

**PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSES ON SINGLE-PARENTHOOD IN  
INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS IN SPAIN**

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**Abstract**

We examine psychologists' and social workers' discourses in relation to international adoptions by single-parents in Spain. The analysis suggests that these professionals, who play a key role in moving forward (or not) the adoption process, work with a distinctive notion of 'the best interest of the child' in which the heterosexual couple is taken as the normative referent of parental and family relations. The principle of the child's best interest is explicitly defined at the legislative level and is incorporated as part of child protection policies but in interview discourses it intertwines with many other themes. Our analysis uncovered some diversity in psychologists' and social workers' discourses, which seem to be tied to their professional and experiential background. However, an argument which portrays single parenthood in negative terms dominates their views. These representations are developed even though the available evidence from post-adoption assessments does not support such bias.

**Keywords:** International Adoption – Single-parenthood – Best interest of the child – Professional practice

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Becoming a parent through international adoption is a complex bureaucratized process. The formalization of an international adoption needs aligning the legislative requirements of the country of the candidate parents, the country of origin of the child and international conventions in relation to child-protection and children's rights. Despite cross-national variability in these regulations there are a number of commonalities in the procedures across contexts. Once the formal pre-requisites to become a candidate adoptive parent are met, at the heart of the process is a procedure in which the 'suitability' of candidate parents' is assessed. Again, there are cross-national variations but usually this evaluation involves a series of observations, training schemes and interviews with candidate parents. Psychologists and social workers play a key role in this assessment, as they are considered the 'knowledgeable experts' (LeVine 2004; cf. Rose 1999) who can investigate and judge the suitability of candidates to assume their parental roles successfully. Eventually, their assessment has to be validated by governmental authorities, since (governmental and judicial) authorities ultimately supervise and ratify different stages of the adoption process. Yet, at least in Spain, psychologists' and social workers' joint assessment of candidate parents is not often disregarded by authorities (cf. Bermejo and Casalilla 2009).

This investigation into the parental suitability of candidate adoptive parents can be understood as a *gatekeeping encounter*. Erickson (1975) introduced the concept to examine how access to individual rights through institutional encounters may be the result of emergent and culturally-mediated face-to-face interactions between 'candidate recipients' and the institutional agents who control the process. Erickson's analysis focused on counseling sessions in community college but, since then, the notion has been used to examine numerous institutional settings (Michaels 1981; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 2002; Roberts and Sarangi 2003; Blommaert 2001) where access to particular 'privileges' and 'rights' are -at least partially- interactionally managed through a series of face-to-face encounters

characterized by their institutional asymmetry. This is the view taken by Noordegraaf et al. (2008a, 2008b) for the set of interviews and observations that are part of the suitability assessment to become an adoptive parent in the Dutch child protection system. They describe social worker's identities in a juncture between helpers and gatekeepers: "as executors of the law they also have a gatekeeping function. In other words, they are authorized to advise state agencies on very serious matters such as supervision orders, visiting arrangements, and suitability for adoptive parenthood" [Noordegraaf et al. 2008a: 311].

However, as a gatekeeping encounter the 'suitability assessment' process has some particularities. As construed in professional practice and national/international legislation in many countries, the assessment process is not designed to mediate the rights of 'solicitors' – which we could perhaps frame as 'fulfilling adult development through parenthood'. Rather, the suitability assessment and the judicial decisions that support it are designed to protect and promote the rights and needs of children and the future adoptive child (for example the 1993 *Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in respect of Intercountry Adoption*) – but see Howell (2006a) for a contrast in this construction between the United States and Norway. This re-focusing involves at least three features that make it an especially complex and contentious task. First, it rests on judgments around future hypothetical situations about possible parenting scenarios with an unknown child and not actual experience or factual child-rearing scenarios (Noordegraaf et al. 2008a, 2008b). Second, the professionals who manage the process are clearly entangled in the dilemma highlighted by LeVine (2004) of using developmental psychology as scientific knowledge about childhood or as a moral program for to the promotion of culturally based ideals of child-rearing and growth – or, more critically, do not identify this as a dilemma and construe 'psychological expertise' as the legitimate discourse to define all aspects of the process and pursue what is, in effect, a moral program about the family (cf. Rose 1999). Finally, child protection policies and procedures

rest on a principle, the “best interest of the child”, which is tremendously difficult, or perhaps impossible, to define thoroughly in professional practice.

That the “best interest of the child” is far from being a transparent concept is illustrated in the monographic attention it has received in ethical analysis in fields such as medicine (Kopelman 1997a), family law (Alston 1994) or, specifically, child protection policy and adoption (Rivero 2007; Howell 2006a; Fonseca et al. 2012). Our own reading of this work suggests that this intellectual effort has not been able to put forward an unproblematic definition of how this standard operates. For example, one proposed definition offered for various domains of professional practice is:

the best interests standard used as a standard of reasonableness, guides us to select what most informed, rational people of good will would regard as maximizing net benefits and minimizing net harms for children, given the legitimate interests and rights of others and the available options [Kopelman, 1997b: 287].

