The Quest for a Child of One’s Own: Parents, Markets and Transnational Adoption

Riitta Högbäck

INTRODUCTION

The global numbers of transnational adoptions have more than doubled recently compared to the situation at the beginning of the 1990s, when researchers believed that the trend would, on the contrary, be a downward one (Altstein & Simon, 1991: 191). According to calculations made by Peter Selman (2007), over 45,000 children changed their country and culture through adoption in 2004. The number of children coming to Finland increased from about 50 in 1990 to nearly 300 in 2004 and 2005 (Social and Health Ministry, 2006). The flows are from south to north and east to west. From the information available it can be estimated that by the end of the decade there will be close to one million transnationally adopted persons in the world. Even though these figures are small compared to the total number of migrants (at least 185 million according to the World Migration Report, 2005), transnational adoption is one of the few forms of migration that is accepted and actively promoted by the Western receiving states. While the supply of ‘adoptable’ children sets the limits, adoptive parents are the actors whose decisions, which are rooted in very private hopes and anxieties, determine the number and direction of adoptions.

What is it in the current era that triggered this phenomenon? Why has there been such a tremendous increase in transnational adoptions to Western families recently? This article addresses these issues by first considering the context and briefly looking at the situation in both the receiving countries (why do people in the West travel abroad to acquire children) and the countries of origin (why are there children available for adoption) and the relevant dynamics. Secondly, it explores the following questions on the basis of information gathered in thematic interviews with Finnish adoptive parents: How are adoptive parents’ experiences shaping and being shaped by the market in transnational adoption? What kind of issues lie behind the decision to adopt a child from abroad? How do parents build up their expectations concerning the future child?

THE DYNAMICS OF SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Adopted children move predominantly from poorer Third World countries or transition economies to richer countries in North America and Western Europe (including Scandinavia, Italy and, recently, Spain). However, as Table 1 below shows, among the major states of origin are also countries experiencing economic growth, such as South Korea and China.

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China and Russia (with other Eastern European countries) by far outnumber all other continents. Indeed, the huge increase in intercountry adoptions after 1995 coincided with the appearance on the adoption market of these two countries, which have proved the most popular among Western adoptive parents (Table 1). Preliminary data for 2005 and 2006 indicate that the peak for transnational adoptions has been reached, and the numbers have slightly diminished (Selman, 2007). China and Eastern European countries have recently issued new sets of restrictions (Helsingin Sanomat, 2006; 2007), and have since reduced the number of children leaving the country. The demand in the West, however, continues to grow.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Number of children sent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>13,408</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>9,440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>3,420</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>2,238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>2,046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>1,741</td>
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<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>1,509</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of destination</th>
<th>Number of children received</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>22,884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>5,541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>4,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>3,403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1,955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>1,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1,109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>289</td>
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Total (22 countries) 45,288

Source: Selman (2007)

In order to understand the logic behind these figures, it is necessary to take a closer look at how and why transnational adoption evolved and has developed. Although intercountry adoption in its present form began after the Second World War and humanitarian motives were part of the picture, it did not become common until after the number of suitable infants available for domestic adoption started to decrease during the 1960s, most notably in the USA, Scandinavia and the Netherlands (Hoksbergen, 2000: 93; Triseliotis, Shireman & Hundleby, 1997: 8; Yngvesson, 2000: 183). During that time there were changes in both abortion practices and the availability of contraceptives. Single motherhood was less stigmatised, and in the Nordic countries newly introduced family allowances also played a role. In Finland the increase in transnational adoptions in the 1990s was linked to the decrease in the numbers of young children available for domestic adoption in particular (Parviainen, 2003: 43).
The current rise in intercountry adoptions is, indeed, connected with the changing patterns of childbearing and family formation in the West. Global competition makes it harder to find and keep a job, and to combine work and family (Hantrais, 2005). This, together with rising levels of women’s employment and more extensive processes of individualisation, result in patterns of delayed parenthood (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Infertility is on the increase all over the developed world (Spar, 2006: 1-2), including Finland (Klemetti, Siho & Koponen, 2004: 50). The majority of adoptive parents are involuntarily childless (Hoksbergen 2000, 97; Telfer 2000, 334), and most have first undergone medical fertility treatment (Howell, 2004: 227-228; Malin, 2002: 301). In Finland about 80% of intercountry adoptive parents do not have any biological children (Sosiaali-ja terveysministeriö, 2006). There are currently queues for both fertility treatment and for the counselling that is compulsory for potential adoptive parents.

The reasons why there are children available for adoption are, at least at first glance, independent of the demand. Global inequities and extreme poverty are common background factors. In many sending countries the development of global markets, economic liberalisation and privatisation have had an adverse effect on the well-being of women and children in particular (Heymann, 2006). It has been observed that, generally, for intercountry adoptions to occur on any larger scale a combination of at least four factors is needed: war, imbalance in socioeconomic conditions between the sending and receiving countries, organisational linkages between them, and a political decision in the sending country to allow intercountry adoptions (Altstein & Simon, 1991: 2-3). More recent factors include policies that curb women’s reproductive rights, such as the stringent population-control policies in China (Johnson, 2002) and the Ceaușescuan forced family-enlargement policies in Romania that resulted in massive child abandonment after the collapse of the regime (Kligman, 1995). In China, domestic adoption was also included in the one-child policy, and despite considerable willingness to adopt within the country, transnational adoption was favoured by the government (Johnson, 2002: 388-390; Miller-Loessi & Kilic, 2001: 247). As far as Eastern Europe is concerned, economic collapse, poor living conditions, and the lack of support systems for poor families and single mothers have resulted in child abandonment. In many cases parental rights have been terminated (A Decade of Transition. 2001: 108-109). Thus, the supply of potential adoptive children also increased.

