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Figuring the transnational 'Child-to-be-adopted': The web as a virtual sociocultural contact zone for intercountry adoption

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Abstract

This paper presents our research which is part of a larger project that explores how to track and understand the linguistic, discursive and sociocultural contact zones or networks brought about by intercountry adoption. Using mediated discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, membership categorisation analysis and interaction analysis, the project attempts to trace a host of discourses and contingent practices of care and kinship that are heterogeneously assembled to 'translate' a child (legally and/or willingly) from one familial 'place' or network in the world to another, crossing linguistic, sociocultural, racial, class and national boundaries in the process. We introduce in this paper our first observations of the discursive construction of the 'child-to-be-adopted' in the pre-adoption stage. We focus on the crucial role of the 'intimate public sphere' of the Internet from the parents' point-of-view, specifically their personal web pages and online diaries that anticipate the 'transnational' mobility of the 'waiting' or abandoned child in a faraway place.

Epigraph

"The pupils of the first grade were discussing a photo of a family. In the picture, the hair of the youngest boy was of a different colour than that of the rest of family. One of the boys in the class thought that the boy was adopted, to which a girl from the class said: 'I know everything about adoption because I am adopted.' 'What does adoption mean then?' the boy asked. 'It means', the girl answered, 'that a child does not grow in the mother's belly but in her heart.'" (a translation of a re-circulated story from an online guestbook of a Finnish adoption website)

Introduction

This paper presents our research which is part of a larger project that explores how to track and understand the linguistic, discursive and sociocultural contact zones or networks brought about by intercountry adoption. Using mediated discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, membership categorisation analysis and interaction analysis, the project attempts to trace a host of discourses and contingent practices of care and kinship that are heterogeneously assembled to 'translate' a child (legally and/or willingly) from one familial 'place' or network in the world to another, crossing linguistic, sociocultural, racial, class and national boundaries in the process. We introduce in this paper our first observations of the discursive construction

of the ‘child-to-be-adopted’ in the pre-adoption stage. We focus on the crucial role of the ‘intimate public sphere’ of the Internet from the parents’ point-of-view, specifically their personal web pages and online diaries that anticipate the ‘transnational’ mobility of the ‘waiting’ or abandoned child in a faraway place. As the quotation in the epigraph illustrates, we should be aware of the circulatory power and mobility of such discourses and their sometimes unpredictable effects — this time on the adopted child. The story by an adoptive parent entered onto an online guest book humorously shows the consequences for the adopted child of a particularly intensive mobilisation by adoptive parents of a sentimentalised discourse of adoption, one which can also be found in the pre-adoption stage. The adopted girl in the anecdotal narrative had taken literally the effusive origin stories, such as ‘you grew in my heart’, or the repeated promise or declaration by the adoptive parents(s), ‘I (will) love you in my heart (with all my heart)’, which are also found on adopters’ personal homepages.¹

Intercountry adoption

Intercountry adoption features regularly in the mass media, often spectacularly (as in the illegal cases where babies are traded across national borders as commodities for childless couples), yet the general public knows little about the processes and practices of this fairly recent phenomenon (since the 1950s). There are big differences in intercountry adoption practices across the Western countries (Selman 2000). In only a few receiving countries is adoption thoroughly regulated at all stages by the state. Denmark and Finland are comparable examples, though Finland has much fewer intercountry adoptions per year. The adoptive family is an intense site of inspection, an intersection of a whole range of medical, judicial, educational, psychological and linguistic practices. Through application procedures, social worker visits, obligatory courses, official adoption agencies and adoption associations, the child and the prospective adoptive parent(s) are discursively constructed in a variety of ways, for example as a ‘last resort’ (for the child and/or the adopter) or a ‘complete’ family unit (shifting with the move to legalise single and gay/lesbian adopters). Other countries, such as the USA, France and Germany have a much more liberalised ‘market’ with less state regulation, and so private sector agencies and lawyers flourish, resulting in quite different discourses that are often more legalistic, individualistic and parent-centred.

