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Article *in* Disparidades Revista de Antropología · December 2023

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Disparidades. Revista de Antropología
78(2), julio-diciembre 2023, e021
eISSN: 2659-6881
https://doi.org/10.3989/dra.2023.021

ARTICLES

PERFECT STRANGERS: SEARCHES AND REUNIONS BETWEEN ADULT ADOPTEES AND THEIR BIRTH SIBLINGS IN CHILE, ARGENTINA AND SPAIN

PERFECTOS (DES)CONOCIDOS: BÚSQUEDAS Y ENCUENTROS ENTRE ADULTOS ADOPTADOS Y SUS HERMANOS/AS DE ORIGEN EN CHILE, ARGENTINA Y ESPAÑA*

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Recibido: 09 de febrero de 2022; Aprobado: 07 de noviembre de 2022

Cómo citar este artículo / Citation: Salvo Agoglia, Irene, Soledad Gesteira y Chandra Kala Clemente-Martínez. 2023. «Perfect strangers: searches and reunions between adult adoptees and their birth siblings in Chile, Argentina and Spain». *Disparidades. Revista de Antropología* 78(2): e021. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3989/dra.2023.021>.

ABSTRACT: Social research shows that, for many people, sibling relations have a prime role in their life. However, in the field of interdisciplinary studies on adoption, particularly at the Ibero-American level, these relationships have been little explored. In the framework of a multi-sited comparative study, this article examines the experiences of a group of Chilean, Argentine and Spanish adopted adult people who sought and found their birth siblings. Using the field material obtained, we analyse the complexity of the dynamics and affects involved in these meetings and their impact on the construction of identity and kinship relations against a background of deep and structural social, economic and cultural inequalities. We discuss how our findings can contribute to understanding searches for origins and outline various challenges for adoption policies and practices as well as avenues for future research in this field.

* This work was supported by the FONDECYT/ANID Project No. 11200491; UBACyT Project 20020170100527BA; BP-2021 (2021 BP 00104), AGAUR and Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation under Grant PID2020-112692RB-C21/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

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KEYWORDS: Adoption; Searches for origins; Siblings; Identity; Relations.

RESUMEN: La investigación social muestra que las relaciones de parentesco entre hermanos/as son primordiales en la vida de muchas personas. Sin embargo, en el campo de estudios interdisciplinarios sobre adopción, especialmente en el ámbito iberoamericano, se ha explorado escasamente estas relaciones. En el marco de un estudio multi-situado y comparativo, en este artículo examinamos las experiencias de un grupo de personas adultas adoptadas chilenas, argentinas y españolas que buscaron y encontraron a sus hermanos/as de origen. A la luz del material de campo realizado, analizamos la complejidad de las dinámicas y afectos involucrados en estos encuentros y su impacto en los procesos de construcción de identidad y de las relaciones de parentesco, teniendo como trasfondo profundas inequidades sociales, económicas y culturales de carácter estructural. Discutimos cómo nuestros hallazgos pueden aportar a la comprensión de los procesos de búsqueda de orígenes y proyectamos diversos desafíos en las políticas y prácticas adoptivas, así como también en los futuros estudios sobre el tema.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Adopción; Búsquedas de orígenes; Hermanos; Identidad; Relaciones.

1. INTRODUCTION

The social sciences have become increasingly interested in sibling relationships as one of the main relationships of social life and basic to kinship (Alber *et al.* 2013; Edwards 2013). The concept of sibling encompasses a wide variety of relationships in terms of the degree of relatedness, shared upbringing, contact and legal status (Elgar and Head 1999). Moreover, despite being extremely complex and variable, sibling relationships tend to be very significant and enduring (Butcher and Upright 2018). In adoption research, the remarkable primacy of the study of vertical family relationships, focusing on the adoption triad, as compared to horizontal relationships, overlooks significant figures and relationships in the life story of adopted people. Historically, in a context of full and closed adoptions, shrouded in secrecy, many birth siblings grew up apart and often even unaware of the other's existence. In particular, research on post-adoption contact has focused mainly on adopted peoples' reunion and post-reunion experiences with their birth mother, with both birth parents or with birth relatives in general. Little attention has been paid to the significance of establishing or maintaining contact between siblings who may never have lived together, know each other only superficially or may not even be aware of the other's existence. It is, therefore, essential to examine the experiences of adults who search for a "lost" birth sibling (Ludvigsen and Parnham 2004). More recently, some research has begun to address the matter of siblings separated by adoption (O'Neill *et al.* 2014, 2017). However, there has been little work on searches for origins and reunions related to domestic adoptions in countries of the global South or international adoptions between countries of the North and the South, even though such searches have increased vertiginously over the past decade.

