

Attachment as Affective Assimilation: Discourses on Love and Kinship in the Context of Transnational Adoption in Denmark

Lene Myong & Mons Bissenbakker

To cite this article: Lene Myong & Mons Bissenbakker (2021): Attachment as Affective Assimilation: Discourses on Love and Kinship in the Context of Transnational Adoption in Denmark, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, DOI: [10.1080/08038740.2021.1891133](https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1891133)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1891133>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 08 Mar 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 186



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Attachment as Affective Assimilation: Discourses on Love and Kinship in the Context of Transnational Adoption in Denmark

Lene Myong ^a and Mons Bissenbakker ^b

^aCentre for Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway; ^bCentre for Gender, Sexuality & Difference, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to initiate a critical dialogue on the politics of love and attachment by investigating the way in which the concept of attachment governs the field of transnational adoption. We take our starting point in an analysis of a collection of background articles, teaching materials, and interviews produced by child psychologists as well as instructions to and testimonies from adopters. Reading the material through Sara Ahmed's notion of affective orientation and Lauren Berlant's critical deconstruction of love, we argue that the texts popularize and instrumentalize John Bowlby's framework of attachment theory in ways that connect attachment to specific notions of love. Even though the aim seems to be the strengthening of intimate familial ties in adoptive families and ensuring feelings of kinship and security for the adoptee, the notion of attachment-as-love simultaneously organizes a narrative logic that positions the adoptee in a deadlock between pathologization and the demand for *affective assimilation* into the adoptive family. Our reading seeks to invite a more critical approach to notions of the attachment paradigm as an idealized route to affective belonging and psychological well-being for adoptees.


ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 February 2020
Accepted 11 February 2021

KEYWORDS

Transnational adoption;
intimacy; emotion; love;
pathologisation

From its early days, the field of transnational adoption in Scandinavia has been characterized by discourses on love, humanitarianism, and multiculturalism (Yngevesson, 2012). However, the legitimacy of adoption has undergone significant changes over the last 20 years. Writing in the US American context, Kit Myers identifies a discursive shift in dominant perceptions of transnational adoption, and argues that in recent decades the view of adoption as equivalent to saving a vulnerable child has been supplemented by discourses framing it as a way of creating a loving family (Myers, 2013b). This shift—whereby the desire to create a loving family intertwines with humanitarianism as a fundamental motive—can be said to have endowed transnational adoption with a new form of insistent moral legitimacy. Yet, the formation of a “new” adoption morality has also been challenged and overturned during the same period by adoptees who articulate strong critiques of the displacement of children through the racialized economy of transnational adoption. In Denmark, critical interventions by adoptees have contributed to disrupting dominant narratives of adoption as the epitome of welfare-state benevolence and anti-racist family formation (Koo, 2019; Myong & Kaisen, 2015). While these critiques have reshaped public debates on adoption in highly significant ways, a broad majority of parties in the Danish parliament have primarily responded to these critiques by seeking to strengthen the transnational adoption system.¹

CONTACT Lene Myong  lene.myong@uis.no

The political attempts to consolidate the adoption system have converged with a strong focus on love and attachment within the field of adoption. This focus seems to be part of a general Scandinavian tendency. In the Swedish context, Em Andersson (2010) has analysed an archive of political documents, research reports, social-work handbooks, and educational material published during the period 1997–2008.² Andersson argues that attachment perspectives permeate these documents, with the effect that adoptees are construed (and governed) as a vulnerable population; a vulnerability that is thought to be caused by the adoptees' (traumatic) separation from their first family (2010: 67–68). Also situated in Sweden, Cecilia Lindgren's examination of adoption assessment reports suggests that parental norms have intensified a demand for adopters to prove themselves as loving parents by demonstrating self-sacrifice and the investment of time and effort (Lindgren, 2015). These norms also place a substantial affective responsibility on adoptees to reflect the affection of their adopters, because the precondition for becoming a successful family is not just that the adopters offer love, but that the adoptee "accepts their gift by expressing love [in return]" (Lindgren, 2015, p. 486). In this economy of love, various popular versions of attachment theory have emerged as an omnipresent discourse on how to assess and secure healthy affective relations within the adoptive family, because it is thought that "showing that children are securely attached proves they have good parents" (ibid.: 485). An emphasis on affective bonding is also noted by Katrien De Graeve, who argues that in Flanders, Belgium, achieving attachment between adoptee and adopter is considered the greatest challenge for adoptive families—not racism or social exclusion (De Graeve, 2015, p. 81). The scholarship of Andersson, Lindgren, and De Graeve aligns with Rachael Stryker's influential argument that (popular versions of) attachment theory place a heavy obligation on adoptees to perform different forms of affective labour (2010, 2013). The view of love and attachment as adoption ideals prompts a critical discussion about the processes whereby "children's assertion of agency is constructed as a problem" (Stryker, 2013, p. 337), and about how ideals of healthy attachment enable and/or foreclose specific forms of kinship, intimacy, and liveability. Attempting to initiate a critical dialogue on the politics of love and attachment, this article asks how and to what extent these concepts govern the field of transnational adoption (albeit in different ways depending on how adoption is institutionalized and managed in various countries).³ We will examine a case from Denmark, which illustrates how the notion of attachment has come to shape the field of adoption in this specific context. Since the instrumentalisation of attachment theory in relation to transnational adoption to Scandinavia has been only sparsely examined from a critical perspective, we wish to encourage a discussion of its consequences, both in Denmark and in a broader global context.

