails to take into account the social, political and ideological contexts that shape the adoptive families’ experiences.

Furthermore, although research by white adoptive parents tends to be over-represented in adoption research, adoptive parenting work remains relatively understudied in Belgium and elsewhere. In contrast to adoptee-researchers, who typically focus their research on adoptees’ experiences and identity struggles, only a few transnational adoptive parent-researchers have looked at their own and other parents’ identity work (e.g. Volkman 2003). Also researchers who occupy other subject positions than that of adoptive parent, a few notable exceptions notwithstanding (e.g. Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006; Tigervall and Hübinette 2010; Willing 2010), have shown relatively little interest in the experiences and identity work of adoptive parents in relation to the migration of their children. Adoptive parents’ experiences as facilitators of migration who ‘lack the experiences that typically define most other narratives of migration’ (Willing 2010) are seldom considered relevant in migration research. As such, the way the migratory movements of

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their children influence and transform adoptive parents' lives and identities has largely been overlooked.

In addition, only a handful of studies have touched upon the relationship between adoptive parenting practices and citizenship (Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006; De Graeve 2010). Although some researchers have recently begun addressing parents' attempts to connect to their children's birth country (Anagnost 2000; Volkman 2003; Yngvesson 2003; Marre 2007; Traver 2007; Jacobson 2008; Willing 2010), the complex web of imagination and ideology that fuel these practices needs further exploration and theorization.

The goal of this PhD project is to address major gaps in the present research by providing a theoretical and empirically-informed account of the narratives and performances of transnational adoptive parents. By exploring how adoptive parents both normalize and problematize the perceived differences of their children and families, and by examining what work is done and which imaginations are drawn upon in relation to that difference, it aims to gain insight into how racial, cultural and genetic diversity is metabolized within the so-called private realm of the family. Based within a feminist and constructivist anthropological epistemology, this thesis explores the identity work that parents conduct both for themselves, and on behalf of their children, and examines the citizenship potential of adoptive parents' parenting work.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The research questions are addressed through an ethnographic study of cultural practices of adoption and qualitative interviews with Flemish parents who have adopted children from Ethiopia. The interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011. Approximately fifty-five adoptive mothers and fathers (including prospective parents) were interviewed and conversations with social workers involved in the adoption procedure were conducted. An additional thirty participant observation sessions were carried out during adoptive parents' information sessions and festive and charity events. The author's experiences of being an adoptive mother of a child from Ethiopia facilitated entering the field and constituted an important source of practical knowledge.

The participating parents came from diverse backgrounds (working in diverse professions, living in both cities and rural areas, non-religious or Catholic), yet were predominantly middle-class, (highly) educated, white, heterosexual and married. A minority of the mothers were single at the time of the interviews or in a lesbian relationship. The motives for adopting a child varied, from infertility to illness, to the wish to 'help an orphaned child'. Their number of children ranged from one to six and several families had children by both birth and adoption. Their children's age varied from a few months to twenty-five years old, although the majority of the families had young children. All families adopted through a state recognized adoption agency and followed the stringent adoption procedure prescribed by the Belgian Federal and Flemish community authorities.

An ethnographic research strategy was utilized in this study because this methodology is best suited to obtain rich and nuanced answers to the research questions posed.

Ethnography is usually defined as the written account of social research that involves the researcher's participation in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, drawing on a range of sources of data, trying to grasp the meanings of human actions and how these are implicated in wider contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

The ethnographic approach used in this study is theoretically underpinned by feminist and constructivist anthropological epistemologies (Dietz 2003; Egeland 2004; Haraway 1988; Hastrup 1995; Hyung Yi Kang 2009; 1994) which posit human reality as socially constructed and argue that knowledge production can only be obtained through shared social experience, and is dependent on the researcher's intellectual and embodied social positioning. This reflexive approach to ethnography denies a single interpretive truth or a pre-established ontological entity that can be revealed, but takes a view of knowledge as situated (Haraway 1988).

The research draws from postcolonial feminist studies and critical race studies, including whiteness studies (Ahmed 2007; Byrne 2006; Collins 1994; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Frankenberg 1993), which understand concepts such as race and identity not only as continuously produced and reproduced, but also as embedded in power structures. Furthermore, findings from critical kinship, family and motherhood studies, and more specifically, feminist postcolonial and anthropological accounts of Western family ideologies and cultures of relatedness have been important for the analyses presented in this thesis. Last but not least, I draw on conceptualizations of citizenship as developed by critical citizenship studies over the last two decades. These studies have pointed out that citizenship is not just about access to formal rights, but also about recognition and full participation (Lister 2007). These critiques have emphasized the dialogical and relational aspects of citizenship and its inflection by a range of social and cultural factors such as identity, social status, cultural presuppositions and belonging (Lister 2007; Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999:4). Furthermore, feminist critiques also revealed the citizenship potential of practices that are relegated to the so-called private sphere (Lister 2007; Oleksy 2009; Plummer 2001 & 2003; Turner 2008; Werbner & Yuval-Davis 1999).

