

From Pragmatic to Sentimental Adoption: The Evolution of Child Adoption in the United States over the 20th Century

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Abstract

Adopting a child, as an alternative to bearing a child, is a widely accepted means of forming a family in the U.S. today. According to the 2000 Census, adopted children comprise 2% of all U.S. children under age 18. In fact, the U.S. was the first country to enact the modern adoption law in the 19th century that protected the best interest of the child and provided adoptive parents with exclusive parental rights upon court approval. According to the historical literature, however, even in the U.S., child adoption remained “few and mostly informal” among white families in the early 20th century (Carpe 2000), where adoptive parents were taking children in mostly for their labor values as farm laborers or housekeepers. With a gradual decline of the economic value of children and a growing perception that nurture matters more than nature, a greater number of childless couples began to adopt unrelated infants to rear the child as “their very own” (Berebitsky 2000). By the 1940s the number of families seeking to adopt far exceeded the number of adoptable children. In other words, the historical literature suggests that child adoption in the U.S. have evolved from “pragmatic adoption” to “sentimental adoption” in the course of the 20th century. As preceding studies remain largely qualitative, however, we know relatively little about the nature and extent of adoption practices in the historical U.S.

The objective of this study is to quantitatively document the changing nature of child adoption and evaluate its implications for the welfare of adopted children. Using the public use samples of U.S. Federal Census microdata (IPUMS) in 1880-1930, which contains more than 10,000 white adopted children residing in married two-parent households, I first investigate parental motivations for adoption. Using a multinomial logit analysis in which parents select child attributes when adopting, I find that farming households were more likely

to adopt children for pragmatic reasons, while households with higher socio-economic status were more likely to practice sentimental adoption.

Next, I investigate whether or not parental motivations for adoption affect educational investments in adopted children. To do so, using IPUMS 1880-1930 and 2000 data, I compare educational outcomes of biological and adopted children. I find that, in 1880-1930, adopted children had significantly lower educational outcomes (i.e., lower literacy rate, lower school attendance, and higher labor force participation) than biological children after controlling for household characteristics. Moreover, the educational disadvantages were considerably greater for adopted children in farming households in 1880-1930. When compared with biological children in the same household, the educational disadvantage of adopted children persisted in the earlier decades, indicating that parental discrimination might have been an important reason for their disadvantages. By 2000, the educational disadvantage of adopted children have been greatly reduced or even reversed in some measures. My findings are consistent with the great transformation of adoption practices in the U.S. from pragmatic to sentimental adoption with important implications for the welfare of adopted children.