In Denmark, transnational adoption emerged as a popular reproductive option post-World War II, when fewer Danish-born children were available for adoption and the implementation of stricter screening procedures made it more difficult to adopt (Myong & Trige Andersen, 2015). In Danish adoption practice, the emergence of love as an ideal has been closely connected with a renewed interest in the concept of attachment over the last couple of decades; so closely, in fact, that love and attachment are often used synonymously in everyday parlance. The (re)establishment of attachment as a core concept is neither new nor unique to adoption; it can be found across educational and care settings, and attachment ideology has exerted a profound influence on adoption practices since the mid-twentieth century (Herman, 2008). In order to illustrate the way in which attachment ideology has become an ideal for successful transnational adoption,⁴ we will investigate a collection of articles published in a special issue of a Danish magazine, *Adoption & Samfund* (2007) ("Adoption & Society", hereafter A&S). The magazine is published by an influential interest group (of the same name) for Danish adopters. It thus addresses a readership primarily consisting of adopters and is an important forum for negotiations about what constitutes the ideal transnational adoption family. Its special issue on attachment presents a useful case study of the ways in which popularized forms of attachment theory have been widely circulated and cited within the field of adoption in Denmark. In A&S issues published between 2007 and 2020, attachment is mentioned regularly but in different capacities; for example, in articles where adopters describe

their experiences of adopting children, and in reviews of books and other materials that thematize attachment. However, the topic of attachment appears most consistently in advertisements for courses, seminars, and talks aimed at informing adopters about adoption-related issues.

Our theoretical framework borrows from critical adoption scholarship that specifically focuses on the affective biopolitics of adoption (Eng, 2003; Myers, 2013a; Stryker, 2010, 2013; van Wichelen, 2014) and feminist studies of “humanizing” affects such as love, compassion, and empathy (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2001). Our analysis seeks to unpack the logics associated with attachment and love in order to reflect on the significance of these logics for the biopolitical administration of transnational adoption. The analysis aims to conceptualize attachment as constituting a specific *affective realm* in which the subject is oriented and orients themselves according to specific ideals of love. What we offer is thus a detailed understanding of the way in which the attachment paradigm functions as a form of biomedical technology (Stryker, 2013), and we argue that this may be indicative of how a dominant focus on the adoptee’s linguistic, racial, and cultural adaptability in a Danish context (Myong, 2009) has been replaced by a focus on the adoptee’s affective (love) potential and ability to attach themselves to the adoptive family. Following from this, we argue that the renewed interest in attachment may be conceptualized as instigating a shift between two related paradigms of assimilation, namely from *cultural assimilation* to *affective assimilation*. Turning our attention to the paradigm of affective assimilation that currently facilitates transnational adoption, the analysis shows that this paradigm is no less problematic in terms of limiting the potential to imagine alternatives to the present ideals of transnational adoption intimacy.

Analysing attachment as affect

Psychological development theory—and attachment theory in particular—has had a strong influence on conceptualizations of the relationship between parent and child, not least the importance of this relationship for the child’s development (Rose, 1989/1999; Walkerdine, 1993). Western ideals of the nuclear family and exclusive motherhood have profoundly informed these understandings (Kousholt, 2011; Mayhew, 2006). In the years before and after World War II, researchers conducted multiple studies of institutionalized children which advocated against this form of childcare, instead emphasizing the importance of the child–mother relationship (Herman, 2008). Thus, as attachment psychology has become highly influential in popularized narratives on child development, it is no surprise that such discourses also influence adoption practices. Although this article does not attempt to provide a genealogical analysis of the attachment concept as theorized by Bowlby (1965/1951, 1958) and Mary Ainsworth (1967), among others, it does formulate a critique of the specific way in which the ideal of attachment has come to influence discourses about transnational adoption. Our criticism is informed by the so-called affective turn within critical race, gender, and sexuality studies (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). The affective turn refers to research that examines the way in which affects simultaneously produce and are produced by social domains. Thus, we wish to draw attention to the emotional—or “affective”—aspect of the attachment concept. Sara Ahmed, who describes affects as performative actions that contribute to shaping subjectivities and social contexts, inspires us to consider how affect relies on both performative and phenomenological conceptualizations of the way in which experiences and narratives come to “stick” to specific objects. Emotions may be seen as performative and historically situated, as they “involve speech acts [...] which depend on past histories at the same time as they generate effects” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 13). Such effects may include expectations about which emotions should arise from certain phenomena (such as marrying or having children) and what those emotions are expected to do for us, or beliefs about which emotions should be pursued or avoided. Emotions are thus to be understood less as private, interpersonal traits than as performative constituents of subjectivity, because they make the subject recognizable to others and themselves as emotionally oriented by or towards certain objects and social phenomena (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed operationalizes the phenomenological concept of *orientation* by conceptualizing how subjects and groups

become affectively invested in—and are turned in the direction of—specific objects and ideals. She points to *the family* as an example of an object towards and around which the subject is expected to orient herself. In this case, specific emotions (particularly *happiness*) can serve as a corrective apparatus that points the subject in the direction of the family. The members of the family are expected to “turn in the same direction” and thus to *orient* themselves towards the family as a common goal (Ahmed, 2006). Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of love functions in much the same way, as she points to the ambivalent ways in which narratives of love have come to occupy a central position in modern ideals of identity and meaning (Berlant, 2001). As we will show, such ideals of love prove to be crucial to how attachment theory has influenced popular discourses of kinship.

