

# Intercountry Adoption:

## Society's responsibilities to children adopted into cultures other than their own

Professor Dr. R.A.C. Hoksbergen

*Professor R.A.C. Hoksbergen is the Director of the Adoption Research Center at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. He visited Australia toward the end of 1988. This paper was presented to a seminar in Perth and the International Conference on Adoption and Permanent Care held in Melbourne in November 1988.*

### THE RELEVANCE OF THIS ISSUE

When we discuss and think about responsibilities to intercountry adopted children, we have to answer several questions first:

- Responsibility to whom?
  - What are the special characteristics of the persons or groups involved?
  - How big will this responsibility be?
- and
- Is it, quantitatively speaking, an important phenomenon?

I will answer the second and easiest question first.

How many intercountry adopted children arrive each year in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Great Britain, other European countries, Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada?

First I have to say that it is not easy to get reliable data. Data from some countries like Sweden, Holland, Denmark and Switzerland seem to be rather complete (Hoksbergen and Gokhale, 1986), but in other countries (Belgium, Federal Republic of Germany) you will only find figures from some agencies, and no overview of the total number of intercountry adopted children in the last 15 or 20 years. This means that the following figures are estimations, based on the exact numbers of certain countries and suppositions.

In countries allowing intercountry adoption, about 0.5 to one percent of all children are intercountry adopted. For example: in Sweden, 1000 to 1500 intercountry adopted children arrive each year (birthrate about 10,000); in Denmark 400 to 600 children arrive (birthrate  $\pm 60,000$ ); in Holland 1000 to 1200 (birthrate  $\pm 180,000$ ). The total number of intercountry adoptions in Western Europe is probably around 10,000 a year.

For the United States figures from 8000 to 10,000 are mentioned (National Committee for Adoption, 1985), but no exact data is known. For Australia and New Zealand I do not have the data either, but, regarding the population numbers, this will probably be between 1200 and 1600 intercountry adoptions a year for Australia and 300 to 400 for New Zealand.

In my opinion the numbers mentioned above, are big enough to speak of quantitative relevance. On the other hand I find it rather careless that for some countries no exact data is available. This conclusion brings me to the first responsibility:

#### **1. Intercountry adoption has to be treated with great administrative carefulness on state level. Bilateral data has to be available.**

This means that quantitative changes can be analysed immediately and the creation of all kinds of rumours among adoptive agencies can be prevented.

Also, the adoptive parents, who depend on others for the fulfilling of their intense and great desires, will know what is going on and what their possibilities (for a second child for instance) in some countries are. For the countries and institutions involved, it means *working with more openness*. I think that a greater openness for the phenomenon of intercountry adoption between countries is slowly becoming possible.

Politically speaking, it is important to know that in 1987 the United Nations officially declared that intercountry adoption can be one of the possibilities for the protection and welfare of a child. Politicians from several Third World countries may feel supported by this Declaration.

### ADOPTION ORGANISATIONS

This plea for openness is also very important for the way intercountry adoptions are organised and carried out. This is a big problem in many countries.

The decision that a child has to grow up in another family, in another country, is fundamental for the rest of its life. Therefore this decision has to be made and carried out as carefully as possible. This means that private adoptions have to be either controlled properly (so they will not be completely private anymore) or forbidden.

In the research projects of our Adoption Center at the University of Utrecht, department "Child Studies", we found when looking at disrupted adoptions, that private adoptions are more at risk than adoptions organised by agencies.

We also know that private actions of couples can stimulate the occurrence of all sorts of commercial activities like child hunting and child farming in the countries of origin. Later on the adoptees may suffer from the idea that the way they were moved from one country to another was surrounded by lawyers, physicians and others who were only interested in money. I will give you just one example of this.

In September this year my assistance was called in for a boy of 16 years old, who came from Asia. One of his main problems was his aggressiveness, which was sometimes even dangerous for his classmates and teachers. His aggressive behaviour was caused partly by remarks about his past, race, adoption status and so on. In the course of time this behaviour was also presented on other occasions when he had relation problems with his peers, teachers, parents and others.

