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Review of Sociological Literature on Intercountry Adoption

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This review surveys sociological literature on intercountry adoption from 1997 to 2010. The analysis finds a preponderance of literature from the United States, reflecting its place as a major receiving country, and a focus on adoption experience organised by reference to the adoption triad: adoptive parents, adoptees, birth families. Reflecting the power imbalances in intercountry adoption, the voices and views of adoptive parents dominate the literature. There is an emerging literature generated by researchers who are intercountry adoptees, while birth families remain almost invisible in this literature. A further gap identified by this review is work which examines intercountry adoption as a global social practice and work which critically examines policy.

Keywords: Literature review, sociology, intercountry adoption, adoption triad.

Introduction

This article reviews sociological literature on contemporary intercountry adoption, identifying key themes and approaches employed to explore the social and cultural implications of the practice. The temporal scope focuses primarily on publications from 1997 to 2010 (with some publications after 2010). The major finding of this review is that the research literature on intercountry adoption tends to reflect the power distribution of the three sides of the adoption triad: with adoptive parents' views, voices and experiences dominating; an emerging literature which looks at the adoptee experience; and very little work focused on the family and communities which lose children to intercountry adoption. Work which examines intercountry adoption structurally and in terms of policy is extremely scarce, highlighting a challenge for sociologists engaged in this field.

Intercountry adoption is a western-generated phenomenon. Its history is rooted in humanitarian responses to the plight of children in war and disaster, where policy is made in haste or not at all (Fronek, forthcoming; Fronek and Cuthbert, 2012a). Key flashpoints are the Korean and Vietnam Wars where, in the latter, 'Operation Babylift' enabled the mass evacuation of children overseas for the purposes of adoption (Willing, 2004). Intercountry adoption was readily framed by rescue discourses that brought together 'waif' children with 'heroic' and 'warrior like' adoptive parents (Zigler, 1976; Cuthbert and Lothian, 2010),while adoptees' birth families existed as 'ghosts in the room' (Gunsberg, 2010, quoted in Raine, 2011: 9; Riggs, 2012).

Debates on the purpose and outcomes of contemporary intercountry adoptions are increasingly fragmented with tensions and opposing perspectives. These are particularly evident between three main actors within the so-called 'adoption triad': adoptive parents, adoptees and birth families; that is, the families to whom adoptees are biologically connected. Other key actors such as adoption policy makers, adoption professionals (such as social workers) and private, non-government and government representatives also play a role, but one which is rarely examined in the research literature, as noted in this review. These actors intervene at structural, political, legal, economic and social levels, and mediate, via legislation, the establishment of country-to-country programs and assessment processes that prospective adopters must navigate to acquire a child (Cuthbert and Spark, 2009). While adoption is often seen as private familial practice, it unfolds within a complex interplay of private and societal understandings of what constitutes families. Families, whether formed through adoption or other means, are socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1967), culturally shaped and historically situated (Hall, 1990). Adoption policy reflects dominant views of family at given points in time with respect to who is considered fit to parent and who is considered an 'adoptable' child (Cuthbert *et al*., 2009; Swain, 2012).

In western countries where intercountry adoption receives support, the emphasis is on the acceptability of adoptive family formation, relative to other forms of family formation. Sentiments of child 'rescue' from wars, poverty or social exclusion also come into play. Over the past twenty years, it is the individuals and couples struggling with infertility that opt out of or exhaust assisted reproductive technologies (ART) who have turned to intercountry adoption (Fisher, 2003; Selman, 2009). In contrast to other modes of family formation, intercountry adoption involves transferring a child from *other* parents rather than creating a child where social, cultural and biological heritage are shared by the parents (Willing, 2010). Adopters receive and assume the weighted task of raising 'other people's children' (Spark and Cuthbert, 2009). The social and cultural dynamics of this phenomenon that occur transracially across national borders and cultures are a rich field for sociological analysis.