Our intention in applying an affect-theoretical approach to exploring the workings of attachment theory within the field of adoption is not to criticize it for being “too emotional” or for replacing “authentic” emotions with “inauthentic” ones. Any field may be seen as characterized by certain emotional attitudes, and the authenticity of emotion may prove to be a question that is always open-ended (Cvetkovich, 1992). Rather, we are interested in how certain emotional ideals influence the practice of adoption, as kinship formation arises through affective logics. Our examination of *attachment* and *love* as conceptualizations of each other is not an effort to discredit love or to argue that a more genuine love should replace false forms of love. Instead, we are interested in how different expectations of the power of love shape the field of adoption through the concept of attachment. In this respect, a series of questions provide points of orientation for our analysis: What is the appeal of love? What promises are materialized through love when it takes the form of attachment? And what does attachment promise as a special form of love? In other words: How does the narrative of love enable certain forms of kinship, intimacy, and liveability and foreclose others? To identify the “limits of love”, we investigate the disruption and collapse of attachment and love that become particularly apparent in relation to the diagnosis *attachment disorder*.⁵ However, it is not our intention with this article to contest attachment disorder as a clinical diagnosis. Rather, our interest in *collapse* and *disorder* has to do with how discursive disturbances in attachment can indicate the expected ideal emotional connection.⁶

Attachment and adoption in Denmark

We have not been able to verify the number of transnational adoptees in Denmark who have been diagnosed with attachment disorder, or how many children and adolescents come into contact with various forms of attachment therapy. However, in the United States it is estimated that about 1% of all children are diagnosed with some degree of attachment disorder and that the number is likely higher for both transnational and national adoptees (Stryker, 2010; see also Barth, Crea, John, Thoburn, & Quinton, 2005). At the same time, the number of professionals specializing in attachment therapy has increased steadily over the past 20 years (Stryker, 2010). This development may partly be understood in the context of the growing medicalization of adoption, which is linked to more children with so-called special needs being adopted. As Sonja van Wichelen notes, a growing body of research from the Netherlands and Sweden in the mid-1990s focused on the increased risk of behavioural problems, suicide, and mental illness among adoptees (2014: 113). Scrutinizing this tendency in current Swedish social policy, in which transnational adoptees are associated with severe risks related to social behaviour, psychological development, and disorganized attachment, Andersson connects this discourse to Ellen Herman’s analysis of the figure of the “psychologically damaged adoptee” that was established during the 1970s in the USA (Andersson, 2010, 2016; Herman, 2008). Although researchers in Denmark have not engaged in the exact same type of research, general concerns about “damaged children” from Romania and China have dominated public debates on adoption in the Danish media, and in the years following 2000 a growing number of publications and popular science articles about adoption, attachment, and attachment disorder surfaced.⁷ One prominent example is the aforementioned organization, A&S,

which has consistently highlighted the importance of knowledge production about different aspects of attachment as a fundamental part of the “adoption professionalism” advocated both in their magazine and in their lobbying efforts to influence adoption legislation.⁸ For example, the organization has invoked “secure attachment” as an argument against granting the first parent(s) rights to maintain contact with the child.⁹

As mentioned above, we have selected the special issue of A&S’s membership magazine (2007) as an example, firstly because the magazine is widely read by Danish adopters and thus constitutes an influential channel for information, and secondly because we see it as indicative of the discursive logics that continue to characterize dominant understandings of attachment in Denmark. Through a discourse analytical approach (Foucault, 1972; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) inspired by the affect analytical framework of Ahmed (2004, 2006) and Berlant (2001), we engage with the thematic articles of the special issue on attachment as each of these can be seen to represent popularized discourses on attachment and adoption, as well as valorized positions and voices within the field: the specialist, the therapist, and the adopter. Methodologically, we have analysed the texts with respect to how they imbue meaning to (and thus discursively construct) the concept of attachment: which affects are presented as equivalent to valorized forms of attachment between adopter and adoptee? And which affects are construed as antagonistic to such idealized attachments? Based on this analysis, we highlight a number of affective logics concerning attachment that are traceable in contemporary discourses on transnational adoption. Currently, attachment constitutes a central theme in the mandatory adoption preparation courses for potential adopters, as well as in post-adoption counselling. The only state-accredited adoption agency in Denmark, Danish International Adoption (DIA), also communicates instructions to (prospective) adopters on post-adoption family life through an attachment framework dominated by the same logics that we highlight in the following (see also Bissenbakker & Myong, 2021).¹⁰

The special issue contains two background articles on attachment, written by a schoolteacher and a specialist in child psychology, respectively; an interview with a psychologist; an excerpt of teaching materials from a local child psychiatry department; an article containing excerpts from a qualitative interview study of female adoptees; and an article by a psychologist on so-called holding therapy. Also featured in the issue are three personal accounts by adopters based on their experiences of their adopted children’s attachment disorders. Two initial conclusions can be drawn from the collection of articles. Firstly, it is noteworthy that the special issue does not contain any examples of articles written by adult adoptees reporting on their experiences of attachment. The figure of the young adopted child—mediated through the adult adopter—remains the focal point for how attachment and the distribution of affect are articulated. Although finding one’s place in the intimate economy of attachment entails that both adopters and adoptees engage in affective work, the parties are not represented as occupying equal positions within this affective economy. It is the viewpoint of the adopter that is the focus of this special issue. Secondly, the special issue’s strong preference for featuring the points of view of “experts” gives the impression that its findings are scientifically founded. The concept of attachment itself is not up for discussion, but rather is presented as a scientific fact about which A&S provides educational information to adopters. Our analysis seeks to unpack what this fact of attachment is thought to be by investigating the perceived relationship between attachment and love. How is this relationship configured in the material? And what promises does it make to the adopter and adoptee, respectively?

