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

By

Josephine A. Ruggiero

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 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. 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., 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

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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.)
top two journals in sociology. 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 a 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:


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, the1999 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

2The ASR article was about adoptive parents (Hamilton, Cheng, and Powell 2007) and the AJS article was on Korean adoptees (Shaio and Tuan 2008).
handful of sociologists who have done research and published on the topic of adoption, most are adoptive parents themselves (i.e., Kirk, Fiegeiman, 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 and 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. The children had absolutely no control over who would “adopt” them or how they would be treated, whether as a member

\[\text{See http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org/03_homework/02_history/03_civilwar.html.}\]
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 than 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-adoptive) 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
The Challenges and Rewards of Presenting and Publishing Sociological Research on Adoption: An Historical Reflection on Searching for an Audience

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 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.

References

Adoption clubhouse at http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org/03_homework/02_history/02_civilwar.html.


About the Author: Josephine A. Ruggiero, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Sociology at Providence College, began doing original research on international adoption from Eastern Europe in 1997. In addition to giving many presentations at scholarly meetings of sociologists and applied sociologists about her research on adoption, she has published her research on adoption in American journals and books (2007, 2007c), published two articles in European journals (2014), and written four published reviews of books about adoption (2001, 2005, 2011, 2016). Dr. Ruggiero was also a three-time invited guest on Donna Montalbano's radio program, Adoption Discussions (2007, 2008, 2012) and a guest on Newsweek Radio in 2010, just prior to the release of her "My Turn" article which appeared in Newsweek Magazine on April 26, 2010.