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Cecilia Lindgren

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TITLE PAGE

Title:	Ideals of parenting and childhood in the contact zone of intercountry adoption: Assessment of second-time adoption applicants in Sweden
Author:	Cecilia Lindgren, PhD Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies, Linköping University, Sweden
ORCID iD	0000-0002-4427-3321
E-mail address:	cecilia.lindgren@liu.se
Telephone number:	+ 46 13 282927
Mailing address:	Cecilia Lindgren Department of Thematic Studies - Child Studies Linköping University 581 83 Linköping Sweden

Ideals of parenting and childhood in the contact zone of intercountry adoption: Assessment of second-time adoption applicants in Sweden

Abstract

Intercountry adoption is a global phenomenon, a contact zone in which notions of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest' are negotiated. The present article explores what norms of parenthood and childhood Sweden, as a receiving country, communicates in the global flow of children and ideas. Adoption assessment reports are examined, with a focus on how adoption applicants are portrayed and how 'good parents' are thereby construed. The analysis demonstrates how certain qualities, e. g. being loving, self-sacrificing and child-centred, are ascribed to applicants, and how the presentation of 'good parents' also defines a proper childhood.

Keywords

Adoption assessment, childhood, globalization, intercountry adoption, parenting ideals, social categorization

Intercountry adoption is a global phenomenon, and one of the processes that set children in motion and inform the exchange and transformation of ideas (Howell, 2006; Stryker and Yngvesson, 2013). In 2012, 466 children from more than 25 countries were adopted by Swedish families via authorized adoption agencies (Swedish Intercountry Adoptions Authority, 2013).

According to the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, it is the responsibility of the receiving state to determine whether prospective parents are suitable to adopt a child, and of the state of origin to determine whether the placement of a child in a certain family would be in his or her best interest. 'Good parents' and 'the child's best interest' are, however, indistinguishable (Thelen and Haukanes, 2010a, 2010b). Decisions on what placement will favour the child entail a vision of good parenting, and assessments of parenting capabilities rely on certain ideas about what children need (Lindgren, 2006). Consequently, in intercountry adoption policy and practice, different parties' notions

of parenthood and childhood meet and are negotiated. In this context, receiving countries present their adoption applicants as fit and able to parent a child born in another country; that is the focus of this article. It will explore what norms of parenthood, and childhood, Sweden communicates in the global flow of children and ideas.

Globalization of childhood and the contact zone of intercountry adoption

Research on children, childhood and globalization describes a flow of capital, people and ideas, processes in which Western conceptions of children – as vulnerable, precious and entitled to a childhood of fantasy and play – are spreading around the world (Sherif Trask, 2010). Intrinsically connected to the Western concept of children and childhood are notions of proper parenthood (Thelen and Haukanes, 2010a). Child-rearing ideologies and practices are spreading, but are constantly negotiated in institutional settings. As ideas travel, they are integrated into new contexts and thereby transformed and reformulated (Sherif Trask, 2010; Thelen and Haukanes, 2010b).

Social anthropologist Signe Howell has described intercountry adoption as a practice whereby

...children are moved [...] from countries less developed economically and technologically in the South to the much wealthier North where there is a growing demand for them. The diffusion of ideas, however, moves in the opposite direction: from the liberal democracies of the economically developed Western nation-states to those that are less developed in the South and in Eastern Europe. (Howell, 2006:7)

This two-way flow, of children and ideas, is seen as a manifestation of the globalization of Western knowledge and morality, informed by psychological discourse and concepts of children's rights and best interest, and underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Adoption Convention (Howell, 2006; Thelen and Haukanes, 2010b). International conventions are not neutral, but

reflect and produce norms and claim world-wide approbation, Howell (2006) argues. She shows, however, how norms are sometimes accepted and sometimes contested, in international politics as well as everyday adoption practices. Accordingly, adoption is not a simple transmission of children and ideas but rather a global arena for exchange embedded in complex power relations – a ‘contact zone’ (Pratt, 1991).

The concept of ‘contact zone’, first formulated by Mary Louise Pratt (1991), has been elaborated and applied in different fields of research, such as social history (Peleggi, 2012), museum studies (Schorch, 2013) and adoption studies (Noonan, 2007). Pratt aimed to problematize notions of community and a homogeneous social world, and defined contact zones as ‘...social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power’ (1991:34). Given the line of argument in childhood and globalization research, intercountry adoption may be seen as a contact zone, a social space marked by uneven power relations where cultures meet and where Western notions of childhood and parenthood are dominant but still negotiated. However, the power relations that influence this encounter are indeed complex.