In this article, we analyse the results of a multi-sited comparative international project, carried out in Chile, Argentina and Spain, about searches for origins in adoption. All three countries share a long tradition of adoptions characterised by secrecy, taboos and irregular practices (Gesteira *et al.* 2021; Marre and Gaggiotti 2021). However, given the global movement towards openness in adoption, particularly in the past decade, in these three countries, the number of adult adoptees searching for their birth relatives, especially birth mothers and birth siblings, is increasing every year. In addition, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), these countries are strengthening their adoption policies and practices in a bid to maintain the bond between birth siblings. In particular, this article uses an interdisciplinary analytical lens to examine both the diverse paths that birth sibling relationships take in processes of searching for origins and the plasticity with which the participants signify and (re)assemble these relationships after experiences of meeting. The article begins with a brief theoretical overview of notions of sibling kinship relationships and identity and a review of the literature on searches for origins and reunions with birth siblings. The

results are then presented to show the emotional dynamics and liminalities of these processes and provide a broader view of the relationships that are significant for adopted people in the process of identity construction.

2. KINSHIP, IDENTITY AND ADOPTION

Anthropology has always been particularly interested in understanding kinship systems and the relations that are established. The centrality of kinship is reflected in continuous production on the subject starting with the early anthropologists. In the early 1970s, however, new critical perspectives on the discipline and some of its concepts emerged, beginning to move away from the organisational aspects of the kinship system and becoming interested in kinship as a system of symbols and meanings. Critical voices emphasised the need to contextually analyse the values and symbols associated with family and kinship relations and how people articulate and engage in everyday relationships (Carsten 2000a). Anthropologists were the first to be interested in how social connections (and kinship) are constructed through substances and practices that create "relatedness" (Carsten 2011). The importance given to relationships with "blood" relatives and, especially, birth siblings must be understood in the light of our Euro-American model of kinship where kin relations have often been thought of as based on biological connections created through sex and birth or conception and childbirth. In addition, this model promotes exclusive filiation, that is to say, it establishes that an individual can belong to only one parental group. However, although kinship takes into account conception and procreation as biological determinants, it is an essentially social fact, subject to manipulation and choices of a symbolic order (Zonabend 1986). Kinship is also a transpersonal relationship anchored in the "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2013) and a reflexive system since the subjects reflexively inhabit networks of dynamic relationships that are maintained and transformed (Ball 2018).

In turn, identity is a complex polysemantic notion that has been conceptualised and problematised by different authors and disciplines (e.g., Giddens 1991; Hall 2003; Strathern 1999). Following Giddens (1991: 54), "a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others [only], but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." The interrelation of notions such as memories, narratives, ruptures and connections illustrates how searches can be a mechanism to give logic to a particular biography. Strathern (1999) asserts that knowledge about one's birth is one of the foundations of a sense of identity. On the disclosure of biogenetic origins, she highlights three aspects: 1) the meaning that this type of knowledge has for personal identity; 2) that knowledge about kinship refers to an identity that is embedded in a context of relationships which are affected by information about origins; and 3) that different types of information are directly related, implying that one piece of information can automatically cancel out another previous piece of information (Strathern 1999). Having such "constitutive knowledge" (Carsten 2000b, 2007; Strathern 1999) is particularly important for the identitary work undertaken by adopted people whose biography contains "gaps" and, consequently, major discontinuities in their experience as persons.

Finally, adoption and other forms of third-party reproduction contest the biological notion of kinship and pose challenges to symbols such as birth or blood (Howell 2006; Marre and Briggs 2009). Adoption represents a privileged field from which to explore how kinship is produced through social practices and to explore cultural forms of the "social" and "biological" aspects of human lives. Adopted people simultaneously negotiate and reconcile belongingness in their adoptive and birth families, attributing features of their identity to their birth family (e.g., natural abilities, appearance and personality) as stemming from genetics. As a result, they may feel a within-group connection with birth family members even without forming relationships with them. Marre and Bestard (2009) show not only the importance of physical resemblance in connections between relatives and recognition of family identity, but also the difficulties of establishing continuity in aspects that separate adopted people from their birth family. These authors reflect on how family resemblances are linked to the relational aspect of kinship and to a way of building ties between people (Marre and Bestard 2009). In addition, adoption policies and practices are guided by a biogenetic model of kinship, based on consanguinity and exclusive filiation: each child "has only one mother and one father" and, therefore, cannot belong to two

families simultaneously (Howell 2009; Marre and Briggs 2009). This was reflected in the "clean break" principle, which referred to a complete rupture with birth relatives (Duncan 1993).