Poverty, wars and conflicts, state policies and HIV/AIDS in Africa produce huge numbers of children in need of families and assistance. There are 143 million children in the world who have lost one or both parents, of which about 18 million are total orphans (Children on the Brink, 2004: 28). There are also hundreds of thousands of children in state-run institutions all over the world (A Decade of Transition, 2001: 94; Johnson, Banghan & Liyao, 1998: 501-502). It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to equate these children with those involved in transnational adoption. Two officials employed by Unicef and the International Social Service respectively, and in charge of monitoring intercountry adoption, are very clear about this. Most institutionalised children are toddlers or even older, and suffer from various mental and physical illnesses. They are not the healthy young infants preferred by adoptive parents. There is, in fact, evidence that the number of families wishing to adopt such infants exceeds the number of available children. (Cantwell, 2003: 72; Saclier, 2000: 59.) Likewise, 90% of the orphans in the world are over the age of six (Children on the Brink, 2004: 14), making adoption very difficult.
The structural imbalance between demand and supply in transnational adoption results in the paradoxical situation of adoptive parents queuing and waiting for long periods for 'adoptable' children, while at the same time there are certainly lots of children languishing in institutions. The effects on the structural level may be completely counter-productive, and also against the wishes of many adoptive parents. There are reports from countries such as Ukraine (Cantwell, 2003: 72) and Colombia (Hoelgaard, 1998: 217) about difficulties in finding as many healthy infants as are requested by potential adoptive parents. In some cases adoptions of young children have not reduced their numbers in institutions. In Belarus, for instance, intercountry adoptions of children under the age of three increased 160%, while the number of children under three in institutions increased by 170% (A Decade of Transition, 2001: 106). Indeed, at the beginning of the 1990s higher numbers of children were adopted directly from birth families rather than from institutions in Albania and Romania, and later in Guatemala (Cantwell, 2003: 72; Kligman, 1995: 249-250).

The practices of transnational adoption may also become self-perpetuating. Foreign adopters have been favoured over domestic families in Colombia because of their higher donations to orphanages (Hoelgaard, 1998: 217-221). South Korea, despite being a wealthy state by Asian standards, is still sending children abroad. These children are predominantly the offspring of single mothers. Single motherhood is highly stigmatised, and there are no welfare services for these mothers or for poor families in Korea at the moment. Researchers have pointed out that by continuing with intercountry adoption instead of developing domestic welfare programmes the government is, in fact, accomplishing major economic savings (Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998).

Efforts have been made to regulate the market elements in transnational adoption via national legislation and international agreements. European countries are more regulated than the USA, where about 40% of adoptions are private (Modell, 2002: 136). In Finland, all prospective adoptive parents have to receive counselling and use the services of agencies accredited by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and must obtain a permit to adopt from the Finnish Board of Inter-Country Adoption. Similar arrangements prevail in the other Nordic countries (Howell, 2006: 137-158; Masson, 2001: 155). According to the Hague Convention (1993), which is the major international agreement concerning intercountry adoption, all countries must first look into the possibilities for the child to remain in its family of origin or to remain in its country of origin. Moreover, there can be no financial gain for any of the parties involved. Most receiving and sending countries have ratified the Hague Convention, China being the most recent. Notable exceptions are the USA, Russia, Korea and Ethiopia. Legislation or agreements do not alleviate the structural imbalance between demand and supply, however.

The reasons for the growing demand and desire for children in the West are considered next, and then the focus moves to the experiences of adoptive parents in Finland.

**CHANGING PARENTAL IDEALS IN THE WEST**

Several writers have noted the changing meaning of children and parenting in the West. It has been argued that as fertility has declined, the social value of having a child has gone up. Being a parent is all the more important now. Having a child has also become a project that is carefully planned beforehand, just as people plan their lives in general. Parenting has almost
become a means of self-fulfilment or an opportunity for personal growth. Children make life meaningful and give one a sense of belonging and a sense of permanence. They have become extremely precious. (Beck-Gemsheim, 2002: 71-72).

This change has been accompanied by changing ideas about parenting and the role of parents. From the 19th century onwards parents have gradually been expected to do a lot more than just raise their children. During the 1800s motherhood emerged as a role the primary purpose of which was to provide the best conditions for children’s growth. First there was an emphasis on hygiene and diet, but after the Second World War the mother was expected to provide psychological nurture as well (Howell, 2006: 86-87). Parenting understood as special care and attention started to be perceived as highly important for the child’s future. The task of parenting has become more and more demanding. Parents are now responsible for their child’s overall development, and they are expected to give it the best possible start in life. In a society in which performance and even health are thought to be the results of one’s own actions, parenting starts to take on new qualities. The powerful desire for a child turns into a desire for a certain kind of a child, one that is as perfect as possible. (Beck-Gemsheim, 2002: 71-103).