Method

Databases in the social sciences were searched to identify relevant literature. Search terms were 'sociology' combined with 'intercountry', 'international', 'overseas' 'foreign and 'adoptions'. Specific searches were conducted of websites and resources that focused on adoption research. These were: 'The history of adoption project' (Monash University, n.d.); The Canadian Adoption Research Writings Webpage (Adoption Council of Canada, n.d.) and 'The adoption history project' (Oregon University, n.d.). The *Adoption Quarterly* journal was systematically searched for articles that contained sociological content or method. Internet searches were also conducted using Google Scholar and Google Books using the same search terms. Publications were read and organised into research relevant to each triad actor. Themes, issues and interrelationships are identified and critiqued in the analysis. Gaps are also identified.

A critical analysis of selected contemporary sociological research conducted over the past twenty years on birth families, adoptees and adoptive parents has the potential to inform broader social understandings and to inform researchers, policy makers, adoption

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practitioners and adoption communities. Recommendations for future research are drawn from this analysis.

Contextualising intercountry adoption and sociological insights for contemporary research

Adoption policies and practices enable the movement of children across cultures across time. Simon and Alstein argue that intercountry adoption has evolved into 'a story of global relations, where Non White, free-for-adoption Third World children are adopted by White families living in the West' (2000: 6). Shiu (2001) attributes the concomitant legal, national and social institutionalisation of modern adoption practice to the establishment of the Holt International Adoption Agency in Korea and Operation Babylift in 1975.

The Korean (1950–1953) and the Vietnam (1954–1975) Wars were crucial to the establishment of practices that expatriate children for adoption. These two 'founding' episodes involved the 'airlifting' of children for adoption by predominantly white parents to western nations such as the United States, Canada and Australia (Brookfield, 2009). While typically framed as acts of rescue with ensuing policies favouring the needs of prospective parents (Fronek, 2009; Fronek and Cuthbert, 2012a; Fronek and Cuthbert, 2012b), a number of adult adoptee scholars criticise adoption as a form of 'cultural imperialism' and 'kidnapping' (Hübinette, 2006; Kim, 2006; Berquist, 2009), fuelled by concerns that inadequate processes existed for accurately determining orphan status (Emerson, 1975; Zigler, 1976; Herrman and Kasper, 1992). Subsequent policies and practices, rather than confirm 'orphan' status have expanded its definition to include children who have families and often parents and instead focuses on the facilitation of intercountry adoption (Pfund, 1994, 1997).

During the past twenty years, the top sending countries of children for adoption are the developing or economically disadvantaged countries in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and South America, while receiving countries are wealthy developed Western nations (Lovelock, 2000; Volkman, 2005; Howell, 2006; Selman, 2009). Though adoption patterns appear neatly divided between affluent and poorer nations, this is not always the case. Popular sending countries such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan are no longer considered 'Third World'. Nor are the global movements of children a one-way flow from the non-west to western nations. Engels *et al.* (2007: 267) report that several hundred US children are adopted overseas annually. These children, mostly African American or bi-racial, are sent to receiving nations such as Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Belgium. These adoptions address gaps in inadequate social service systems where ethnic and racial minority groups are overrepresented (Stokes and Schmidt, 2011) and court ordered adoption from care has emerged. Celebrity adopters who circumvent legislative and policy safeguards overshadow 'ordinary' middle-class prospective parents (Root, 2007; Mezmur, 2009; Willing, 2009) and the disempowered families of the children they adopt. Contested and often illegal transfers of children from conflict or natural disasters zones such as in Haiti or Darfur continue (Berquist, 2009; Balsari *et al.*, 2010; Dambach and Baglietto, 2010; Fronek and Cuthbert, 2012a). Situations of imminent danger or even significant poverty do not justify the permanent removal of children for adoption and the severing of ties from their families and communities. It is therefore important to understand the societal and cultural dynamics that underlie these practices.

