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International Adoption from an Anthropological Demography Perspective: Growing Families or Adding Migrants?

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Introduction

Anthropologists and demographers have each written about international adoptions, but what is particularly striking is that they make sense of these adoptions using very different paradigms. Anthropologists are more likely to view international adoptions as related to *family formation* – highlighting the way that adoptions mean the removal of a child from one family and the incorporation of that child into another. Demographers are more likely to view international adoptions as a very small slice of *international migration* – highlighting the fact that a person has been relocated from one nation to another. Anthropological demography combines some of the insights of both disciplines by bringing anthropological concepts and insights to bear on the categories and approaches of demography (Kertzer 2005:525; Johnson-Hanks 2006:254). In this paper, I develop an anthropological demography perspective on international adoption. I use qualitative data collected through ethnographic fieldwork as evidence for my position that international adoption is best understood as *dynamically related to families and to migration*. As such, it must be analyzed dynamically – that is, with respect to the life course, meaning that our analysis should not end once we have identified the act of migration itself. Such an analysis must also take seriously the emic perspective. This term refers to local or "insider" views, and its use in anthropology usually signals that the anthropologist has identified specific values, categories, or concepts that are particularly meaningful to the research participants themselves (Lett 1990, 130).[2] I think we need to take seriously adoptive parents' and adoptees' perspectives on what international adoption is.

Kenney and Ortman observe that "Although international adoption intersects with many issues of interest to demographers, including international migration, family formation (in receiving countries) and family limitation (in sending countries), as well as the construction of interracial or interethnic families, the subject has received little attention in the demographic literature" (Kenney and Ortman 2005). Although its numerical incidence remains low in comparison to other population movements such as labor migration and refugee displacement, international adoption has grown rapidly in significance over the short course of its history. Selman suggests that "While [international adoption] was a phenomenon involving only a small number of children from relatively few countries, the possibility (or necessity) of a demographic approach was largely ignored. Today it is a phenomenon involving over 30,000 children a year moving between more than a hundred countries" (Selman 2002, 206). Selman also estimates that "the global total for the period 1948-2010 is likely to be approaching one million" (Selman 2009a, 45).

Recent papers on international adoption by demographers such as "the unknown immigration" (Lozano and Kossoudji 2009), or the "quiet migration" (Weil 1984; Selman 2002)

typify the perspective of viewing international adoption as migration, while at the same time suggesting it is minor or unstudied. Migration is the dominant frame that demographers use to understand international adoption (Lovelock 2000; Weil 1984), but international adoptees fit imperfectly into demographic understandings of international migration. They are technically migrants, of course, because they cross borders and become citizens of new countries. But they are a unique, age-graded, privileged kind of migrant whose relocation is only possible because of how they become embedded in new families, and simultaneously excised from their families of origin.

Peter Selman has argued to the contrary that "a demography of intercountry adoption must see the movement of children not only as an aspect of international migration – in which case it is of very minor significance – but also as related to issues of fertility, in that a key motivation in receiving states is the demand for children by childless couples who have not been successful with infertility treatment and who have faced a diminishing availability of young children for domestic adoption.... For this reason, it can be useful to relate intercountry adoptions to the number of births in both sending and receiving countries" (Selman 2002, 206).[3] But infertility is not the only motivation for international adoption, and high fertility is not the only reason for child relinquishment. Further, there are political and social pressures that lead families to choose international adoption over domestic, and one country over another, and these causal factors are bracketed from accounts that rely on fertility categorization.