Research studies of intercountry adoption are increasingly common, but are predominantly from psychological, psycho-social or social welfare perspectives. Instead, we wish to promote a discourse studies approach that investigates how the social issues and discourses of adoption are mediated in the actions and practices of different actors, primarily of adoptive parents.

Discourse studies, mediated action and transnationality

Social and political theory has taken a decidedly ‘global’ turn in recent years, resulting in a sustained critique of conceptualisations of ‘society’ and the ‘nation-state’. Instead, social theorists ask us to refocus on, for example, transnationality, global orderings, hybrid

¹ However, in the preface to this circulated story, the author of the guestbook entry writes: “The old saying that ‘children always tell the truth’ seems to hold true here, too. Beautifully put, or what?” Thus, we can see that the sentimentalised discourse is so powerful that this reader/sender does not see the irony in it. The child’s misunderstanding reveals, in fact, the attempt by the adoptive parents to smooth over the perceived absence or loss of a biological origin narrative, yet they appeal to the equivalence of their ‘love’ to that based on cultural narratives of ‘blood ties’. There is a discrepancy between the adults’ metaphorical discourse and the child’s bodily understanding.

collectives, flows and mobilities, and networks. Given that discourse studies draws heavily upon social theory we are compelled to ask what new possibilities there are for discourse studies as a result of contemporary social and political theorising. We might query what the consequences are of taking seriously an emerging ‘network sociality’ for a discourse studies methodology. What can discourse analysis in its various forms provide for understanding events as mediated in, through and across talk, text and other modalities of discourse? How are we to describe and explain ‘global events’ as manifested in actual discursive practices? With the emergence of a new sociocultural order of globalisation, how can we refigure ‘discourse’ (and language) in relation to the post-national?

We are interested in pushing two methodologies we are familiar with — critical discourse analysis (CDA) and conversation analysis (CA) — in new directions to cope with the impact of globalisation, new media and the ‘knowledge society’. Our lives are increasingly interconnected with actors of all scales across the planet, and these relationships are mediated in new ways that tend to deterritorialise communication and language. Moreover, we know this is happening, and our attempt to understand how and why reflexively shapes our interactions and practices in ways that are inimical to globalisation itself. No longer can we restrain ourselves to look at ‘texts’ as transmission containers for dominant ideologies without regard to their circulation and uptake. No longer can we examine the ‘local ordering’ of a single conversation when the participants themselves do not recognise the scale of ‘local’ (or ‘micro’) as wholly constitutive of their interactions. In fact, text and context, micro and macro, actor and structure, as well as local and global, are all problematic dualisms that often hinder our understanding of sociocultural ordering. Latour (1993, 1999) criticises the rock solid distinctions between nature/culture and society/technology that modernists have produced, but which do not bear scrutiny. When we investigate how we interact in and with the world, they are usually *not* found in such dualistic terms. Adoption is a case in which nature and culture, and kinship and belonging, are clearly problematised. Howell (1999) uses Latour’s notion of ‘hybridity’ to elucidate how adoptive parents create cognitive boundaries between different contexts to attempt to insulate the conflicting discourses from each other, eg. the social versus biological accounts of origin and ‘roots’.

Following mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001), we prefer to shift the focus to investigating mediated action, action that is always mediated in significant ways for the participants. Because discourses come to have certain effects when they are engaged in specific actions, we need to track just how social actors produce and interpret intelligible action in recognisable ways. We are, therefore, also concerned with exploring more intimately the relations between discourse and action, and between the discursive and the non-discursive, which have hitherto been ignored or under theorised. Scollon (2001: 158) is fundamentally concerned with “how the transformations from practice, action, and habitus to person, characteristics, and identity is performed through discursive practices and other practices of technologisation and objectivisation.” We might compare his formulation to that of Foucault’s: “it is one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (1980: 60). Thus, in our approach the apparently fundamental relations that constitute our beliefs in identity, self and individuality are contingent, and thus just how they are articulated on each occasion is left open for investigation.

