

The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats: The Making of the Healthy White Baby Crisis.

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The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats: The Making of the "Healthy White Baby Crisis"

Ana Teresa Ortiz, Laura Briggs

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The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats

Ana Teresa Ortiz and Laura Briggs

In 2002, a researcher looking for endocrine markers of early childhood stress and trauma compared two groups: postinstitutionalized children adopted from Romania by U.S. families, and post-foster care children adopted by U.S. families. By virtually any measure—age at adoption, aggressiveness toward peers and family, trouble getting along with other children, school problems, delinquency—these two groups of children offered the same (considerable) behavioral and emotional challenges to their adoptive families. (In an unexpected note of grace, despite their serious struggles, a very high percentage of adoptive parents—84 percent—reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their adoptive children.)¹ Finding these children so similar in so many dimensions raises a question: why did Americans rush to Romania in 1991 (2,594 State Department visas were issued for Romanian "orphans" that year, and only 100 each in 1990 and 1992)² to adopt deeply troubled kids at considerable expense to the mselves and with very little formal support for raising them, when they could have adopted substantially similar children in the United States, with institutionalized support and government subsidy? While the motives of adoptive parents are as heterogeneous as the children they adopt, this pattern suggests that something, culturally, was at work that steered people away from U.S. kids in foster care. In this light, legal scholar Richard Posner's paradigm of low price increasing demand for difficult-to-place U.S. children is clearly inadequate; something far more complex than money was at stake.³ (Patricia Williams cynically called Posner's the "old children, cheap" model.)⁴ In 1991, at the height of the Romanian adoption boom, many suggested that the answer was crudely race, as these were presumptively white children being adopted from Romania.⁵ Yet the considerable numbers of white children in U.S. foster care (nearly 40 percent) gives the lie to this as a motive in any straightforward way.⁶ Either a lot of would-be adoptive parents were behaving in an extremely irrational way—spending upward of \$10,000, \$20,000, even \$30,000, traveling halfway across the world, and negotiating difficult visa problems in a language few of them knew to adopt children who were as old, as traumatized, of the same race, and as sick as children that they could adopt in the United States with more information about their past, free access to health care and mental health [End Page 39] care for their children, and non-need-based subsidies of upward of \$600 a month—or adoption decisions respond to different pressures than are usually articulated.

We read this apparently inexplicable difference in approach to Romanian children and children in the domestic foster care system as what anthropologist Sally Falk Moore terms a "diagnostic event." By this she means those moments of powerful contradiction that lay bare cultural logics, identify the diverse stakeholders in social conflicts, and reveal the genealogies of ideas linking institutions.⁷ Not all adoption is like the Romanian context; it is a very different set of practices in diverse places. This particular time and place draw some of the contradictions most starkly, however, leading us to ask whether they inform us about important logics of childhood. We are not interested so much in the motives of individual adoptive parents—good, bad, or indifferent—but in looking at the kinds of knowledges, beliefs, and institutional and state practices that made their decisions seem natural and inevitable, that structured what potential adopters were likely to know, believe, and not know, and that may have led individuals to think that adopting U.S. children in the foster care system was far more difficult than it, in fact, is. The conundrum of Romanian adoption in 1991 lays bare a genealogy of the racialization and biologization of poverty through a...

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THE MAKING OF THE "HEALTHY WHITE BABY CRISIS"

Ana Teresa Ortiz
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