

21/04/2016

How (Not) to Talk About Adoption



Speaking about adoption in Spain, where until 2008 it was one of the countries with the lowest birth rate and an extremely high adoption rate, is difficult for parents, professionals, and researchers alike. Qualitative research has revealed that two competing, co-existing ideals about the relationship between family creation and support and how this is dealt with are at the root of these communicative difficulties.

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Until 2008, Spain had an extremely high adoption rate, accompanied by a birth rate that continues to be among the world's lowest. These idiosyncrasies show that people in Spain carefully plan their families, making Spain a good place for encountering the definition of families and how they are created.

In this context where transnational adoption is common and normalized, the authors of this study, published in [one of the top ten anthropology journals](#), found that speakers of adoption do not follow a specific set of rules about what to say (such as "you were meant to be our child") or not to say (such as "the adoption was very expensive").

Instead, they observe a generalized sense of caution when speaking and not speaking about adoption. This caution is best described as "communicative vigilance". It springs from the difficulty of mediating two contradictory understandings of talk and kinship: (1) a referentialist one in which adoption's undesirability must be masked and (2) a performative one in which talk can

create a new world where adoption is equivalent to and as valuable as more conventional ways of creating families.

These findings represent an advance in anthropological studies of language and kinship. While most research on language socialization focuses on children, this study examines the language socialization of adults who will later be responsible for socializing their children and other adults. The study also identifies an area where talk about family takes place, which is useful given that ideas about family are often treated as common-sense and difficult to elicit formally.

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References

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