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Sociological insights can assist in understanding the changing role of intercountry adoptions and the underlying rationales. It has been argued that we have reached a stage of late, 'liquid' or advanced modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2000; Bauman, 2001) that is shaped by the rise of individualisation and de-traditionalism. As a result, western notions of 'the family' are also undergoing changes with non-nuclear family formations increasingly visible (Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Emerging globalising processes propel unprecedented cross-border flows of people, goods and ideas resulting in increasingly flexible, hybrid or diverse notions of identity and belonging, including in the family (Glick Schiller *et al*., 1992; Basch *et al*., 2000; Vertovec, 2001). Sociological insights into such changes contribute to new attitudes towards parenthood and 'the family', including 'post-familiar' and 're-invented' families (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), such as those created by ART (Baker, 2008), and new attitudes towards those headed by 'same-sex' (Duffey, 2007) and 'mixed-race' couples (Luke and Luke, 2000; Parker and Song, 2002). Other developments include the emergence of transnational families (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Skrbiš, 2008), headed by parents who perform 'long distance intimacy' while living abroad separated from their children (Hochschild, 2002; Parreñas, 2005; Zhou, 1998).

Though intercountry adoption offers fertile ground for the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959) and a rich field of inquiry for sociologists concerned with identity, race and culture, migration and transnationalism, comparatively little sociological attention has been paid to how key social changes manifest or are reflected in intercountry adoption (Riley, 1997: 88). Less work has been done on intercountry adoption from within a policy framework. As a consequence, this review discusses the available literature in the terms of that literature itself, which focuses – almost exclusively – on the adoption triad, with the majority of research focused on the experience of adoptive parents, and then, in descending order, on adoptees and birth families. We comment as we move through this review on structural, social and cultural influences, and on the gaps in research on policy.

Overview of the field

Intercountry adoption has generated a sociological ripple rather than wave of interest. US sociological research has an overwhelming presence in the field. Research on adoptive parents and adoptees was located with a marked paucity of research on birth families. Wegar (1997: viii), a Finnish-born adoptee and sociologist, claimed astonishment at the lack of interest by sociologists in adoption. Fisher later confirmed that most research had been conducted from other disciplinary perspectives. He argued that sociologists 'have done relatively little to inform the public regarding adoption in a way that might address . . . the effects of stigma that may still be attached to adoption' (2003: 358). The problem, in his view, was that adoption is a social practice that constructs 'non-traditional' families who tend to be positioned as 'second best' compared to families whose members are biologically related (in the west), suggesting that the status of non-nuclear family forms remain tenuous (Istar Lev, 2002).

While aiming to provide a sociological account of macro-issues in US adoption, Engels *et al.* (2007: 257) found that:

> The adoption literature reflects little input by sociologists, and as a result, theories and empirical studies in adoption have been limited to individual and family adoption, with less attention paid to social structure and the national and international factors influencing adoption.

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Engels *et al*. (2007: 257) reported that this neglect explained why social work studies and media reports were mostly used to provide a macro picture of US historical trends in intercountry adoption. The implication being, vital understandings of the influence of culture and society on international adoption, a phenomenon intimately concerned with such matters, are missing and represent a failure to inform national and international policies. The work of Engels *et al*. (2007) provides a general picture of the uneven power dynamics between the US and sending nations that is 'useful for policy makers, practitioners and others concerned with the occurrence of international adoption and its potential consequences' (2007: 257).