The temporality of attachment

A recurring theme in the special issue is the description of attachment and love as inseparable. For example, the first article of the special issue, entitled “Attachment and adopted children” (“*Tilknytning og adoptivbørn*”), describes the relationship between attachment and love as follows:

In the popular understanding, attachment is the love between children and parents, which is the foundation for lifelong togetherness. Here, attachment is understood as the bond that arises and is built between the child and their most important caregiver(s). (Huse, 2007, p. 11)¹¹

It is worth mentioning that this conflation of *attachment* with *love* is not necessarily in line with the original attachment theory as formulated by Bowlby and Ainsworth. Nevertheless, the above informal understanding is maintained throughout the articles, making love the recurring affect that is used to illustrate or prove attachment. Throughout the special issue, attachment becomes intimately connected with love. In the quote above, attachment and love are construed as interchangeable concepts representing the same content, which constitutes the condition for lifelong togetherness. Attachment (love) is also explained as the bond that arises between a child and their primary caregivers. Here it seems significant that attachment (love) emerges as a *prerequisite* for togetherness (in the first sentence of the quotation), but that attachment itself is also understood as a *bond* (in the second sentence of the quotation). Thus, a circular logic seems to apply in which attachment and love, bond and togetherness simultaneously appear as each other's cause and effect. The interchangeability of attachment and love gives rise to an association that makes it impossible to think of one without the other. The affective economy that is drawn up complicates critical readings of attachment, because such readings could be seen as a critique of love itself and as obstructing the lifelong togetherness that is promised as the result of the coupling of attachment and love. Describing attachment simultaneously as a prerequisite for and synonymous with love invites strong investments in attachment, which is also characterized as “a togetherness that lasts a lifetime”, giving the impression of a relationship that is strong and unbreakable. In this way, the connection through attachment is imbued with the promise of lifelong progression and movement towards a liveable future.

If love and togetherness inscribe the adoptee subject and adoptive family into a liveable future, what comes to connote unliveability? This question is indirectly answered by the special issue's strong focus on attachment disorder and its educational advice on how adopters should relate to children with attachment problems. This advice can be read as illustrations of both how kinship formations become idealized, and their connection to specific distributions of affect. We may also think of the advice as orientation devices (Ahmed, 2006) that impose a script for managing complex relationships and difficult emotions through love—a management that includes both the adopter and the adoptee. In most of the articles, a number of symptoms are categorized in relation to different types of attachment disorders. Some focus on the child who avoids physical contact, has outbursts of anger, exhibits destructive or violent behaviour, suffers from depression, and/or rejects intimate and close contact with adopters and/or other children. Thus, the intimate promises of attachment and love are closely accompanied by the threat of pathology.

From this perspective, it is interesting that the special issue generally: a) links the cause of the attachment disorder to the time *before* the adoption, and b) links the pathology to the adopted. In this sense, the diagnosis of attachment disorder is aligned with broader cultural imaginings of the adopted child travelling from a bleak past in their country of origin to a prosperous future in the recipient country (Briggs, 2003). Popular images of inadequate institutions and unreliable caregivers materialize as a pathology in the child, and a narrative of neglect and attachment is naturalized and amplified through a temporal logic: the attachment disorder observed and diagnosed in the present is explained by a harmful past. In the special issue, it is primarily through the diagnosis that “knowledge” about the adoptee's history is provided to the reader, and it is also through the diagnosis as scientific discourse that this “knowledge” achieves the status of truth. The discourse on attachment and attachment disorder can thus be said to organize adoption kinship through a temporality that identifies the past as the *origin* and *cause* of the pathology manifesting in the present.¹² Andersson argues that Swedish social policy portraying “adoption simultaneously as a risk *and* a protective factor constructs transnational adoption as a legitimate solution to social problems” (2016: 207). This analytical point resonates with the temporal logic that inscribes the

child's present with a double meaning: simultaneously construed as an arena for the pathology's potential materialization and the solution to the neglect of the past. The latter can be seen, for example, in the article "Treatment of 0–3-year-old adopted children with attachment disorders" ("Behandling af 0–3 årige adoptivbørn med tilknytningsforstyrrelser"):

Various possible interventions exist for 0–3-year-old children with attachment disorders. As previously mentioned, adoption of a child with an attachment disorder is an important intervention, as the child is thereby ensured a stable caregiver. Studies have shown that the intervention does, in fact, have a positive influence on the child's behaviour. (Jørgensen, 2007, p. 24)

In this quotation, adoption is presented as an appropriate and reparative answer to damage (pathology) that has already occurred. Thus, adoption is understood as a suitable intervention and a charitable deed that secures the child's capacity for love and attachment. In the special issue, this discourse seems, among other things, to encourage the adopter to remain loyal to the decision to adopt—rather than leaving or terminating the relationship with the adoptee. It is also significant that the special issue represents adoption as the answer to attachment problems, rather than one of their possible causes; thus, attachment disorders and problems are generally described in a very hopeful way. The articles do not include case histories of adopted children who remain pathologically disturbed, or adopters who abandon their parental role. On the contrary, the articles promote a view of pathology as something that can be repaired, and adoption as central to the child's reparation, as long as the adopters seek help and counselling. In this way, the identification of pathology makes the adopted child governable through the production of an individualized and internalized domain as the object for potential transformation.

The capacity to love

In this context, attachment disorder can be read not only as a looming pathological threat to love (the constitutive outside of normality), but also as an integrated and productive dimension of normalization processes. Becoming recognizable as subjects who are capable of loving appears as a promise (and perhaps, more implicitly, a demand) to the members of the adoptive family. This is particularly evident in the concluding lines of the special issue's first article:

Knowledge about attachment and attachment disorders is a tool for creating good, lifelong bonds between children and parents. Through adoption, parents gain a unique opportunity to acquire an already born child, to get to know the child and to get to know themselves, too. You will experience the joy and worry of pouring completely uninhibited love onto a small person who is completely dependent on the adult. Attachment is also created in this space. (Huse, 2007, p. 14)

In this passage, knowledge about attachment and attachment disorder is invoked as a preventive tool for navigating adoptive kinship and as the building block for a lifetime of loving togetherness. Love is represented as a far-reaching and nourishing force, with the promise that adoption will give the adopters a unique opportunity to experience both *joy* and *worry* as the result of loving a child. It is thus the dependent child as an object of affect who becomes envisioned as the basis for the emergence of attachment. Affects such as joy and worry are not connected directly to the child, but to the act itself of "pouring completely uninhibited love onto a small person". The portrayal of uninhibited love as attractive implies that it must be less attractive to love in more inhibited or limited ways. The image of uninhibited love draws on notions of genuine and sincere love as a phenomenon without limitations or conditions, i.e. as a circuit that cannot be broken or obstructed.