These same general tendencies also influence adoptive parenthood, but in this case the increasing emotional value of children and the new parental responsibilities have different repercussions as these principles are applied to already existing children. Viviana Zelizer traced the change in the value of children, and explicitly used adoption practices as an example. According to Zelizer (1985, 169-207), adoption in the American context became sentimental rather than instrumental during the 1920s and 1930s, together with the emergence of the emotionally priceless child. Whereas previously women had to pay in order to get someone to take their unwanted babies, by 1930 childless couples were willing to pay large sums in order to have a child. At the same time the preference for strong, older boys changed into a huge demand for cute, blonde, blue-eyed baby girls. During this process children became objects that were invested with huge sentimental or even religious meaning. In the adoption market it meant that there was no demand for boys over the age of six. Thus, the sentimentalisation of adoption created new demand and a new market.

Adoptive parents, and probably parents more generally, have a number of preferences concerning the child. Similar hierarchies of children have been discerned from interviews with Australian adoptive parents (Telfer, 2000: 334-336) and from Finnish infertility doctors’ perceptions of infertile couples’ preferences (Malin, 2002). What was most desired was a biological child of one’s own, followed by a child born with the help of reproductive technologies. After that came domestic adoption. Transnational adoption was considered the last option. The child’s health and age were also factors: a healthy young infant was the most desired option, whereas adopting a special-needs child or an older child internationally were seen as less desirable.

Other studies have also discerned ethnic hierarchies in societies in general, which seem to be very similar in different countries (Jaakkola, 2005: 69-72; Yngvesson, 2000: 193-194). It appears that a white skin colour is the most highly desired, followed by Asian looks, whereas those with a dark skin colour lie at the bottom. Adoptive parents express the wish to adopt children who look as Western (and as similar to them) as possible, or else they choose Asians or Latin Americans (Dorow, 2002: 167; Melosh, 2002: 54, 67-68).
Another preferred image in adoption is gender: most adoptive parents would prefer a girl (Dorow, 2002: 167; Melosh, 2002: 54). It was observed very early on that adoptive parents preferred girls, whereas those expecting a biological child wished for a boy (Kirk, 1964: 124-127). According to Kirk (1964, 133-138), this is connected to traditional conceptions of men continuing the kin lineage. If a man cannot have a son of his own making, then he would rather adopt a girl. Preference for female children in adoption is also something to do with cultural ideas about girls, who are thought to be easier and more subdued. Boys are regarded as more active, and more of a threat. Fear of the unknown is activated in the case of boys, whereas girls are regarded as less strange and easier to assimilate as part of the family. (Melosh, 2002: 54, 67-68).

I will now turn to the empirical data to see how these issues are played out in individual families. While the reasons for adopting and the preferences of adoptive parents have been established in previous research, these are usually presented in isolation. It will be interesting to look at the preferences in context. In what ways are adoptive parents’ experiences influenced by the sentimentalisation of children and the changing views on parental responsibilities? What else do the parents say when they talk about their decision to adopt or about their preferences? What kind of issues is the desire to parent connected with? How are questions of choice of country negotiated in practice?

DATA AND METHOD

My larger on-going research project examines the lived experiences of mothers/parents at both ends of the transnational adoption chain: birth mothers and adoptive parents. The findings reported here are based on thematic interviews with 15 Finnish adoptive parents collected during 2005 and 2006. While the interview covered the whole adoption story, this article focuses on the parent’s decision to adopt and the adoption process. I did not use a fixed set of questions in the interviews, but I had with me a sheet of paper with six broad themes and short questions related to them I could resort to if the informant was not talkative. The themes were: the pre-adoption situation, the adoption process, becoming parents, life with the child, birth culture and origins, and the attitudes of family and friends. In most cases mentioning the word adoption story was enough to get the informants started. I told them all that I was an adoptive mother myself, and this fact seemed to create an understanding and a bond between the informants and the researcher. I also held interviews with two leading adoption workers/experts, each with over 10 years of experience in intercountry adoption in Finland.

I identified the informants via different routes in order to capture as wide a variation in experiences as possible. Some were contacted through announcements in adoption agencies’ information leaflets for adoptive parents, and I met others at various events for adoptive parents. I also recruited informants from kindergartens and children’s playgrounds. The interviews with the parents were mostly conducted at the informant’s home or in my study at the university, and varied in length from 90 to 120 minutes: They were all tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. For the analysis presented here the transcripts were coded thematically and compared. They were also condensed into cases for further comparison. The majority of the interviewees lived in the Helsinki area, but some were also from the countryside or from smaller towns. They included four single parents and 11 couples. All in
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Three Paths to Adoption