We also wish to expand our range of phenomena from written texts and spoken conversations to include multimodal discourse, spaces, materialities and artifacts. Agency is often distributed across a heterogeneous arrangement or collective, and thus it cannot be understood

from the perspective of only one type of ‘text’ or interactional encounter. Hence, we need not only a ‘textography’ (Swales 1998), but a ‘media-ography’, as well as a mapping of ‘discourses in place’ (Scollon & Scollon 2003).

Method

Following mediated discourse analysis, we wish to determine the active participants, mediational means, scenes, events and actions that matter for each nexus of practice. We are engaged in the beginnings of a ‘multi-site’ (or ‘trans-site’) ethnography (Marcus 1995, Hakken 1999), which follows the actants, the artefacts, the metaphors, the narratives, the life/biographies and the conflicts in and across multiple ‘sites’. We need to determine which social issues and mediational means matter for participants and how actors appropriate mediational means in their mediated actions. For instance, we are interested in what sources of state or agency information and informal knowledges are circulated and appropriated on parental websites and discussion groups. Personal websites are also a means to identify member’s generalisations and individual experiences.²

Since we are focusing at this stage on the Internet presence and online participation of adoptive parents, we are conducting what could be called a ‘virtual’ ethnography (Howard 2002, Hakken 1999, Hine 2000, Markham 1998 and Paccagnella 1997). This means we need to consider a range of methodological and ethical issues particular to this domain of social practice. It is difficult to uncover the practices of ‘going online’ when communication practices and mediated actions are de-contextualised, transient, distributed, asymmetric and mobile. Rather than selecting a territory, the researcher has to identify a ‘virtual’ community or nexus of practice and select the important nodes and nodal events in the social and discursive network.

Data collection

Initially, we follow the prospective adoptive parents as they navigate through the complex process of intercountry adoption, while simultaneously mapping the ways in which ‘the child-to-be-adopted’ is resemiotised up until first physical contact between the adoptive parents and the adoptive child.

We have identified that many prospective adopters use the Internet to garner information, advice and contacts to help them through the adoption process and the institutional procedures.³ Some adopters establish semi-permanent web sites, which can be quite extensive. Moreover, a few adopters become key actors in the creation and maintenance of a home-grown ‘grassroots’ adoption web portal (eg. ‘Chinaadopt’, Kinaadopt in Denmark) or a community forum and mailing list (eg. Yahoo groups). There are, of course, other possible websites that may interest pre-adopters: for example, the vital adoption agency websites, the official state websites, the statistical sources and the anti-adoption websites. At this stage we

² Some adoption researchers have also drawn upon websites in their analyses: Anagnost (2000), Cartwright (2003), and Shiu (2001).

³ Of course, access to the world-wide Internet is for a privileged few. We have no statistics on how many pre-adoptive parents in Denmark have access and use the Internet regularly. Given their status as adopters, and the provision of many resources online by the adoption agencies (eg. the waiting list), it is likely that most if not all have access and use it during the process of adoption. It is unlikely, however, that the birth mothers in the sending countries will have access (Harcourt 1999).

are more interested in how particular adopters construct their websites, network with others locally and internationally, orient to other sites or sources of information, share advice and create 'public goods', and narrate publicly their own personal experiences and problems with adopting their children. Moreover, as Sarangi & Slembrouck (1996: 18) argue, the public domain efficiently manages the needs and wants from the private domain. These needs and wants and how they are shaped through contact with the public domain are readable (as one type of reporting) in the web diaries.

We have collected a corpus of personal websites and online discussion forums from different receiving countries, and we are focusing on their relationship to particular donor countries from a comparative perspective. The receiving countries are Denmark, Finland, the USA, the UK, Canada and Australia. The donor countries include China, Korea, India and Columbia, which are the countries supplying the most number of intercountry adoptees. In our corpus, adoptive family websites are found predominantly in North America and Denmark, but are not so prevalent in the UK, Australia or Finland. Discussion forums are found in all receiving countries, though there are a number of international forums as well (usually in English).

Observation and analysis

The first set of analytical observations concerns how to describe some aspects of the sociotechnical 'networking' of parents as observed in their interactions and familial productions on the Internet. Also of interest is the global propagation and diffusion of discourses, genres and styles in these virtual nexus of practice. A further set of analytical observations focuses on the reflexive awareness different actors have of the ideological import of their language use in relation to adoption. The last section concerns how the child is figured in the narratives of the personal web pages and online diaries designed and authored by the prospective adoptive parents or the adoptive families.