Research setting & methods

This paper is part of a larger study that compared the experiences of adoption of Peruvians, and immigration of Peruvians, to Spain. Over the course of eight months spread over four years (2009-2012), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the transnational adoption of Peruvian children to Spain, a country that also receives a significant amount of immigration. In the past 15 years over 40,000 children from over 35 countries have been adopted by Spanish parents and moved to Spain.[4] In the grand scheme of things these numbers are not vast – the numbers of international adoptions do not even equate to one percent of annual births in Spain. While the actual number of adoptions may appear underwhelming in comparison to births, the change in adoption rates that this represents is quite significant. Between 1998 and 2004, global numbers of international adoptions rose by 42 percent while in Spain they rose by a full 273% (Selman 2010).[5] By contrast, the numerical significance of international *migration* as an important demographic phenomenon in Spain is unquestioned. The migrant population was recently estimated at over 6 million (OECD 2010), constituting about 14 percent of Spain's total population.[6]

Analysis

In the two subsections that follow, I discuss findings from my ethnographic research. Briefly, I found evidence to support Selman's interpretation of adoption as a fertility issue. But my data also suggest that Selman does not go far enough in his re-conceptualization, because there are multiple ways in which adoption is more closely aligned with fertility than with migration. For example, many adoptive parents disagree that international adoption is a migration issue, and even people who have not adopted recognize adoption to be a family formation strategy rather than migration. However, I also found evidence to support the more conventional demographic interpretation of adoption as migration. For example, the experiences of adolescent adoptees suggest that migration is an important lens for the interpretation of their

experiences. Thus, I conclude that particularly when adoptees are minors, adoption does seem to be productively understood through a fertility lens, but that as adoptees age and acquire more agency, this affinity evaporates.

1. Adoption as fertility issue

The emic perspective in anthropology argues that we must take seriously what people themselves tell us about their lives in order to produce interpretations of reality that resemble actual experiences. Listening to what people told me about adoption, I identified two separate arguments that people make to show that, at least in the early stages of international adoption, those involved did not view it as migration but rather as a project related to family formation. On one hand, parents (and legal authorities) state that international adoption differs from better understood forms of migration. On the other hand, parents (and society at large) explicitly view international adoption as family formation.

International adoption differs from migration in some important ways. First, the person who makes the decision about migration is not the person who is moving. Weil explains that this is a key difference between labor migration, where the migrant typically makes the decision to move, and international adoption: in the latter, the adopter does not move (Weil 1984, 277).[7] Second, members of receiving societies are quite clear about their position that the child's movement is not migration. For example, the anthropologist Diana Marre was told in no uncertain terms by a teacher in Barcelona that at the school she was studying "we do not have immigrant children, we have children adopted internationally" (Marre 2009, 228). And the sociologist Sara Dorow collected a listserv post from an adoptive parent that stated bluntly "Our children are NOT immigrants. They are, once adopted, citizens of the United States" (Dorow 2006:210).[8] In these cases adults are conveying clearly that adopted children are different from immigrants.

If international adoption is not exactly migration, what is it? It is a phenomenon that is motivated by very specific ends and desires: an adult, or a couple, somewhere in one of the world's wealthier countries, wants to have a child. This widely held sense that international adoption is family formation (rather than migration) fits very well with work that anthropologists have done around the world which broaden our concept of what "fertility" is. In particular, Caroline Bledsoe's study of child fostering in West Africa shows that "natural fertility" is related to child fostering and cannot be understood without taking into account the variety of ways women have children (Bledsoe 1990). Recruiting new family members – through adoption, fostering, marriage, blood brotherhood, godparenthood, and reproduction (Kottak 1986; Bledsoe 1990; Bodenhorn 2000; Brady 1976; Mintz and Wolf 1950; Smith 2004) – is, in anthropology, a phenomenon that can best be understood if we examine together the many ways in which it happens, of which the narrowly defined demographic variable of "fertility" is just one.