Thus, the promise of attachment is not only of love as the reward for an exceptional affective effort; it is also a promise of the adopted child as an ideal object towards whom adopters can direct their love. By this logic, the *completely* uninhibited love becomes proportional to the *completely* dependent child, so that one appears to be a requirement for the other. Dependency thus serves as the prerequisite for loving in an uninhibited way. Here we can see love as an affect that fixates upon

the child as the object of love, because the child is already positioned in a relationship of dependency on the adult. What is presented here as an idealized relationship of love is one in which the object of love (the child) does not—and *cannot*—reject the subject who loves. Thus, what adopters are presented with is not, as one might expect, the prospect of receiving or experiencing love. Rather, it is the opportunity to be recognized (by others and by themselves) as subjects who are capable of loving. One could also say that attachment labour invokes the prospect of uninhibited love and an ideal object towards whom that love can be directed. In other words, attachment's promise of love does not primarily take the form of a positive emotional experience or affective intensity. Instead, the promise materializes as a relationship that offers adopters the idealized potential to become intelligible as loveable subjects.

Disorderly attachments—Love's murder of ambivalence

Our reading of love as an affective technology that subjectivizes both adoptees and adopters is inspired by Lauren Berlant's understanding of love. Berlant asks how it has come to be "that love has been established as the core feeling of being and life, a primary feeling of sociality from which one's history should emerge as if on a red carpet" (Berlant, 2001, p. 436). Berlant takes an interest in the central position that love is assigned in modern life, as the social domain in which we expect our subjectivities and life stories to unfold and be nourished (*ibid.*). Through a critical reading of Freud, she proposes that love must be understood as a *promise* of something, and that the most fundamental promise of love may be that it will "murder ambivalence" and replace it with emotional certainty (*ibid.*: 434). Love thus promises to erase all emotional doubt and replace it with an unambiguous feeling of love. According to Berlant, the notion of True Love ultimately entails an assurance *that* one loves.

Drawing on Berlant, we may ask: if the concept of attachment offers a lasting and loving relationship, what ambivalences does the healing of the attachment disorder promise to bring to an end? What kinds of emotions and attachments are made (un)recognizable through love's murder of ambivalence? The view of ambivalence as an obstacle to attachment and thus to a lifelong loving relationship is expressed, for example, in the introductory article "Attachment and adopted children" (Huse, 2007). This article describes the adoptee's inability or unwillingness to distinguish between different caregivers as one of the unmistakable signs of *attachment disorder*: "Some children do not distinguish between parents and others, but approach all adults indiscriminately. They need help to set limits in relation to others and to seek intimacy from the caregiver(s)" (*ibid.*: 12). Love is represented here as a limited source that is threatened by too many recipients. Accordingly, the treatment for this type of disorder is to direct the child's attachment towards one preferred object. The article emphasizes that:

To begin with, visits [by others] to the home should be brief. The child should only sit in the arms of the mother or father (this also applies to older children), and should only receive food, comfort, and care from the mother or father. Visitors can get coffee and cake themselves. Mother and father must be attentive to the child and not to being a good host or hostess. Of course, siblings should also share the joy, but the newly arrived child must learn to distinguish – through experience – who the caregiver(s) are in her/his new life. (Huse, 2007, p. 13)

A series of performative practices are imagined here in order to ensure that the relationship between the adoptee and the adopter(s) remains exclusive. The demand for exclusivity may be understood as a negotiation of how adoption kinship risks being rejected as inauthentic in the context of kinship norms defined by biology (McKee, 2016). The threat of losing cultural intelligibility and status as a Real Family can be seen as contributing to the pressure to perform unambiguous attachment. However, the demand for exclusivity is not unproblematic, because it simultaneously constructs other forms of attachment as potential threats to the idealized attachment. It is striking that the special issue makes no mention whatsoever of the possibility of loving ties between the adoptee and

their first family (not even in dismissive terms). In view of this, it is tempting to understand love directed towards the first family as one of the ambivalences that love for the adoptive family offers to erase. Following this line of thought, we might think of the concept of *attachment disorder* not just as a diagnosis of the inability to establish emotional bonds, but also as the name of a *disorderly* set of ambivalent attachments that create a disruption in the nuclear adoptive family's affective script.

Misplaced anger and boundless love

As we have shown, the concept of attachment leads to a demand for emotional exclusiveness, and this demand is accompanied by a demand for emotional unambiguity. Loving attachment is presented as the ability to master and ultimately replace ambivalent or “negative” emotions with positive, loving emotions. This becomes particularly evident in the special issue's personal testimonials, which are written by adopters of transnationally adopted children (two individual children and two siblings aged four and seven) who have been diagnosed with attachment disorder. It is worth noting that all of the testimonials authored by adopters involve experiences with the use of so-called holding therapy.¹³ As Stryker explains (2010, 2013), this form of therapy has been questioned as a method. However, for the purpose of this study we are not interested in discussing the practice of holding therapy as such, but in analysing what the expected outcome of this therapy says about attachment as an idealized goal for adoptive families: i.e., how the adopters interpret the ambitions of love and what they see as signs of attachment and lack of attachment.