In recent decades, as ways of procreating and living as a family have diversified, giving rise to multiple interpretations, narratives and practices, the issue of origins has emerged or re-emerged in social and political debate. People who have been adopted sometimes embark on long searches for identity in a bid to answer the question about their origins, which may have been kept secret, denied or considered unimportant (Martial, Côté and Lavoie 2021). Searches for origins by adopted people raise the question of the status of relationships that have been "erased" and all the "forgotten" relationships (Théry 2009). Adopted people expect that more knowledge about their past will contribute positively to the formation of their identity by giving them a greater sense of who they are today (Carsten 2007). Moreover, the ways in which adopted people move among the positions available in the narrative space and time dimensions when creating their story exemplify the provisional, plastic and constantly changing nature of identity (Lindgren and Zetterqvist 2014).

3. THE PLACE OF BIRTH SIBLINGS IN ADOPTION: SEARCHES AND REUNIONS

Much of the scholarship in new kinship studies continues to focus on social parenting or marriage, while other relations within the "web of kinship" (Fortes 1949) have been neglected. The latter include the relationships established by brothers and sisters. Despite some classic kinship anthropological studies of siblingship, there has been neither continuity nor a unified body of work on this subject, resulting in scattered insights (Thelen, Coe and Alber 2013). While filiation binds individuals who descend from each other, siblings have no such ascending or descending tie, but rather horizontal roots (Bernart and Buralli 2006). According to Segalen (2013), ties between siblings are characterised by their ambiguous nature, involving affinity and, therefore, a tie that is close to friendship, but also implying obligations. Furthermore, sibling relationships are characterised by inequalities and rivalry, and conflicts are common. According to Sanders (2002): «the rules for conducting a sibling relationship have never been established; ambivalence is its keynote, and instability its underlying condition». For Carsten (2013), sibling relationships may be simultaneously close/distant, similar/distinct, equal/hierarchical and reciprocal/competitive, highlights the importance of memory, continuity and intergenerational obligation in shaping them. This complexity also reflects the simultaneous construction of relations between siblings as equal or similar (children of the same parents) and different (due to their differences in birth order, age and gender) (Thelen, Coe and Alber 2013). This makes siblingship an extremely fertile field for examining how meaningful relations are generated and maintained in various contexts.

Exploring siblingship within the field of adoption provides an opportunity to better understand how relatedness is created, maintained and fractured over the life trajectory of an adopted person (Meakings *et al.* 2017; Thelen, Coe and Alber 2013). Recently, a growing interest in this figure has revealed the particularity of the relationships established between siblings who seek and find each other. Some studies report that the first person sought by many adults who were adopted is their birth mother (Müller *et al.* 2003) and that, after meeting her (or not), they go on to meet their birth siblings. Pavlovic and Mullender (1999) found a high level of anger and feelings of injustice among birth siblings, related to the "loss" they had experienced and their search to "gain" contact. For Volkman (2009), the search for siblings is more practically and emotionally straightforward and apparently, a happier, more optimistic and less tragic experience than searching for birth mothers. The excitement of searching for and perhaps finding siblings must be understood in the light of cultural concerns about genetics and biology as well as roots and identity (Volkman 2009). Some studies have found that adopted people feel closer to their birth siblings than their birth mothers (Müller *et al.* 2003; Sachdev 1992), are less intimidated by them (Berge *et al.* 2006) and that feelings of anger, loss and rejection are less likely since siblings bear no responsibility for either the conception or the adoption (Berge *et al.* 2006; Gediman and Brown 1989; Trinder *et al.* 2004). However, meetings with birth siblings are also fraught with ambivalence and tension (O'Neill *et al.* 2017). The literature has also examined the emotional journey of search, contact and reunion with birth siblings in adolescence or adult life and the reactions of a sibling to the arrival of an adopted person, which changes the family structure and relational dynamics in profound

and irreversible ways (Thompson 2009). Developing and maintaining relationships with birth siblings is complex, particularly because they usually meet as "strangers" in adulthood (Ottaway 2012). In the study of Ludvigsen and Parnham (2004), most birth siblings described emotions such as excitement, apprehension, nervousness, impatience, optimism, anxiety and sadness–often simultaneously. Other studies have found that, after meeting, most participants remained in contact with their birth siblings, often for several years, and that the relationship was considered positive (O'Neill *et al.* 2014).