When he and his uncle (he was not living at home anymore, partly because his mother could not deal with his problems at all) visited me, one of his questions was whether his adoption was done in

a proper way and whether there was any money involved in his country of origin. He also wanted to know if his papers and for instance the names of his birthparents were true. His self esteem was highly influenced by the fact that he was adopted from another country and even more by the fact that he was so uncertain about the way this was done. Fortunately I could immediately tell him that he had no objective reasons for these feelings of insecurity at all. Of course telling him the real facts about his adoption story will not have positive results regarding his aggressiveness right away, but we can say that for this boy at least one problem is solved.

In connection to this I come to the second responsibility:

#### **2. Regarding the organisation of intercountry adoptions, each country involved should make legal regulations for all intermediary organisations.**

There have to be special demands for the qualifications of the (social) workers involved. The organisations have to be controlled and they should not compete with each other to get children from the same institution or country. I repeat that we must realise that the power of an adoption organisation on adoptive parents is tremendous. Therefore, some supervision of the procedure of placing adoptive children in families is necessary. Thinking of the power of these organisations and the demand for control, one should never decide to have only one adoption organisation in a receiving country. Adoptive parents must have alternative organisations to choose from and also, we will see the positive influence of a certain social control between organisations this way. In Holland this seems to be an important factor. Due to this social control and the judging of each others' practices, we will soon have the legal regulations in the Netherlands which I have been pleading for, for so long.

These first two responsibilities are more of a juridical kind and they concern especially the organisations and authorities involved. The following two are more about the adoptive families directly.

### ADOPTIVE PARENTS

One of the most important aspects of adoptions is the way adoptive parents perceive their parenthood. Do they (wish to) experience this parenthood as completely similar to that of other parents, or do they feel and notice important differences?

The well-known American social scientist David Kirk has studied the attitudes of adoptive parents. He differentiated them in two groups, those who

obviously acknowledge the difference in parent-hood with other parents (*acknowledgement-of-difference, A.D.*) and those who do so much less (*rejection-of-difference, R.D.*)

Kirk found correlations with three indices: the parents' empathic ability with regard to the way in which the child perceives its adoption status, the communication between parents and child about adoption, and the child's trust in its parents. Kirk came to the conclusion in his study with about 2000 adoptive parents that the more the parents acknowledge the difference, the higher they score on all three indices, so the better the family relationships are.

We used Kirk's instrument to measure the attitude of adoptive parents in a study of children who arrived from Thailand in Holland between 1974 and 1979 (*Hoksbergen a.o., 1987*).

We found the same correlations as Kirk did. It is also important to give some other results of our comparison. The adoption organisations in Holland promote the acknowledgement-of-difference attitude very much. They do this for instance by stimulating the parents to visit the country of origin when the child grows up, to have information about that country at home, to speak about the past in the country etc. Because of this policy of the organisations and based on literature and reports about foreign adoption, our outlook on the way in which the parents experience adoptive parenthood has become a little bit different. We would rather speak in terms of internal and external orientation of adoptive parents. The internals are strongly family-oriented in their ideas and usually involuntarily childless. There also is a group (the externals) with abstract ideals, who adopt a child partly because they refuse to contribute to the mondial overpopulation, or they are shocked by the difficult circumstances of children somewhere else in the world. The A.D.-attitude will more likely occur among externally oriented parents, whereas the R.D.-attitude will be more likely among internally oriented parents.

In this line of reasoning it was expected that parents who appreciate contacts with other adoptive parents and are a member of a parents' adoptive organisation (more externally oriented parents) will have more of an A.D.-attitude than parents with fewer contacts. This expectation proved to be correct, which means that once again it has become clear that it is very useful for adoptive parents to be a member of a parents' adoptive organisation. It makes it easier for them to keep in touch with other adoptive parents and to get important information about the background of the child.

I will now formulate the next two responsibilities:

**3. In the receiving country the organisations and authorities involved should stimulate adoptive parents to get the A.D.-attitude (acknowledgement-of-difference) as much as possible.**

This can be achieved by assembling and showing important information on the country of origin. They should also stimulate contacts between adoptive parents.

The child should have the possibility to accept its special identity. Special because it is adopted and also because it is from another country with perhaps another race. The openness of the parents to communicate with the child about its back-

ground is a basic condition for the interracial adoptee to develop a stabile identity. This also means that the parents should know as much as possible about the background of the child. Knowledge of important details concerning the original parents and family should be available to the child in the future and to the adoptive parents at once. The child will ask many questions, such as: why was I relinquished, do I look like my father/mother, are they still alive, do I have brothers or sisters in the country of origin etc. etc.

