

The Challenges and Rewards of Presenting and Publishing Sociological Research on Adoption: An Historical Reflection on Searching for an Audience

By

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Abstract

Going back to the 1980s, this paper examines sociologists' apparent lack of interest in doing research on domestic or international adoption, including presenting papers at national sociology meetings and publishing articles and books on the topic. The author examines the thesis that sociologists who **do** work on controversial, but important, topics and issues, including adoption, may perceive themselves as marginalized among sociology colleagues because they 1. *lack visibility* and numerical support among other sociologists; and 2. *lack access* to sociological venues through which to present their work to interested audiences and to publish it in mainstream venues. Ruggiero reflects on her experience as a sociologist of adoption since 1997, examines factors that may explain sociologists' lack of interest in adoption as a legitimate topic for sociological research, and identifies opportunities and incentives that may encourage more sociologists to study adoption and other important but controversial topics. She concludes with a section about how more sociologists can move their work from marginal to mainstream.

Keywords: sociology of the family, international adoption, older child adoption, adoption from the U. S. child welfare system

Introduction

Adoption dates back to ancient times. One example is Moses' adoption by Pharaoh's daughter. In the book of Exodus, we learn that Moses's biological mother, Jochebed, made an adoption plan for her son in order to save the infant Moses from death by drowning in the Nile, as Pharaoh ordered should happen to all newborn Jewish males. Moses' sister, Miriam, kept watch as the infant floated down the Nile in a watertight basket for Pharaoh's daughter to find him. Subsequently, Miriam approaches Pharaoh's daughter who agrees to hire Jochebed to nurse him until he is weaned. Moses is then delivered back to Pharaoh's daughter and he officially becomes her son. A second example is from Ancient Rome.

A second example is from Ancient Rome. To arrange the adoption of a male child, some higher-status families looked to less-wealthy families who had more sons than they could afford to raise. In such cases the

biological parents of the male child had to agree to the adoption and "execute a deed" making over the child to the other family. From that point on, the child no longer had any claims on his biological parents. In these situations, adoption was viewed as a workable solution for both families. Certain categories of people (i.e., vestals, certain palace officials, and slaves) were not allowed to object to their child's adoption by another family. Abandoned children had no parents to object to an adoption. In the United States, domestic adoption, both formal and informal, has been a popular way to build and/or expand families since the founding of this country.

In the United States, domestic adoption, both formal and informal, has been a popular way to build and/or expand families since the founding of this country. During the 20th century, domestic adoptions in the U. S. increased in the post-WWII period and *peaked* in 1970, when 175,000 domestic adoptions took place (Bonham 1977). Using data from nationally representative

samples of women aged 15-44 years, collected by National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG) in 1973, 1982, 1988, and 1995, Chandra et al. (1999) found that the percentage of never-married women in this age group who had *ever* adopted a child *declined* from 2.1 percent in 1973 to 1.3 percent in 1995. In recent years, most domestic adoptions of non-infants are from the U. S. Public Foster Care system.

After World War II, adopting children born in other countries also became a way for Americans to build families. International adoptions to the U. S. expanded in the mid-1950s with the adoption of increasing numbers of children born in South Korea and western Europe. Between September 11, 1957-June 30, 1969—the earliest years for which the U. S. Citizen Information Service (C. I. S.), formerly known as the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (I.N.S.), reported data on adoptees from sending countries in Europe and Asia to the U. S., over 20,000 children born outside the U. S. joined American families through adoption. During that time period, 61% of the international adoptees came from Asia—more than half of them from South Korea. International adoptees from Europe were fewer (i.e., 39%).

During the 1970s, almost **50,000** immigrant orphans entered the U. S. either as adoptees or to be adopted. This number increased to **77,606** children in the 1980s. The 1990s showed a further increase in international adoptions to **102,380** children-- with adoptees to the U. S. beginning to come from Russia and other countries in eastern Europe (e.g., Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Romania, and Bulgaria). Between 1991 and 2011 inclusively, for example, Americans adopted **58,708 children from Russia alone**.