4. METHODOLOGY

This article is based on qualitative and ethnographic multi-sited research. The specificity of anthropological research lies neither in the "grounds" or "scenarios" in which it takes place nor in the type of skills applied. Instead, it consists of how they are used by the researcher, who has been trained with an anthropological focus, and applies them within the process of ethnographical research (Jociles 1999). Given the multi-sited nature of this study, it is important to bear in mind the similarities and differences between the countries involved in terms of their history, legal systems, kinship beliefs and practices. Data was collected in Chile (Santiago and Viña del Mar), Argentina (Buenos Aires), Spain (Barcelona) and Nepal. The fieldwork at each site was carried out by each of the authors of this article between 2016 and the time of writing this article. Participants were recruited through institutional and personal networks, social media and snowball sampling.

In Chile, the fieldwork took place between 2017 and 2021, interviewing 35 people (26 women and 9 men) who were adopted within the country between 1965 and 1996 and were aged between 21 and 53 at the time of the interview. They had conducted their search for origins when aged between 18 and 45. Thirty-three were adopted as babies and the other two when three years of age. Out of the various searchers who found information about their siblings in their adoption records, this article takes a subset of seven cases, in six of which reunions took place while, in the other, the birth mother prevented a meeting. Six participants met maternal half-siblings, who had been raised by the birth mother; they were all her first child and the only one given up for adoption. One participant was aware of a maternal half-sibling, also given up for adoption, but was unable to locate him.

In the Argentine case, ethnographic research was conducted with social organisations of people seeking their origins, including some adopted persons who had mostly been falsely registered with the Civil Registry as biological children, which constitutes a crime. The fieldwork took place between 2010 and 2016 and included observations at state agencies, trials and other activities as well as in-depth interviews with 40 mostly women activists between 30 and 60 years of age, who were searching for their origins. The absence of an adoption file meant that those who were falsely registered had little chance of success. However, the reunions that did take place showed the importance of the figure of the sibling as a very powerful tie that generates intense emotion. This prompted a research decision to focus on a subset of seven specific cases, analysing the characteristics of the reunion and, particularly, the figure of the birth sibling.

The Spanish-Nepalese case consisted of participant observation and interviews. The ethnographic fieldwork in Nepal took place mainly in the Kathmandu Valley but the return trips of adoptees were followed to other parts of the country. Thirty-five adopted people (21 women and 14 men), aged between 10 and 30, were interviewed. They had been adopted between birth and up to 13 years of age. Twenty-three had at least one adoptive or birth sibling, out of whom this article takes a subset of nine cases where there was some contact with a birth sibling. These interviewees were between 19 and 30 years of age. Some participants lived in the same autonomous community, permitting more frequent direct contact, while those living further apart tended to be in relatively frequent contact through social networks or travelled to the city where the birth sibling lived. All the birth siblings interviewed knew of the existence of the adopted person. The incorporation of the Nepalese case highlights the differences between cultures in how siblings are recognised and classified. In Nepal, "biological siblinghood" coexists with "social siblinghood", a relationship that does not stem from

the same biological parents and includes a variety of relationships such as cousins or friends, marking a socio-cultural difference with Spain.

In all the sites, the research involved qualitative interviews with questions that invited the interviewees to develop a story about the adoption process and, specifically, the search for their origins. The flexibility of the interview guidelines was conducive to the development of a narrative, composed of stories, examples, episodes and/or memories of various dimensions of the search process. The interviews, which lasted some two to three hours, were recorded and transcribed. The three authors of this article analysed the material from each site together, using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to systematically examine the meanings and stories. The transcripts were read and reread to identify the main thematic areas, a process shaped by the interaction between our research questions, our reading of the literature and the themes that were evident in the interviews. Consistent with a thematic analysis approach, we searched for themes and patterns across the entire dataset, discussing and refining the analysis until reaching a consensus. All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to confidentiality in strict adherence to the ethical principles of research involving human subjects. To ensure participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used and details of places and dates that could permit their identification are omitted.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Finding birth siblings: connections, estrangement and relocation in the kinship network

The idea of "laterality" (Segalen 2013), which is not exempt from tension and ambivalence, is useful for understanding what happens between birth siblings during and after reunion experiences, particularly as regards the construction of personal identity and kinship relationships. From the very first meeting, experiences and what they signified varied widely. Although some disruptive elements may emerge during the first meeting, claims related to the adoption itself generally seem not to have a place there (Berge *et al.* 2006; Gediman and Brown 1989; Trinder *et al.* 2004). Birth siblings are positioned as peer figures who, although knowing the facts (or not) and having a position on them, did not have any direct involvement in the adoption. Therefore, no suspicion or blame is attached to them. This is the case of Julia (Argentina, 35 years), who was adopted in Argentina and found her birth mother as an adult, discovering that, after giving her in adoption, she had married and had four more children. On her birth siblings, Julia says that «they have no responsibility for anything».