Often, unfortunately, little or nothing is known about the natural family and environment, especially when it concerns a foundling. However, at least something will always be known. So, for example, the police station or railway station where the child was abandoned should be written down in the documents, and the precise circumstances how the adoptee was found.

We can summarise all this as the 'black hole' in the adoptee's life. We are obliged to make this hole as small as possible.

This is a responsibility for the organisations and persons involved in the country of origin and in the receiving country. It is fundamentally wrong to withhold important data. Sometimes people have the impression that they serve the adoptive parents well by doing this, because the things that should be told are far from nice. This is not true. Knowing the facts of your history is knowing yourself better (identity), but of course an adoptee might need some help with the process of forming this stabile identity or to accept some unpleasant facts about his background.

The factors mentioned above that have to do with obligations for organisations in donor and receiving countries, for adoptive parents (telling!) and with needs and possibilities for adoptees lead me to the next responsibility:

**4. In the country of origin as much information as possible about the background of the child should be assembled.**

All information should be kept for at least 100 years. Adoptees must always have the possibility to obtain the information themselves, for instance to verify what their adoptive parents told them or when they did not get any information at all.

The organisation should use a questionnaire or protocol to gather the information that is most important for adoptive parents and later on for the adoptees.

We developed such a protocol at the Adoption Center for the organisation Worldchildren. It has to be adapted to the country of origin and the organisation involved.

**DIRECT FINANCES**

When adoptees approach adolescence, they become increasingly dubious about their background. The need to attain a clear identity increases. As a part of this process, we often see that they are very eager to visit their country of origin, place of birth, etc. Some adoptees want this so badly that there may even be therapeutic reasons for the voyage.

Most parents are willing and able to help their adoptee with his plans. As we all know the social-economic background of adoptive parents is on the average rather high. This means that they often have enough money for the trip and that they

speaking English, but it is also true that for some adoptees these circumstances are much less favourable. In my clinical practice for instance, there are two boys (18 and 19 years of age, one of them is from South America and the other one from South-East Asia) who have not had any contact with their parents for years.

These boys were very unhappy and depressed. An important problem was the way they thought about their original family. Their parents did not tell them very much about their background and the relationship between parents and adoptee was rather bad almost from the start. In the course of time it became worse and when they were about 12 years old, they were placed in an institution for adolescents. They had psychological problems we often see in children who arrive in a family at a later age, like low capacity for attachments, rather unscrupulous (stealing and lying easily) and very much occupied with themselves and their life history. According to the caretakers and to us it could be helpful for the boys to visit the country of origin. But who would pay the costs? The parents were not approachable at all. One of them for instance replied by saying: "If you find the boy, you may keep him!"

Of course these are very exceptional stories, but for us they are relevant. Therefore the next responsibility is:

**5. The receiving society should enable adoptees from far countries to visit their country of origin.**

In cases where parents cannot or are not willing to pay the costs, a special fund, made by adoptive organisations, has to be approachable.

There is another financial problem which is a much bigger one. It has to do with the circumstances in which many adoptees are relinquished or, better said, have to be given up. We all know that an important reason for many young mothers in the Third World to give up their baby, is that they do not have any possibility to take care of the child themselves. They have to go to work for example and there is no reliable person to look after the child. There is no social welfare system for young unwed mothers in that country like there is in Western countries now. You will agree with me that this welfare system is an important reason why so few children are relinquished, beside the use of widespread methods of contraception.

Do we have to accept these facts of life? Do we have to accept that we receive these children from the Third World without giving any structural help to prevent these problems? I am not saying now that it is our task to change big cultural and financial hardships in the Third World countries, but I am also not saying that by receiving the child our responsibilities are over. Of course we still have responsibilities for instance for the adoptee's family. I will give another example.

As you will understand I visited several donor countries. One day in 1976, on my second visit to India, I was in an institution where children were brought in for adoption (both in-country and intercountry). That morning a woman of about 27 years old came in with two children of one and three years of age. She could not take care of these two children properly any more — she had two other children, but they were old enough to go to school themselves — because she had to go to work. She lived on her own, her husband had died a few weeks ago. She could not afford someone

to look after her children. She did not have any relatives in Bombay, because she and her husband were from the very south of India. When I asked the lady whether she would not prefer to keep the children, she told me that she did not want to give them up at all, but that she was forced to do so.