Less privileged countries that send children to privileged countries to be adopted may accept Western truths about children’s needs and best interests. However, as Howell (2006) points out, it is the former that have what the latter so eagerly want; namely, the children. This means that sending countries are in a position to make their own rules, to set specific requirements for prospective parents’ age and marital status, their stay in the country, their participation in legal procedures, and for follow-up reports during the child’s upbringing (Howell, 2006). Countries that do not live up to what is stipulated will not be entrusted to take in children for adoption. A recent example of this is the Russian ban on adoptions to Sweden, because of Swedish acceptance of same-sex marriage and same-sex adoptive parents (Huffington Post, 2013). Accordingly, power relations within the contact zone of intercountry adoption are not straightforward but rather intricate.

In this context, the presentation of prospective parents to sending countries is an important focus of study. In intercountry adoption, children are exchanged for the promise of good parents and a proper childhood. Swedish authorities and agencies, and also prospective parents, represent the Western discourse on children's needs and rights, but are still dependent on representatives in sending countries to accept their definitions of fit parents and a beneficial childhood. Given this, what vision of parenthood, and childhood, does Sweden offer in exchange for children?

Assessment process and empirical data

In Sweden, people wanting to adopt transnationally apply to the social services in the municipality where they live. They are investigated by an assigned social worker who performs register checks, interviews and home visits. The social worker writes an assessment report, including a statement on whether the applicants would be suitable adoptive parents. The report is forwarded to the municipal social welfare committee, which decides whether or not the applicants will be granted consent to adopt abroad (National Board for Health and Welfare, 2009).

If granted consent to adopt, the applicants may engage one of the four authorized adoption agencies in Sweden that offer intercountry adoption intermediation. In the ensuing adoption process, the social worker's report will be translated and serve as a presentation of the prospective parents to a sending country. This means that all considerations and judgments regarding the applicants' parenting capability, made by the social worker and the committee, are also communicated in an international context. Assessment reports are therefore a highly relevant source for exploring parenthood and childhood ideals in intercountry adoption practices. These texts – their content, arguments and rhetorical organization – produce and reproduce a Swedish discourse on parenting and childhood. Like Rachael Stryker (2010), in her study of families seeking attachment therapy for their adopted children, I would argue that ideas about parenthood and childhood are socially reproduced by adoption policy

and practice, and specifically the assessment process. Social work narratives, and the language about family, construct reality and prescribe the categories of good parents and a proper childhood.

This study is part of a broader project on the assessment of adoption applicants in Swedish social services. The empirical data consist of 106 assessment reports from 64 social services units in 57 municipalities around the country. The collection of data was arranged in cooperation with two of Sweden's four authorized adoption agencies. In their archives they have close to 1,900 assessment reports that, for the period 2009-2012, resulted in the local social welfare committee granting the applicants consent to adopt internationally. With their assistance, letters containing information about the project and the research procedure were sent to all applicants, requesting permission to access and use their assessment reports for research purposes. Even though such reports contain personal and sensitive information, and a 5% response rate was expected, no less than 25% of those contacted gave their informed consent. Those who did not respond remained anonymous to the researchers.

Due to the time it would take to anonymize all reports (approximately 1 hour per item), data collection was restricted to one of the four years. One hundred and twenty reports were photocopied by the agencies, and read through and anonymized by the researchers. Fourteen reports were left out because they were incomplete in some way. The remaining sample of 106 reports were scanned, transformed into digital text files, read through and corrected in accordance with the photocopies, and finally imported to a data analysis software program, NVivo, to be coded and analysed.

This study will focus on the 29 reports assessing couples who have adopted before, and are seeking to adopt a second child. The 29 couples in question lived in, and were assessed by social service units in, 25 different municipalities. Median and average age were 40 years for men and 39 years for women. At the time of the assessment 23 of the 29 couples had been married six years or longer, but most had been living together

long before getting married. In 14 of the families both spouses had university training, and in another seven one of them had. In the remaining eight families, both spouses had finished upper secondary school. The 29 children already adopted into these families, 12 girls and 17 boys, were born in ten different countries. Six of them came to Sweden before the age of one, and another 18 at the age of one to two years. Only one child was older than four when adopted to Sweden. The year their parents were assessed for a second adoption, 17 of the children were one to three years old and another 11 were four to six years old.