Three slightly differing paths to transnational adoption were discerned in the data: couples having trouble conceiving, single women adopters, and a few families that stated an interest in adopting from abroad but with no history of infertility. As was shown earlier, involuntary childlessness is by far the most common reason for adopting. In my data eight couples out of the total of eleven, and three single women out of four, had infertility issues in their backgrounds. Five couples had first tried to conceive with the help of new reproductive techniques. Of these only one had been able to have one child, but not a second. Those who had not succeeded portrayed the treatments as emotionally draining. A lot of hope, time and money had apparently been invested in these efforts. Vivian described the fertility treatments as "an emotional roller-coaster that one would not wish on anyone." By the time a child was referred to them through adoption it had taken them "ten years to finally have a child at home." Another couple, Jenny and Mike, had nine in vitro fertilisations over a ten-year-period before they finally put a stop to the treatments. The interviewees gradually arrived at the decision that it did not really matter how they obtained their children. Men often needed more time to accept the idea of adopting. Several had also pondered upon the possibility of adopting domestically, but did not fit the stringent requirements: domestic adoptive parents cannot be over 40, and single people are not eligible at all (Parviainen, 2003: 43-44). Transnational adoption, then, was for many the last hope in terms of obtaining a child. In Finland roughly 10% of all adopters are single women (Sosiaali-ja terveysministeriö, 2006). The typical story of the single adopter was that of a woman realising she had not been able to find the man of her life, and her biological clock was ticking. They all said they had always thought that one day they would have children. Tina’s dream was to have her children in her 40s, but a serious illness rendered all hopes of giving birth impossible. The others had tried to become pregnant in previous relationships. Alison described her endeavours: “I had a partner and we tried to have a child, our first... [...] But the child did not come and then my partner was still not willing to consider adoption, so finally I left him.” In Lucy’s case the
relationship ended just when she had started to entertain ideas about motherhood. She also said that her temporary employment contract had not been made permanent until a few years before she decided to adopt, and pregnancy would, in fact, have meant unemployment. For these women being able to become a mother was clearly more important than having a child with a man at any cost. Alison and Eva explicitly stated that they did not want to find just any man in order to have a biological child. Eva explained:

“I had almost a mad look in my eyes, that now I'm looking for a man to father my children. But then I thought no, this can't be. I can't go to a restaurant just to find a man... [...] How could I ever explain it to the child, that I just went with a man in order to get pregnant.”

Of the three couples who had not had infertility problems, two had first had biological children. The third had opted to adopt straightaway, but did not rule out biological pregnancy later on. They all shared an early interest in transnational adoption. “I decided in upper-secondary school that my kids would come from elsewhere in the world,” said Isabella. All had read articles about people adopting from abroad, or had met someone who had done it. For these couples transnational adoption also opened up new dimensions in life. They enjoyed learning more about their children’s birth countries and met interesting people through adoption circles. They also just “felt good about having adopted,” as Isabella put it. However, adopting had still primarily been a way of enlarging or forming a family. “We had just always wanted to have a big family,” said Carol, for whom it had been quite difficult to find a country that would allow children to be adopted into a family that already had three biological children. Isabella and her husband did not start the adoption process until “there was a strong urge to have children.” These adopters did not differ that much from those who had adopted because of infertility or because of the lack of a partner. A powerful desire to have a child was present in all cases.

Parenthood as a Goal

This desire seemed to be connected with the wish to experience parenthood and to become a real family. In other words, it had to do with identity issues in the parents. Judy and Steve explained how they “wanted to experience children and being a parent.” Vivian pointed out that, regardless of the route, they had children: “The outcome is the same: we have children, we have a family.” The informants also made it clear that they did not see themselves as ‘saving’ the children, even though the idea of having been able to give a child a better life gave them pleasure. Bob remarked: “I don’t see us as rescuers in any way, on the contrary we were very selfish in wanting more children. [...] our motive was to have a big family.”

Having a family and being in the category of a parent also meant being able to act like a family and to participate in the social activities of families with small children. Monica, who first tried fertility treatment for a long time and whose adoption process was unusually long, remarked how at first everyone else had children, but not she and her husband, and now no one else had small children. She pointed out that it would have been nice to be a parent at the same time as all her friends. Ann, who recently remarried, emphasised the significance of small children to the identity of a couple: “We still wanted to raise small children together as a couple, just like couples in general.”
Part of the identity of a parent is that the child is “one’s own.” Foster parenting, which would have provided a quicker route to having children, was not what these people wanted. This came out emphatically in the interviews. “I wanted a child of my own. If you’re a foster family, the child is never legally yours,” remarked Vivian. Parenting entails an exclusive and permanent tie with the child. One cannot experience the parental role to its fullest if the child can be taken away. Peter put the worst fear of all into words: “We were told that it would be a lot easier to get a foster child. But we felt that we couldn’t do it because what if the child was taken away from us and then we wouldn’t have any children. It would be really terrible.”

After having adopted children of their own, Peter and his wife went ahead with foster parenting as well. The story of Eva is also instructive. “They [the social workers] said they had a one-year-old that should be placed in foster care. [...] The child’s father was going to prison. [...] But afterwards he will be free I said, and then I’d have to give this one-year-old back. My heart isn’t that big. [...] I would want that child as my very own.”

Another side of exclusive parenting is that the parents make decisions concerning their child without interference from others. The existence of possible other carers is problematic in this context. Jenny and Mike explained: “The thought I had in my head that the children must be ours so that no outsider could have any say in the matter was strengthened during the preparation courses.” And Lisa:

“I thought about foster parenting. [...] I could do it. [...] I have the abilities and the skills for it. [...] But afterwards I have come to realise that these children are very challenging. [...] if I had to take into account another kin group or two and all the social workers with whom I would have to negotiate what languages my child learns at school or whether I can take it to the doctor when it’s sick…”

It is quite remarkable how adamantly these people pursued the dream of obtaining a child. The child became a long-term project requiring planning, determination and stamina. It also meant taking matters into their own hands and thus, very much in line with individualisation theory (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), being responsible for their own life history. Eva talked about feeling powerful after making the decision to adopt because that meant she was able to have an influence on her life. Mike described his family’s actions and feelings as resembling those of an athlete practising for the Olympics, their only goal being to obtain a child. Another example is Ann, for whom it had always been difficult to conceive. She had two grown-up children from a previous marriage, but she also produced one stillborn baby. She had recently remarried and had been going through fertility treatment resulting in two stillborn babies. She subsequently managed to adopt two children with her husband after fighting their case when they were initially only given a permit to adopt an older child. She explained:

“I feel that I have spent my entire life trying to have children. [...] These children are more valuable to me than to the average person. [...] Now I’ve achieved what I want. I don’t want more [children]. I won’t have to fight any more.”
The informants spoke at length about their hopes and anxieties concerning their future child. As is suggested in previous research, most adopters hoped for a young and healthy child. Many also hoped for one that would "look similar to us" or would be "Western looking." They expressed a clear preference for girls: only four out of the 15 did not explicitly wish for a girl. The most preferred countries of origin were Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. These were the number-one choices of all but two of them, but did not always, for various reasons, materialise.

Officially intercountry adopters have to choose the country before their application can proceed. They may also express a wish concerning the child's age and health in broad terms, and sometimes gender, but not much more. The parents were, however, very aware of the practices in the contact countries. They knew which countries were sending young and healthy children, or girls, for instance. The country thus became a code word for the age, gender, health and skin colour of the child. Jenny and Mike, for instance, explained that they chose China very early on because they wanted "as young a child as possible, under two years old," and because the children coming from there tended to be healthy. China also had less restrictive criteria concerning upper age limits for adopters, and with its ancient culture, it seemed glamorous to them. Isabella and her husband had recently changed the adoption agency in the sending country because this one "sends tiny, tiny ones, and fast."

It is, however, useful to look at the preferences in context. The parents' hopes and expectations seemed to be firmly anchored in perceptions of the best possible outcomes for the child. Very much in line with ideas concerning new parental responsibilities, they wanted to be able to provide their child with the best possible start in life. In order to achieve this, they wanted to be able to have as big an influence on its development as possible. Alison gave as her reason for preferring to adopt a small child the problems experienced by the children adopted at an older age she had seen when working in schools. "I thought with a smaller one you have more scope." Ann explained that the reason they wanted a very small and healthy child was because then she and her husband would be able to do more. Ann:

"We ruled out Russia because the children coming from there tend to be not very healthy and are somewhat older. [...] A young child has fewer traumas. And we'll be able to have a bigger influence. [...] We'll be able to give the kind of food, stimuli and so on that have an effect on the brain. If you think about the future of that child, the better the start in life the child gets... we want to ensure that the best possible chances are given."

The preference for girls was also connected with ideas about parents being able to do a better job in guiding the child. Girls were assumed to be both easier to raise and to have an easier time being foreign-looking in Finland. Peter said: "At the time of the first child we had an illusion or we imagined that it would be easier here for a girl; that a girl would manage better." Monica's husband had insisted that they put in the application that they would strongly prefer a girl. Monica explained that she would, in fact, have taken a boy, particularly as this would have speeded up the adoption process. However, her husband "had hopes for an easier child. [...] in his experience boys are more difficult to raise."
husband who preferred a girl, which could have something to do with the idea of the male
genealogical lineage being continued by fathers and sons. When this is not possible
genetically, then a girl is preferred. Mike remarked:

“I took it automatically to mean that we would get a girl. But the social worker
said that it could also be a boy. I must say I felt very uncertain, because I had
assumed it would be a girl. [Y] I think for a man it would take quite a lot of
thinking it over, if it were a boy.”

The racial/ethnic preferences of the parents were connected to their fears that a child who
looked different from the Finns might be subjected to racist remarks and other forms of
racism later in life. They felt they would be able to protect their child better if it looked similar
to the majority. The rationale was that in such cases they would be better able to give the
child a better life, again following the obligation of parental responsibilities. Tina originally
considered only Asian countries, and preferred a girl: “I thought about other people’s reactions
when the child is a teenager. Attitudes towards a big black guy are totally different from
those towards a tiny Asian girl.” Gender and race are thus intertwined in many ways. Eva
also pondered at length on the various implications of the child’s race. She first considered
adopting from Russia:

“That would be close-by. [...] And I thought about the looks as well, they
might be lighter [skinned] there. [...] But then it turned out that they are not
giving children to single adopters. [...] I learned that another Eastern European
contact was working well at the time. I just thought, well it’s in Europe. [...] although it’s said that parents should not have the right to consider the looks
[of the children] but now that one of my children looks different and is from a
different culture, teasing and racism are a reality. [...] It doesn’t change my
feelings but you think somehow that you can protect your child better if it
looks similar.”

Issues dealing with fears about racism also play a role in the next excerpt illustrating the
complex ways in which parents negotiate the various attributes of the future child. As it was
not always possible to obtain the kind of children that were hoped for, it became necessary
to reconsider the options. It seemed that some attributes of the child were exchanged for
others, and this followed a cultural logic of its own. If it was not possible to obtain a young,
healthy and Western-looking child, then the first two attributes were combined and traded
for the last one. If the child was a bit older and maybe had minor health-related issues, then
it should at least be Western-looking. Vivian said that they did not mind if the child were no
longer a baby: they would accept a slightly older one. Vivian:

“At first we considered the Philippines. But the more we thought about it, the
more important it seemed to us, as we live in an old, traditional rural area where
people are very old-fashioned, we started to feel that it might be best if the
child looked as Western as possibleY. It could easily be a problem here. [...] What if we looked into Russia. [...] Many people have said to us that it’s such
a good thing that they look Finnish. [...] We put in the application that we
would accept an illness that was curable in Finland.”
Monica explained how they first wanted to adopt from Estonia even though the children coming from there were not always completely healthy. “We would have taken the risk of the child not being in perfect health. [...] But we wouldn’t have taken a very sick child.” They were also prepared to accept a slightly older child. Monica: “My husband felt that children from there would look similar to us, so that there wouldn’t be these racist issues. [...] He’s a school principal, so he’s seen these things.” Estonia was not available, however, and so they finally adopted a slightly older child from Asia. However, as Monica explained: “She [the adopted child] is in fact very light in skin colour.” She further wondered whether her adopted daughter might, in fact, be partly Western.

