The New Face of Ethnography: Utilizing Facebook as an Alternative Study Site

The transfer of children has been a traditional means of survival for both families and children in cultures throughout history as an informal, non-permanent arrangement. Plenary adoption, as practiced in the United States since the middle 20th century is very different in that it requires the permanent, legal severing and reassigning of kinship ties. This is not natural but the practices surrounding it as well as the stereotypes, tropes and stories weave themselves into society and make it ordinary and normalize the practice.

Adoption practices have changed over time and the understanding of adoption both publicly and privately have changed as well. Popular and widespread tropes surrounding adoption do not adequately cover the emotional and lived experience of those involved in the process but they do create a rubric to explain how one should feel about adoption and how one should embody the experience. The change from closed to open adoption and the introduction of international and interracial adoption prompted a change in the American definition of “family” and the way adoption was conducted and understood as a social institution. The narratives of those intimately involved in the adoption process begin to reflect those changes and incorporate them into the adoption story.

Online ethnography presents both benefits and complications. On the plus side, online communities break down the walls of networks, creating digitally mediated social spaces. The Internet provides a platform for social interactions where real and virtual worlds shift and conflate. Social interactions in virtual environments present another option for social researchers and offer significant advantages for data collection, collaboration, and maintenance of research relationships. For some research subjects, such as members of the adoption triad, locating target groups presents challenges for domestic adoption researchers. Online groups such as Facebook pages dedicated to specific members of the adoption triad offer a resolution to this challenge, acting as self-sorted focus groups with participants eager to provide their narratives and experiences.

Ethnography involves understanding how people experience their lives through observation and non-directed interaction, with a goal of observing participants’ behavior and reactions on their own terms; this can be achieved through the presumed anonymity of online interaction. Electronic ethnography provides valuable insights and data; however, on the negative side, the danger of groupthink in particular Facebook communities can both attract and generate homogeneous experiences regarding adoption issues.

Adoption narratives are not simply a matter of constructing personal stories or chronicling an event, they are a reflection of social understanding and belief systems. This project addresses the silences, erasures, and peripheralization that exist in the dominant national adoption narrative. Normative narratives of adoption contextualize it as providing a home for homeless children and children for childless families. This frame prevails in public discussions, but elides less positive and more complex aspects of adoption: the emotional situation of birth mothers, the family secrets kept from adoptees, and fear of adoptive parents, etc.

I bring the voices of the adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees to the forefront of the discussion to contest and destabilize normative adoption narratives and create an alternative adoption narrative that acknowledges the ruptures that must take place before adoption is possible. I provide an analysis of personal narratives from birth/first mothers, adoptive parents and adoptees to expose how adoption has defined members of the primary groups within the constellation of adoption and how their performance of identity both conforms and pushes back against popular tropes and “common knowledge” about adoption.

My project works toward a (re)formation of adoption narratives that capture experiences not recognized in how adoption is presented socially and emotionally. I (re)create an adoption narrative that amplifies the voices that have historically been pushed to the background and dismissed. This alternative adoption narrative will problematize the win-win solution and offer a different perspective on the mass transfer of children in the United States. To explore these issues I rely on more than 200 narratives submitted by members of the adoption triad through a completely anonymous online survey.

My anthropological research, as it relates to the constructivism of narratives that inform identity, is novel and methodologically innovative. My analysis of the unique and contingent nature of the adoptee-adopter-biological parent connection turns the performative “structures of sentiment” that have informed the modern adoptive process on their heads. My methodology reflects the turn toward social media communities as a source of data.

The paradigm shift my work offers is necessary to understand the lasting impact that adoption has on members of the adoptive triad beyond childhood. Adoption is not simply a single event, but instead follows the participants through life and gathers new meaning as greater understanding of the self and relationship to others is exposed. My work, specifically the anthropological inquiry of familial roles, performativity and narrative construction as a proxy for self-identity, is part of a new theorization of the ways context and identity matters within the institution of adoption.

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