While the assessment of first-time adoption applicants must focus on their *potential* as adoptive parents, reports on second-time adoption applicants can – and shall, according to national guidelines (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2009) – describe and evaluate their actual parenting *capabilities*. Consequently, in the second-time adoption cases studied, the social worker’s evaluation of the applicants as adoptive parents contributed to their being given the permission to adopt a second child. In the reports, applicants were declared to be good parents. Here, I will explore how their image as fit parents is discursively construed in these texts that are sent abroad to present Swedish prospective parents, and what norms and ideals of parenthood and childhood they communicate in the contact zone of intercountry adoption.

Each report consists of eight to twelve typewritten pages, and includes sections on the applicants’ personal background (family history, childhood, education), current life situation (working conditions, living conditions, financial situation, social life), health status, personality and hobbies, marriage, motives for adoption, and knowledge about and experience of children. It concludes with the investigator’s summary and final assessment, where applicants are declared to be good parents and an approval of their application is recommended. Information related to the first adoptive child, and the applicants as parents, is integrated into the different sections or provided under specific headings.

Methodological approach and analytical procedure

The study takes on the approach to texts and their rhetorical organization represented by discourse analysis (Potter, 1996). It applies narrative perspectives on social work reports, and methodological tools for analysis of social categorization (Baker, 2000; Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2006; Hydén, 1997). Assessment reports are not analysed as descriptive texts, reflecting the investigation process or any factual state of affairs, but rather as institutional narratives (Hydén, 1997) that argue for, and thereby justify, a proposed decision to declare the applicants fit parents and approve their application (Noordegraaf et al., 2009). In the reports, applicants are portrayed in relation to norms and standards for good parenting, and the narratives thereby construct and reconstruct the moral order (cf. Hall, 1997; Hall et al., 2006). As Lars-Christer Hydén (1997) points out, institutional narratives are not so much about people as they are about stereotyped moral characters into which people are cast. In assessment reports, the moral character the applicants personify is 'the good parent'.

By analysing descriptions that lay ground for the conclusion that applicants are good parents, the moral order of parenting and childhood that these reports communicate can be demonstrated. 'Social work accounts are concerned with categorising people, their attributes and behavior', Christopher Hall (1997:126) argues, and claiming that someone is a good parent requires 'a formulation that demonstrates her as possessing attributes or behaviours which warrant the category' (Hall et al., 2006:22). Given this, I chose a methodological approach focusing on categorization work (Baker, 2000; Hall et al., 2006), i.e. analysing how certain attributes, activities and qualities are attached to categories through description, and how categories are linked together.

As a first step, all statements regarding the child already adopted into the family, and the applicants as her or his parents, were coded in relation to parenting (how applicants are reported to talk about being parents and act as parents), family life (how applicants are reported to organize and live their everyday lives with their child)

and the child (information about the child's health, development and everyday life). In the next step, statements on each topic were examined with a focus on the construction of applicants, within the texts, as 'good parents'. Accordingly, the following analysis explores what *opinions*, *actions* and *qualities* are ascribed to applicants through description, and how the category of 'good parents' is thereby construed. It also examines how descriptions of the individual child are linked to, and reinforce, the categorization of applicants as good parents and the portrayal of a proper childhood. The article is based on a detailed analysis of all 29 reports, and 25 of them are quoted or directly referred to in the text. All names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

Parenting – portraying fulfilment, love and responsibility

Helen and Frank have a four-year-old son, Sam, and they now wish to adopt a second child. In the assessment report, their own wordings are used to describe their experience of becoming parents:

Frank: "My wife and I have gotten very close since we adopted Sam: it can be as simple as all of us sitting at the dinner table and laughing about everything and nothing. The relationship has naturally changed, but for the positive. We're, like, a family now. That's what we've been longing for for six years". [...]

Helen: "I experience this mother role as the greatest in my life; when you've waited for six years, this is the best of the best." (A103)

This is a telling example of how applicants' experiences of becoming parents are described in the reports. The quotes tell that being parents is what this couple wants most of all. They had been *waiting*, and they had been *longing*, and it was not until they had their son that they became a family. Becoming parents completed them, not just as a family but also as a couple, *getting close to each other*, and as individuals, experiencing *the greatest in my life*. Becoming parents also brought joy and happiness. The picture of the family at the dinner table, *laughing about everything and nothing*, effectively communicates that they belong together and that being a family is what life is all about.