I will explain the issue of a prospective parent's motivation at some length, because it is the proximate determinant of a child's migration through international adoption. Child welfare authorities require prospective adoptive parents to be motivated only by the desire for a child. So-called "humanitarian" motivations are not seen as acceptable. The reasoning behind this is that the child's best interests are met by people who genuinely want to become parents, not by people who are taking pity or trying to help. The logical conclusion, for our understanding of international adoption, is that we need to understand it as related to family formation. The child's migration is incidental to the central goal, which is matching an adoptable child with someone who solely wishes to be a parent. The child's migration is incidental, but it is not irrelevant. In

fact, current adoption law insists that, if possible, children remain in their countries of birth. The Hague Convention on international adoption requires that authorities "have determined, after possibilities for placement of the child within the State of origin have been given due consideration, that an intercountry adoption is in the child's best interests" (Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, Paper 4b).[9] Thus, international adoption is a form of migration that has a very specific end – a child's placement into a family. Without that end migration would not be permitted, nor would it be advocated; indeed it appears here as an undesirable, tolerated by international bodies only because it supports the child's best interests. Therefore, in the early stages of international adoption, migration is not the most productive way to conceptualize this movement. From the perspective of the adopting parent(s) who have caused the child's migration, what is being achieved is a larger family.

Thus Peter Selman is absolutely correct to claim that international adoption is related to fertility issues. However, this is not *only* because of adopting couples' infertility nor because of decreasing fertility rates over all, presumably leading to fewer relinquished children domestically, as he suggests (Selman 2002, 206). I would propose taking Selman's argument a few steps further. At least for the early stages of international adoption – the years preceding it and the first several years of a child's life abroad – we must conceptualize adoption itself as a family-making project, or even as a kind of fertility. International adoption is a way of recruiting a child to your family. That is, it is more reasonable (demographically speaking) to treat international adoptions as the outcomes of fertility strategies, inflected by immigration policies and practices but not wholly of them. Overall, while migration is clearly one aspect of what is going on at the beginnings of international adoptions, family-making is far more consequential.

2. Adoption as migration: An adolescent's perspective, interpellated as immigrant

While family-making is the most significant motivator for *initiating* an international adoption, as Selman indicates, I nonetheless found additional evidence that supports the alternative interpretation of adoption as migration. The experiences of adolescent, transracial adoptees indicate that migration is an important lens for the interpretation of their experiences. As adoptees have aged into adolescence and beyond, and as international migration to Spain has grown impressively, adoptees may be "mis-identified" as immigrants (Hübinette and Tigervall 2009:344). For example, Carmela and her husband were walking on the sidewalk, and their kids were up ahead. Separated just by a few paces from their parents, the siblings paused to admire a car just long enough for its owner to snap, "What are you doing?" Young people who know that this phrase is meant for them have clearly also internalized a wider social apprehension of them as potential car thiefs.

This "mis-identification" of adoptees as (labor) migrants is made possible by several factors. First is their slow disaggregation from the family group, an independence that comes with adolescence. That is, the older they get, the more likely it is that they could move unaccompanied by a white family member through the streets of Madrid. That absence of a white kinsperson to help "place" the adoptee makes all the difference.[10] Second is the vast increase of immigrants to Spain, many from the same countries or regions as these international adoptees.

As members of the dominant society mis-identify internationally adopted adolescents as migrant youth, the adoptees themselves are in the process of developing their own complex identities. It is an open question for further research "which comes first," or – more likely – how identification of difference by self and others jointly and collaboratively develop. But the data I

collected in Spain suggest that there are also many adolescent adoptees who begin to identify with migrants. Diana Marre, who has worked with international adoption in Catalonia, notes that some adoptive parents there have reported "that their adolescent children began to make contact with immigrants from their country of origin, looking for 'their people' or seeking a sense of belonging, speaking like them and adopting their mode of dress" (Marre 2009, 239-40).

Data from interviews corroborate this interpretation. A Colombian adoptee, Laura, told me that her brother, also adopted from Colombia, remarked a few years ago "I'm not going to that disco because there's a lot of *sudacas* there," using a pejorative term for South Americans. Laura said that she replied to him, "Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Things have changed, and her brother now surrounds himself with South American friends and his Dominican girlfriend. To Laura this is a positive sign that means that "he's accepting where he's from."