In the testimonials, ambivalent emotions are generally represented as challenges to adoptive attachment that can potentially be replaced by—or at least subordinated to—the bonds of love. One adopter explains how holding therapy has transformed her transnationally adopted child from exhibiting a range of negative emotions to a child who expresses his love for her. The adoptee's declaration of love for the adopter emerges here as the implicit goal of holding therapy, comprising the testimonial's happy ending and thus tangible proof that the attachment therapy has worked: “And one day, when we had ended our Holding, he came back and said: ‘I want to whisper something to you: I love you’” (Anonymous, 2007b, p. 30). Negative, complex, and ambivalent emotions are here transformed into one particular emotion (love), which orients the child unequivocally towards the adopter. It is striking that in all four cases the adopters highlight the adoptees' declarations of love as proof of a well-treated attachment disorder:

She [...] often comes to me, unprompted, and wants to kiss and hug. Tells us, typically around bedtime, that she loves us. (Anonymous, 2007a, p. 21)

[...] after a couple of minutes, his love for me was boundless. (Anonymous, 2007b, p. 30)

Angelika has attached herself to us, especially to me. She is also very good at talking about how much she loves me and always will love me. (Stephansen & O., 2007, p. 31)

He has said probably 10 times in all, quite unprompted, that he loves me. It's absolutely fantastic. (Stephansen & O., 2007, p. 32)

What is notable here is that the adoptee's reciprocation of love is presented as a confirmation of boundless, lifelong love as the ideal form of love. The child's spontaneous, unambiguous, and authentic love is presented as the promised outcome of the trials of attachment efforts: a profound affective reward for a profound affective labour.

Whereas love in the special issue comprises the goal and reward of attachment, anger is an affect that is repeatedly highlighted as a sign of a disorder that stands in the way of loving attachment. Therapists and adopters refer to expressions of “rage” (A&S, 2007: 20–21, p. 27) and “anger” (ibid.: 16, 20, 23, 30) as behaviour that arouses suspicion that the adoptee is suffering from an attachment disorder. Anger and rage appear as tangible obstacles to loving attachment, but they are also emotions that are repeatedly explained away in the testimonials. For example, one adopter explains that her adopted son's fits of anger involve threats to leave

the adoptive family and return to his country of origin: “He was furious and screamed as if possessed. [...] ‘I want to go back to China NOW!’” (ibid.: 30). However, the threats are interpreted as fearful outbursts: the child is “unnaturally afraid of losing us and must constantly be reassured that he is a part of the family and that he cannot be replaced and that he does not have to go back to China” (Anonymous, 2007b, p. 29). To the adopter, the child’s threats and rage are signs of fear rather than anger. Here, anger becomes a displaced sign of other emotions, which is of course entirely possible. Nonetheless, it seems significant that love’s perceived Other (in this case, anger) is presented as a displaced emotion. In contrast, love is not expected to be an expression of anything other than itself. As a mode of orientation, anger generally appears in the special issue as *misplaced*: it is merely a signifier, while love is always the signified. In other words, love becomes authentic *through* the portrayal of other emotions as displaced expressions of each other. This process inscribes love with a special aura of honesty: as a form of attachment, love’s signs are credible, while anger is portrayed as a cover for something else.

Between pathologisation and affective assimilation

The spread of attachment discourses raises questions about how the politics of love are negotiated within the field of transnational adoption. Our analysis reveals how attachment works to “adjust the bonds of love”, to borrow a phrase from Nikolas Rose (1989/1999). The A&S special issue narrates attachment in ways that establish a temporal development defined by an unliveable past, a pathological present, and a liveable future secured through loving relations between the adoptee and the adopter(s). Through this narrative, attachment becomes shaped by a number of requirements based on an expectation of *affective assimilation*. The popularization of attachment discourse entails the imposition of an affective script that orients the adoptee’s attachment exclusively towards the adoptive family. Thus, in the context of transnational adoption, love takes on a precarious status for the adoptee: depending on which object(s) their love is directed towards, its singularity and temporality, the adoptee risks being exiled to the domain of pathology.

The (re)investments in attachment frameworks and their promises to organize love and kinship raise a number of questions. In what ways are adoptees produced and governed as a population through the affective (pathologising) economy of attachment? And to what extent does the affective framework of attachment and attachment disorder work to centre and privilege the nuclear adoptive family and the emotional needs of the (white) adopter subject? Following on from these questions, the investments in the organization of love through attachment could also be linked to love’s capacity as a “straightening device” (Andersson, 2016), ironing out the ambivalent feelings of the adoptee in order for them to become oriented around and towards their adoptive family. Thus, the discourse of attachment does not promote the message of love as a (magical) conqueror of all obstacles; rather, the investments seem connected to the hope that love will be able to soothe and mend the unequal and racialized power relations between adoptee and adopter. Thus, what is “straightened out” through the circuit of love is not only feelings of ambivalence or “negative” affects (such as anger)—which deviate from the script of attachment—but even more so the impact of inequality, displacement, and loss on transnational adoption. In this way, we may understand the investment in the production of love through attachment as an investment in affects that promise to depoliticize and defuse the political and racialized implications of transnational adoption. For these reasons, we suggest a more critical approach to the widespread acceptance of the attachment paradigm as an idealized route to affective belonging and psychological well-being for adoptees. For adopters and others with an investment in supporting transnational adoption, the concept of attachment extends a promise to secure adoptees’ feelings of kinship and security within the intimate space of the adoptive family. For the adoptee, however, the notion of attachment-as-love organizes a narrative logic that places them between pathologisation and the demand for affective assimilation.