The intimate public sphere and the technologisation of networks

The Internet offers a variety of forums for parents (and adoptees) to make contact with 'like-minded' people, with affiliations based on stage in the official process; chosen birth country, region or orphanage; adoption agency; category of family; category of adoptee and so on. Adoptive parents form both loose and tight networks to share experience, distribute knowledge (outside of the control of agencies/state) and form support groups, which to some extent are like communities of practice (Wenger 1998) that negotiate a virtual sociocultural contact zone. Personal websites, 'low-fi' web navigation software (search engines, web rings, weblogs) and online discussion forums afford new ways and transform traditional ways of building trust, creating 'public goods', distributing agency and awareness of presence across a complicated sociotechnical collective (see Wellman 2002, Rheingold 2002).⁴

It has been noted that the Internet makes possible an 'intimate public sphere' (Anagnost 2000; see Berlant 1997). One reason for the relatively intimate nature of the personal websites may derive from the intense scrutiny that the couple or single adopter have had to undergo as part of the institutionalised adoption process. This has inculcated both a more radical discursive reflection on their identity as a non-normative family, and a longing to be publicly

⁴ We can describe these techniques and tools as providing for 'centres of calculation' (Latour 1987) or 'portals of association', which network and mediate the calculation and testing of performative social bonds and alliances.

accountable as a family that copes with adoption. Even though they make up only one percent of families with children, they share in common with other pre-adoptive and adoptive parents the experience of the intrusive practices of the authorities. This may result in the desire to share that experience online (and offline) for the benefit of others.

Most of the web sites we have examined are authored by adoptive mothers. There is a noticeable absence of father(s) as autobiographical subjects (either in heterosexual couples or as single adopters) — except as they are included within the narrative ‘we’ (shifting between ‘I’ the mother to ‘we’ the parents) — though the father/husband may be working behind the scenes to create and maintain the website that features the archive and narrative of adoption. Many adoptive parents’ web sites contain a ‘maternal archive’ (Berlant 1997), a ‘museological mania’ (Kelly & Apter 1993: 352), that constitutes an imaginary archival ‘origin story’ ready to be accessed at some future date when the adopted child will undertake the self-reflection and questioning expected of an adoptee. Here we also find a technologisation, a hybridised convergence of the Internet economy with the prospective adopters — ‘the consuming family to be’.

On their websites, many adoptive parents create a bricolage of images, photographs, music, texts, documents, layouts, navigation systems and links, borrowing from here and there to create a semiotic aggregate (Lemke 2002, Scollon & Scollon 2003). The personal homepages and websites by the adoptive parents are constructed in ways that afford a variety of different usages (cp. Karlsson 2002), eg.

- 1) as a ‘maternal archive’ (Berlant 1997) for the child at some future date to ‘discover’ his or her ‘origins’;
- 2) as a ‘public good’, useful for other adoptive parents to ‘learn’ from;
- 3) as a resource for the author;
- 4) as a means to track in limited ways a social network or community of practice (eg. to link outside the website to other ‘waiting’ parents, webring, discussion forms).

Many adoptive parents design their web sites by drawing interdiscursively upon a design shell and/or a prefabricated iconology. Thus, this can tie them into chains of flexible economic exchange as carriers and transmitters of dual-use signifiers: their appropriation of the off-the-shelf iconology and software supplied by web providers insures the circulation of the product or brand amongst the community of users/browsers. Sometimes adoptive parents from non-English speaking countries appropriate CyberEnglish software (technologisation of genres). For example, adoptive parents from Denmark have created a website using the American CaringBridge website service (whose catchphrase is “Be There”), which they also publicised on an online discussion forum in Danish. In their provision of easy scripts for the creation of personal homepages (as virtual ‘lifebooks’ or ‘weblogs’) served from their website, not only does this software permit the technologisation and resemiotisation (Iedema 2001) of the ‘maternal archive’ (eg. journal history and photo collection), the software provider also seductively aims to provide a free social service for the parents and their larger social network, eg. “A free online service to keep friends and family - your caring community - in touch and informed during important life events, including medical treatment, childbirth or adoption” (<http://www.caringbridge.org>). We wonder how extensive is the appropriation and diffusion of ‘European American’ communicative and caring practices into other national contexts and hence into the practices of adoptive families both online and offline, eg. with self-help books, web-advice, therapy techniques, and so on (cp. Cameron 2000, 2002).