In other words, what are, where and how children’s best interests are met largely rests on professionals’ rationality and benevolence and, in the particular case of adoptions, professionals’ considerations in relation to candidate parents as secondary parties with, perhaps, some legitimate interests and rights. Given this context, it seems especially important to examine professional discourses -understood in Foucault’s (1972) terms as a complex set of interrelated ideas and concepts that regulate a social field, reflect power relations and are tied to the identities of its producers- and not only interactional processes during institutional encounters. If, as we describe below, psychologists and social workers play a crucial gatekeeping role in the international adoption process in Spain it is critical to understand the rationality, theoretical reasoning and the various social issues that are taken into consideration by these key actors when assessing the suitability of adoptive parents.

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This issue is especially relevant in the case of single-parents: women and men (although the vast majority of cases involve women) who begin the process individually without a partner/spouse and aim to begin a single-parent family project by choice through adoption (e.g. Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik 2007). Spanish national legislation recognizes and regulates the right of individuals to begin an adoption process – in fact, strictly speaking, Spanish legislation in relation to adoption (e.g. *Ley 54/2007, de 28 de Diciembre, de Adopción Internacional* and the Spanish Civil Code) describes the adoption process in relation to individual candidates and adds special provisions for ‘couples’ as a collective entity. Nonetheless, some cases of regional legislation, our observations of the process, the documentation that is regularly distributed by regional authorities in charge of supervising the adoption process and previous findings from our project strongly suggest that heterosexual couples, especially those who have chosen adoption given their difficulties with biological procreation, are seen as the default candidates for adoption while all other configurations are treated problematically by the system.

Also, in the Spanish context there are a number of technical documents, training manuals and ‘research reports’ which portray single-parenthood unfavorably. This reading varies in its explicitness from the relatively neutral depiction of single-parenthood as a ‘special circumstance that may deserve particular attention’ (Casalilla et al. 2008), to the examination of single-parenthood as a risk-factor (Berástegui 2003) to judicial analysis where a diversity of family configurations are put into question. An illustrative example of the more heavily judgmental literature is a recent proposal (Adroher 2007) - which has politically become increasingly influential - where “suitability” as the assessment goal is further specified as “eligibility”. This move would legitimately allow public authorities to exercise their preferences for certain family configurations and adoptive parent candidates over others on purely socio-moral grounds (original in Spanish, our translation):

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Capable and suitable adoptive parent candidates do not have a “right” to adopt; it is children who have been abandoned who have a right to grow up in a family.

Establishing these criteria does not involve a discrimination that is contrary to the constitutionally granted right to equal treatment among potential adoptive parent candidates but the legitimate selection of those who, as judged by the public administration, respond better to the best interests of the child. In light of this criterion, the public administration may prefer adoptions by couples than by single parents, adoption by childless couples than by families with biological children (...) or adoption by a heterosexual couple than adoption by a homosexual couple [Adroher 2007: 986-987].

These considerations circulate and are taken up in the Spanish context despite the fact that: (a) the own assessment of post-adoption processes made by Spanish authorities does not highlight any particular risks in the case of single-parent adoptive families, and (b) judicially-guided revisions of the initial ‘unsuitability’ assessment made by child protection authorities tend to overrule this decision and grant adoptive candidate parents (including single-parents) a ‘suitability’ status for various reasons which are often not contemplated or considered legitimate by psycho-social professionals (Bermejo and Casalilla 2009).

In other words, single-parenthood operates in the Spanish adoption process (and international legislation/policy in sending countries) as a family-type category with a relatively ambivalent status and is the object of discursive work at many levels in the Spanish adoption / child-protection system. Further, this intertwining of family diversity and adoption in Spain emerges as part of general trends in Spanish families. The Spanish adoption system has rapidly become one of the most active internationally -in 2004 Spain was the second country in the world in total number of international adoptions (Selman 2009)- and, in comparison to

other Western states (e.g. Noordegraaf et al. 2008a; Howell 2006; Ouellette 1996), seems to have an especially complex and cumbersome bureaucracy. More broadly, family diversification in Spain is an increasingly visible social and policy topic and has been addressed in various psychological-professional studies (e.g. Arranz et al. 2010). From a socio-anthropological perspective, this diversification reflects a transformation in how family projects and kinship, in line with changes in other Western contexts, is construed in Spanish society (Rivas 2009) – an ideological construal that may permeate professional discourses in a number of ways. In all these trends single-parenthood by choice has a visible part. González et al. (2007) report that in 2005 26% of children were registered in the census as affiliated to “out-of-wedlock” mothers (the broad census category that, unfortunately, collapses unmarried but cohabiting couples who give birth to or adopt children, single-parent adoptions and single-mother with biological children) and, in the case of international adoptions in Spain, between 2000-2004, an average of 9.4% of open cases were of single adopting mothers (González et al. 2007).