Consequences of parenthood on the relationship are commented on in the reports. Becoming parents is reported to have 'further strengthened their relationship' or 'bound them together' (A3, A57). For Kate and Ed, 'life together has become more meaningful, and the relationship has become more deep' (A6). Descriptions of a strengthened relationship are accompanied by portrayals of applicants' life with children as harmonious and calm. Dana and Alf say, according to the report, that 'their life has become calmer since Mitch's arrival, and they're happy with life' (A44). Through such statements it is made clear that the applicants can manage the challenges of parenthood. Having a small child has *not* strained their relationship or caused stress, but has instead brought them closer and made them calm. Rhetorically, what is communicated is that they, as parents, are in their right element. This is what they are meant to do. This is made explicit as Harry, the father of a four-year-old boy, is quoted in the report:

Picking up Alex was the culmination of a long, personal process that resulted in my feeling whole as a person, as I finally became the parent of a beloved child.
(A81)

The image of parenthood as a life-fulfilling experience is supported by applicants' reported description of their child as 'the happiness in life', 'all they'd dreamt of', and as someone who gave 'their life another dimension' and made them understand 'what life is all about' (A13, A34, A3, A88). Throughout the reports, words like *love*, *joy*, *happiness* and *gratefulness* are used to describe what the parents feel. The reports thus communicate the image of parents filled with happiness, who see in their child the meaning of life and their own true calling. This image is balanced, however, by a portrayal of parents who are not blinded by love, but rather take their parental responsibilities seriously.

Reports tell that parents engage in their child's everyday life in pre-school, attend pre-school meetings and are open, straightforward and cooperative in relation to the staff. They also visit the children's health care centre, and seek and follow advice when needed. Such statements produce an image of responsible caretakers. Parents are also reported to read to their children, to sing and play with them and to talk to them. Eric

and April, for instance, read stories and participate in their son's play (A97). Luis and Diana read and sing to Max every night, and stay with him until he falls asleep (A34). These are activities that signal engagement in the child's development, and the descriptions also paint a picture of an intimate and secure environment where the child gets a great deal of attention. Descriptions of the interaction between parents and child as 'good', 'very good and loving' and 'harmonious and mutual' (F2, A79, F28) also portray a sound relationship in which the parents see the child's needs and respond to them. Reports on how parents deal with the child's background further strengthen this. By telling how parents and child read about, and look at photos from, the birth country, and talk about the adoption and the child's birth mother, the reports communicate that the parents are open to their child's unique history, and are able to put her or his needs first.

In addition to being portrayed as attentive and responsive, parents are also described as firm and consistent. The following excerpt, regarding three-year-old Tim's parents, demonstrates this:

They are strict with the bedtime routine, that he is to stay in bed. David and Irene are careful to keep set routines and have certain set rules they are consistent with. However, Tim is a good negotiator and if there is good reason rules can be changed. (F2)

David and Irene have rules that need to be respected, but Tim is described as *a good negotiator* and, consequently, rules can be changed. His parents are portrayed as firm, but the statement also communicates that they respect him as an individual and let him have a say in things that concern him. Hence, being a loving and dedicated parent does not include letting the child do what he or she pleases, but firm and consistent parents need not be rigid.

Parents' ability to set limits is put forward in the reports, but in wordings that also demonstrate their responsiveness. For example, three-year-old Sam 'is validated in dialog with his parents, and is given necessary routines and limits', and Chloe's parents 'give attention in a good way and can set good limits' (A57, A60). The typical words to

be combined are *love* and *limits*. Parents are reported to give ‘a great deal of love, as well as necessary limits’ (A77). Statements like these feature devoted and loving parents who do not shy away from the everyday challenges of parenthood.

To summarize, assessment reports construct overwhelmingly happy, yet responsible, parents: they love their child above all, and to them, being parents is the most important thing in life; they respect and interact with their child, and are attentive to her or his needs; they establish routines, negotiate and set boundaries.