The critical theoretical perspective adopted by this thesis does not imply a critique of the parenting practices of individual mothers and fathers, nor of the work of individual people who are professionally involved in the process of preparation and support of adoptive families. Yet, this thesis aims to lay bare some of the unquestioned and accepted notions and axioms that underpin prevailing adoption discourses and practices, assumptions that may be the very cause of the feelings of non-belonging, exclusion, and inferiority that many adoptees are said to struggle with. By deconstructing so-called truths that guide adoption policy and by unmasking their contingency and social and cultural constructedness, it aims at destabilizing dominant ideas in adoption that dramatize and pathologize the adoptees' condition. These ideas disregard or downplay the potential effect of an ideological framework that situates adoptees outside a sphere of 'real' belonging.

## Principal Findings

The thesis contains three empirical chapters in which the collected data are presented and analysed. The first empirical chapter describes the economy of information that is organized for selecting, training and supporting adoptive parents in Flanders. The ways these largely state-funded and regulated services are organized, and how insights from psychological theories are disseminated among and reproduced by adoptive parents, are exemplary of what Foucault calls ‘governmentality’. By this term, Foucault refers to ‘the regularities of everyday existence that structure the “conduct of conduct”’ (Nadesan 2008; Rose 1999). Foucault uses the term ‘biopower’ to refer to a technology that appeared in the late eighteenth century and that involved ‘the penetration of social and self-disciplinary regimes into the most intimate domains of modern life’ (Guthman and DuPuis 2006). ‘Technologies of normalization’ create divisions between groups of ‘normal’ people, ‘who can manage their own risks’ on the one hand; and “‘targeted populations”, those who require intervention in management of risks’ on the other (Guthman and DuPuis 2006). ‘Positive knowledges and expertises of truth’ associated with the ‘psy sciences’ have played a very important role in the making of governable and self-governing subjects (Rose 1999).

The chapter demonstrates that in current dominant adoption discourse, adoptive children and adoptive families are construed as a ‘targeted population’ in contrast to ‘normal’ children and ‘natural’ families. What Howell (2006) calls ‘psycho-technocrat’ experts such as educationalists, child therapists and social workers, enhance the ‘authority of psychological explanations for behaviour’; and most importantly, create and naturalize criteria of normality. Judged against these criteria, the adoptee is seen as deviant and highly susceptible to psychological problems. The problematic nature of their deviance is underpinned by theories of paediatrics and child psychology, which are considered as issuing from the ‘real’ nature of humans, assessed by objective scientific methods and therefore true, universal and beyond politics. In light of a naturalized mother-child bond, the adoptee is imagined as having been snatched away from that natural union and therefore ‘assumed to experience severe problems’ (Howell 2006). In other words, the very fact of being adopted is seen as an important risk factor for psychological distress.

Although the thesis does not deny that some adoptees must cope with traumatic experiences, it is critical of the current framework that is used for organizing the selection, preparation and support of adoptive families, as it tends to pathologize adoption as such. Such a framework, that holds the adoptee ‘hostage to adverse early childhood experiences’ (Triseliotis and Hill 1990) is, as Triseliotis and Hill (1990) argue, far ‘too deterministic’ and can have serious implications for adoptees and their families (Yngveson 2010).

The second empirical chapter discusses how the economy of expertise described in the previous chapter influences and shapes the daily adoptive parenting work and the parents’ conceptualization of their families’, children’s and their own identities. It describes how prevailing ‘intensive’ parenting ideologies that tell us ‘that children are inno-

cent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centred on children's needs, with methods that are informed by experts, and that are labour-intensive and costly' (Hays 1996) are invoked to justify the transfer of children from poor to rich families. Moreover, it argues that the global inequalities that are at the heart of transnational adoption produce uncertainty and feelings of guilt and indebtedness that drive many adoptive parents into charity work as part of their intensive parenting practice.

Furthermore, it discusses how intensive mothering ideology is pushed to extremes in adoption circles by dramatizing adoptive parenthood, conceptualizing it as in need of extraordinary measures (that extend beyond the measures prescribed by 'normal' parenting guidebooks). It urges adopters to become something like social workers or therapists for their children, or what Buysse and Vandebroek (2010) call 'semi-professional' parents. It explains how this dramatization carries the risk of reinforcing exclusionary mechanisms as well as domesticating difference. However, this extremely intensive parenting work tends to further underline adoptive children's and adoptive families' deviance from the aspired norm. It carries the risk of reinforcing essentialisms within the context of profound global inequalities, due to its articulation with ideas that define the 'true' needs of children in terms of exclusive parent-child bonds, and conceptualize the child's race as the mark of a different culture that both essentially belongs to and must be re-instilled in the child (Castañeda 2011).