'Positive adoption language': contested language ideologies

Among adoptive parents (and adoptees), there is clearly an awareness of and a strong emotional response towards the inappropriate behaviour of people who have little understanding of adoption, ie. those who can hurt the feelings of adoptive parents and adoptees in everyday or institutional encounters. Common attitudes to adoption are usually stereotypical and normative, and are often drawn from the mass media. The parents signal their discomfort when they give advice on appropriate language usage, combined with anecdotal evidence of such encounters and guidance on how to solve 'the problem' or avoid the topic or encounter altogether. Hence, parents are cognisant of the tactical importance of language in shaping sociocultural responses and actions. If one wishes to effect social change, then one strategy is to initiate a shift in the everyday use of concepts (mediational means), such that certain actions become thinkable, and thus doable, while others become unthinkable. Sometimes known facetiously as 'political correctness', Fairclough (2003: 22) calls this a process of cultural and discursive intervention, which "attempts to change discourses on the assumption that changing discourses will, or may, lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalisation."

Many US American adoption support websites give practical, constructive advice on specific vocabulary and phrases to use that avoid what they see as the negative associations that adoption has in English. Unfortunately, in their recommendations to condone a particular usage on the grounds that it is offensive to adoptive parents and their families, the highly contested politics of adoption is often elided. The practice of attending to politically correct language usage is often termed "Respectful Adoption Language" or something similar by adopters. The advice is often given in the form of a two column list of appropriate and inappropriate language: SAY THIS, DON'T SAY THAT. The items on the list are visually presented in a left and right column: the left signifying the appropriate term or phrase, and the right the problematic word or phrase. The list constitutes a classificatory schema (structured as a set of binary categories) that attempts to 'de-biologise' the origins of the child, diminish the role of the 'birth' mother/culture, or reduce the importance of 'adoption' as an ontological descriptive modifier. Examples include:

- (1) 'birth parent', but not 'real parent';
- (2) 'genetic relative', but not 'blood relative';
- (3) 'our child (by adoption)', but not 'our adopted child';
- (4) 'adoption circle', but not 'adoption triad';
- (5) 'was adopted', but not 'is adopted'.

Another example, which is intended to emphasize 'choice' and agency, recommends that it is inappropriate to say that the 'birth' mother 'places a child for adoption' or 'gives a child away', but that she 'makes an adoption plan' for the child. One of the implications is that the mother in the sending country is relinquishing the child freely.

On some websites anecdotal evidence is given that reconstructs a particular everyday conversational encounter in which the adoptive parent is insulted, hurt or otherwise offended. The examples aim to illustrate the insensitivity of the interlocutor upon hearing the news of the adoption plans or in the presence of an adopted child. For instance, here is one case of a reported conversation narrated (and fictionalised) by a member of an Internet bulletin board on adoption:

Q: "What's her mother's name?"

A: "My name is Lisa."

Q: "No, I mean her real mother's name."

A: "I'm her mother."

Q: "NO, I mean her real mother."

A: "What do you think I am? Polyester?"

And then, as if I must be some sort of an idiot, I said, "Ohhhh you mean her birthmother!"

Q: Then she said, "Well you knew what I meant all the time."