Adoptive parents

It has been suggested that social trends such as infertility and the rise of individualisation have led to perceptions of parenthood as lifestyle choices rather than economic or social necessities. These views shift the purpose of international adoption, whom it serves and the rationales that circulate within societies to justify it, from traditional notions of rescue and altruism to meeting the desire of those in privileged societies to parent children. Such trends are confirmed in Högbacka's (2008b) recent study where she proposes that there are three populations who turn to adoption: couples experiencing difficulties conceiving, single parents and those with biological children who are typically altruistic. Of the latter group, Högbacka (2008b: 318) claims some find adoption 'opened up new dimensions' to their lives, and that they 'felt good about having adopted' when so many children needed families. She also suggests that parenthood is seen as a life goal and path to self-development. This reflects sociological understandings on post-traditional families and intimacy in late modernity (Giddens, 1992; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2003) and the impact that 'reflexive modernity' has on adoption (Pringle, 2004). As Anagnost (2000: 392) explains, the 'position of parent for white middle-class subjects has increasingly become marked as a measure of value, self-worth and citizenship' that, in turn, effects infertile couples who adopt transnationally to resolve this tension. These observations also apply to same-sex couples (Riggs, 2006; Ross *et al.,* 2008).

The analysis sheds light on how certain themes have sparked greater sociological interest than others. An overwhelming number of the identified studies on adoptive parents focused on consumption and cultural practices, or what Jacobson (2008), a white adoptive parent, calls 'culture keeping', the recognition of adoptees' birth heritage. Culture keeping' includes the emerging consumption of ethnic goods and foods by adoptive families, and the maintenance of ties with adoptees' birth countries through activities such as Motherland Tours, practices supported by most national and international adoption policies. Fonseca (2006: 2) urged in her research on Brazilian adoptions that such practices be viewed as 'a transnational issue' *par excellence* due to their involvement in 'the transference of people, goods and ideas across national borders'. Chen (2003: 11), in her Canadian research, also emphasised the 'transnational flows of population, discourse, commodities and power [and that] Intercountry adoption is one discursive site of those connections'.

Some sociologists warn that 'culture keeping' practices are superficial and merely symbolic. Dorow (2006b: 229) describes how adoptive parents of Chinese children embraced such transnational activities. She rejects the idea that families' constructions of 'Chineseness' and multicultural identities are unfolding in a 'borderless' world of 'global'

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belongings. In her view, the 'celebration of pluralism' that underpins the 'envisioning a glorified global family of "different but the same"' (2006b: 87) masks the deeper complexities of identity and power-relationships in transracial and cross-cultural adoptive families.

Interestingly, most of the literature that focuses on 'culture keeping' has explored the lives of parents who have adopted from China (Miller-Loessi and Kilic, 2001; Dorow, 2002; Falvey, 2008; Louie, 2009). The prevalence of this cohort of adoptive parents is related to China's status as one of the top sending countries of children. Despite the popularity of adoptions from countries in Eastern Europe, issues of racial sameness between adopters and adoptees may mean that culture is not as salient a feature of their lives compared to intercountry *and* transracial adoptive families (Paulson and Merighi, 2009). Falvey notes that adopters of Russian children often present a more 'silent portrait' of their family. Whiteness is seen as normative and white adoptees, in contrast to Chinese ones, are not perceived to have an 'innate need . . . to maintain connections with their heritage' (2008: 281). Accordingly, recent research specifically explored how racial matters shape white adoptive parents' approaches to adoption (Moosnick, 2004; Hubinette and Tigervall, 2009).

A smaller number of studies focus more specifically on constructions of parenthood (Anagnost, 2000; Pringle, 2004), in particular, 'good mothers' (Herrman and Kasper, 1992; Cuthbert *et al.*, 2009) and the relationship that feminists have with adoption (Moosnick, 2004; Dorow, 2006a; Ishizawa *et al.*, 2006). These studies demonstrate that parenthood is highly gendered. Women are primarily responsible for child-rearing decisions and mothers who have biological ties with their children are given a higher status than others. While affluent feminists find grounds to advance women's rights and the rights of other socially infertile groups to parent and construct families outside 'traditional' contexts of procreation through adoption, the means of establishing such rights by adopting sits uncomfortably with the subaltern positioning of 'birth mothers' who are unable (and unassisted) to keep their children (Dubinsky, 2007; Sotiropoulos, 2008; Cuthbert *et al.*, 2009). The rendering invisible of less-resourced adoption actors is embedded in this seemingly unresolvable tension, and their invisibility is a feature of much of the literature reviewed.