Notes

1. Since 2012, when interventions by critical adoptee activists and journalistic exposures of illegal adoptions and abuse in adoptive families gave rise to fierce discussions among the Danish public, the Danish adoption system has been subjected to a number of reforms with the stated purpose of “securing” adoption [i.e. for adopters] for the future (Ministry for Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs, 2014).
2. The listed publications by Em Andersson were originally published under a different first name.
3. Our investigations are part of the collaborative research project *Loving Attachment: Regulating Danish Love Migration (LOVA)*, funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark. LOVA investigates how, and to what effect, the concept of attachment has been operationalized in order to regulate different forms of family migration in a Danish context between 2000 and 2018. <https://koensforskning.ku.dk/forskning/lova/>
4. This special issue is part of a comprehensive archive of attachment-related material in Denmark compiled by Lene Myong. The archive consists of governmental reports, research reports, and newspaper articles, as well as information published by adoption agencies and organizations for adopters.
5. The WHO’s International Classification of Diseases, ICD-10, describes two forms of attachment disorder: F94.1, labelled “reactive attachment disorder of childhood” and F94.2, labelled “disinhibited attachment disorder of childhood”.
6. The analysis obviously does not predict (let alone verify) adoptees’ or adopters’ specific experiences of attachment. Instead, it seeks to identify the affective realms established by the discursive formations in the material.
7. For publications concerned with adoption and attachment, see e.g. Buch Illing & Krarup Høgsberg (2013), Claësson & Idorn (2012), and Rygaard (2006).
8. During the early 2000s, *Adoption & Society* published a number of articles touching upon attachment and/or attachment disorder. See e.g. Møller (2002), Nørkjær (2004), and Rygaard (2005). For an example of how attachment has been linked to adoption professionalism, see weekly update from J. Damkjær, the then president of A&S: “We at A&S have repeatedly said that we lack adoption professionalism in Denmark and that the foundation is knowledge of developmental psychology, attachment and socialization.” Published at <https://adoption.dk/ugenyt-fra-formanden-1-halvaar-2013/>, 18 May 2013 (accessed 10 February 2020).
9. In principle, A&S supports a form of open adoption, but any requests for contact by the first parents are also seen as potentially detrimental to the attachment between adopters and adoptees. See e.g. weekly update from J. Damkjær: “If biological parents are to be able to contact their children given up for adoption when they feel a need to do so, it will be very difficult for adoptive parents to create the healthy attachment which is the most important thing a child needs. Such contact can very easily put an adopted child in a situation where he or she feels like a pawn between biological parents and adoptive parents—an all-too-familiar scenario from unhappy divorces. That would certainly not be protecting the interests of the child.” Published at <https://adoption.dk/ugenyt-fra-formanden-1-halvaar-2013/>, 10 May 2013 (accessed 10 February 2020).
10. The adoption preparation course is conducted under the auspices of the Family Law Department of the National Social Appeals Board (Ankestyrelsen). The course description cites attachment as a recurring theme: <https://ast.dk/born-familie/adoption/kurser> (accessed 10 February 2020). In addition, six hours of post-adoption counselling is mandatory for the adopter(s); the pamphlet for this counselling also cites attachment as a theme: <https://ast.dk/filer/born-og-familie/adoption/flyer-6obligatorisketimer.pdf> (accessed 10 February 2020). See also Danish International Adoption’s website: <http://www.d-i-a.dk/adoptionsprocessen/efter-adoption/#> (accessed 10 February 2020).
11. All quotes have been translated by the authors.
12. One could also, in the words of Katrien De Graeve, call this a dramatization of the child’s abandonment, in which different losses are “identified as the adoptees” dramatic core that may cause psychological dysfunction’ (De Graeve, 2015, p. 81).
13. Unfortunately, space considerations do not allow for a more detailed discussion of “holding” or other forms of attachment therapy. For more on the subject, we refer to Rachael Stryker’s (2010) study of attachment therapy in relation to adoptees in the United States.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

Funding

This article is part of the Loving Attachment: Regulating Danish Love Migration (LOVA) research project, funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark. Grant no. DFF-6107-00095 .


Notes on contributors

Lene Myong is professor and director of the Centre for Gender Studies, University of Stavanger. Her research explores the intersections of reproduction, race, and whiteness in a Nordic context, and how different forms of racism organize public debates and cultural production. Key aspects of her research have focused on different facets of transnational adoption, including the strong critiques of adoption articulated by adult adoptees in recent decades and the biopolitics of adoption within the Danish welfare state.

Mons Bissenbakker, associate professor, PhD, is head of the Centre for Gender, Sexuality, and Difference at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. His research concerns the biopolitics of affect in the intersections between queer, feminist, de-colonial, and crip theories, as reflected in cultural products such as fiction, film, public debates, discourses of law, etc. His current research project 'Attachment Required: Danish Migration Legislation 1999–2018' investigates the ways in which the concept of national attachment governs Danish love migration.

ORCID

Lene Myong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3700-1157>

Mons Bissenbakker  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6516-2137>

