

EurAdopt and ICAR: a wealth of knowledge at two leading adoption conferences

In 2026, as every two years, the two leading international conferences on intercountry adoption took place: The International Conference on Adoption Research (ICAR9), where the latest scientific insights are shared, and the EurAdopt conference, which focuses on policy and practice. An wealth of knowledge and insights, some of which I would like to share here.

ICAR

ICAR and EurAdopt are very different conferences. ICAR was established to bring together researchers from a wide range of scientific fields who are involved in research into intercountry adoption. They present their research, exchange experiences and get to know each other better.

Last July, the University of Porto organised ICAR9. Around 240 participants came together for more than three days to listen to around 220 presentations. The mornings started with overview presentations on particular themes. These were followed by a flood of short, 10-minute presentations in which researchers shared the latest research findings and experiences. Full of information, satisfied and thoroughly exhausted, we returned from ICAR9.

EurAdopt

The EurAdopt conference has a different approach. It is organised by EurAdopt members, European adoption organisations committed to ethically responsible adoption practice. Despite the major challenges adoption organisations currently face, an impressive conference was organised in Malta this year, with more than 100 participants.

The programme was built around three main themes: the experiences of adult adoptees, research, and policy and practice. Workshops presented practical applications of post-adoption support in smaller groups. Examples included a Finnish system where adoptees can receive lifelong post-adoption support, Swedish 'roots' trips, a Belgian buddy programme for adoptees, and a Dutch support system for searching roots via INEA.

What stood out?

First of all, the trend of an increasing number of adult adoptees attending, both as participants and as presenters, is continuing. And whereas this may have sometimes felt a little uncomfortable in the past, I have the impression that a shift is now taking place, with everyone working towards the same goal: the best possible life for the adoptee. We're all pulling in the same direction.

There is also increasing attention to issues that have become visible precisely through the experiences of adoptees. Identity is an important example, but so are the concrete experiences of how loss, deprivation and adoption can have a lifelong impact. At both ICAR and EurAdopt, adoptees called for adoption decisions to consider not only the best interests of the child, but also the interests of the future adult. Attention was also drawn to the importance of considering the consequences for future generations.

With all the attention currently being given to identity, adoptees' experiences and abuses in past adoptions, the restorative effect of adoption sometimes seems almost to be overlooked. That is why it was valuable that both conferences included an overview of the consequences of the deprivation

many children experienced before adoption, often in children's homes, and how these experiences can continue to affect them later in life.

At both conferences, Jesús Palacios, one of the leading researchers in this field, presented how knowledge about the effects of the period before adoption, adoption itself and life after adoption has developed. He described how, in the beginning, we knew nothing; how knowledge grew about the extent to which children's homes and deprivation in early childhood could cause harm; and how much recovery is possible within adoptive families. He also emphasised how much adopted children can differ in their backgrounds, the nature and duration of the deprivation they have experienced, and their opportunities after adoption. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

After so many years of research and experience, there is scientific agreement on the broad outlines, and the focus is shifting towards the nuances. For example, researchers are now looking at where the effects of deprivation are biologically embedded, making recovery difficult even in a stable and loving upbringing. Furthermore, some effects of early childhood deprivation only become apparent after puberty. We can also see that the effects of later life experiences, such as those related to identity, are gradually taking on an increasingly important role.

Identity was not a major theme in research for a long time, because the focus was mainly on children's development. As one of the presenters put it: *"When you look at recovery in children's development after adoption, you look at the individual. But the child's earlier context – the fact that they came from their own setting, with their family, culture and ethnic background – only received attention much later."*

'Lived experiences'

The session at ICAR in which several adoptees shared their personal experiences was deeply moving. Alicia Desrochers spent her first fourteen months in one of Ceaușescu's horribly neglectful children's homes in Romania before being adopted. She brought the deprivation and recovery associated with such a home to life through her personal story and images. She spoke of her developmental delays and her shame about what had happened to her. Later, she came to realise that her life story was not only one of loss, but also of exceptional resilience: *"I am a survivor"*. With the support of her adoptive parents, she managed to build a life for herself and now works as a social worker. Alongside the grief of loss, she also stated that *"being an adopted person also means being an incredible survivor, someone who deserves to be heard and celebrated"*. That message, she said, is one she is keen to share with other adoptees.

Lifelong

A recurring theme at both conferences was that separation and adoption have lifelong consequences. That is why lifelong support is needed. This also raised the issue that the decline and phasing out of adoption, with the loss of adoption organisations and the knowledge they possess about the circumstances, backgrounds and documentation of the periods in which adoptions took place, can be a major loss for adoptees. Jaqueline Long told how she learnt that her adoption organisation was to close down. For her and her brother, this organisation had always been a place that, through its knowledge and activities, provided a firm foundation and something to hold on to. The prospect of this support disappearing gave her a deep sense of loss and uncertainty. To ensure lifelong post-adoption support, the necessary expertise must also be preserved, and reliable infrastructure must remain available for, for example, access to adoption records.

Identity

Within the theme of identity, I found the development of the Adoption Consciousness Model (ACM), particularly interesting. This model, developed together with adoptees, describes how adoptees can move through different 'milestones' or stages when confronted with significant experiences relating to their adoption.