Given this context, in this article we examine the discursive formations around single-parenthood held by professionals who are actively involved in Spain in different parts of the international adoption process. Our analysis attempts to uncover the main ideologies in relation to single-parenthood that circulate among adoption professionals and, given that these discourses do not emerge as a coherent and homogeneous system, the potential sources of variability in these discourses. Specifically we examine two elements in the construction of these discourses: (a) the role played by the ‘best interest of the child’ principle as a rhetorical and/or structuring device in professional ideologies about single-motherhood and (b) the role played by professional trajectories and professional position in the adoption system on participants’ discourses on single-parenthood. The data we present stems from a larger multi-disciplinary project on single-parenthood by choice which we discuss in the method section.

Before, we will provide a brief contextualization of the adoption process in Spain and the role played by social workers and psychologists in the system.

### **International Adoptions and the Role of Psychologists and Social Workers in Spain**

Becoming a parent of an adopted child in Spain is a lengthy and highly institutionalized process that begins with the initial decision to become an adoptive parent and contacting public authorities and continues months and years after the adoptive child has arrived in Spain and becomes part of an adoptive family – see Figure 1 below for a summary of the process. Candidate parents have to undergo a training scheme, an extensive ‘suitability evaluation’, deal with several governmental and judicial authorities in Spain and the country of origin of the child and participate in post-adoption follow-up assessments. The full process is eventually ratified by judicial authorities and continuously supervised by public child-protection authorities, which in Spain are decentralized to each regional government. In turn, child-protection authorities may be directly responsible for the whole process or delegate all or part of these tasks to accredited agencies and professionals. Further, this outsourcing scheme varies from region to region in Spain. For example, in Madrid the tendency is to have a pool of individual professionals who work for the system and are known as the *TIPAI Turno de Intervención Profesional en Adopción Internacional* (Professional Counsel in International Adoptions), regionally accredited professionals who can perform –for a professional fee paid by candidate parents- part of the suitability and follow-up assessments and write up perceptive reports with their evaluation. These professionals are usually licensed clinical psychologists or independent social workers who dedicate part of their work-time to ‘suitability assessments’ in international adoptions. Based on our findings, usually psychologists in the TIPAI (an overall larger pool) dedicate a comparatively small fraction of their time to adoption assessments while social workers in the TIPAI (a much smaller pool of

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professionals) often dedicate most of their time to this task. In contrast, in Catalonia the suitability assessment is arranged through organizations under contract with governmental agencies – thus, candidate parents do not have a choice in terms of who performs the suitability assessment and professionals tend to dedicate a larger portion of their time to work in international adoptions. Finally, another set of non-governmental agencies that assume responsibilities in the international adoption process are known as *ECAI Entidad Colaboradora en Adopción Internacional* (Collaborating Agency in International Adoptions). These are usually chartered as non-profit -but not costless to candidate parents- organizations and support ‘suitable’ parents during several parts of the ‘pre’ and ‘post’ adoption process. Typically, these collaborating agencies specialize in a country or region of the world, since in Spain the ‘suitability assessment’ and certification is specified for a particular country of origin and for particular types of adoptive children.

In this system, psychologists and social workers are the key professionals in charge of the process. They are collaboratively responsible for the training component of the procedure; they prepare together the final recommendation in relation to each candidate individual or couple; and are also responsible for the post-adoption assessment. As part of the suitability assessment, candidate parents must undergo separate interview(s) with the psychologist and social worker and, usually, the social worker will also be in charge of the home visit to candidate parents’ homes. These professionals can have different backgrounds and work for different agencies (or be self-employed professionals) but to work in the system they have to participate in similar training schemes organized by regional authorities and their respective regional professional associations. These training schemes are often organized by professionals from child-protection authorities and/or collaborating agencies who already work in international adoptions and have experience in the field.

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In short, given that regional governments are responsible for international adoptions and that they have put into place a complex set of regulatory mechanisms, the pool of professionals who work in the system is relatively small in each region, yet these professionals appear to be positioned between two forces that complicate the way professional discourses shape their practice. On one hand, they are all part of the same system, have undergone similar training schemes and draw from the same pool of technical documents and guidelines, gray literature and conceptual references. On the other hand, professionals in the system can be very heterogeneous in terms of their professional training (social workers and psychologists, and among the latter align with various theoretical schools), their actual professional experience and the position in which they work in relation to the international adoption process: assess the suitability of candidates, support parents who have moved on in the process, supervise all aspects of the system, etc. It is this diversity that makes it especially relevant to examine the role played by professional positioning in the configuration of ideologies and discourses on single-parenthood and international adoption.