Between 2000-2011, the number of international adoptions by U. S. parents continued to increase, doubling from the 1990s total of **102,380** to **206,535**¹. During the first decade of the 21st century, U. S. government statistics show that Americans adopted more children internationally than they did during any *single* decade of the 20th century.

In sum, between 1970-2010, Americans adopted a total of **434,000** foreign-born children. Overall, international adoptions of immigrant children by American citizens lessened in total numbers during the second decade of the 21st century. Some countries either slowed down (e.g., Ukraine) sending children to the U. S., or stopped sending adoptees entirely (e.g.,

¹See U. S. C. I. S., Immigrants Admitted as Orphans by Sex, Age, and Region and Selected Country of Birth (Table 14 1986-1991; Table 15, 1992-2002; Table 10, 2003-2004; Table 12, 2005.

Romania in 2005, Russia in 2014). Changing geopolitical conditions and an increasing amount of negative media attention about troubled adoptees and their beleaguered American adoptive parents were two reasons for the changes in Russian adoption policies to the United States.

International adoption to the U. S., overall, has been a thriving business for decades. At this writing, the largest number of foreign-born children that Americans have adopted are from the People's Republic of China (PRC). The second largest number are from Russia. The total number of international adoptions by U. S. citizens declined further between 2012-2019. In 2019, China sent fewer than 1,000 adoptees to the United States.

Literature Review

In examining the coverage and treatment of adoption as a topic in college textbooks on the family, published from the 1960s through the early 1990s, Hall and Stolley (1997) found that adoption was only *minimally covered* and actually *declined* between 1988 and 1993. Specifically, these authors reported that the coverage of adoption in the books they analyzed averaged (a mean) of 2.0 pages in texts published in the 1960s and actually *declined* to 1.1 pages for texts published between 1988 through 1993.

About 10 years later, Fisher (2003a) reviewed 21 texts and 16 readers on the family. He reported that *texts* averaged only 2.0 pages on adoption and *readers*, 3.78 pages. More startling is that Fisher discovered that, when present, the portrayal of adoption in these texts was *negative*— as “fraught with risks and hazards.” According to Fisher (2003a: 156-157): “Worst case scenarios were often presented as though they were typical of adoption, and the books’ negative generalizations about adoption were in many cases not supported by empirical data.”

Even more recently, Perry (2013) added his conclusions regarding the lack of sociological publications on adoption, and, more specifically, the lack of publications in “flag ship” sociology journals. After doing a critical examination of sociologists’ contributions to the published *sociological* literature on adoption, going back to 1980, Perry (2013:1) concluded that: “Adoption is arguably the most neglected family relationship in the sociology of the family.” He based this statement on the lack of sociological research on adoption (or foster care) in either the *American Sociological Review* (ASR) or the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS). Both journals are considered by most sociologists to be the

top two journals in sociology.² Perry went on to say that the neglect of sociological research on adoption and foster care has happened because sociologists have *mistakenly* let researchers in other fields--including social work, psychology, history, and mental health, dominate research and writing about adoption research. In his brief look for articles on any aspect of adoption published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family (JMF)*, Perry discovered that, except for an article by Smock and Greenland (2010), most of the articles on adoption that the *JMF* published were by scholars in social work, psychology, or family science.

With the lack of visibility and the negative portrayal of adoption in student texts and in prestigious sociology journals, it is not surprising that, historically, few sociologists have engaged in doing research, writing, or speaking about adoption at national-level conferences or in mainstream sociology journals. Until the 1980s, publications on adoption appeared to be peripheral to the interests of mainstream sociology which focused on “basic” rather than “applied topics, and, generally, on less controversial topics.

Some sociologists who *did* work on doing adoption research, publishing, and presenting about adoption issues, likely felt marginalized by/among other sociologists. Marginalization was due, in large part, to the definition of the boundaries of appropriate scholarly domains for sociology and sociologists and to the lack of access to sociological venues through which to bring their work on adoption into the mainstream. Therefore, relatively few North American sociologists have been visible doing research, publishing, and presenting papers on the important, but controversial, of adoption during that time period.