Sotiropoulos (2008: 78) is a white adoptive parent and observes in her study of open adoptions, where birth parents have contact with adoptive families, how disparities in wealth and power shape adoption: 'Fuelled largely by Western money and middle-class interests, adoption often pits adoptive parents and birth parents as adversaries and, in turn, commodifies the human beings that forever binds them together', meaning adoptees (also see Suter and Ballard, 2009). By highlighting such tensions, the enormous challenge facing policy makers in their efforts to understand the social and cultural complexities of intercountry adoption while ensuring the best interests of children are foregrounded.

Adoptees

Unlike sociological studies on adoptive parents, research on issues of identity and belonging for intercountry adoptees reveals much tenser relationships between birth heritage and the societies in which they were raised. Adoptees feel uncomfortable with notions of altruism that suggest 'rescue' (Willing, 2004; Trenka *et al.*, 2006; Kim, 2009). Hübinette (2003: 4) is a Korean adoptee and cultural studies scholar. His work, informed by postcolonial and sociological theory, argues that while the practice of intercountry

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adoption is more typically perceived by adoptive parents, agencies and other advocates 'as a progressive and anti-racist act of rescuing non-white children from the miseries of the Third World', the practice must be seen 'as a wider set of relations of domination and subordination' (2003: 4).

Another point of difference from studies of adoptive parents is that issues of race are approached more explicitly through explorations of adoptees' experiences with racism from a non-white perspective. For example, Tuan (1999) introduced the idea that Asian Americans are imagined and subordinated in the US as 'forever foreigners' and 'honorary whites'. Kim (2009: 877) explained that there is a 'peculiar overvaluing and fetishizing of transnational and transracial adoptees taking place ... making possible some lives over others', in reference to how Asian adoptees, as 'honorary whites', are considered more desirable to adopt than African American children. Her proposal finds support in Louie's (2009: 298) study of Chinese adoptions where Chinese adoptees tend to be seen as 'exceptions from racism rather than a catalyst for anti-racist views amongst the family'.

Subtle and sometimes overt forms of racism that impact on adoptees lives can be internalised, as demonstrated by Shiao and Tuan (2008b) regarding Korean adoptees' attitudes towards dating other Asians. Their research draws on key sociological literature such as critical race theory (Omi and Winant, 1994) and concepts of masculine hegemonic identities (Connell, 1987). They argued that racial discourses are salient in intimacy and dating (2008b: 200) with complications for Korean adoptees raised by white adoptive parents in white social settings. Participants who had been able to do 'ethnic exploration' were more likely to have dated Asians than those who had not. However, internalised racism was also a factor, with some stating that whites were more attractive, and that Asian males did not measure up to hegemonic male identities associated with white, heterosexual masculinity.

Many adult-aged adoptees from Asia and other ethnicities deemed the non-white struggle with feeling 'authentic' as a result of being racially different from their white parents and culturally different from people who share their ethnicity. As with the adoptive parent research, many of these studies were conducted by researchers who are intercountry adoptees (Williams, 2003; Willing, 2004; McDermott, 2006; VanderMolen, 2006; Kim, 2007a). In contrast to the critical work by adoptee researchers, adoptive parent researchers tended to argue that adoptees may be 'empowered' by embracing their 'hybrid' identities (Gray, 2007a, 2007b).