### **Method**

The findings in this paper draw from a larger interdisciplinary research project (involving researchers in Anthropology, Psychology, Sociology and Law) on single-parenthood by choice -via adoption and assisted reproduction- in three Spanish regions: Madrid, Cataluña and Valencia. These three Spanish regions were chosen because they have high numbers of adoptions by single-parents and, especially, active organizations of single-parent families. As part of the larger project we have collected data of various kinds such as: (1) interviews with

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single-mothers and fathers (56 interviews with adoptive parents); (2) observations over the course of three years of different socialization and support spaces (virtual and physical) for single-parent families, as well as some of the institutional meetings with the professional actors who are part of the processes into parenthood that we have studied; (3) collected and examined the relevant legislation, jurisprudence and documentation on adoption, assisted reproduction and single-parenthood in Spain; (4) interviews with children in some of the participating single-parent families (14 children between 3-19 years of age) and some (indirect) observations of their family interactions; (5) interviews with the relevant professionals who play a role in the two paths into parenthood we have examined (adoption/fostering and assisted reproduction).

In this paper we focus on the data gathered from interviews with psychologists, social workers and other professionals involved in the international adoption processes in Spain. This sub-sample consisted of 28 professionals (19 Psychologists and 9 Social Workers) involved in different aspects of the process. All participants were contacted directly or through their professional organizations and volunteered to be interviewed for the study, which was explicitly framed as focused on single-parenthood by choice. The professionals we studied played different roles in the system as discussed in the previous heading. Table 1 summarizes the basic distribution of this set of participants, indicating their primary professional role in the adoption process at the time of the study:

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The semi-structured interviews allowed professionals to develop their own topics and discourses but used as a starting point the following themes: demographic data, participation

in training programs in adoption, professional trajectory, representations about the families they have worked with in the field of adoption, representations on the children who are eligible for adoption, the cases of single-parents they have worked with (both successfully and unsuccessfully assessed) and experience with and views on truncated adoptions / unsuccessful processes. Although the larger project focuses on both single-parent men and women, none of the professionals we interviewed reported substantial experience working with single-men (being international adoptions by single-men something that is increasingly restricted), thus, the analysis and discourses, in practice, focused on single-mothers.

Data has been analyzed using the basic principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) with a particular interest in identifying the organization of professional discourses (Foucault 1972) around single-parenthood and adoption. This approach is also compatible with a form of thematic analysis that is inductive, constructionist and focused on latent themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Specifically we have worked in a three-step process through which we have: (1) used the larger project and data to generate empirical codes to process the interviews; (2) develop more comprehensive theoretical and conceptual categories for this initial coding; (3) develop an axial and selective analysis of the categories to explore relationships between them. This analysis was followed through in group discussions of the various members of the research team, all of which have participated in collecting and analysis de data and, as said, have different disciplinary backgrounds.

## **Results**

Our analysis suggests that the professional portrait of single-parents as candidates for adoption is problematic. The general assumption is that this is not the desirable choice among a potential pool of candidate parents. This perspective is most visible when we explicitly elicit

the issue. When asked to assess advantages/disadvantages of single-parenthood in the case of adoptions, the response tends to be quite unbalanced:

*Interviewer:* (...) but do you see any advantages to single-parenthood?

*Andrea:* Well, I don't see any. I don't see them (...) Some of the advantages the mothers I see report, like they don't have to reach agreements, in some couples reaching an agreement is very complicated and so on. I do not see this as an advantage. I believe that even if you do not reach an agreement, just trying, and even some disagreement, there is nothing wrong with disagreement, there are different ways of seeing things, and you talk, you comment, you argue or whatever, but I do not see an advantage. I see no advantages; if you want me to tell you the truth I have not yet seen them. But, yes I believe that a family of a single person can be a good enough family for a child. [Andrea, Clinical Psychologist, Suitability Assessment]<sup>1</sup>

Andrea, a clinical therapist who dedicates part of her time to suitability assessments, is explicitly unable to point out potential advantages of single-parents as candidates for adoption. Her argumentation is constructed by directly counter-arguing what single mothers' report as some of the advantages of their situation by pointing out the inherent positive qualities of dialogue and coordination by two parties in a relationship, even if this effort is unsuccessful. This example is one of the most explicit and unmitigated unfavorable arguments around single-parenthood. Other professionals, in line with research that has examined the particular affordances of single-parent families for specific types of adoptable children (Shireman 1996), provide a more elaborate argument in which some advantages might be pointed out in particular scenarios.