American and Canadian Sociologists Who Have Worked in the Field of Adoption

In searching the published literature on domestic and international adoption between 1984 and 2018, I discovered only a handful of sociologists who have published work on adoption-related topics. Some have published articles (Miall 1987, 1994, 1996; March & Miall 2000; Feigelman 1997; Feigelman et al, 1998; Goldberg 1997, 2001). Of these sociologists, only Goldberg (1997, 2001) appears to have published her research on Romanian adoptees in recognized sociology journals:

²The *ASR* article was about adoptive parents (Hamilton, Cheng, and Powell 2007) and the *AJS* article was on Korean adoptees (Shaio and Tuan 2008).

Marriage and Family Review and *International Review of Sociology*. A few sociologists have written books (Kirk 1984; Feigelman and Silverman 1983; Simon et al. 1992, 1994, 2000a, 2000b; Tessler et al. 1999; Ruggiero 2007b). Three sociologists have either co-authored (Altstein and Simon 1990) or written book chapters on adoption (Wegar 1998; Ruggiero 2007a).

Fisher (2003b:2) noted that, prior to 2000, sociological work on adoption and the sociologists who produced this work, did not get much attention or recognition from other sociologists who study the family. The published sociological literature on adoption between 1984 and 2000 supports Fisher’s conclusion.

The **thesis** of this paper is that sociologists who work on controversial, but important, topics and issues, including adoption, may perceive themselves as marginalized among sociology colleagues because they lack

1. visibility and numerical support among other sociologists and
2. access to sociological venues through which to bring their work into the mainstream.

Where Are the ‘Sociologists of Adoption’ in Recognized Sociology Journals?

If a journal has either *sociology* or *family* in its title, at least some of the articles it publishes should be by sociologists working in the field of adoption. However, Fisher (2003b), discovered only six articles and four book reviews on adoption published in *the Journal of Marriage and the Family* during the 1990s. He does not say whether any of the authors of these articles or reviews were sociologists. Fisher also states that he found *no* references to adoption in the Key Word Index of this journal’s 439-page review on research on the family in the 1990s. Similarly, the 1999 edition of the *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*, a 750+ page volume, contained only four references on adoption.

Except for several articles written by sociologists and published in the journal *Family Relations*, sociologists of adoption appeared to seek publication of their work in journals *outside* of sociology-- typically social work journals where there seems to be is more receptive editors and readership (See, for example, Della Cava et al. 2004; Ruggiero and Johnson 2009).

Like other scientists, sociologists are motivated to do research and write about topics that are important to them. It is not surprising then that, among the

handful of sociologists who have done research and published on the topic of adoption, *most* are adoptive parents themselves (i.e., Kirk, Fiegelman, Fisher, Goldberg, Ruggiero, and Tessler). However, Simon, one of the most well-known sociologists of adoption is *not* an adoptive parent. Simon's research and writing about adoption was motivated by her interest in interracial adoption, especially of black children by whites and the controversy that surrounded it. Black social workers had taken a position strongly against black children being adopted by white families. Simon's research challenged that policy and was central to then President Clinton's 1997 decision to make a *child's need for a family* a more important factor than the *race of the family* that adopted him/her/them. The fact that Simon co-authored an article (1990) and books with Harold Alstein (1992, 2000a) and others authors (1994, 2000b) whose expertise is in social work, a closer field to work on adoption issues, may have allowed her to more easily cross over into the field of adoption which has typically been the domain of social work.

What kind of message does mainstream sociology's apparent lack of interest in adoption send sociologists who studied the family during the 1980s and 1990s? As older-child domestic adoptions from foster care and international adoptions became more common, *and* the numbers of sociologists who attended national meetings increased, one would expect that adoption would be a topic of increased visibility at professional meetings of sociologists. This did not appear to be the case: Very few sociologists interested in discussing family issues like older-child and special needs adoptions appeared in Conference programs at American Sociological Association (ASA) or at meetings of applied sociologists, including the Sociological Practice Association (SPA) and the Society for Applied Sociology (SAS).