A: "No I didn't. I'm her real mother and I always will be. What do you think Sara will go through if she heard u say that I'm not her real mother and she is too young to understand?"
(excerpted from Johnston 2001)

This example illustrates an orientation by the adoptive mother (A) to inappropriate questioning and categorisation by her interlocutor (Q). Rather than explicitly correct the assumptions that Q makes in her question (eg. that the child has a 'real' mother who is not present and who has a name that is known to A), A uses a multi-turn discursive strategy to frustrate and thus educate an ignorant interlocutor. On the one hand, Q is engaged in repairing (third turn repair) what she hears as A's misunderstanding of her original question "What's her mother's name?". On the other hand, A is 'performing' a mock misunderstanding of the reference of the question. In fact, she is overdoing an implicit other-initiated, other-repair (ending with her insincere recognition of the trouble source: "Ohhhh you mean her birthmother!"). This results in Q realising that the misunderstanding is intended, and that the term 'real mother' is an insensitive way of referring to the 'birth mother', yet she appeals to the reasonableness of her original question in the circumstances. A denies this and then delivers with a distinctly moral tone an indignant account of her 'realness' as a mother.

Another example (from Johnston 2001) illustrates a similar scenario, told second-hand, but one in which the offending person apparently should have known better because of their category-bound professional expertise and sensitivity.

Friends of mine adopted, and shortly after adopting the husband was telling a client about it and the client asked, "Oh, well how much did she cost you?" No this was not a blundering idiot like most, but a social worker!

In this case, alternative interpretations are possible that undercut the complaint against this person rather than make him or her a more extreme case who should have known better (the exception that always proves the rule). For instance, it may have been exactly because s/he was a social worker, and hence such a categorisation as a professional (not a client) can be heard as implicating s/he knows about the process/costs, that s/he has a right (more than an average citizen/friend has) to take this issue up in such a fashion, as a matter-of-fact way of inquiring about the process.

On the web, an alternative source of advice can be found that aims to contest and subvert the common ways in which language (for instance, the parental discourse of adoption) maintains a particular pro-adoption ideology that elides actors, and deletes or subsumes agency. It is to be found on some English language adoptee web sites, such as those of Bastard Nation and Trans-Racial Abduction. One web site reproachfully calls the naturalised pro-adoption discourse 'Adoption-Speak'. For example, targets for change are 'adoption', 'adoptee', 'birth mother', 'best interests', 'adoption plan' and 'as if'. These websites are clearly deliberately antagonistic towards the pro-adoption websites mentioned above.

The next stage of our study will be to monitor how different actors attend to or disattend an ‘adoption ideology’ in a variety of discursive (and non-discursive) practices, such as everyday conversation with family or friends, social worker visits, online discussion forums, preparation course group work and autobiographical narratives.

How is the ‘child-to-be’ figured and categorised?

The last set of analytical observations focuses on how the child is figured in different discourses in the narratives and intertextuality of the personal web pages and online diaries designed and authored by the prospective adoptive parents or the adoptive families. The online diaries can be regarded as a mediational means to claim public trustworthiness. In other words, if a couple keeps a public diary about their adoption process, it is in a way claiming that they have ‘nothing to hide’.⁵ In contrast, the information that the client gives in a bureaucratic process is usually not accepted at face value by the institution — clients are presumed to be ‘uncooperative’ and their contributions are open to scrutiny (see Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996: 47).

In the Scandinavian adoption sites scrutinised for this study, the absence of the word ‘child’ is remarkable. It is only when the desired child is talked about in relation to adoption that people write specifically about ‘a child’ or even ‘our child’. For example,

- (1) ‘with certainty there would come a child, after a long time with uncertain IVF treatments’ (“der med sikkerhed ville komme et barn, ovenpå den lange tid med usikre IVF-behandlinger”), (from ‘Carmen and Jakob’s web diary’⁶ in which they discuss adoption vs. fertility treatments);
- (2) ‘our future child might not come from the Saanxi province’ (“tuleva lapsemme ei ehkä ole Saanxin maakunnasta”), (‘Samppa’ in a diary entry anticipating a trip to China, the donor country);
- (3) ‘adoption permission for one child’ (“adoptiolupa yhdelle lapselle”), (from ‘Samppa’s’ diary entry about the institutional decision for a permission to adopt);
- (4) and finally, ‘it is far and foremost a child one wishes for oneself’ (“man ønsker sig jo først og fremmest et barn”), (from ‘Carmen and Jakob’s’ adoption diary when the wish-for-a-child is talked about at a general level).