However, all these professionals, in their discourse, shy away from a socio-moralized justification of their standing in relation to single-parenthood. As formulated, their analysis of

the implications of single-parenthood is not about single-parenthood as a family model but about single parenthood in the context of the particular needs and challenges of adopted children. This is the stance that articulates their discourses and structures the different layers of argumentation in relation to single-parenthood and adoption. We have identified three clusters of ideas that present single-parenthood in distinct terms: (a) single-status in relation to socio-emotional capacities; (b) single-parenthood in relation to ‘complicated’ adoptions and (c) arguments to de-problematize single-parenthood. In the following headings we examine each of these themes and discuss how they might be connected to (or even made possible by) the different professional positions that are available in the international adoption/child protection system.

### **‘Being single’ as an Index of Emotional Immaturity and Social Isolation**

In the ‘Manual for Suitability Assessments in International Adoptions’ published by the regional government of Madrid (Casalilla et al. 2008) single parenthood is not seen per se an undesirable option for adoptive children and single-parents are considered legitimate and potentially suitable candidates. Nonetheless, single parenthood is presented alongside other ‘special circumstances’ and professionals are advised to pay special attention to various issues in their assessment of candidates who begin the process without a spouse. Most of the themes identified in the manual are re-introduced in the professional discourses we have examined. However, while in the ‘guidelines’ they are presented as potential variables (‘protective’/‘risk’ factors) that play a role in the outcomes of the adoption process, in professional discourses they are often upgraded to ‘clinical syndromes’ peculiar to single-parent candidates:

*Interviewer:* -and on the relationship of the opposite sex? Has there been a rejection in the majority of cases, or how is that?

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*Manuela:* No! You can have them, you can have them. But there are people who are resentful of the opposite sex, because they had partners and they left them, or anyway... Some people are very 'heart-broken' and, so, in a way, they turn to adoption as a refuge for their feelings of loneliness and all that. And then, all this must be assessed very carefully. That is why I was telling you about this case I had, she did not want to be asked about anything, of course, that is important. A single-parent with a super strict upbringing, with a number of issues, of course, we have to ask her many things. So then, she refused to answer and answered only half-heartedly and then, of course, we gave it a negative. [Manuela, Family Therapist, Suitability Assessment]

A trait that receives particular attention is related to a candidate's capacity to establish mature intimate relationships, which is incorporated to the interviewee's personal history and projected onto the future capacity (or incapacity) to construct a strong bond with the adopted child. Alongside isolation and the incapacity to develop close relationships, emotional overdependence and immaturity are also seen as problematic traits that characterize some single-mother candidates. These latter aspects are also tied to the role played by 'profiling' in professional discourses. Professionals' vary in their willingness to cluster single-women into particular profiles: some psychologists and social workers do so with ease while others find grouping types of single-women under a limited number of categories unhelpful. But among those professionals who do offer categorizations of single-women, there is general agreement in terms of the profiles of single-women who opt for international adoptions. One profile, the least problematic and more positively valued, is represented by accomplished and independent professional women who delay motherhood to pursue their careers. Alongside this model, two other profiles are offered and characterized in less favorable terms. One is 'older women' who opt for adoption to prevent solitude and often while mourning a lost spouse or parent. The third profile is used for women who begin the adoption process without

themselves having left the family home or consider initiating their own emancipation through the adoption process:

*María Teresa:* I prepared the case, the first negative assessment of a single-parent, a woman who in the practicalities of her life, there was no place for this child. She was a thirty-something woman with her own apartment but lived with her mother, and I don't know if the father was alive, I can't remember.

*Interviewer:* She lived with he mother?

*María Teresa:* Yes, yes and she had never thought about moving out, so Ok, “what are you going to do with your child?”, and there she started to stammer “well, yes, I don't know, I imagine I will go with him/her...”, I mean (...) there was not clear project.

[Maria Teresa, Clinical Psychologist, Suitability Assessment]

For these cases, the problematic trait is over-dependence and attachment to their own maternal figures rather than emotional isolation. This affective context is seen as an index of an adoption project that is not sufficiently elaborated and does not lead to a positive assessment. In short, in the context of the socio-psychological suitability assessment single-motherhood can end up being construed as a psychological syndrome with negative consequences and disadvantages for the future adopted child. This stance is especially visible in professionals with a strong clinical background and who primarily work in the initial ‘suitability assessment’ of the international adoption process, although it may also be present in professionals who work in other stages of the adoption process - but will be elaborated differently.

This is not the only stage in the process where single parenthood receives special consideration and is tied in complex ways to the ‘best interests of the child’ rhetoric. Single-parents do receive positive assessments and enter the international adoption circuit – which in

Spain is a completely different path and system from national adoptions. They participate in this circuit alongside heterosexual couples and are inserted in dynamics characterized by an imbalance between the demand for adoptable children and the offerings made by each 'sending' country.