My Experiences Presenting Papers on International Adoption at National-Level Sociology Conferences

I presented my first paper on international adoption (Ruggiero 1997) in the sociological practice session at the 93rd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in Toronto, Canada. Dr. Robert Dentler, an applied sociologist, scheduled my paper in the papers panel he organized that year. I was fortunate to be able to give my first presentation on international adoption to a sizeable audience. As the last presenter, however, my time to speak was limited. Nevertheless, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to discuss my work and was hopeful about having many more such opportunities at

future professional meetings. I presented twice more at ASA conferences (Ruggiero 2001a, 2004).

Subsequently, I sought opportunities to present my research at sociology conferences. I found them primarily at applied sociology conferences: The Sociological Practice Association (Ruggiero 2001b), The Society for Applied Sociology (Ruggiero 2003) and the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (in 2005, 2011, 2013).

Except for the 1997 ASA Conference, the number of attendees at sessions at the two ASA meetings where I presented, was small. I will use the 2004 ASA Conference as an illustration. At these meetings, I presented a paper (Ruggiero 2004) in the Section on Family roundtables. The roundtable format was a new one for me. So I was curious to see what kind of turnout we would have for that session. The time was decent, early afternoon, and the choice of city, San Francisco, outstanding. However, at a national meeting which boasted record attendance, only four people were at that roundtable: The session chair, who was actually a substitute for the official chair, and (we) three presenters. The other two presenters were graduate students working on their MA or Ph.D. degrees. All of the presenters and the moderator were women. Despite our giving thoughtful and important presentations at that roundtable, no one else got to hear the issues we discussed.

Perhaps the meeting day, time, size of meeting attendance, competition from other sessions scheduled at the same time influenced session attendance. Although these variables likely did have some effect, I wondered what else could have been responsible for the lack of an audience at our roundtable.

What Factors Might Explain Sociologists' Lack of Interest in Adoption as a Legitimate Topic for Research?

I consider four possible explanatory factors:

1. **That research on adoption has been stigmatized.** Historically, adoption appears to have been viewed as a minor topic. "Orphans" have been traded or "bought" by "enterprising" individuals over the years. Like slaves, they were secondary individuals. An example of this secondary status is the orphan trains which operated between 1850 and 1920 in the Midwest.³ The children had absolutely no control over who would "adopt" them or how they would be treated, whether as a member

³See http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org/03_homework/02_history/03_civilwar.html.

of the family or as an unpaid worker. Some of those children, unfortunately, were not even true orphans—that is, were *not* parentless.

Many Muslim countries have no legal mechanism for domestic adoption and do not allow international adoption. Islamic children are not allowed to be adopted because adoption would require changing their true identity. In such a case, an adopted Muslim child would be placed in a potentially difficult position when seeking a marriage partner: The risk of violating a taboo if his or her blood lineage is unknown. In many cultures, orphans are considered among the outcasts of society, living outside of family and some living on the streets. They are unwanted and unprotected.

Therefore, adoption is a difficult topic to research as well as to contain because of changing circumstances and geopolitical boundaries. In recent decades, adoption of older children, especially from troubled early circumstances, was *not* a “feel good” enough topic to motivate investigation or warrant publication. Publishers did not actively seek or consider publishing books on adoption, unless such books would likely be high-volume sellers and/or make the editors and potential readers “feel good.” The net effect is that contracts for books about older-child adoption have been few.

2. That adoption has been viewed as a women’s issue/topic, although one that seems to fall outside of the field of Women’s and Gender Studies.

Since single men as well as single women adopt, why is adoption not a “men’s issue” too? One reason may be that, to men, adoption is not an income-producing topic. After all, adoption costs money and takes both time and considerable effort! Men are inclined to be more interested in income-producing topics, such as organization and business. Men’s issues, such as business, also become status enhancing. Perhaps, women initiate adoption to a greater extent than men do, even among heterosexual couples. A second reason may be that, beginning the mid-1990s, international adoption started to receive some sensationalistic media attention and became a negatively charged topic. In his article on adoption for the 2003 *Annual Review of Sociology*, Fisher (2003b) states: “Despite the fact that adoption is hardly unusual, it has received remarkably little attention from sociologists.”

