

“Doing Household”: An Anthropological Study on Adoptive Family in Romania

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Introduction

In modern adoption, adoptive parents and adopted children receive official certification of family when they finish the legal procedure of adoption. However, do they really become a “family” immediately after their relationship is legally authorized?

This article examines Romanian adoptive families and their family formation. Romanian domestic adoption can be examined through the anthropological concept of fictive kinship because of its theoretical focus on “doing family” (Nelson 2020). The conventional dichotomy between real (blood and legal) and fictive kinship is complicated because adoption provides a new family with a legal relationship and, over time, a sense of being “true” family without a blood tie. In other words, adoption consists of aspects of both real and fictive kinship.

The aim of this article is to show that “*a gospodări* (doing household)” is key to making people a “true” family in Romania in cases of adoption. While one of my interlocutors said that Romanians showed a preference for having biological children rather than adopting, “doing household” gives both adoptive parents and adopted children a sense of truthfulness in their relationship as family.

Anthropological Kinship Studies

In her anthropological analysis of adoption, Signe Howell (2003) describes how internationally adopted children in Norway are made into Norwegian people through a process she calls “kinning.” While “kinning” is a useful concept in cases of adoption (Alber and Martin 2018), Howell focuses on children’s integration into wider kin networks rather than more localized familial units.

In contrast, the concept of fictive kinship focuses on network building in one-to-one relationships within smaller groups. Margaret Nelson (2020) points out that the creation of fictive kinship by “doing family” shows how daily actions construct “like family” relations among those who were previously not considered kin. However, her analysis only discusses how people create family-like relationships by “doing family.” Within Romanian domestic adoption, doing family leads to more than becoming “like a family”; rather, “true” family is formed through doing family and, more specifically, through “doing household.”

Studies of fictive kinship presuppose the distinction between real and fictive kinship. Even when scholars discuss intimate relationships between non-kin such as students with teachers (Wilson 2017) and adolescents with mentors (Scott and Deutsch 2021), they are just “like a family” and not a “family” because real family is considered a legal or blood relationship. As a result, the concept of fictive kinship seems to enforce a fixed dichotomy between real (blood and legal) and non-real kinship while, at the same time, emphasizing the process of creating close, familial bonds.

Janet Carsten, on the contrary, intends to overcome this dichotomy between real and non-real kinship through her research in Melanesia. She asserts that the constant sharing of substances such as blood, sperm, eggs, breast milk, and food can lead people to form kinship through notions of “relatedness” (Carsten 2000). While Carsten’s (2000, 2011) work is useful to think about kinship and even broader cosmological ties, her argument does not account for the specificities and differences in individual social ties (Holy 1996).

Doing Household in Adoptive Family

While anthropological studies of fictive kinship investigate how kin-like relationships are created, they are unlikely to fully explain family formation in adoption because adoption forms what is often considered to be closer ties than fictive kinship. How can family formation in adoption be understood? This article examines kinship through narratives by two Romanian adoptive families.

The data was collected through unstructured interviews with adoptive mothers and adopted children at Brasov City in Romania in 2022. All participants were informed of the study and consented to participating. Conversations were held in Romanian and English but were translated to English by the author. Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Six years ago, Maria adopted a five-year-old girl. At the beginning, Maria and her husband spent most of the time with their adopted daughter “as family.” For Maria, family consists of those who “stay together, help each other, and work together.” However, the family was not achieved only by the parents’ effort but also by actions of the daughter. Maria thought that her adopted daughter also had to participate in the household by helping the parents, such as washing dishes, taking care of the garden, and so on. In an interview, she insisted that her daughter had to “*a gospodări* (do household)” to be a member of the family.

This concept of doing household emerges from Romanian indigeneity. In Romania, the nuclear family household is the core of a collective identity, with children being an integral part of that collective. A study summarizes mid-twentieth century ethnographies of Romania and describes that “[c]hildren were part of the meaning of the core concept of *gospodar* (householder), which

designated the most valuable rural identity” (italic in original: Stanciulescu 2010, 321). As I discuss, this importance of household is also applicable to the contemporary urban setting.

My focus on fictive kinship is not to suggest that Romanians do not have a concept of kinship based on blood and legal ties. In fact, adoption is often chosen as a result of couples’ infertility. In Maria’s case, adoption began as a substitute for having biological children. However, after “doing household” with her daughter since the adoption, they formed a family rather than only feeling “like a family.” In fact, when Maria was asked the difference between biological family and adoptive family, she answered that there was no difference between them and both were a “true” family.

Active Participation in Family Formation by Children

Children are not just passive in this process of “doing household.” Another interviewee, Elena, adopted an eleven-year-old girl, Silvia, a month ago. Elena discussed an ongoing negotiation between the two of them. In Silvia’s relationship with her adoptive parents, she had a stronger attachment to her father than her mother, as revealed when she called him “father” but referred to Elena by her first name.

Silvia had not yet stepped into processes of “doing household.” Because of her shorter time in the new family and less attachment to her mother, she refused to join in doing household with Elena. In the interview, Elena verbally expressed her dissatisfaction with Silvia not working in household but spending time as she pleased like watching television and listening to music. In addition, Silvia sometimes refused to fulfill a passive role in “doing household” by eating prepared food. Silvia did not eat what Elena typically cooked, resulting in Elena changing her cooking habits for the sake of Silvia.

Elena and Silvia’s interaction demonstrates how children can negotiate with the parents in “doing household.” In Romanian adoption, both parties partake in new family formation through engaging in or rejecting the joint effort of actively and passively doing household. Parents bring children into the household and provide opportunities to “do household.” However, children may also refuse this participation by favoring their own indulgences instead.

How Do They Become a “Family”?

As these narratives indicated, adoptive parents and adopted children cooperate in “doing household” to make the family “true” even though they do not have a consanguineal tie. In this process, adopted children are not just a recipient of the new setting. Rather, they have power to negotiate with the parents to transform the household and make a new family.

The concept of “doing household” is not particular to family formation in Romanian adoption. Rather, Romanian adoptive families have borrowed this indigenous and rural concept of household in their urban settings, employing it to create truthfulness within their new familial relationships. From this perspective, as Maria mentioned, both biological family and adoptive family are “true.” Therefore, the investigation into adoption makes it clearer that family can be conceptualized as a unit of “doing household” in Romania rather than a group of people that are identified only by affinity and consanguinity.

Further research is required to examine whether “doing household” contributes to children’s kinship formation with other adoptive relatives including their wider adoptive kin networks since these more distant relatives often do not share households in contemporary Romania. Nowadays, “doing household” is a particular practice within nuclear and cohabiting families. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how “doing household” takes place in kinship formation across households and distance.

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Author Biography

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