

**Intercountry Adoption Research Project
Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies
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The project:

Where the last two decades have seen a dramatic upsurge in intercountry adoption in most Western countries, numbers of adoptions from abroad into the UK have remained comparatively very low. With a population twelve times the size of Finland's, for example, the UK makes approximately the same number of intercountry adoptions every year (300). Finland itself lags well behind Spain, Sweden and Ireland, the states where the per capita ratio of intercountry adoptions is highest.¹

What makes the UK different? The aim of this project is to build a clear picture of how intercountry adoption is perceived and practiced in contemporary Britain. This study will investigate the assumptions, expectations and behaviours (cultural, political, institutional, socioeconomic) that underlie British intercountry adoption patterns. We will concentrate on the interface between policy making/implementation and broader understandings about parenting, race and nationality. Taking an anthropological perspective, the project will focus on the experiences of parents, social workers and policy makers involved in intercountry adoption. The end result will be a nuanced ethnographic study of family making processes in the UK today.

The questions:

Intercountry adoption produces families that challenge taken-for-granted ideas about parenthood, citizenship, ethnicity and race. It also entails complex institutional, bureaucratic and legal involvement in the most intimate arenas of family life, bringing together groups with diverse standpoints and interests. Our investigation of perceptions and practices relating to intercountry adoption will revolve around three interrelated sets of questions:

1. Questions relating to how intercountry adoption is variously understood by the parties involved.

- What kinds of persons are thought to be adequate parents for what kinds of children?
- How is intercountry adoption evaluated by comparison with other forms of family making, including transracial domestic adoption?

- What understandings concerning race, ethnicity, social status, national belonging and cultural heritage are relevant to the practice of intercountry adoption?
- How do these understandings cross-cut ideas about what makes an appropriate family?
- What role do these understandings play in decisions about children's best interests and children's rights?
- What role do the various monetary exchanges that accompany intercountry adoption play in its moral or ethical evaluation?

2. Questions relating to how the practice of intercountry adoption is shaped by institutional and governmental frameworks particular to the UK.

- How is access to intercountry adoption services made available and/or restricted by the institutional framework currently in place?
- How does access to intercountry adoption services compare to access to domestic adoption services?
- How is intercountry adoption prioritized or otherwise in relation to other services provided by the various authorities and bodies involved?
- How is intercountry adoption costed in economic terms by the various parties involved?
- What principles and values, both explicit and implicit, are involved in the process of costing intercountry adoption?
- How are decisions about deployment of resources regarding intercountry adoption moulded by notions of race, ethnicity, social status, national belonging and cultural heritage?
- How do public opinion, policy and implementation regarding intercountry adoption intertwine?

3. Questions relating to the kinds of interactions that take place among the various parties (parents, social workers, civil servants, policy makers) involved in intercountry adoption.

- How do the different parties understand and evaluate each other's aims, interests and capacities?
- Who is considered to be best placed to decide on and monitor family-making practices and norms? How is their entitlement achieved and contested?
- What kinds of power are exercised in the process of granting/gaining entitlement to become a parent of a child adopted from abroad?
- To what extent do the various parties consider themselves empowered or disempowered within the intercountry adoption process, and at what stages?
- What kinds of knowledge do the different parties hold about intercountry adoption practice, procedure and legislation?
- How is this knowledge and expertise acquired, deployed and contested? How is it disseminated or not to the various parties and among them?

The methodology:

Our research methods are dictated by the overall goal of producing an in-depth, qualitative, ethnographic study centred as far as possible on participant observation. The kinds of evidence we aim to collect will include verbal and written statements by the different parties, records of interactions, official and unofficial documentation, as well as media reports. We intend to:

- Create and analyse a series of questionnaires directed at the different parties (including parents and prospective parents, social workers, policy makers, and civil servants), in order to gain a first impression of their perspectives and of the issues that they find pressing.
- Follow up the questionnaires with extended semi-structured and unstructured interviews with a sample of respondents. We anticipate that some respondents will be interviewed once, others on further occasions.
- Engage in extended participant observation in the different institutional settings involved.
- Attend training and information sessions aimed at social workers as well as at prospective adoptive parents.
- Attend meetings and reunions of adopters and of their representatives.
- Attend meetings of adoptive parents' representatives and of representatives from official bodies.
- Gather and analyse a wide range of documentary evidence regarding intercountry adoption including policy, consultation, legislation, as well as, when made available, internal documentation produced by the different bodies.
- Build up and analyse an archive of media reports and images relating to intercountry adoption.

Dissemination:

The results of the research will be disseminated through academic publications, official reports, contributions to handbooks and newsletters of user organisations, presentations at academic conferences and at workshops and conferences organised by and aimed at stake-holders.

The beneficiaries:

- Charities involved in intercountry adoption, among them the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering and the Intercountry Adoption Centre. These charities rely on relevant research in order to advise policy makers; train social workers and monitor their practices; and support children, families and adopted adults.
- Policy makers linked to the Department for Children, Schools and Families, in charge of legislating Britain's involvement in intercountry adoption.
- Parent support groups (such as the Overseas Adoption Support and Information Service or Children Adopted from China) and adult adoptee

support groups (such as the Transnational and Transracial Adoption Group).

- Local Authorities and voluntary adoption agencies who employ social workers to assess prospective intercountry adopters as well as in the follow up of adoptions.

The researchers:

Dr Huon Wardle is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. He is the author of *An Ethnography of Cosmopolitanism in Kingston Jamaica* (2000) and has published on Jamaican adoption in a global context.

Dr Paloma Gay y Blasco is also Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews. She is the author of *Gypsies in Madrid: Sex, Gender and the Performance of Identity* (1999). She has published on race and ethnicity, and has work forthcoming on American narratives of Chinese adoption.

Dr Wardle and Dr Gay y Blasco are married and have one birth child and one child adopted from China.

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ⁱ Spain's per capita ratio of intercountry adoption was 134 per million in 2005. Sweden's was 97.3, and Ireland's was 96.8. The UK's ratio was approximately 5 per million.