3. That research and writing about adoption is the domain of the disciplines of social work, psychology, and psychiatry rather sociology.

Professionals in these fields studied and wrote about adoption first, laying claim and establishing their legitimacy in doing and publishing adoption research. If sociologists disagree with the notion that adoption is outside our “turf,” we need to ask ourselves what the sociological perspective and our understanding the contextual and other variables that affect adoption outcomes can add to the body of research on adoption. We also need to ask ourselves if sociologists view adoption as a legitimate way to form or expand families. Do we think that doing research on, and writing about, adoption will *not* be as highly regarded or rewarded in the same way writing about other topics may be?

Regarding research crossing over into other scholarly domains, I was pleased that one of my articles on international adoption was accepted for publication by *The Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal* (Ruggiero and Johnson 2009). I was also pleased that Transaction Publishers agreed to include an article by Kathy Johnson and myself in an Appendix at the end of my book on Eastern European Adoption (Ruggiero and Johnson 2007c). Our rationale for doing that was to publish a practical piece that would be useful to pre-adoptive parents interested in international adoption, social workers preparing them (pre-adoption) and providing (post-adoption) services.

Recently, I have read about research on domestic adoption from the U. S. foster care system, conducted by teams of researchers from different disciplines, including sociology and social work. I saw that some recent articles by these cross-disciplinary teams were published in sociology journals (Font et al. 2018; Berger et al. 2018)

4. That the lack of substantial, or any, funding from government or private sources has discouraged more sociologists from doing research on adoption.

Opportunities/Incentives That Might Motivate More Sociologists to Study Adoption

Here I consider four factors that might help turn more sociologists of the family in the direction of doing adoption research:

1. The opportunity to study important research questions about contemporary families. For example:

- In what ways have families changed and how has adoption figured into these changes?
- Do adoptive parents and others currently think that there is a stigma (Miall 1987) attached to adoption?
- What factors can improve adoption outcomes for special needs children and their adoptive parents?
- How do race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation influence the way diverse types of families are formed and function in contemporary society?

2. The opportunity to disseminate the results of our research in ways and through mechanisms which reach diverse audiences—the general public, prospective adoptive parents, practitioners who work with adoptees, as well as other sociologists.

The opportunity to share my research with diverse audiences was a major motivating factor for me. In 2005, when I began seeking a publisher for my book manuscript on adoption from Eastern Europe, my plan was to reach more than a single audience. I discovered, at that time, that publishers did not respond well to “cross-over” books—that is, to books geared to both professional and popular audiences. I have also learned that presses like Praeger and Greenwood Press, which used to publish sociological books on adoption, have changed their focus.

To disseminate information about my research on older-child and sibling adoptions from Russia and other Eastern European countries, I gave presentations at several regional adoption conferences in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island prior to, and after, my book came out. Especially at the annual ACONE conference, I found a more receptive audience for my research.

Sometimes people who heard about my research reached out to me privately, often by email. I have shared my research findings with post-adoptive parents of Eastern European children available for adoption outside of Russia, typically by U. S. families. I have also talked by telephone with pre-adopters who wanted information and some perspective about the direction of their adoption plans. My goal in doing this was to listen, provide information, and offer some perspective. I never discouraged anyone who asked for my take on their situation or plans.

3. The opportunity to link sociological research to action in the area of adoption policy and practice.

Sociologists have a lot to offer in studying adoption: a contextual framework, using social facts to explain social outcomes, a dynamic perspective in studying issues, the training which allows us to see the links between the micro and macro levels of analysis, and skills in drawing out implications for change. With the exception of Simon’s work on trans-racial adoptions, sociological work in the field of adoption has yet to be visible enough to influence policy or practice decisions on any level of government.

4. The availability of sufficient funding to study adoption, both domestic and international.

After I had collected data from my Phase I (mailed questionnaire) and Phase II (telephone interview) surveys, I applied for, and received, a small grant from the Committee to Aid Faculty Research (CAFR) at Providence College (PC). Receiving this grant allowed me to fund the costs of hiring a graduate student from another university to assist with coding and a part-time secretary to type up the telephone interviews. I was also fortunate to be able to hire a series of undergraduate work-study students, paid for directly by PC, to assist me with data analysis and other tasks.