The model begins with a situation of relative calm or contentment: the '**status quo**'. A '**rupture**' can occur following a significant event, such as experiencing loss or discrimination, being confronted with potential abuses, or the loss of an adoption organisation that you trusted. Such a rupture can lead to '**dissonance**': the feeling that your own life story no longer makes sense or does not adequately explain what you are experiencing. This can lead to '**expansiveness**', in which broader perspectives emerge and you can rediscover yourself. This can lead to '**agency**' – a sense of being in control of your own life and being able to act on it. What I find particularly valuable about the model is that it does not follow a straight line from one stage to the next, but works more like a spiral: in relation to different issues, you can be at different points in the process. David Asplund extended the concept to society. He showed how the Swedish research report into irregularities in past adoptions has acted as a kind of 'rupture' for society. Satwinder Sandhu showed how the model can be valuable for support services and policy-making, as it helps to better understand adoptees' responses and place them in context.

During the EurAdopt conference, Lynette Long and Tam Kane used images to explore the theme of identity. Lynette Long described how, during her teenage years, she felt as though she had a "*face that told a story that nobody understood, successful on the outside, silent on the inside*". She also emphasised the lifelong nature of adoption as an issue.

Tam Kane also sought to convey to the audience what it feels like to be 'different'. She recounted a Zimbabwean story in which a baboon rescues a young hare, takes him in and teaches him how to survive in the jungle – as a baboon. Later, the hare says, "*but you never asked me: 'who are you?'*". Through this story, she made it clear how important it is for children to have their own background and identity recognised as well. With this in mind, Tam Kane, together with other adoptees, developed the AFDIT model. This model supports the matching of children with a different ethnic background by assessing, on the one hand, the needs of the child and, on the other, the awareness, empathy, willingness and skills of prospective adoptive parents to make room for the identity of their future child.

Vulnerability of LGBTQ+ adoptive parents

For years, Abby Goldberg has been studying the development of children raised by same-sex adoptive parents, comparing their outcomes with those of children raised by different-sex couples. In her keynote lecture at ICAR, she presented a different perspective: how the stigma surrounding LGBTQ+ couples during the adoption process can lead to critical social workers asking intrusive, boundary-crossing questions and to the placement of children with more severe and complex needs.

After placement, these families are more vulnerable to having their children removed from the home, as reports to child protective services are made more readily. This is despite the fact that her studies showed that adopted children raised by these parents have outcomes comparable to those raised by different-sex parents.

Mothers in Taiwan

Birth parents and birth families were also discussed at both conferences. For me, the most innovative story was that of Yenchi Ting and Zoe Pai, social workers and post-adoption support coordinator at Cathwel, a children's home in Taiwan from which many intercountry adoptions take place. At the EurAdopt conference, they explained how they support mothers who are considering relinquishing their child for adoption. First and foremost, they try to keep the child within the family. If that is not possible, they support the mothers through the process of saying goodbye, through their grief, and in maintaining contact with their child and the adoptive family. They also support the mothers when their child later tries to make contact with them, as reunion can reopen old wounds, both before and after contact takes place. Mothers can, for example, take English lessons, participate in peer support groups and receive help in understanding and processing their trauma. A unique example of lifelong post-adoption support in a country of origin.

Next generation

Holly Grant-Marsney showed from her own experience how complicated a separation history containing painful elements can be. She called this 'the shadow story alongside the fairy tale'. Adoptive parents are the first to be faced with the difficult question of whether, when and how to share such information with their child. When the adoptee later has children of their own, they face the same dilemma: do you place the burden of the shadow story on the child, or do you carry the secret? And if you decide to share the story, how do you do so? Her story illustrates how the consequences of separation and adoption can extend into the next generation.

Policy and ethics

Policy, ethics and abuses in intercountry adoption were also discussed at both conferences. For instance, adoptees spoke about the barriers they encountered when searching for information in their country of origin, both practical and emotional. Laura Leinaweaver showed how complicated it can be to do justice. Using the example of an unlegalised but reliable relinquishment statement from a biological father, she showed how legal rules do not always serve the best interests of the adoptee.

Critical questions were also raised about government investigations into past abuses in the adoption system. David Asplund expressed his concerns about the way conclusions from the Swedish research are sometimes drawn. He notes that nuance is often lacking because the focus is purely on abuses. As a result, anything that deviates from the norm can quickly be defined as abuse. In addition, far-reaching conclusions are sometimes drawn from limited factual information (inductive reasoning).

In my presentation, I raised similar concerns about the Dutch investigation on past abuses. I presented a framework of questions that can help to carefully assess information relating to separation and adoption - which at first glance may appear incorrect or incomplete - before it is classified as a case of abuse. The framework includes questions like: do our standards always and everywhere apply, or is there room for different standards in other cultures and periods? And what role can scientific knowledge play in answering these questions? How well established is the knowledge from the various perspectives? Such questions are important because research shows that adoptees who are confronted with potential abuses are, on average, less satisfied with their adoption and with their lives.

Kristien Wouters from Steunpunt Adoptie and Ariane van den Berghe from the Central Authority in Flanders presented the personal approach developed by the Flemish government for adoptees,

adoptive parents and birth parents who have concerns about the adoption record. They can report their concerns, have their voices heard, after which an independent organisation can carry out an investigation. In addition, psychosocial support is available.

Looking back

Looking back on these conferences, what stands out most to me are the committed and passionate participants. It is also clear that the declining numbers of intercountry adoptions do not mean that these conferences are losing their significance. Quite the opposite. The questions are changing, new insights are emerging, and the need for knowledge and exchange remains strong.

It is becoming increasingly clear that separation and adoption are not events that only affect adoptees during childhood. They can play a role throughout a person's life, not only for adoptees themselves, but also for their families, their children and potentially for future generations as well. And there is still much to learn about this.