In Western parenting discourse, having children and being a family is the meaning of life, and is fulfilling for both individuals and couples (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Högbacka, 2008). A ‘language of love’ (Modell, 2002:165) permeates parenting talk, and describing and showing love for one’s child is the ultimate sign of parenting capability. However, love should be coupled with stability, reflexivity and a readiness to engage in the child’s development and upbringing (Forsberg, 2009; Modell, 2002; Noordegraaf et al., 2010). Good parents love, communicate and set limits (Böök and Perälä-Littunen, 2008). This is exactly the characterization that adoptive parents, in the assessment reports, are declared to fit.

The description of adoptive parents as calm, happy, attentive and respectful brings to mind the seldom discussed ‘harmonious parents’, introduced by Diana Baumrind (1971) in her classical studies of parenting patterns. Harmonious parents have control without exercising it, interact with their children as equals, and prepare them for a life as community members. This, in turn, corresponds with concepts such as ‘democratic boundary setting’ and ‘democratic training’ in Swedish parenting and education discourse. In his book *Grow –not obey*, paediatrician Lars H Gustafsson (2010), one of Sweden’s most noted debaters on child rearing, advises parents to meet their children as equals and respect them, to communicate, negotiate and have patience with them. Further, the pre-school curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011) states that children should be encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings and

to take part in everyday decisions concerning them. They should be listened to and respected, so that their growth into responsible individuals and democratic citizens is furthered. These ideals are reflected in the categorization of applicants as good parents.

Family life – portraying dedication, child-centredness and self-sacrifice

A key concept in the descriptions of how family life is organized is *time*. In relation to parental leave, the report on Ava and Toby, the parents of a three-year-old boy, says:

Since they adopted their son Noah, their time has been filled with caring for him. They have taken turns being home from work for just over a year and a half, to give Noah a good foundation to stand on and to give him and themselves the possibility to bond in a comprehensive way. (A83)

This excerpt tells that Ava and Toby have both stayed home with their son for an extensive period, to foster a parent-child relationship. It hence portrays them as dedicated parents. It is put forward in the reports that parents have ‘taken turns being on parental leave’ or ‘shared the parental leave’ (A62, A86). Through such statements, the qualities of seeing parenthood as a shared responsibility and being willing to stay home to pursue this, are attributed to the category of good parents.

At the time of the assessment, however, most applicants had returned to work and their child was attending pre-school. When one or both parents work part-time, this is noted in the report. Regarding Dana and Alf, for instance, the report tells that they both have reduced their working hours, ‘to be able to spend more time with their son’ (44). The issue of time is also related to pre-school hours. Jill and Craig have ‘both chosen to work part-time, 90%, so Lily won’t have such long days at pre-school’, and Ellie ‘has reduced her working time by 20% so Vega won’t have such long days at pre-school’ (A3, A43). Parents who do not work part-time are reported to work close to home and have flexible office hours, thereby being able to keep pre-school days as short as possible.

Statements like these communicate that parents prioritize their children and try to maximize their time with them, at the cost of not being fully dedicated to work. They also indicate that spending overly *long days* at an institution away from home, even if it is a pedagogical institution with professional staff, is not good. Responsible parents cut down on work, or at least adjust their office hours, to pick up their children from pre-school and spend time with them.

That adoptive parents prioritize being with their children is also demonstrated in explicit statements about their being dedicated to family life:

The couple tell that family life with Liam is their greatest interest, and they put his needs first. (A97)

After they adopted Vega, family life is the most important thing for both of them. (A43)

According to the reports, being a family and meeting the child's needs is what takes up the parents' time. There are statements, even though they are exceptions, about how parents try to find time for themselves, in the evenings when the child is asleep or at lunchtime during workdays. Rhetorically, this actually reinforces the image of parents as dedicated and child-centred: even though they want to tend their relationship, time for themselves never takes time away from their children.

Statements about how family time is spent contribute to the portrayal of applicants as dedicated parents. The report on Jill and Craig, the parents of a two-year-old girl, illustrates what is asserted:

Since the couple adopted their daughter Lily they spend most of their free time with her, and do activities appropriate to her age. They make various excursions, go to playgrounds and spend time with other families with children. Many of their own interests are set aside. Craig is still interested in music, and plays and sings a lot with Lily. He is not engaged in a band like he was previously. (A3)

This piece of information about the family's everyday activities also portrays Jill and Craig as parents, by ascribing certain actions to them: i) they spend time with their child; ii) they adjust their activities to what is appropriate for a child her age; iii) they

give up their own hobbies, or transform them into child-centred activities; and iv) they socialize with families that also have children.