Although the adoptions analysed here took place in early childhood and the birth siblings had had no contact until meeting as adults, most participants referred to them simply as "sister" or "brother", indicating greater openness and emotional connection than felt with their birth mother. This is in line with the findings of the ethnographic work of Fonseca (2002) in Brazil in which she reported anecdotal allusions to mystical attraction in some meetings between birth siblings after years of separation. They referred to this using the expression "blood calls". Maturity and life experiences may also enable older siblings to view the reunion as adding something positive to their lives, rather than taking something away (Thompson 2009). For example, Analía (Argentina, 44 years), who was severely mistreated by her adoptive mother and studied law to "defend the cause" and uncover the child trafficking network in the country's La Pampa Province, describes their long embrace in the first meeting with her sister after years of separation and her feeling of "unique relief". Julia's story also describes similar emotions of connection:

> With my sister, I felt that emotion of finding someone, I had the same sensation as when I was in love, of waiting for the little message (text) and "let's see what he's going to say to me" (*smiles*), that's what I felt, that stage was very exciting. I wanted to hug the brother I saw, I would have stayed talking. (Julia, Argentina, 49 years)

One of the factors that appear to favour feelings of belonging and connection is the absence of secrecy on the birth mother's part about the existence of the child given up for adoption. According to Thompson (2009), pre-awareness of the existence of a surrendered sibling allows the others to conceptually integrate that brother or sister into the family "mobile", even if only in an "absentee" capacity. This makes the meeting less disruptive than if an entirely new element were being introduced. Moreover, unplanned pregnancy

and single motherhood now carry less stigma than for previous generations. This is reflected in the account of Manuela, who was three years old when given in adoption. She reports that her birth mother reiterated numerous times that her entire birth family was aware of her existence as the "elder sister" given up for adoption. In addition, she expresses her surprise at the juxtaposition of positions as daughter and elder sister since her initial expectation was only to find her birth mother. The absence of expectations about other relatives also unburdened these new bonds and meant that the reunion was experienced as a magical and instant connection that has strengthened over time:

> She (birth mother) said, "They all know about you, they all know they have an elder sister" […] As I had no expectation, none at all, everything that appeared was a gift. With my sister, it was as if we had known each other all our lives. I talked more to my sister than to my mother. (Manuela, Chile, 42 years)

In some cases, the laterality between birth siblings seems to facilitate adoptees' active process of relocation within the new kinship structure (Lévi-Strauss 1983), which is reconfigured and expands, as illustrated by Analía:

> The meeting is about rearranging, I went from being an only child to having a sister by my mother and father, to being the middle sister of daughters on my father's side and the younger sister of brothers on my mother's side from La Pampa. Shit, you say, "I was an only child", it's a total reconstruction... no matter how well everything turns out, you have to readjust a lot of situations. (Analía, Argentina, 44 years)

However, the cases of Sirjana (Nepal) and Tamara (Chile) are different. Sirjana was adopted when six years old and was the third youngest of seven siblings. For Sirjana, all her Nepalese family are "strangers", with whom she shares "only" biology. She seems not to feel connected to her biological relatives, including her six birth siblings. Before the first in-person reunion, she used to say of her family, "they didn't look anything like me." During the reunion, she was distant towards her birth family and relatives, did not talk to them and stayed by the side of her adoptive mother:

> My siblings have explained to me that they could not support us. We were too many, I guess. But I still don't understand it very well. I don't dare to ask either because I don't know how to, I only just met them. I just can't connect with them. They are very different from me. (Sirjana, Spain-Nepal, 19 years)

By contrast, Tamara (Chile, 27 years), her birth mother's first child, was adopted when three years old as a result of a contested process for negligence. She grew up unaware that she was adopted until, at the age of 24, she found a personal document written by her father recounting her adoption and quickly decided to search for her origins. When she read her adoption records and discovered she had two brothers, she was shocked and curious about what she would feel in this new type of relationship. In her first meeting with her brother, she found that, although a pleasant person, he was a complete stranger. As in the case of Sirjana, the biogenetic connection was not sufficient and she felt him to be a stranger with whom she shared absolutely nothing:

> When I found out I had brothers, I was shocked and I thought, what will they be like? What will it be like to be someone's sister? And, when I met my brother, I felt he was a lovely person, a sun, but we had nothing in common. (Tamara, Chile, 27 years)

Within the framework of the hegemonic Western biogenetic model of kinship, reunions with birth relatives imply reorganising the network of kinship relations. Analía recounts how, despite having prepared herself all her life to find her siblings, the meeting involved "readjusting" both the intergenerational relationship with her birth parents and the intragenerational relationship with her birth siblings. She views the latter as making the meeting easier and as associated with longing for reparation and the possibility of an affective relationship, unlike her birth parents with whom it is no longer possible to recover lost time and experiences:

> All my life, I prepared myself to meet my siblings (*smiles*) and I was trying to see how to be a sister and do it as well as possible. The parity with siblings, despite having different lives, makes you begin to realise that you have a lot of things in your genes, in your memory,

> wherever [...] My siblings made everything much more natural. We could carry on investigating what happened with my parents and try to reach the truth of the story but, in the end, there's no real reparation, we can't go back to being babies and they can't go back to being that age but, with the siblings, we have a whole road ahead. (Analía, Argentina, 44 years)

Regarding the reorganisation of kinship relations, the case of Nancy–the only child of her adoptive family–shows that meeting her birth mother was the starting point for the construction of a new position in the structure of kinship: her role as aunt. She was the first child of her birth mother who became pregnant while a sex worker and immediately gave her up for adoption. Her position as aunt has allowed her to experience new affections and is a source of maximum gratification to her, once again showing how relationships overlap and affect each other:

> If my brother needs something, he knows he can call me […]. My niece stayed with me in the holidays. When she left, she said, "Auntie, those were the best holidays of my life." The affection grew, I never thought I had a brother, never thought I would be an aunt. Out of everything, being an aunt is the most important to me. My niece is the apple of my eye. (Nancy, Chile, 32 years)

The case of Daniela (Argentina, 43 years) also illustrates this point. She and her sister were bought by two different families from the same midwife. Daniela found out she was adopted when told by her adoptive parents following the death of her birth mother. She found her sister in 2016 thanks to an ancestry DNA study. In an interview, she emphasises how, when meeting her sister, she was shocked to see her own physical resemblance to her nephew:

> It was heavy to see [the resemblance] in my sister and heavier even to see her son because he looks very like me, that is, he's like me in a male version, I had never seen anyone who resembled me (*smiles*). (Daniela, Argentina, 43 years)

These new roles and figures (aunt/nephew and niece) provide an insight into the value of physical similarities and operate as "mirrors", two matters discussed in greater detail below. The meetings between adopted adults and their birth siblings analysed in this study do not constitute rites of passage in a strict sense. However, on the rites of passage that accompany any change of place, status, social position or age[4] (Gennep 1960, Turner 1974), we identify the emergence of new positions (sibling, uncle/aunt, son/daughter) that arise from the biogenetic link and coexist with feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty. In this sense, these relationships can be conceptualised as liminal in that interviewees find themselves on a threshold or "limbo" between their biological and adoptive relationships, deploying different creative strategies to reorganise and relocate between the two universes. The complexity of these identity relationships allows us to understand them as liminal, not as a phase prior to a reorganisation and/or new state/stable group, but precisely because ambiguity persists in the "new status".

5.2. "Why me?": secrets, rivalries and feelings of in (justice) between birth siblings

As Carsten (2013) asserts, kinship may be ambiguous, perceived as "dangerous", and be imbued with feelings of guilt and injustice and gestures of reparation. The circumstances of the relinquishment are critical in a reunion, affecting the emotional dynamics with both the birth parents and the birth siblings. As noted above, secrecy often left siblings unaware of each other's existence, depriving both parties of a bond (Ludvigsen and Parnham 2004). In line with Fonseca (2009), some cases of domestic adoption in Chile and Argentina show that geographical proximity may hinder, rather than facilitate, searches and reunions. This occurs because they cut across lines of race and class, revealing the dynamics of social inequality and power that, despite progress, continue to foster secrecy and are a source of discomfort about the idea of interaction between the parties involved. In some cases, adoptees were prevented from knowing their birth siblings because the birth mother had kept silent

4 Rites of passage have three phases: the separation of the individual from their previous state/group; liminality (from the Latin limen or threshold), which is the stage of transition from the previous state to the future and is characterised by ambiguity in that the subject no longer belongs to previous state/group and does not yet belong to the next one; and, finally, the reincorporation phase in which passage to the new state/group takes place (Turner 1974).

about the "secret child" born when she was single or as the product of sexual violence or an extramarital relationship (Salvo Agoglia and San Román 2019). This is the case of Susana – a 'secret child' born of an extramarital relationship on her birth mother's part. Ignoring the broader socio-cultural factors that had made her birth mother afraid to reveal her existence, she claims that her birth mother is a "selfish" person:

> I would have liked her to say, "come and meet your siblings" because they are my siblings; like it or not, they are my siblings because we have the same blood. In other words, if I were to have a problem with my bone marrow, I could rely on them. But she didn't give me the chance to know them, because of her selfishness, because of thinking what they would say about her. (Susana, Chile, 35 years)