Some, on the other hand, preferred a small and/or healthy child and then the skin colour was not an issue. Peter said that they wanted a baby, it did not matter from which country or what it looked like. Bridget and Bob wanted a small healthy child, originally from China, but this was not possible. China was not accepting new applications at the time. They then thought of another country that accepted their age, but which gave no guarantees as to the skin colour of the child: “It could be anything. [...] No one knew whether it was quite light. [...] Or very dark.” This did not matter in their case. Alison at first considered adopting from Russia because “it is nearby and I knew some Russian children.” Then she learned that, given her age and the Russian policy at the time, it was not possible to obtain a small child. Small children were, on the other hand, available from Africa. She was told that even if she were over 40, she could still adopt a one-or two-year-old. Alison: “And at that moment the image of a tiny, tiny African child came into my head, and from then on stayed there as I was so happy that I could still get a small child.”

**WAITING FOR THE CHILD**

Due to the discrepancy between the demand for ‘adoptable’ children and the supply of such children in their countries of origin, the waiting period for adoptive parents can be long. The two adoption workers/experts interviewed both stated that at that time there were more applications from adoptive parents than there were available children. They also both pointed out how difficult it was to find new contact countries. Preliminary data for transnational adoptions in 2005 and 2006 (Selman, 2007) indicate that the imbalance between demand and supply is increasing.

“Today the answer is most often that there is no need to start intercountry adoptions, or that there are enough representatives from other countries there.” (Expert 2)

“And some old contacts have managed to start domestic adoption and foster-care programmes so that there is no longer a need.” (Expert 1)

The result is that adoptive ‘pregnancy’ could last literally years. The adopters do not know when a child will be assigned to them or, what is more important, whether one will be assigned to them. The process is experienced as both indeterminate and uncertain. This is psychologically very demanding for the waiting parents, and as was seen most of them had hoped for and been trying to have children for quite a while prior to making the decision to
adopt. The uncertainty of the process often results in emotional stress and expressions of envy. Monica and her husband waited longer for their daughter than anyone had ever had to wait for a child from that country. She explained:

"We were actually glad that we had not told many people, well, we told some, but not everyone. I think people knew we were planning [to adopt]. But really it took almost four years. [...] Otherwise we would have had to explain endlessly to others why she hadn’t arrived. [...] We just noticed that one couple had sent their application a year after us, and that one two years later. [...] Why are they getting [a child] and why aren’t we. [...] We thought that we probably would never get one."

It has also become more and more common for adoptive parents-to-be to monitor their progress and that of the others using the Internet. As Jenny and Mike told us: "We followed the discussion groups [on the Internet], so you can see who gets a child and so you can anticipate the arrival of your child." Bridget and Bob waited for two years. They felt that the process was too long.

"We were just waiting. [...] and then we discovered that there were other families passing us all the time, we started to wonder about this. [...] and then we waited and waited. [...] And nothing happened. Christmas is coming. And nothing happens. And everyone of course is asking. [...] And we’re starting to get very angry, wondering if this is going to amount to nothing, and we keep going to the Internet and we find out that they’ve had a child and they’ve had a child."

It seemed that adopters who were in some way on the periphery, i.e., were not traditional as far as age and civil status were concerned, were even more worried than the others. In Ann’s case the decision to adopt had been preceded by several attempts to conceive utilising new reproductive techniques. Intercountry adoption was the very last chance for her and her family. She explained:

"We are both a bit older. [...] I still remember how we wondered whether it was really going to happen. [...] I said I was so excited. My husband said let’s wait and see if there are enough [children] for everyone. [...] He said I won’t believe this until we are on the plane coming back to Finland."

Likewise, single adopters often had a hard time waiting. They were constantly worried about possible changes of policy in the sending countries. This happened from time to time, so their fear was entirely based on reality. Tina’s adoption process was unusually long and difficult. It lasted six years, during which time she changed the country of origin five times. She explained:

"My nerves were completely shattered in the process. [...] it was just that you could never be sure. I had been disappointed so many times as the authorities came and decided that single adopters were no longer accepted. It was not directed at me, it was somehow directed at the whole group and I felt that I
could not have any say in the matter. [...] You just float around in a vast sea where you might bump into a child or you might not.”