Reports tell that parents engage in children's activities, and adjust their everyday activities so that the child can participate. Tim's parents, for instance, plan vacation trips with regard to him, the report says, and let him decide when choosing activities (F2). Furthermore, parents are reported to give up their own hobbies. Lydia, who used to sing in a choir, now spends her time with the family, Toby and Martha have toned down their hobbies in favour of 'activities the whole family can take part in' and Oscar and Anne do not have time for their hobbies, 'as they currently base their free time on Tilly's needs' (A60, A79, A89). Reports tell that parents have a social life that is also child-centred. They get together with other parents: families with children the same age as their own, children at the same pre-school, and children who are also adopted. That parents maintain contact with other adoptive families is commented upon, and any connections between the children are emphasized. It could be that they come from the same country or even from the same orphanage, or that they have become best friends. Through such descriptions, parents are characterized as dedicated, child-centred and self-sacrificing, and these qualities are attributed to the category of 'good parents'.

To summarize, the reports portray parents who organize and tailor every aspect of life with regard to their children: they minimize working and pre-school hours, and maximize time with their children; they give up their own hobbies to do things their children choose, can take part in and appreciate; and they establish a social life their children will benefit from. The reports thus construct 'good parents' as dedicated, child-centred and self-sacrificing.

In research on Western parenthood discourse, 'family time' and 'quality time' have been established as prescriptive terms, connected to the ideal of child-centredness and togetherness (Daly, 2001; Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007), and related to time *for*

children (i.e. everyday care) and time *with* children (i.e. doing things together) (Forsberg, 2009). While parents who are characterized as irresponsible focus on work or their own hobbies (Böök and Perälä-Littunen, 2008), good parents let the child's needs steer family life and set other interests aside (Daly, 2001). The latter qualities are exactly those ascribed to adoptive parents in assessment reports.

The applicants are thereby also proven to meet the Swedish cultural norm of 'involved parenthood' (Forsberg, 2009) and gender equality in family life (Björnberg, 2002), prescribing that both mothers and fathers put their children's needs first, spend as much time with them as possible and form close parent-child relationships. These norms are anchored in the history of the Swedish welfare state, supporting parents to take care of their children (Björnberg, 2002; Forsberg, 2009). They also correspond with the increased impact of attachment theory in Sweden since the 1990s (Zetterqvist Nelson, 2009).

Child-centredness is part of the social construction of family, Stryker (2010) argues, and is also defining for a proper childhood. The role of the sacralized child in capitalist society is to consume the parents' time, energy and love and to enjoy a childhood of play, family life and enriching activities. The characterization of Swedish adoptive applicants, and their life with children, indicates that this is the kind of childhood they can offer.

A happy, healthy and harmonious child – presenting evidence of good parenting

Even though descriptions of the applicants as parents say something about the child, as the object of care, information about the child is primarily given in sections that do not explicitly aim at describing parents. Statements focusing on the child refer to investigators' observations, reports from child care professionals or parents, and provide information about the child's health, development, personality, social relations and everyday life. The report about Dana and Alf, for example, refers to what their son Mitch's pre-school teacher has said about him:

Mitch is described as a happy, positive and curious boy who is both satisfied and secure in himself. He is active and forthcoming. Mitch is age-appropriate, and his development is positive. Mitch's speech today consists of single words, but he has high word comprehension and understands instructions. His gross and fine motor skills are very good. He dances, crawls, walks, runs, paints, builds with blocks, swings and plays football. (A44)

This is a characterization of Mitch; however, it is also a characterization of his parents. Telling that Mitch is *happy, secure* and *active* and develops well indicates that his parents give him everything he needs. In the reports, I would argue, statements about the child serve as an evaluation of the applicants as parents.

Reports state that the child already adopted into the family in question is healthy, has been vaccinated according to plan, and gets regular check-ups at the children's health care centre. Smaller as well as more serious health problems, and the way they have been treated, are accounted for. Noah, for instance, has had his hearing impairment fixed, Holly has been given something for her dry skin, and Tim is awaiting minor heart surgery (A83, A91, F2). These reports tell, obviously, that the child's health is under control, but they also communicate that the parents have been observant and have seen to it that their child gets professional health care. Seemingly neutral information about children's health hence portrays their parents as responsible. According to the report, Ella was malnourished and under-stimulated when she came to Sweden. After a month she took her first steps, the report says (A82). The story tells, without explicitly saying so, that being cared for by her new parents, who offered proper care and a stimulating environment, favoured Ella's development. Her recovery bears witness to their capability.