### **Single Parents as the Recipients of 'Complicated Cases'**

International adoptions take place in a context marked by global socio-political and economic inequalities in which children from poorer countries are transferred to Western nation-states and families (Briggs and Marre 2009; Quiroz 2007). Although the system is defined by international regulations and treaties as aimed at protecting children's rights and exploitation, this circulation of children is partly defined as a 'market' (Marre 2009; Yngvesson 2012). In this market there are more or less desirable children for adoption and parents' who have more 'parenting capital' to exercise choice in the system. Younger and healthy children are the most demanded and 'precious' choice and heterosexual married couples who are unable to bear biological children the more privileged recipients. Yet, in this system, single-parents are sometimes considered the more suitable candidates for particular types of children. Some of these matches are imposed by existing legislation in Spain and the country of origin but others are simply the result of conventional practices in the country of origin and Spain.

Furthermore, these normative principles are seen as changing periodically and used by each country to regulate the circulation of their available children:

*Esmeralda:* In the Philippines right now single-parents can't present requests (...) but let me confirm that now. Because the rules change from time to time, I don't know if this year it has changed because there was moratorium in relation to age. Wait, yes, single-parent can present requests, but for older children.

*Interviewer:* Ah, older children.

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*Esmeralda:* Yes, or children in the list of special needs children. It changes. Normally when countries put out new rules, it is usually to restrict single-parents (...) and in Vietnam single-parents can adopt and everything. In China ‘green passage’<sup>2</sup>, single-parents can’t adopt, unless your case was already registered in China and they change the procedure to a year in ‘green passage’ (...) [Esmeralda, Psychologist, Collaborating Agency]

As the extract shows, single-parenthood status plays a variable role and through time may be admitted or not in international adoption procedures – while, for example, countries tend to have much more explicit and stable policies in relation to prohibiting adoptions by homosexual adults (whether single or as a couple). These constraints have an effect on how professionals construe single-parent adopters and the children who could result in better matches with them. On one hand, older children seem to be easier assignments for single mothers. This is partly the direct consequence of normative arrangements, as there is a professional expectation that the age difference between the child and the parent should not be more than 40 years - thus older women (the ‘usual circumstance’ in single-mothers) are assigned older children. However, some professionals also consider that age is used by the administrators in the countries of origin of the child to discourage single-parent candidates. On the other hand, willingness to accept health problems seems to be construed as a factor that might facilitate the process (or, basically, make it possible) for single-parents and help move forward through the multiple obstacles that are seen as part of the adoption process. Yet, the motivation behind this acceptance of health problems raises a number of tensions between the various professionals who work in the Spanish international adoption system. The following lengthy extract captures some of these complexities. Juana, a social worker who works in suitability assessments, critically examines the role of other professionals and stages of the adoption process in creating misguided expectations for single-parents:

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Of course, 'green passage'. Then, the ECAIs must say "put such and such in the report, of the handicaps you would accept". Then they come and tell you "cleft lip". But cleft lip is something that has a range of degrees; there are cleft lips that are nothing. So then when you want that, you are thinking that it won't be anything, right?, that "well, maybe it's missing a finger", "but look, you know what the problem is?, here it says lack of extremities, higher or lower, they can give you a child without a hand". So, they start thinking (...) in the end I feel like saying "Let's see in 'green passage', there aren't kids with dandruff", I mean, its other things ((laughter)). So they just try to 'beat around the bush', they had been told that no... like that the ECAI could, somehow, of what was given they could filter and offer you what you want (...) ((laughter)). So then you go to the regional government and say "one of the things that 'green passage' is supposed to have is that there is no age range and you get it done in four months". So then I call the regional government, they are getting very stubborn with the age range thing in the regional government, so I talk with a social worker: "look, I have a 48 year old single-parent who is going through 'green passage'". The first thing you receive from the other side is "she's crazy", so "ok, well, if you want, we can talk some other time". I mean, like let's see, girl, you are supposed to be a professional from the Madrid regional government, so save your judgments, we talk about the case and then (...) but, come on, "she's crazy" is not a professional assessment of a technician in the regional government of Madrid. Just because I'm telling you I have a 48-year old that will go 'green passage'. It's like, what's the matter? But then they go on and say "if they are not accepting marriages of that age, well she can't not go", and then they say "well, let me check with the lawyers", and the next day they call and say "well, yes, she can go" ((laughs)). [Juana, Social Worker, Suitability Assessment]

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To recapitulate, once single-parents have passed the suitability assessment they move on to the next step in the adoption process and begin the administrative procedures with the country of origin. During this part of the process, psychologists and social workers who work for ECAIs are their main interlocutors and, in this context, single-parenthood is framed in different terms. All parents have already completed (successfully) the ‘suitability assessment’, thus the more inquisitorial stance of psycho-social professionals seems to dissipate.