Also, reference to a ‘child’ appears often in descriptions about what the adoption agencies do. For instance, they ‘mediate children’ (“formidler born”), or there is a ‘child in referral’ (“barn i forslag”).

The status of web diaries as a source for information and knowledge to other adoptive parents, and not just as ‘notes for oneself’ becomes clear in, for instance, the following quote from ‘Carmen and Jakob’s’ web diary: ‘If one gets problems with one’s child, AD is quite definitely a good and competent councillor.’ (“Hvis man får problemer med sit barn er AD helt sikkert en god og kompetent rådgiver.”) So, instead of ‘if we get problems with our child’, a generic, instructive tone is used. The question then becomes: Is the instructive tone used to avoid talking about ‘my/our child’, and, instead, to talk about ‘one’ and ‘one’s child’,

⁵ The Finnish websites in the corpus are deliberately anonymised, except for one Finnish-Swedish family website. Thus, in these cases the adoption process itself, and not the individual adopter, becomes accentuated.

⁶ Although the adoption websites are in the public domain, accessible to anyone over the Internet, we have made our examples anonymous by changing names.

or: Does the instructive mode offer a possibility to talk about ‘one’s child’, even if not intimately?

But when Carmen and Jakob report on somebody else talking about their future child, the word ‘child’ is used to talk about ‘us’ and the emotional connection: ‘The social worker of our case in the Copenhagen Municipality rang and told us that it would unfortunately not be her who would bring us the happy news about a child, because she would stop working.’ (“Vores sagsbehandler i Københavns Kommune ringede og fortalte, at det desværre ikke ville blive hende, der skulle overbringe os den glædelige nyhed om et barn, da hun skulle holde op.”) The care taken to avoid talking about ‘our child’ continues even when the couple announces that there is a child waiting for them — it is done first with the official formulation ‘we received a child-in-referral’ (“vi fik barn i forslag”), and then it is formulated through membership in a group: ‘we would be among those who got a child’ (“vi ville være blandt dem der fik barn”).

Hence, the authors of these Finnish and Danish web diaries seem to avoid talking about ‘our child’, and even the word ‘child’ only appears in connection with (often pre-formulaic) ‘adoption talk’, or when the adoptive parents instruct others on possible problems with an adopted child, or when they report on others talking about their child-to-be, or when they talk about themselves as members of a bigger group that adopts.

Although adoption diaries are still a fairly new and rare example of the intimate public sphere, it is pertinent to compare them to online pregnancy diaries (see Madge & O’Connor 2002). The Finnish adoption web site quoted above was especially interesting because the woman became pregnant after around two years in the adoption process (this sometimes happens and the adoption process is legally terminated). She then started a pregnancy diary on the same site. This new diary gives a possibility for us to compare how the future biological child is discursively constructed in pregnancy diaries with how adopted children are constructed in adoption diaries. As was the case in other Finnish and Danish data (personal web pages) it was typical that the words ‘child’, ‘baby’ or ‘fetus’ were not used explicitly, and especially not in the formulation ‘our child/baby’. Nevertheless, reference to the bureaucratic process ‘adoption’ as a term entails ‘child’, and therefore makes it possible for the website author not to mention the ‘virtual child’, who possibly has already been born in the faraway donor country. In the same way, the term ‘pregnancy’ or the expression ‘being pregnant’ makes it possible not to refer to a ‘child’ or a ‘baby’, or a ‘fetus’.

The pregnant woman in Finland, ‘Santtu’, calls her site ‘Santtu’s adoption and baby pages’, thus contrasting ‘adoption’ with (biological) ‘baby’. As in the adoption diaries analysed earlier, there is no mention of ‘child’, ‘baby’, or ‘fetus’, in this diary. The first reference to the fetus is a link to an ultrasound picture: “the first ultra”. Then the child can be talked about as parts — ‘the hands were clearly visible’ — or, especially, as a heart beat (taken as evidence that there is something there that is alive). The first reference to the fetus is by the humorous term “the Minnow”, a metaphorical expression which later was changed into a nickname (with capital letter and the quotation marks dropped). ‘Baby’ appears for the first time in connection with the buying of used baby clothing, i.e. not about the specific baby that is expected. The last ultrasound pictures mentioned were taken officially (at some specific point in the pregnancy, unlike many of the ones she had taken in a private clinic just to get a ‘picture’), and among them was a ‘profile’. Now the category ‘boy’ (to refer to the gender — could also mean ‘son’ in Finnish) is used: Minnow’s gender was ‘revealed’ in these pictures.