Also, statements on the child's development communicate that parents offer a stimulating environment. Reports tell that the child is developing *well, very nicely, normally*, or more specifically that he or she is well developed verbally, physically and/or emotionally. Regarding two-year-old Chris, his pre-school teacher said:

For his age, and considering how long he has been here in Sweden, he is far advanced in his development, talks a great deal and understands a lot. (F12).

He has not been in Sweden very long, but Chris is already well ahead in his development, and his reported progress in learning the language indicates that his life with his parents favours his development.

The image of a healthy and well developed child is reinforced by statements about the individual child's personality and everyday life. *Secure, happy, active, harmonious, curious, open, strong-willed* and *considerate* are just a few of the many adjectives used to describe adopted children. Reports on their life and activities at home and in pre-school, like *singing, dancing, climbing trees, drawing, listening to stories, kicking ball* and so on, portray playing, laughing children who like to spend time with both adults and other children. According to the reports, Theo 'is lively and outgoing, but can also sit deeply concentrated for long periods of time', and Tilly 'is both generous and can help herself or object to something, and dares to be herself' (A62, A79). Statements like these produce an image of a harmonious child, neither hyperactive nor passive, neither possessive nor yielding.

Reports also comment on how children relate to their parents. They state, for instance, that the child has adjusted well to his or her new life, and has a close and secure relationship with the parents. There are also reports, though, that describe early adjustment problems. For example, according to the reports Tim was introverted, Cindy had difficulty adapting, and Ella developed stress and sleeping problems after surgery (F2, A46, A82). The reports tell, however, that thanks to their parents' willingness to seek professional advice and ability to respond to their children's needs, they are now well adjusted to their new lives and families. The overcoming of problems thus serves to prove parenting capability.

A recurrent topic in relation to parent-child relationships is attachment patterns. Some reports simply state that the child is securely attached. Mia, for example, is said to have 'formed attachment bonds with both parents in a fantastic way' (A13). Other

reports are more elaborate, and provide information to substantiate this conclusion. Vega, for instance, 'at the home visit, has clearly shown that the parents are her security, cosying up to them' (A43). Regarding Chris, the report states that he is a happy and secure little boy, who turns to his parents to seek closeness and comfort (F12). Such statements refer to attachment theory, which states that keeping close to one's parents when strangers visit, and turning to them for comfort, are behaviours that indicate a secure attachment pattern (Bretherton, 1992). In the report about Mitch's parents, quoted above, nothing is said explicitly about attachment. But, by referring to a statement from a child care professional, 'When he's picked up [from pre-school], Mitch shows happiness and seeks the parents' closeness through cuddles and by crawling up onto their lap' (A44), a secure attachment pattern is displayed. No more needs to be said.

Descriptions of adopted children as securely attached implicitly ascribe certain qualities to their parents, i.e. being open, responsive and emotionally available. According to the theory, a child who displays a secure attachment pattern has had a caregiver who responded appropriately and consistently to the child's needs and formed a secure parental attachment bond to him or her (Bretherton, 1992). Given this, showing that children are securely attached proves they have good parents.

To summarize, the analysis shows how reports, through seemingly objective descriptions, construct 'the happy, healthy and harmonious child', a category that is linked to and rhetorically supports the categorization of applicants as 'good parents'. A healthy child has responsible parents, and a child who is developing well and learning a new language lives in a stimulating environment. A child who laughs, plays and makes friends has parents who impart love and self-esteem. A child who explores the world, but turns to his or her parents for help, closeness and comfort has parents who see and meet their child's needs and favour secure attachment.

The characterization of children, and parents, hence reflects the cultural norm of involved parenthood and the influence of attachment theory in Sweden, mentioned above, but it also says something about what is idealized in children's behaviour and personality. The goal of the Swedish school system is to foster a child who is active yet focused, secure and self-confident yet social and considerate (Swedish Agency for Education, 2011). Interestingly, this also corresponds, in certain points, with how a 'harmonious' mother describes her daughter in Baumrind's (1971) study. What connects the two is the fostering of responsible community members.