Studies of adult Korean adoptees (Shiao *et al.*, 2004; Shiao and Tuan, 2008a, 2008b; Randolph and Holtzman, 2010) outnumber all other populations, followed by those on Vietnamese adoptees (Williams, 2003; Willing, 2004; Cherot, 2009) and some on both populations (Gray, 2007b; Cherot, 2008; Kim, 2009). This is not surprising given that adoptions from Korea from the 1950s and from Vietnam in the 1970s were the 'founding' waves of contemporary intercountry adoption and there are 'several generational cohorts of adoptees living in the United States ranging from infancy to their fifties (Tuan, 2008: 1854). Tuan (2008) also noted 'older cohorts were encouraged to deny differences and assimilate ... [and] Younger cohorts, in contrast, have come of age in a very different social climate characterised by the availability of social and material resources' (ibid.), changes reflected in wider societal attitudes and social policies over the last fifty years. These resources include accessing 'heritage camps, motherland tours, and consumer items' (2008: 1855) made available by adoptive parents as 'culture keeping' efforts. However, an interesting disparity in the perceived benefits of these types of activities between

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adoptive parents and adoptees is identified by Randolf and Holtzman in their study of Korean culture camps.

> Parents felt camps affirmatively shape their children's racial identity. Adoptees, on the other hand, noted that although they did enjoy the camp, it contributed very little to their racial identity … and did not help them address the racial differences and prejudices that they experienced in their everyday lives. (2010: 85)

While the impact that such cultural practices, often supported by policy, have on adoptees remains contested, the rise of Vietnamese adoptee organised community groups is beneficial to their overall sense of identity and belonging (Willing, 2004; Cherot, 2008).

There is a much smaller number of sociological studies on adult adoptees from other countries of origin and fewer still reporting on reunions with surviving biological relatives. A rare exploration of transnational practices for adoptees seeking to connect with birth families in Haiti (McDermott, 2006) and an auto-ethnographic study by an adoptee from Guatemala (VanderMolen, 2006) were identified in the literature search. General analyses of adoptions from Africa, rather than adoptee experiences were located (Root, 2007; Breuning and Ishiyama, 2009). There is a comparative study of Korean adoptees with other Korean populations such as non-adopted Korean Americans and Korean international students (Shiao and Tuan, 2008a), but less is known about the experiences of adoptees from other countries leaving a significant gap in knowledge.

Another area that remains largely unexamined from sociological perspectives are the experiences of babies and younger children, whom Quiroz (2008) calls the 'diaper diaspora', with one study on younger Chinese adoptees (Ponte *et al.*, 2010). Standard sociological tools such as surveys and in-depth interviews are inappropriate for use with young populations. However, sociologists can begin to explore the symbolic construction of children in adoption (Dubinsky, 2007) and even visual ethnographies of family photo albums and videos. Tools sociologists have used to explore issues of race and identity in mixed-race families (Twine, 2006) may be applied to adoption. Many older intercountry adoptees are now biological and/or adoptive parents creating spaces for fresh sociological investigations.

Birth families

The voices of birth families and communities are scarce in sociological inquiry though occasionally heard through the disciplines of law and anthropology (Fonseca, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Bos, 2007; Smolin, 2007). There are two notable exceptions, the work of Kim (2007b) and Högbacka (2008b). Kim explores the increasing visibility of Korean birth mothers, the 'ghostly double', representing repressed collective trauma and radical global inequality. The struggle of these women for legitimate motherhood from positions of vulnerability, she argues, has been strengthened by the search of many adoptees to find and reconnect with their families. The Korean birth mother deemed invisible by white western adopters is central to understanding international Korean adoption, now well over fifty years old.

Högbacka (2008b) provides a powerful analysis of the collision between the exclusivity of western family formation and the inclusivity of models relevant to the rest of the world, particularly evident where families experience poverty, structural barriers and

limited choice. She argues that birth mothers and extended families are made invisible by inequality and the irrevocable and permanent severing of ties enforced by adoption as framed by legislation and international agreements. Negating perceptions of bad mothering, the participants in this study did not want to place their children for adoption, preferring temporary fostering arrangements that were unavailable to them. Persistent themes of wanting better lives for their children masked the absence of alternatives and choice. The notion of intercountry adoption as 'gifting' a child is rejected by Höbbacka (2008a) as these placements lack bonds, reciprocity and shared relationships. Höbbacka (2008a) concludes that open adoption arrangements that encompass two families and co-operative arrangements better preserve identities and address power and resource imbalances between triad members and constitute new family formations that are more relevant to the contemporary adoption phenomenon.