Still, at the end of the diary, Minnow is not talked about as ‘our Minnow’ — the humorous distance to the unborn is kept linguistically.

Therefore, we can see that both adoptive and biological parents appear to avoid talking directly about a/their ‘child’ or ‘fetus’. One way of interpreting this lack of explicit linguistic reference is that the waiting parent(s) do not want to ‘claim’ the child before physical contact with the child. In the Finnish adoption diary, however, there is a change after she learns she is pregnant. She now describes their plans a month earlier to travel to the donor country ‘to get our little girl or boy’. In addition, she writes in the pregnancy diary: ‘our adopted child from China’. When the adoption process is over, it seems to be easier to talk about ‘our (adopted) child’.

In contrast, it appears that pre-adopters on some of the US American sites have no problem claiming the child as theirs. Indeed, one class of US American adoptive parents’ websites prefigure the ‘waiting child’ even before the referral of a specific child (accompanied by the medical records and the photograph(s) of the child). Adoptive-parents-to-be construct a schematic, generic web design to be filled at the appropriate time with details of the significant next event, such as the referral photo, the acceptance, the trip and the physical contact.⁷ For instance, one website includes a caption “referral photo to go here” to accompany an empty picture frame. These website diaries also indicate that naming the child is an important decision at this early stage for the parents-to-be, as is their preparation of the ‘home’ (through consumption) for the much anticipated arrival of the ‘waiting child’.⁸ This may reflect the differences in the adoption process, which in the USA is an individual, legal issue, but in Scandinavia the ethics of the process are accentuated in official discourses and courses, in which the future adoptive parents are encouraged to some extent to see the whole process from the child’s — and not only their own — perspective.

Even if the Scandinavian parents would not linguistically talk about ‘their child/baby’, they were, anyway, keen to ‘foresee’ or imagine the forthcoming addition to their family — to visualise as well as gather scraps of information or ‘data’ about the infant and its pre-history. Visualisation of the fetus — the biological child — is possible through ultrasound. For adopted children we can envisage an analogous ‘scan’ or resemiotisation composed of an assemblage of evidence, for instance referral photos, photos of adopted children from that country, medical records, statistical records, and so on. Thus, with adoption we could talk about low frequency or ‘low fi’ scanning; that is, picking information from here and there, which is thoroughly a heterogeneous assemblage of ‘culture’, ‘nature’ and ‘technology’.

Conclusion

Further studies will investigate how adopters integrate their online practices — browsing, building a web presence and taking part in networks and discussion forums on the Internet — with how they manage their domestic life, their contacts with the authorities and strangers, their participation in adoption preparation courses, and their ongoing disclosure of their adoptive status (to kin, friends, colleagues and strangers). We are also interested in how these

⁷ See Cartwright (2003) and Telfer (1999) for extensive analyses of parents’ use of the referral photographs they receive from the agency.

⁸ We might also ask why these pre-adopters, in their eagerness to adopt as soon as permissible, have occupied their time in website building. Is this a middle-class preoccupation in a risk society?

practices mediate and assemble their lifeworld of adoption as nexus of practice, as well as construct and circulate sociocultural knowledge about the appropriate forms of adoptive relations.

If we better understand how prospective adopters formally and informally navigate the 'linguascapes' of adoption texts, media, rules, institutions and practices, we may be better able to recommend how to develop participatory adoptive parenting courses, to promote empowering public adoption discourses and to provide timely online resources for facilitating the parents' decision-making about transnational adoption and their adoptive practices within an ongoing ethical, child-centred policy.

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