Here, Susana's birth mother acts as a "gatekeeper", preventing her from knowing the birth siblings born after her and excluding her from relationships with her birth relatives. Although they are strangers to her, she still considers them "her siblings" because they share the same blood and a biogenetic connection that could, if necessary, serve as a source of medical help. This position reflects the predominance of the Western notion of bodily substances, such as blood, which acquires a deep symbolic meaning that flows between fields such as kinship and relational practices (Carsten 2013). Melina, adopted by a Spanish family in Nepal, was the only child on her mother's side. When her mother died after giving birth to her, her father remarried and, because the new family rejected her, she was placed in an orphanage. Melina knew that she had seven siblings on her father's side because she had visited her hometown several times. However, like Susana, she felt excluded from this relationship by not knowing that one of her half-siblings had also been adopted in Spain. On discovering that her adoptive parents knew about this birth brother, she felt disappointed and, at the same time, very ambivalent about getting to know him, as well as fear about his reaction:

> I asked my father about it. He told me that, years ago, he had received an email from a woman who said she was my brother's adoptive mother. He couldn't get in touch with her because of problems with his email and he had to switch to a new account. Years have passed since then, but I don't know why we're still not in contact. I've just found out I have a half-sibling "nearby" (*points*). And now I don't know what to do. I would like to contact him. I feel that need but I'm also afraid that, now, he won't want to know about me. (Melina, Spain-Nepal, 25 years)

Particularly in those cases where only the firstborn child or one of the children was given up for adoption, interviewees face the paradox of being both the child who was "left behind" (Yngvesson 2013) and the "chosen" child. The latter is a very common narrative in adoptive families and, in reunions, is a source of pain and feelings of injustice. For example, Clara (Nepal, 19 years), wanted to know why she was given up for adoption while her birth brother stayed with her birth family. She took this as a sign that there would have been some chance of her remaining in her birthplace. According to the account of her widowed birth father, who had also spent years looking for information about Clara, "she stayed in the home because she needed more care than her brother." He tried to explain to her that the pressures of care and domestic tasks meant he could only cope with her two siblings, a justification that Clara found insufficient. Julia (Argentina, 35 years) and Fernanda (Chile, 25 years) were also deeply shocked to find they had younger birth siblings close to their own age:

> When I learned about my history, I found out she had other children after me, three more […] When I knew, it was heavy because it raises the question: why me? (Julia, Argentina, 49 years)
> When they gave me the file, they told me, "she has two daughters", my heart tightened. When they told me their ages, it was worse because they were two or three years younger than me. That was what most shocked and disappointed me, I felt many things at the same time. I thought, "they have so little difference with me, why did she have to give me up and why did she keep them? why couldn't she do with me what she did with them, why?" I know a lot can happen in life in three years, but I don't understand why. It was unfair that, with them, no and, with me, yes. (Fernanda, Chile, 25 years)

For Fernanda, the emotional dynamics of the meeting are dominated by an intense feeling of injustice in the face of the supposed possibility of "choice" on the part of her birth mother when she

decided to give her up and then, a few years later, to have and keep her other daughters. The circumstances were radically different: when she had Fernanda, her birth mother was single and the pregnancy was the product of a casual relationship whereas, when she had her other daughters, she was married. Nonetheless, the significance that the supposed choice has for Fernanda directly determines the emotional dynamics of the relationship with her sisters and how she maps the network of kinship relations, negotiates her position and relocates herself in it:

> My birth mother's eldest daughter doesn't like me very much because she told her (birth mother) that I was coming to steal her place as elder sister. So I told her, "no, they are not my sisters." I will never steal her place as elder sister, nor do I want to be her sister, because I have my sister. My adoptive sister is my sister, that's it. I may be related by blood, but I don't consider them sisters. Sister for me is the person with whom one fights, tells things to (*laughs*). I told her that I was not coming to take anyone's place, I just wanted to know what happened with my adoption. (Fernanda, Chile, 25 years)

The arrival of a sibling of the same sex may create a feeling of being bumped out of one's position as "favourite son" or "eldest daughter" or of a competition to be the best. For her birth mother's second daughter, Fernanda's return as the "true" firstborn felt like an intrusion that threatened her place as eldest daughter. In this context, Fernanda positions and refers to her birth sisters as the "daughters of her mother" and her adoptive sister as "sister", emphasising that blood does not *per se* constitute a sibling relationship. This illustrates the reflexive nature of kinship (Ball 2018) and the simultaneous process of de-relating from her birth sisters by classifying them as '"strangers" and her adoptive sister as a "relative", amid an intense family conflict that implies reorganising the positions disordered by the search and reunion.