The third empirical chapter zooms in on one aspect of intensive adoptive parenting work, namely the engagement in the adoptive child's birth country, by for instance eating out in Ethiopian restaurants or attending concerts of Ethiopian musicians. The culture work is often performed in the context of adoptive parents' festive and/or charity gatherings. The focus on the parents' 'culture work' is particularly interesting as it poignantly reveals the battlefield of intersecting processes in which transnational adoptive families are shaped. It shows how culture is invoked for the negotiation of the children's otherness and how this invocation of culture interconnects with discourses of relatedness, identity and belonging. It investigates how these cultural celebrations are shaped by prevailing ideas on culture and 'otherness' and how they can turn out to be empowering or rather exclusionary for black adoptive children.

The analysis shows the double orientation of the parents' work both to (1) establish the grounds for their children's citizenship by cultural empowerment and (2) establish themselves as middle-class, involved, cosmopolitan, open-minded, 'good' parents-citizens. It argues that the parents' culture work can be analysed as an example of what Kershaw (2010a) refers to as 'caregiving for identity'. In his response to Lister (2007), Kershaw (2010a) argues that the care work of minority caregivers shows that caregiving for identity can be considered as an expression of political citizenship. As such, he further challenges the public-private dichotomy that underlies a traditional view of citizenship as something that is solely played out within the public sphere (Kershaw 2010a). By referencing Collins' work (2000) on women of colour who, through their care work, try to guard their children 'against ubiquitous messages that brand them as

less valuable' he makes a powerful argument for considering caregiving for identity as 'quintessentially political', irrespective of where it is performed (Kershaw 2010a).

The adoptive parents' culture work can be interpreted in the same vein as it is part of the whole package of care work that the adoptive parents perform, encouraged by prevailing parenting ideologies and as a way of empowering their children. This care work extends beyond the private sphere of the nuclear family and beyond the provision of basic care to encompass the production of cultural practices, social values and identity (Kershaw 2010a). Although the parents' organizations are not in most cases activist political movements and their gatherings and events are located within the sphere of familial recreation and social life, their implication for the identity of parents and children turns the culture work into a political act (Kershaw 2010a, 2010b).

The dominant adoption discourse that problematizes adopted children's identity on the one hand, and, though far less problematized, encounters racism and racialization on the other, encourages adoptive parents to actively intervene in the children's identity. Parents assert that they want to arm their children against racism and offer them tools to construct a sound identity. The identity of transnationally adopted children is constructed against presuppositions with regard to physical characteristics that are supposed to signal someone's belonging to a certain ethnic background; and against and as part of a society that views identity as singular (Wekker 2007). The children's life trajectory as well as their physiognomy disturb essentialist views of ethnic identity and a 'homogenistic' (Blommaert and Verschueren 1992) conception of citizenship. Within adoption cultures alternative identities for the child are considered and discussed. The limits of assimilation are explored within the context of a society in which difference is problematized. Different views of culture and identity circulate among parents, are discussed, criticized, are tested by their everyday experiences and are adjusted in one way or another.

However, the parents' and their children's specific position at the intersection of different layers of privilege and exclusion, in conjunction with a discourse of intensive parenting that tends both to challenge and to support the status quo, result in a very ambivalent practice. On the one hand it can offer the children alternative conceptualizations of identity and citizenship and can be interpreted as a form of resistance against exclusionary representations. On the other hand it seems to be indicative of essentialist notions of identity and the pathologization of the children's hybrid condition, and risks becoming embroiled in essentialist imageries that assess physical appearance as a marker of (non)belonging (Andersson 2010).

Furthermore, the prevalent discourse in adoption circles traces adoptees' (potential) identity problems to an individual, psychological struggle that stems from their being relinquished on the one hand and their ability to attach to the new and non-biological family on the other. Problems of belonging are thus addressed at a personal or familial level, while the broader social context, that has enabled the adoption in the first place and that works in exclusionary ways for the adoptee, are not fully acknowledged. The embeddedness of the adoptees' experiences in a broader social context of (global) unequal power relations and deeply rooted racism is largely ignored.

As Yngvesson (2010) asserts, by placing the ‘disturbance’ in the adopted child itself, by almost exclusively explaining emotional problems in terms of early infancy trauma (and distancing them from the child’s lived experiences of racism), parents and adoption professionals tend to ignore that the very whiteness of the parent, and the imaginations and exclusions that go with it, may be a factor in producing the adopted child’s disturbance. The mere focus on problems of belonging on a familial/personal level moves the responsibility to the adoptee him – or herself and as such, does not challenge the status quo that excludes the adoptee from full belonging on a broader, societal level.

The intertwining of the parents’ discourse with paternalistic (neo)colonial imaginations of rescue, a colour-blind negation of race as an everyday lived reality, and consumerist modes of engaging in their children’s birth country, run the risk of domesticating the global inequalities underlying transnational adoption. ‘[C]elebratory representations of cultural difference’ (Anagnost 2000), without acknowledging the uneven global relations that make possible the transfer of children, tends to keep white parents in what Žižek (1997) calls ‘the privileged empty point of universality’ from which they respect other cultures, but at the same time assert their own superiority. The capacity of such representations to empower the black adopted child is much more doubtful.

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