After a discussion with the director of the institution, it was decided that this mother would be helped financially. She would get someone to take care of the children while she was working. This person would be paid by a sponsor family of the Dutch organisation Worldchildren. By giving only two hundred rupee or 20 Australian dollars a month, the family could stay together.

Let me give another example. Four years ago, a Dutch adoptive father phoned me to ask the following: he had four children from Indonesia of nine to 18 years old. For the eldest three, originating from the same family, it was very important to visit Indonesia. Two of them were very eager to see their natural family. They were four and six years old when they arrived in Holland and they still had good memories of their lives there. The question was in fact: shall we take the youngest child, originating from a different Indonesian family with us as well? We do not have the address of his family and we may not be able to find them at all, though we will try so. I advised him not to make any difference between the four children. Just taking the child will stimulate his intermediary in Indonesia to find his parents as well.

Of course I can tell a lot more about this family, their visit to Indonesia, the meeting of both parents (they found the natural parents of their youngest child as well), the reactions of both families and children, but that is not the point here.

When this Dutch adoptive family met the parents of the youngest child, they were confronted with a family who had given up a child nine years ago, due only to financial problems. To give the child, who was sick at the time, some chance to survive (they could not pay for the medication) they had taken it to an adoptive organisation. The couple, who had three more children, still had financial problems, but they both tried very hard to overcome them. The Dutch couple decided to help them via their Indonesian intermediaries. They are still in close contact with both Indonesian families.

This is of course a rather exceptional story. To find the addresses for instance and to be able to make such a trip is not given to all adoptive parents, but what we can learn from these stories is that our responsibility for the background of the child does definitely not end at the moment the child is placed into a family. This is one of the main reasons why most Dutch adoptive organisations combine project help and the financial sponsoring of children with the adoption of children. This brings me to my second financial responsibility.

**6. All adoptive organisations and parents involved should try to combine the concrete**

**adoption with some kind of financial help for the children who have to stay there, or somehow for the child's natural family.**

This can also be done in a rather distant way, for instance by supporting small projects in the city or even the country the child is from.

I hope I do not need to say here that I do not mean at all special financial help from the organisation to get in fact more children. Project help and adoption have to be separated. It is very dangerous when they are related too much, because that could cause situations where intercountry adoption is stimulated in the countries because it raises money for the institutions. This attitude clashes with the "Declaration against abandonment and destitution of children in developing countries" of New Delhi, April 1st, 1985 where it is said that:

"V Intercountry adoption should only be carried out by non-profit organisations which also support in-country programmes against abandonment. Intensive efforts should be made to ensure that the child is either supported in its own home or placed in an adoptive home in its own country. Only when these efforts do not meet with success, should this child be considered for intercountry adoption."



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Together with the adoption organisations in the Third World, we should try to prevent intercountry adoption as much as possible. Is it not in fact a shame for our world that so many children cannot grow up in their own country? And should it not be our first responsibility to prevent this anomaly? Do we not only then take the thesis "in the best interests of the child" seriously?

I come to my last point now and you will not be surprised that this deals with scientific research, which is one of the main tasks of the Adoption Center. In my opinion **the evaluation of intercountry adoption is one of the obligations we have to the donor countries.** The authorities and institutions involved should at least receive objective information about the development of the children. This will help them in several ways:

— First of all it makes intercountry adoption much less business like; contacts with children,

placed years ago, are maintained somehow; for the politicians it is important to know that this controversial work is also controlled by science.

— Some facts and phenomena of adoptees and adoptive parents found by research, may prevent problems with other adoptees or prevent that existing problems in adoptive families become stronger.

— Also, our Adoption Center in Holland which does and has done a lot of research, has experienced that it stimulates adoptive parents, adoptees, organisations, the media etc. to approach us with all sorts of questions. So our other tasks like giving information to everybody involved and to society in general about important facts concerning adoption and helping adoptive families with special problems are supported a lot by this way of working and combining tasks.

That is the reason why I have the honour to be here. I hope that you will realise after my speeches

today and tomorrow that the combination of tasks for an Adoption Center is indeed in the best interests of adoptive children and adoptive parents.

Soest, November 1988

## LITERATURE

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