

Adoption as a Process, Experience, and Institution. Anthropological Perspective

The aim of this project is:

- to analyze, from the anthropological perspective, adoption as it is experienced in contemporary Poland, taking into account its complexity and diversity;
- to contribute to the field of Polish anthropology of kinship, where adoption remains under-studied;
- to further develop childhood studies in Poland, with particular emphasis being put on methodology of research with children;
- to allow for the voices of children to become a part of the adoption debate in Poland;
- to develop cooperation with foreign scholars who conduct research on adoption in order to exchange experiences and to learn about good practices in such research (especially ethical and methodological).

Adoption constitutes a socio-cultural phenomenon perfectly fitted for deepening anthropological understanding of contemporary ideas about children, family, care, and the role of the state for the production of normative structures of kinship. In the proposed project, I aim to unpack a set of values and ideas relevant and formative for the actual adoption experiences.

In the center of my research I put a child and her/his family. In line with the recent anthropological objectives, underlying the importance of listening to children's voices, and in accordance with the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, one of the principal aims of this project is to provide adoptive children with an empowering possibility of speaking out about their experiences and opinions in regards to adoption.

The situation in which a child is raised by people, who are not his/her biological parents, has been present in different historical times and in various local cultures. Yet, the adoption, as it is known today, shall be understood as a concept with a much narrower scope and quite a short history. It has emerged at the intersection of such processes as individualization, formation of a nuclear family, development of human (esp. children's) rights. The scientific reflection on adoption in Poland has developed around legal, psychological, socio-political and pedagogical aspects of the adoptive process. Nonetheless, anthropological reflection on this subject in the Polish context needs to be developed. The embodied experiences of individuals, i.e. families and adoptive children, remain unexplored and the narratives of those involved were not accounted for in anthropological works. This research project is aimed at filling this gap.

Nowadays, it is a child who is a primary focus of the adoption process. „Only a minor can be adopted, and only for his best interest” (art. 114 § 1 Family and Guardianship Code). Thus, it should be analyzed how this best interest is framed in relations to adoption by institutional agents, such as adoption centers, children's houses, courts, social workers, and by non-institutional actors: parents, other family members and, most importantly, the children.

The project is meant as a multi-sited ethnography, conducted using multiple methods in a number of public and private spaces. Suitable techniques of data collection will be used by members of the team in order to understand the contemporary Polish adoption-related practices as situated and performed within various settings. Research methods used in this project include: ethnographic interview, participant observation, participatory research with children, discourse analysis, and questionnaire. Ethnographic research will be conducted among a few categories of actors and spaces involved in the processes of adoption in Poland: adoption centres, other institutional actors involved: the court, the probation officer, foster parents, adoptive families: the adoptive parents, the adopted children of ages 4–18 and the biological children of adoptive parents, the members of extended adoptive family. An intensive ethnographic work will be carried out with selected families, using, among others, such methods as community participation, intergenerational family dialogues, active use of material and visual resources.

In research with children my team will use participatory methods, involving materials that stimulate creativity, by which we may be given access to the meanings they create in non-verbal ways. The research with children implies being conscious and reflexive about: the necessity to apply extraordinary sensitivity and caution due to the subordinate and dependent status of the child, limitations in children's abilities to understand the subject, goal, and consequences of research, having to adjust research methods to children's way of expressing themselves, children's right to express their opinions in matters concerning them and being listened to by adults. As researcher I will pay particular attention to the ethical dimension of the project.

This project will lead not only to the development of cultural anthropology, but it will also contribute to a better understanding of the social phenomena that are undergoing intensive change, as well as it will raise awareness of adoption of various interested parties: scholars in social sciences, practitioners of the care system, members of the adoptive families and the public opinion. It will also add Polish perspective into the international anthropological research on adoption.