Collaborating agencies seek to move on successfully adoption candidates since, among other things, they are financially supported by candidate parents and new adoptive parents will solicit their services based on their perceived track-record. Under these conditions, while single-parenthood was previously construed as an index of certain psycho-social handicaps it is now tied to a particular niche of adoptable children. This discursive transformation is intertwined with a number of contradictions we return to in the conclusions. Before this we discuss the last strand of discourses on single-parenthood that we have identified in our data. These are produced from a particular perspective in the international adoption system that allows for a much more global view of the process.

#### **‘De-problematizing’ Single-Parenthood and International Adoptions**

A small fraction of the participants in this part of the study were professionals who worked inside or in close contact with governmental authorities and had access to the different parts of the adoption process in Spain<sup>3</sup>. Governmental agencies may opt to outsource some of their tasks but are ultimately responsible for supervising all aspects of the adoption process.

Therefore, directly or indirectly, they have access to initial suitability assessments, to the designation at the country of origin and to the various post-adoption follow-ups that are required by Spanish and international legislation. From this perspective, it would seem that some professionals are in a better position to make ‘informed judgments’ about the role of

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single-parenthood in adoptive families - informed in the sense that various pieces of evidence from different aspects of the process can be taken into consideration. Our findings suggest that, indeed, this is the case and professionals (at least, the few we have interviewed) who work directly within public authorities have a more nuanced view of single-parenthood and family dynamics. This more elaborate assessment of single-parenthood is also present in professionals who have an extensive and varied professional trajectory in the field of adoptions (e.g. have done suitability assessments, collaborated in adoptions, done post-adoption activities, have been involved in professional training, etc.). For these professionals, distinctions among families are established in other terms and gender roles and identities are unpacked differently. In relation to what makes for relevant differences between adoptive families, the rationale is completely different:

*Interviewer:* Have you seen differences? In the follow-up, do you see differences depending on the type of families, depending on the type of experiences, single-parents to other families or?

*Jorge Manuel:* I initially, in the single-parent families to couples division, I do not see big differences. I see no major differences.

*Interviewer:* So where would you do the division? For example, with regard to different aspects, for example, I don't know, in adaptive capacity, on how they face the adaptation of the child and all of this?

*Jorge Manuel:* I would make the cut more on a matter of skills and ability to assimilate the strange, the foreign, the alien, the ability to manage conflict, openness, flexibility, I would make the distinction over this (...) anyhow, one sees what one is trying to see, so there is, (...) for example assuming that adoptive paternity or maternity is the same in terms of functions and responsibilities, but we have to assume

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the existential rupture for the child and the family that was involved in going so far away to find, let's say a son, outside what is statistically normal which is this culture and society (...) Then, that break that is to know the truth, to know how to transmit it to the child naturally, clearly, so let's say to start, she/he is different from most of her/his classmates, and to take into account the racial and cultural particularities. Families who are able to address this without fear, generate healthier children, more integrated and better than 'negating' families who send a message that adoptive status is something terrible, that it is better not to speak about it because their history is terrible, and that difference is not managed because it's denied, then, the difference I would make around more 'negating' families (...) [Jorge Manuel, Psychologist, Child Protection Administration]

In other words, it is possible to find discourses among active professionals where single-parenthood is not highlighted as the relevant dimension 'per se' and other elements in family dynamics are taken into consideration. Yet this analysis only emerges among actors who occupy a privileged position -in terms of the view that it permits- within the adoption system. More generally, the fact that professional discourses on single-parenthood and adoption are configured by the roles psychologists and social worker occupy in the system underscores some of the inherent contradictions that configure this social field.

### **Conclusions**

Psychologists and social workers who are part of the international adoption system in Spain participate in a process configured by a number of issues about which there is no consensus. These tensions emerge more clearly when actors in the process do not meet 'received expectations' in relation to their legitimate involvement in an adoption. These expectations circulate both about 'adoptable children' and 'adoptive parents'. In this paper we have not

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examined how adoptable children are defined (see Briggs and Marre 2009; Ouellette 1996) and, rather, have focused on how certain types of ‘candidate parents’ are discursively construed. In this context, single-parenthood seems to be a particularly good category to scrutinize some of the tensions that configure professional work in the field of adoption. The data suggest that single-parent families, as one family type among the diversity of families in post-industrialized contexts (e.g. re-constituted families, non-marital relationships, homosexual parental families, etc.), seem to be an especially volatile category within the international adoption system. Whereas both Spanish and international legislation might have much more clear and explicit regulations for other family compositions (e.g. several countries simply prohibit homosexual adults from adopting children or do not recognize homosexual couples as legitimate spouses), single-parent candidates are ambiguously treated in Spanish regulations and in different countries. This is the terrain in which professionals have to work, thus their discourses on single-parenthood also provide a window to these tensions. We suggest that at least two important tensions are made visible through professional discourses around single-parenthood. These emerge in the attempt to meet the demands of principles that stand in opposition to each other or may even be relatively incompatible and, thus, cannot be legitimately met simultaneously.