References

- Adoption & Samfund. (2007). Temanummer om tilknytning [Special Issue on Attachment]. *Adoption & Samfund* 31(3), 1–39.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ainsworth, M. (1967). *Infancy in Uganda: Infant care and the growth of love*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press.
- Andersson, E. (2010). *Blodets och rötternas logik. Internationell adoption i välfärdens diskursiva praktik* [The logic of blood and roots: Transnational adoption in the discursive practice of welfare]. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Uppsala University.
- Andersson, E. (2016). The risk of relatedness: Governing kinship in Swedish transnational adoption policy. In C. Kroløkke, L. Myong, S. Willum Adrian, & T. Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (Eds.), *Critical kinship studies* (pp. 205–222). London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Anonymous, I. (2007a). Søg hjælp og gør det i tide [Seek help and do it in time]. *Adoption & Samfund*, 31(3), Special Issue on Attachment. 20–21.
- Anonymous, I. I. (2007b). En mors beretning om Holdingterapi [A mother's account of holding therapy]. *Adoption & Samfund*, 31(3), 29–30. Special Issue on Attachment.
- Barth, R. P., Crea, T. M., John, K., Thoburn, J., & Quinton, D. (2005). Beyond attachment theory and therapy: Towards sensitive and evidence-based interventions with foster and adoptive families in distress. *Child & Family Social Work*, 10(4), 257–268.
- Berlant, L. (2001). Love, a queer feeling. In T. Dean & C. Lane (Eds.), *Psychoanalysis and homosexuality* (pp. 432–451). Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Bissenbakker, M., & Myong, L. (2021). Governing belonging through attachment: Regulating marriage migration and transnational adoption in Denmark. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Published online ahead of print.
- Bowlby, J. (1958). The nature of the child's tie to his mother. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 39, 350–373.
- Bowlby, J. (1965/1951). *Child care and the growth of love* (second ed.). Harmondsworth: Pelican.
- Briggs, L. (2003). Mother, child, race, nation: The visual iconography of rescue and the politics of transnational and transracial adoption. *Gender & History*, 15(2), 179–200.
- Buch Illing, A. & Krarup Høgsberg, I. (Eds.). (2013). *Adoption shåndbogen. Det adopterede barn i familien, i dagtilbud og skole* [Adoption handbook: The adopted child in the family, in day care and school]. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Clässon, B. & Idorn, U. (Eds.) (2012). *Holdingterapi - en tilknytningsterapi* [Holding therapy: A form of attachment theory]. Copenhagen: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.
- Clough, P. T., & Halley, J. (Eds.). (2007). *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Cvetkovich, A. (1992). *Mixed feelings: Feminism, mass culture and the victorian sensationalism*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.
- De Graeve, K. (2015). 'They have our culture': Negotiating migration in Belgian-Ethiopian transnational adoption. *Ethnos*, 80(1), 71–90.
- Eng, D. (2003). Transnational adoption and queer diasporas. *Social Text*, 21(3), 1–37.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. London: Tavistock.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (Eds.). (2010). *The affect theory reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Herman, E. (2008). *Kinship by design: A history of adoption in the modern United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Huse, I. (2007). Tilknytning og adoptivbørn [Attachment and adopted children]. *Adoption & Samfund*, 31(3), 11–14. Special Issue on Attachment.
- Jørgensen, B. (2007). Behandling af 0–3 årige adoptivbørn med tilknytningsforstyrrelser [Treatment of 0–3-year-old adopted children with attachment disorder]. *Adoption & Samfund*, 31(3), 22–24. Special Issue on Attachment.
- Koo, Y. (2019). 'We deserve to be here.': The development of adoption critiques by transnational Korean adoptees in Denmark. *Anthropology Matters Journal*, 19(1), 35–71.
- Kousholt, D. (2011). Researching family through the everyday lives of children across home and day care in Denmark. *Ethos*, 39(1), 98–114.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony & socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London: Verso.
- Lindgren, C. (2015). Ideals of parenting and childhood in the contact zone of intercountry adoption: Assessment of second-time adoption applicants in Sweden. *Childhood*, 22(4), 474–489.
- Mayhew, B. (2006). Between love and aggression: The politics of John Bowlby. *History of the Human Sciences*, 19(4), 19–35.
- McKee, K. (2016). Real versus Fictive Kinship: Legitimizing the Adoptive Family. In Kroløkke C., Myong L., Adrian S. W. & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen T. (Eds.), *Critical Kinship Studies* (pp. 221–236). London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Ministry for Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs. (2014). Agreement on a new adoption system in Denmark [Aftale om et nyt adoptionssystem i Danmark]. 7 pages.
- Møller, N. (2002). Vi troede vi var dårlige forældre [We thought we were bad parents]. *Adoption & Society* 26(3), 7–10.
- Myers, K. (2013a). *Race and the violence of love: Family and nation in U.S. Adoptions from Asia*. PhD dissertation, Department of Ethnic Studies. University of California, San Diego.
- Myers, K. (2013b). The violence of love in transracial and transnational adoption: Moving away from the good/bad binary. *Gazillion Voices*, September 2013. No longer available on web.
- Myong, L. (2009). *Adopteret – Fortællinger om transnational og racialiseret tilblivelse* [Becoming an adoptee: On transnational and racialized subjectification]. PhD dissertation, Danish School of Education, Aarhus Universitet.
- Myong, L., & Kaisen, J. J. (2015). The emergence of adoption critiques among transnational adoptees in Denmark. In J. J. Kaisen * [asterisk] Ed., *Loving Belinda* (pp. 89–98). Aarhus: Forlaget.
- Myong, L., & Trige Andersen, N. (2015). From immigration stop to intimizations of migration: Cross-reading the histories of domestic(ated) labor migration and transnational adoption in Denmark 1973–2015. *Retfærd*, 38(3), 62–79.
- Nørkjær, I. S. (2004). En nøgle til vores datter [A key to our daughter]. *Adoption & Society*, 28(3), 7–11.
- Rose, N. (1989/1999). *Governing the Soul: The shaping of the private self*. London, New York, NY: Free Association Books.
- Rygaard, N.P. (2005). En chance for adoptivfamilier [An opportunity for adoptive families]. *Adoption & Society*, 29(3), 10–12.
- Rygaard, N. P. (2006). *Børn og unge med tilknytningsforstyrrelse "tidlig frustration"* [Children and adolescents with attachment disorder "early frustration_"]. Svendborg: Forfatterforlaget.
- Stephansen, K., & O.. (2007). Hold da helt fast! [Hold on!]. *Adoption & Samfund*, 31(3), 31–32. Special Issue on Attachment.
- Stryker, R. (2010). *The road to evergreen: Adoption, attachment therapy, and the promise of family*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Stryker, R. (2013). Movement without movement: 'RAD kids' as circulatory problems in the United States adoption pipelines. *Childhood*, 20(3), 337–353.
- van Wichelen, S. (2014). Medicine as moral technology: Somatic economies and the making up of adoptees. *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness*, 33, 109–127.
- Walkerline, V. (1993). Beyond developmentalism. *Theory & Psychology*, 3(4), 451–469.
- Yngevesson, B. (2012). Transnational adoption and European immigration politics: Producing the national body in Sweden. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 19(1), 327–345.