In another interview, a Spanish couple, Diego and Gabriela, told me about their sixteen year old son, Pedro, adopted from Peru. Pedro was, not many months before our interview, "a real rebel…he got involved with a group, a gang," in Diego's words. Gabriela clarified: "Like a Latin King type." Diego went on: "Yes, but it seems like he gave it up since he started going out with his girlfriend and became more centered." Pedro's girlfriend is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants, and originally came to Spain through family reunification when she was "perhaps 8 years old," in Diego's estimation. Diego explained that Pedro "dresses – well, you didn't see it today, but sometimes he puts on earrings, a bandana, and we tell him not to wear them, but I know he puts them on once he leaves the house…Until just a few years ago, his friends were all Spanish. But now he looks in the mirror and he tries to identify with the others."

Pedro's immigrant girlfriend offered a tempering influence, but Diego was convinced that immigrants had caused the young man's bad attitude in the first place. He compared his family to another couple with a Peruvian child that live in a northern city of about 25,000 people and said that "[adopted children there] don't have as much trouble becoming integrated. There are fewer immigrants." This statement suggests that parents feel the presence of immigrants makes things harder for adopted children. I could not tell whether this was because people think they are immigrants, creating the conditions for a painful misreading, or whether it creates a temptation and possibility of affiliation with immigrants. In either case, however, these statements demonstrate that adolescent youth are being identified as immigrants by others, and that many of them come to seek out immigrants as friends or romantic partners.[11]

These examples suggest that the presence of immigrants has potentially significant consequences for adopted teens who come from the same region as do those immigrants. The argument I make here is that by adolescence, given the regular interpellations as immigrants that adolescent adoptees face, it is more reasonable to treat them (demographically speaking) as immigrants inflected by family-making (i.e., fertility) issues. The questions remaining to be investigated from a demographic perspective include: do adolescent adoptees benefit or suffer as a consequence of the presence of immigrants from their region of birth? For Laura, the consequences are potentially positive – immigrants can help adoptees to understand where they are from, a "truth" about them that "looking in the mirror" helps to document. Diego and Gabriela would probably agree, to the extent that they saw how Pedro's immigrant girlfriend offered a tempering influence. But Diego's analysis suggests that a multicultural context is also potentially a *risk factor* for internationally adopted kids – either because people think they are immigrants, creating the conditions for a painful misreading, or because it creates a temptation and possibility of affiliation with immigrants who are so sharply marginalized within Spanish society.

Conclusion

Demographers have labelled international adoption as "the unknown immigration" (Lozano and Kossoudji 2009), or the "quiet migration" (Weil 1984; Selman 2002). What lies behind those adjectives – what makes demographers uncomfortable with simply calling it adoption? I have argued here that international adoptees are a unique, age-graded, privileged kind of international migrant whose relocation is only possible because of the way they are embedded in families, and simultaneously excised from their families of origin.

To best understand international adoption, we must analyze it *dynamically*. Over the course of an adoptee's childhood and adolescence, the meaning of that adoptee will shift, and his or her location within demographic analyses should also shift. Particularly when adoptees are minors, adoption can be productively understood through a fertility or family-formation lens, from the perspective of the adopting parent(s), who cause the child's migration. Adoptive parents likely view adoption as a way to bring a child into their family – a form of fertility that we would do well to develop a model nuanced enough to capture. But as adoptees age and acquire more agency, this affinity evaporates and viewing international adoption as an aspect of international migration begins to make more sense. Adopted children over the course of their youth, and with great divergence depending on their own experiences, geographic locations, and characters, may experience their condition as similar to that of an immigrant. That young person may be viewed by others in his or her society as a migrant, and may be encouraged by family members to develop affection for their country of origin.