First, as advanced in the introduction, there is the dilemma faced by childhood/developmental experts between acting within the parameters of scientific knowledge and evidence or of doing moral advocacy in relation to children and families (LeVine 2004). The professionals we have interviewed largely present a portrait of single-parenthood as a problematic choice and less desirable option for placement in relation to other choices (ideally, heterosexual couples who cannot bear biological children). However, unlike some of the literature produced within judicial sciences in Spanish (e.g. Adroher 2007; cf. Herrera and Spaventa 2004), psychologists and social workers seem to shy away from formulating their views on

the family on purely socio-ideological grounds. Rather, they present their arguments in the context of their professional training and professional experience -as the legitimate experts (cf. Giddens 1994) in this field- and it is through this rhetoric where particular representations about single-motherhood are produced. In other words, they reproduce and endorse the technical, professional and discursive standing of the psy-professions in the regulation of family life that Rose (1999) has critically examined and Howell (2006b) or Oullette (1996) have shown also play a central role in the field of adoption. However, in contrast to Howell (2006b), as our analysis has focused primarily on one particular stage of the adoption process (initial suitability assessments and pre-adoption work), the professional discourses we have identified do not put their focus on adopted/adoptable children. Representations of children are subsumed under the ambiguities of the 'best interest standard' and attention is directed towards particular ways of representing single-mother candidates.

Second, there are conflicting 'interests' guiding decision-making in adoption processes. On one hand, legislation, policy and professional guidelines are explicitly geared towards promoting and protecting the 'best interest of the child' and it is with this argument that single-parenthood is construed in problematic terms. On the other hand, the practical reality of international adoptions is that the circulation of adoptive children (partially) operates as a market guided by principles of supply, demand and geo-political inequalities (Quiroz 2007; Briggs and Marre 2009; Leinaweaver and Seligmann 2009). In this context, single-parenthood plays an ambivalent position in which sometimes access to adoption is shut down and, in other occasions, is geared towards the lesser 'demanded' children in the adoption system. It is in this later confluence of practices where one of the major contradictions around how single-parenthood is construed in international adoptions emerges: while single-parents' are considered less adequate family models they are assigned the most 'complex' cases for adoption (complex as defined by the literature that reviews risk-factors associated with

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truncated adoptions, e.g. Berástegui 2003; Livingstone and Howard 1991). In other words, the actual practices in the countries of origin that determine child placement relegate ‘the best interest of child’ (as defined by professional discourses) in favor of other considerations. Other critical works have made explicit this paradox (Herrera and Spaventa 2004; Fine 2000) but the psychologists and social workers we have interviewed, perhaps because it questions the heart of their very own practices, fall short of overtly stating it.

**Notes**

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1. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. Here we only show the translation into English. All names are pseudonyms and of each participant we provide their disciplinary background and professional role in the system. To protect the anonymity of participants we do not provide further details on the particular agencies or regions they work in – as doing so would facilitate identifying participants.
2. ‘Green Passage’ (*Pasaje Verde*) refers to the special program organized by the Chinese Government to facilitate and expedite the international adoption of children with various important health and educational special needs.
3. As shown in Table 1 one participant currently worked inside the administration but another four had extensive professional experience in different roles in the adoption system (including previous work in the administration) or were currently involved in their professional supervisory boards.

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**Figure 1: The International Adoption Process in Spain**

	<b>Step in the procedure</b>	<b>Institution / Agency involved</b>
1	First informative meeting	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
2	Request for a 'suitability assessment'	
3	Parenting workshop	
	Parents choose a country for adoption	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
4	Psycho-social assessment	TIPAI OUT-SOURCED AGENCY
5	Suitability certificate is issued	
6	Filing with the country of origin begins: Parents may choose using a 'collaborating agency' or the 'public child protection authority'	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY ECAI
7	Pre-assignment of a child	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AUTHORITIES
8	Approval by Spanish authorities	CHILD PROTECTION AUTHORITY
9	Preparation of the trip to country of origin	ECAI CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY
	Trip(s) to country of origin	
10	Adoption in country of origin	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN AUTHORITIES
11	Legal recognition of adoption by Spanish authorities	SPANISH CONSULATE SPANISH CIVIL REGISTRY
12	Mandatory follow-up assessment(s)	CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY TIPAI OUT-SOURCED AGENCY
13	Voluntary post-adoption activities	ECAI PARENTAL ASSOCIATIONS POST-ADOPTION CONSULTANTS

**Table 1: Participant's Profile and Current Role in the International Adoption System**

<i>Profile / Role in the system (N)</i>	<i>Governmental Agency</i>	<i>Suitability Assessment</i>	<i>Collaborating agencies / Post-adoption consulting</i>	<i>Total</i>
Psychology	1	8	10	19
Social Work		6	3	9
<b>Total</b>	1	14	13	28