Both experts emphasised that the most common reason why adoptive parents-to-be contacted the adoption agencies prior to the arrival of the child was the uncertainty of the waiting period. Parents complained that they were not receiving any information. This led to schisms between the adoption service providers and their ‘clients’, the future adoptive parents. The viewpoint of the agencies differed from that of the parents. The agencies, which were under pressure because of the growing numbers of applicants, experienced the worries and questions of the adoptive parents as demands. One of the experts interviewed felt that the applicants as well as the rest of society nowadays “expected things to happen at once, as if by pressing a button.” The adoptive parents, on the other hand, felt they were not receiving any help in a difficult life situation. Eva changed adoption agency because, in her words, the one she was with was not providing “good customer services.” Judy and Steve experienced the waiting period as unpleasant:

“They treat you as if you’re bothering them. As if you just have to wait. [...] Their behaviour was condescending. [...] It was as if we had no right to ask questions, get information. [...] All information was hard to obtain. Either they didn’t give it at all or…”

Ann was of the opinion that the agencies were supposed to be service providers, but in reality they did not provide any.

“If you work, for instance, you can’t keep phoning them all the time, so you never manage to get hold of anyone. And then this bureaucratic way of working, they have phoning times and they’re always so busy. [...] it’s a way of using power. [...] and they’re not actively trying to do anything.”

BECOMING PARENTS

For most of the adoptive parents obtaining a child had been a long project, which had been further prolonged by the uncertain waiting periods. All this waiting, hoping and imagining helped to build up an over-flow of sentimental feeling in and around the adoption. Peter explained: “The child felt like your own straight away. [...] Even if the process was long and uncertain and you weren’t sure of the outcome, it also prepared you to think of the child as your own.” A lot of emotion and affect is directed towards this child of one’s longings. Isabella, for instance, had strong feelings towards their child-to-be even at the beginning when she and her husband were just starting the adoption process and did not know anything about the actual child. In a way, the feelings were directed towards the image of her loving the child. She said: “I loved my child even when I didn’t know her, even when I didn’t know from which country she would come or who she would be.”

If the idea of the child evoked feelings, the moment it was assigned was very emotional. Jenny recalled her experience of being told that a child had been referred to them. She knew from the Internet that their turn was approaching, so she was expecting a phone call from the adoption agency within the next few days. She told us: “I was already crying before the
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phone rang." The parental role is valorised in these instances. This is exemplified in Isabella's words. Perhaps in what was a Freudian slip, she revealed that this was really all about the parents themselves. Isabella: "It is the most wonderful thing in the world. There can be nothing better in life than being told that you own, I mean that you have become a mother."

Tina’s description of her first meeting with her adoptive son is revealing. First came the relief that it was easy to take the child as her own (i.e., the child was small, cute, lovely), that it evoked sentiments. Over the years so much emotion and desire had been loaded into the idea of having a child of her own that it spilled over. When her adoptive son was brought to her for the first time she cried for a very long time, but the real object of the affects seemed to be the idea of making a commitment for life. Tina: "I thought: here is now the person whom I will look after for the rest of my life. There he is. This is the person. Now I can see what I have been waiting for for so many years."

Other adoptive parents also mentioned that feelings for the child tended to come very quickly after they first set eyes on it. Ann: "Attachment to these children, my husband says this as well, attachment comes within 24 hours. [...] Very strong feelings of attachment." The overwhelming happiness and joy of being new parents was tangible. They remarked how proud they were to be parents. This is captured in Mike’s account: "At first, the first months you’re just so proud and glowing in all directions." In another interview Steve told us: "At first I was just so proud. I was surprised to realise how proud I was to walk in the street with my child. I didn’t expect to feel like that." The new mothers, too, felt this way. Eva: "I think I would be a lot more selfish if I weren’t a mother. [...] Somehow this is for me, and I’m so proud that I’m a mother. Now I’m in the category of mothers."

Some of the parents used almost religious language when describing their feelings upon the arrival of their child. This is in line with the idea of the sacred child and the sentimentalisation of childhood. It was also evident that the child was a certain kind of child. Tina: "I’m at peace now, it’s a religious term, but I achieved peace when at last I got a child that was healthy and everything."

In the midst of the happiness and joy of finally having a child of their own, there was one aspect that the parents found disturbing. This concerned the contingency of the parent-child relationship in adoption. In our culture this relationship should follow out of necessity. The idea that just any child could end up being ours and that the child could be exchanged is disturbing (Modell 1994, 200-201). Even though there is clearly an element of choice in intercountry adoption, after the child has arrived parents try to push this out of the picture. Those parents I interviewed had various ways of introducing an element of fate or necessity into the relationship. One way was to argue that this child was meant to be theirs because of the timing. Vivian: "The most extraordinary thing is that our children were actually born exactly at the time when we first wanted to have kids."

The parents also tried to find similarities between the child and themselves. Sometimes this was in the names, as shown in Eva’s story: "The child’s name was Maya Paola. And my mother’s second name is Paola. And my niece’s name is Maya. In other words the names just fit, this child belongs to my family because of the names." The parents would also try to find physical similarities between themselves and the child, even though the child was ethnically
different from them. Jenny remarked in the interview, in which her husband was present, that, "the girl looked exactly like her father." Alison and her son, in fact, have different skin colours. Yet, she explained:

"My son looks very much like me and others in my family. And he looked familiar even in the photo. [...] His face and his expression in the photo were exactly like mine when I was a one-year-old. [...] I think that they [in the sending country] tried to match me with a child that looked like me."

Other researchers have found the same tendency in adoptive parents to find signs that their child was meant to be theirs (Dorow, 2002: 157; Modell, 1994: 206), and to find physical similarities between themselves and their internationally adopted children (Howell, 2003: 473).