Most professional sociologists would laugh at the very modest funding I had, while I was also teaching full-time. However, at the time, there was little to no funding for research on international adoption from private or government sources.

In the late 1990s, a few international adoption agencies sponsored their own research on the families with whom they worked to arrange international adoptions (See, for example, Claus and Baxter 1997; Cradle of Hope Adoption Center 1998). More recently, when state or local government funding has been available, the funding has been for research on domestic adoptions from the U. S. foster care system. The authors have been part of a multi-disciplinary team of researchers (See, for example, Font et al. 2018; Berger et al. 2018).

Sociology Between the Gaps: A Journal Whose Time Had Come

Based, in part, on the lack of sociological publications on the topic of adoption, upon my retirement from full-time teaching, I decided to start a new journal which would fill *a few* of the publishing gaps left by mainstream

journals. This new journal, entitled **Sociology Between the Gaps: Forgotten and Neglected Topics**,⁴ would publish articles, point of view essays, film and book reviews in each volume, typically on an annual basis. In the second and third volumes, we also published an **Etcetera** section of short pieces related to a theme addressed in one of the first three volumes.

Sociology Between the Gaps (SBG) would be innovative in several ways. It would be sociological and cross-disciplinary, published online rather than in printed form, available at no cost to a global readership, and require no review fee from authors who submit manuscripts for review. Individual articles would appear online as soon as they are accepted.

Most submissions accepted for publication in **SBG** go through more than one set of revisions. The final draft of a submission we accept for publication generally appears in a volume of **SBG** within weeks (not months) after I receive the final draft from the author(s).

Similar to articles published in other sociology journals, manuscripts published as articles are peer reviewed. As of this writing, we have published four volumes of **SBG** with the fifth volume wrapping up soon. I serve as the first (volunteer) Editor-in-Chief of **SBG**.

Starting this journal has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career as a sociologist. Not only have I been able to publish articles and other pieces on important but neglected topics, including adoption from the U. S. foster care system (Ruggiero 2014-2015). But also, through Digital Commons, I can observe and track the popularity of each article or other piece we publish on a monthly basis and where our readers are located.

CONCLUSION

Thinking Critically About How Sociologists Can Move Their Work from Marginal to Mainstream

Basic sociologists study topics that interest them while applied sociologists study topics of interest to them with an eye on the implications of their work for diverse publics and stake holders. Topics can capture the attention of researchers and of powerful segments of the population through attention from the media. Some questions to consider: How visible are the issues in question in the media? Who is talking about them—

⁴Volume 1: *Adoption and Families: National and International Perspectives*; Volume 2: *Civil Engagement of the Future: Creating Livable Communities in Increasingly Aging and Diverse Racial-Ethnic Societies*; Volume 3: *Cultural Lag: An Underestimated Issue in Postmodern Society*.

politicians, the public, etc.?

As I have said before, adoption is a controversial topic. This is especially the case in older-child adoptions because the potential outcome for the child and family, ranging from successful to troubled, is unknown at the start. The outcomes of some international adoptions have been sensationalized; for example, the death of the Polreis adoptee in Colorado and the parents' subsequent trial (Cannellos 1997; Liebovitch 1997).

In writing about adoption, there is always the chance that we, or others, may not "feel good" about some of the results of our research. We cannot control the responses of other people to our work. We can only control our research plan and being careful to be objective in analyzing and reporting all of the results in a fair, unbiased way.

Taking on controversial topics likely means going out of our comfort zone. That said, who is willing to take on controversial topics and talk about both the good and bad news? Are established sociologists (i.e., "veterans") or newcomers at the periphery of discipline of sociology more likely to take risks in their choice of topics to investigate? Status in a professions matters. The availability of funding to support a well-designed research project, especially a longitudinal project, also matters a lot. Without recognition within one's discipline and obtaining substantial funding to support a research project, such projects will remain a dream or wish unattained.

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