In her study of adoptive parents seeking help, Stryker (2010) argues that attachment therapy, by reproducing 'child love' as essential for making a family, preserves the social category of family in the US. Adoptive parents offer love and a good home, but it is not until the child accepts their gift by expressing love that a true family can be established. In line with this reasoning, the reports' descriptions of securely attached children also testify that families have been successfully formed.

Discussion

Intercountry adoption is a global phenomenon, and a contact zone where notions of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest' are negotiated. The aim of this study was to explore what norms of parenthood, and childhood, Sweden communicates in the global flow of children and ideas. Assessment reports regarding applicants given permission to adopt child number two were analysed with a focus on what opinions, actions and qualities are attributed to applicants to support their characterization as good parents providing a proper childhood.

Sentimentalization and a 'language of love' mark adoption policy and practice, and prospective parents see a chance to experience happiness and personal fulfilment (Högbacka, 2008; Modell, 2006; Stryker, 2010). The analysed assessment reports present parents who express happiness and love for their adopted child, and who describe parenthood as the meaning of life. *To love* is one of the criteria met by

members of the category of 'good parents', but this is not enough (cf. Modell, 2002). Love may be the prerequisite for good parenting, but it must be executed through action, and this takes time and calls for self-sacrifice.

Reports portray applicants who make time *for*, and spend time *with*, their child (Forsberg, 2009). They minimize working hours and give up their own hobbies to prioritize 'family time' (Daly, 2001). They engage in activities that the child chooses and enjoys. They communicate with their child and set boundaries when necessary. Rhetorically, this works to prove that adoptive parents do not just have the right intentions; they also realize them by setting their own needs aside and letting life revolve around their child. They hence fit the ideals asserted in Swedish parenting and education discourse, focusing on involved parenthood and democratic training (Forsberg, 2009; Gustafsson, 2010; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Interestingly, the description also corresponds with that of 'harmonious parents' in Baumrind's (1971) study on parenting patterns.

The analysis further shows how the category of 'the happy, healthy and harmonious child' is established. It reinforces the characterization of applicants as good parents, and displays what is desirable child behaviour. Reports picture a child who loves her or his parents, who turns to them for closeness and comfort, and whose trust in them allows for a sound will to play, learn and explore the world. Rhetorically, the portrayal of a securely attached child serves to show that parents' love and time investment bear fruit. It produces an image of an ideal parent-child relationship. In the reports, what Tamar Kremer-Sadlik and Amy L. Paugh (2007) have called a dominant cultural trope of parenthood is manifested: love and togetherness are what create strong parent-child relationships.

Consequently, the portrayal of applicants as loving communicates that they have the prerequisite for good parenting, the description of their child-centred family life shows that they act as good parents, and the characterization of their child as happy, healthy

and harmonious proves that they *are* good parents. They offer what is presented in Stryker's (2010) study as defining a family and a 'real childhood': parental love and a life filled with family activities, traditions, trips and social events with extended family and friends. In line with her argument regarding the importance of 'child love', the description of the securely attached child is crucial. It serves to prove that the parents' offer, the gift, has been accepted and that the child is thereby part of a true family and is enjoying a proper childhood.

When analysing categorization work, it is fruitful to observe statements that depict people's opinions or actions as questionable, inadequate, wrong or bad. In the interface between good and bad, right and wrong, the moral order is displayed (Hall et al., 2006; Hydén, 1997). The analysis has shown, however, that the assessment reports leave no room for moral breaches. Applicants are characterized in ways that would make anything not corresponding with the image of good parents seem out of character for them. Research on everyday life in families with children shows that parents find it difficult to meet their own ideals (Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh, 2007). Parents describe how hard it is to find enough time for their children, and how this creates stress and feelings of guilt (Daly, 2001). Such difficulties are not acknowledged in the reports on parents who apply for a second adoption. On the contrary, it is emphasized that having a small child has made the parents calm and their relationship stronger. They have the time they need to stay home with their child, to engage in child-friendly activities and to be together as a family.

Given this, what Sweden offers in the contact zone of intercountry adoption is not just the Western version of 'good parents' but rather what Modell (2002:151) calls *a fairy tale figure*. According to the reports, these adoptive parents are living the ideal. They are living the dream that the families in Stryker's (2010) study, seeking attachment therapy, are fighting so hard to fulfil. And, their children enjoy a proper childhood, i.e. a time of play and learning, in a secure and loving home with parents who serve as a secure base from which the world can be explored.

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