One further implication of my analysis is that, if our current models of fertility and migration do not well accommodate an understanding of international adoption, it may be necessary to sharpen or replace those models. For example, McFalls's basic introduction to population dynamics glosses fertility as "Adding New People," a phrase that seems to give more flexibility in comparing different ways of building a family, but then goes on to specify that "Fertility refers to the number of births that occur to an individual or in a population" (McFalls 2007, 4). International adoption reminds us that it matters how and what we are counting. Do parents who adopt internationally increase the national fertility rate? (Do parents who relinquish their children to international adoption decrease the national fertility rate?) Presumably not, given the use of the word "births," but the bigger question is almost a philosophical one. To what end do we count births? Is it to determine how the state's population grows or shrinks? Could it be helpful to classify adoption as a birth rather than as a migration, given that the immediate outcome is a child who grows up as a citizen of the state in question?

I raise similar questions with regard to our conceptualization of migration, given that demographers who have dealt with international adoption have broadly classified it as such. As McFalls writes, international migration "refers only to the movement of people across a [national border] for the purpose of changing their place of usual residence" (McFalls 2007, 12). In very basic terms this is the case for international adoption – but there is much more to it than changing the place of residence. Child welfare authorities have determined that it is not a new residence they need, but a specific kind of approved family – one that is authorized to adopt, one that happens to be in another country but this is almost incidental to the movement itself. Could it be helpful to further nuance our definitions of migration in order to account for the reasons that people move or are moved? Demographers are doing important work on this in other areas of migration, such as forced migration and human trafficking (Reed, et al. 1998), exploring the numerous factors that shape such movements, the different dimensions along which they can be

conceptualized, and the methodological innovations necessary to address the challenges in collecting this sort of data. I hope that a similar kind of in-depth analysis can one day be completed for international adoptions.

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[2] It is opposed to an "etic" perspective, which is developed by outsiders, analysts, observers, and so on. Demographic categories are overwhelmingly etic. See also (Szreter, et al. 2004).

[3] Working in the U.S., Kenney and Ortman attempt to use "different denominators—including all live births, all adoptions or all non-relative adoptions, all child immigrants or child immigrants by age" (Kenney and Ortman 2005).

[4] Carmen Giró, "El último reto de la adopción," http://www.magazinedigital.com/reportajes/sociedad/reportaje/cat_id/88, La Vanguardia, 24-6-2012, accessed July 9, 2012.

[5] For some context, Spain had a late "start date" compared to other European countries, due to the long dictatorship of Francisco Franco. International adoption began in the mid 1990s (Marre 2004; Marre 2007; Marre and Bestard 2004; Howell and Marre 2006; Selman 2009b, 577). Domestic adoption has until very recently been quite unusual in Spain, and surrogacy is prohibited, although the egg donation and in vitro industries are thriving (Bergmann 2011a; Bergmann 2011b).

[6] These numbers have begun to decline in the past two years, undoubtedly slowed greatly by the economic crisis but also affected by Spanish naturalization policies that ease immigrants out of the category "foreigner."

[7] In this, it resembles family reunification migration – migrant parents bringing their children to join them in a new country.

[8] Of course this statement disregards that immigrants too can become citizens, through a process of naturalization (although they have additional steps, such as permanent residence first, that adoptees do not have).

[9] Available at http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.text&cid=69. One implication here is that a family is the best place for a child to grow up regardless of the child's circumstances. Although the preference would be for a child to remain in his or her own State of origin. international adoption prioritizes placement into a family over continuity of residence (and culture, nationality, community and so on).

[10] This is not to say that such critiques don't happen when the parents and child are together. As the white U.S. mother of an African-American child recounted to Linda Seligmann, "Who wants to be afraid to walk to the Target and have a black family come up to you and say, 'Are you sure you know what you're doing with her hair?' What that can imply is, 'What are you doing raising a black child?'" (Seligmann 2009, 133).

[11] Many also respond to this interpellation by rejecting immigrants and wanting nothing to do with Peru; this reaction is also understandable in this interpretation. See Leinaweaver forthcoming for more discussion of this possibility.

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