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this article was to investigate some of the factors behind the recent increase in transnational adoption by looking at how adopting from abroad is organised at the macro level, and how this shapes and is shaped by the actions of individual families making the decision to adopt. There clearly are market elements in the way intercountry adoption is currently organised and functions (see also Bhabha, 2004). It is driven by the huge demand for infants generated by changing practices in private life in the West. Although the number of children in institutions in the sending states far exceeds the number of children involved in intercountry adoption, there is evidence that the demand for 'adoptable' children exceeds their supply. The children that are desired are the youngest, healthiest and lightest in skin colour. Thus, the increase in intercountry adoptions has coincided with the upsurge of new countries of origin such as China and Russia, which send the kind of children who are in demand. More than 10,000 infants from China and another 10,000 from Eastern Europe are adopted in the USA and Western countries every year. Other countries of origin lag far behind.

From the perspective of adoptive parents the discrepancy between demand and supply results in very long and uncertain waiting times. As these parents have usually spent a large part of their adult lives struggling to have a child of their own, this causes a lot of emotional stress. Paradoxically, the long waiting times also lead to further commodification of the process. Because it is so difficult and takes time to obtain children through intercountry adoption, would-be parents have to consider tactics in terms of whether to change the country of origin, the adoption agency, or their own preferences. There was a lot of talk about which countries were ‘running smoothly’ and which agencies were ‘arranging’ what kinds of children. The long waiting times also make the children even more precious and valuable to the parents. This further increases the sentimentalisation of transnational adoption, and hence the demand.

The demand for transnational adoption has been created by demographic and life-style changes in the West (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Spar, 2006). The shortage of babies has been accompanied by changes in the significance of children and the role of parents. Children have become the objects of huge emotional investment. Parenting itself is associated with more duties: parents should provide their children with the best possible start in life. (Beck-
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Gernsheim, 2002; Zelizer, 1985) These ideals of 'good parenting' and the value of children are reflected in adoptive parents' experiences and actions. The parents interviewed for this study expressed a powerful wish to experience parenthood. To be in the category of a parent was seen as an opportunity to fulfill their potential as a human being. Others have noted how intercountry adoption is, for many, their last opportunity to achieve completeness (Telfer, 2000: 334-335). The interviewees also emphasized wanting to be a family and wanting to be able to act like a family and take part in family activities (see also Howell, 2001: 208-209). The whole process of becoming an adoptive parent was loaded with sentimentality and a tendency to over-emote (see also Stryker, 2001: 23).

While the parents had preferences concerning their child-to-be, it would be wrong to see this as a problem of adoptive parenthood. They were not more selfish or consumer-oriented than other parents, and were dedicated and committed to their children. Adoptive parents in general are anxious to be 'good parents' (Howell, 2006: 79) and they are very reflective about their own parenting. That they prefer certain kinds of children is connected with the norms and values concerning the nature of parenthood that they share with the rest of society. The interviewees talked about wanting to protect their children and to have a bigger influence on their development. They also wanted to perform their parental roles to perfection. A small and healthy child fits these concerns more easily. They also thought that if the child looked similar to others in Finland, they would be able to protect it better from racist comments and discrimination in life later on. Moreover, girls were thought of as being better able to adjust. There were, however, instances when the 'ideal' child, i.e., a healthy and Western-looking infant, could not be obtained. It seems that an older child has better chances of being adopted into Western families if he/she is Western looking, whereas non-Western looking children have better chances of being adopted if they are very young (see also Goldberg, 2006).

However, on the global level these parental hopes and anxieties lead to the stratification of children by age, health, gender and skin colour, further escalating the imbalance between demand and supply and thus making transnational adoption more like a market. As the demand and the mechanisms of the formation of parental preferences lie in such powerful and sentimental notions of parenthood and children, this trend is not likely to change. The goal of obtaining a child of one's own had become a life project for most of the adoptive parents interviewed. What is changing is the supply of such children. There have recently been reductions in the numbers of children available for transnational adoption in the most popular countries of origin (Selman, 2007). As other countries now have to take in even more applications, it is uncertain what consequences the competition for 'adoptable' children will have. It is very difficult to regulate this kind of structural pressure through legislation or international agreements. Inherent global inequities further complicate the picture.

One issue that needs to be addressed in the future is the position and rights of the birth mothers in these cases. According to research, the majority of children in intercountry adoption are not orphans, and have living birth mothers or other kin (Cantwell, 2003: 71; Fonseca, 2002: 410; Hoelgaard, 1998: 230). It has been argued that the West is increasingly importing all forms of reproduction from the Third World (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003), and thus that poor women elsewhere are in fact maintaining our lifestyles. Allegations that the West is enforcing its own ideas of exclusive parenting, and thus disturbing existing and
more informal childcare practices in the countries of origin that do not necessarily involve permanent rupture with birth parents, have also been made (Fonseca, 2003: 116-123; Hoelgaard, 1998: 204-207; Yngvesson, 2002: 231-232). There have also been claims that at least in some cases children sent for intercountry adoption in Cambodia, Vietnam and Romania have turned out not to have been abandoned in the first place (Solinger, 2001: 26). So far, Western receiving states have not seriously looked into the other side of transnational adoption. In the words of the author of a recent book on intercountry adoption: “Very little, or nothing, is known about the biological parents of most children sent for adoption overseas” (Howell, 2006: 15, footnote 5).

REFERENCES