Conclusion

Most sociological studies of intercountry adoption reviewed focus on adoptive parents, followed by studies of adoptees with a notable scarcity of studies on birth families. Adoptive parents typically come from middle-class, educated backgrounds, are accessible and willing to participate in research and many adoption researchers are themselves intercountry adoptive parents, as indicated throughout this review. Studies on intercountry adoptees tend to focus on those who have reached early to late adulthood and can reflect on how adoption has impacted upon their identities from a broad range of life experiences. Again, the ranks of scholars on the adoptee experience include increasing numbers of intercountry adoptees. The 'ghosts' in this body of research are birth parents who are typically poor, uneducated, may face stigma through participation in research and in some cases may be difficult for researchers to track and access. They constitute a vulnerable research group that face resource, geographical, cultural and language barriers.

However, their absence from the research record remains a problem which further highlights the global and gendered inequalities in power which arguably give rise to intercountry adoption in the first place. Given the relative powerlessness and disadvantage of birth parents in intercountry adoption, Quiroz's concern with 'the bias of who gets to talk' in adoption discourses and adoption research (Quiroz, 2007: 67) represents a major challenge for future researchers in this field. The spectre of the missing or invisible 'birth' families and communities must be made material by future researchers. This is necessary because their very 'invisibility' is an enabling feature of intercountry adoption and also because their stories and their voices are needed to produce a fuller understanding of intercountry adoption and its implications in sending as well as receiving countries.

A hierarchy of power is evident in the adoption triad and this reflects the balance of global power at work in intercountry adoption. Birth families fare worst as they have limited life chances at the time of adoption. The experiences of African women highlight the inadequacy of social policies that do not provide preferred alternatives to adoption, such as foster care, nor resist external pressures favouring adoption and the tensions between exclusive western constructions of family and inclusive models often preferred by those who lose their children overseas (Högbacka, 2008b). International conventions such as the Hague Convention (1993), while well meaning, are underpinned by Eurocentric views of what constitutes family care for children and are biased against the inclusive models of family care which exist in many non-western contexts.

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Though adoptee perspectives have had some influence on policy in terms of racial and identity politics, attempts to capture these issues in policy seem limited to superficial and symbolic gestures ignoring the need for a range of possible connections to birth families and heritage that might be more meaningful to adoptees. Findings from sociological research indicate that 'culture keeping' practices are valued more by adoptive parents than their intercountry adopted children. This review also points to the need for more attention to issues of racism and racial privilege in the context of intercountry adoption by highlighting studies that illustrate how white adoptive parent experiences of acceptance and belonging tend to differ to their non-white adopted children.

There is ample scope for new and important work by sociologists into intercountry adoption as a global phenomenon of family formation, migration and re-settlement in a period of rapid global change, re-configurations of connectedness and detraditionalisation. For those sociologists with interests in the connection between social policy and social experience, the field is even wider. As indicated in this review, attention by researchers into intercountry adoption is almost exclusively directed to the experiential dimensions of intercountry adoption: what is it like to be an intercountry adoptive parent, adoptee and, to far lesser extent, birth family? Work which critically addresses the larger social and political influences which shape intercountry adoption, which examines the social impact of intercountry adoption on the shape of welfare and children's policy in sending countries, and asks fundamental questions about it as a social practice is virtually non-existent. Likewise, with rare exceptions, work which examines the impact of the flood of children from sending countries on those countries, and the communities within them, is also rare. Further, work which take the insights gained from decades of research into domestic adoption and applies this to the intercountry field is also much needed. We look forward to seeing this work – and its impact on evidence-based policy – in the near future.

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