5.3. The birth sibling as "mirror": imagining the "alternative life"

The idea of the sibling as the "other-self" is useful for reflecting on the interchangeability and dynamism of identity positions, as well as the feelings that emerge and are mobilised in meetings with birth siblings in adult life. In the accounts analysed, the birth siblings seem to become a kind of "mirror" that confronts the adoptee with an alternative life, one that could perhaps have been. The meeting with the birth family offers the immediate and obvious connection of physical similarity, while the closeness in age between birth siblings further reinforces the idea of a "mirror", even though they are "perfect strangers".

The birth sibling, whose life has occurred in parallel, appears to be an identity mirror that enables adoptees to imagine, in a counterfactual way, who they could have been and the life they could have lived had they remained in their birth family. Analía (Argentina, 44 years) describes this*:* «I know which school I would have gone to, I know where I would have played.» In line with Lindgren and Zetterqvist (2014), the interviewees' narratives are characterised by an open-time dimension deal with what could have happened in an "alternative life" and the analysis shows how these alternative lives are imagined and valued. Particularly in those cases in which inequalities between birth siblings–and the family of origin–are very marked, the sibling also becomes a "mirror of social inequity".

Adoption is an "involuntary placement" in an adoptive family that acts as a marker of social positioning. Its aim is to provide children with better life chances but it does not extinguish the adopted person's relationship with their "birth" social positioning or the feelings that this double positioning (origin-adoptive) creates. This can trigger very ambivalent emotional dynamics of blame and reparation in the face of the socio-economic differences whose relational implications may produce distancing or a definitive rupture. For example, in Spain, Gautam (22 years) belongs to a high social class and frequently referred to the discomfort he felt when with his elder brother and his Nepalese birth family because he did not want them to feel inferior: "I don't feel comfortable, because I have many things they will never be able to have, and I feel guilty about it." Julia, a lawyer with an upper-middle-class background, also feels uncomfortable with her birth siblings, who are from a lower social class and ask her for help with their legal problems. In Julia, this generates a combination of feelings of responsibility, discomfort and confusion:

> My life was very different, I studied, I never lacked for anything […] You feel a bit responsible. For example, there's a legal conflict between my two siblings, the police intervened, and he [my brother] was asking me for advice

> because I'm a lawyer. It is a strange situation… because you want to help, their economic situation is very difficult, but sponsoring my brother as a lawyer in a conflict with my sister is very complicated. (Julia, Argentina, 49 years)

Similarly, Tamara (Chile, 27 years) found, in her first meeting with her brother, that they had "nothing in common". In the face of the social inequalities and differences of class, she sees herself as enjoying a supposed situation of individual "privilege". This triggers a strong feeling of guilt that, over various meetings with her birth family, leads her to assume a responsibility for her birth siblings' disadvantaged social situation. She compares the "opportunities" she had because of her adoption with those her brother did not have because he stayed with the birth mother. In her own words, this led her to "obsess" about teaching him to read. As shown in the following account, the situation escalates into a conflict in which her birth mother–who does not perceive this inequity as necessarily unfair–becomes involved in a spiral of comparisons, feelings of disqualification, resentment and aggression, which ends up interrupting contact between them:

> I felt the responsibility of being the eldest and having escaped the cycle of poverty because I was able to study for a profession. I lived in a family where we never lacked for anything; we were not rich but never lacked anything. I felt I had had an opportunity they had not had. It hurt me a lot that my brother couldn't read or write […] and I began to obsess about my brother. I thought that if I didn't help him to learn to read, no one was going to help him [...] The conflict with my birth mother stemmed from that, I think she felt very invaded. She saw me as a very different being. (Tamara, Chile, 27 years)

In the relationship that many participants built with their birth siblings, feelings related to privilege, responsibility or guilt co-existed with empathic feelings, solidarity and the intention to support them. These feelings and moralities are problematic because of their individualising nature. They position the adoptee as the only person responsible for a condition or status they did not choose to have, obscuring the fact that adoptions take place in the framework of deep structural inequities and marked hierarchies of class, gender and age over which they have no direct influence. This also generates a strong sense of impotence for not being able to substantially improve the life of the new birth sibling.

In other cases, comparison between the adoptee's possible alternative life with the life they actually had and awareness of the difference with the birth siblings' symbolic and material conditions are signified as "good luck". This reactivates narratives of rescue and salvation from poverty (Villalta 2012), with the consequent gratitude for having avoided an unfortunate fate thanks to adoption (Leinaweaver 2019). This is seen in the account of Suraj (Spain-Nepal):

> I was the eldest and, since there was a sister after me and then another one, there were a lot of people. But, really, I'm thankful for that, because I have a second life. Because if I had been there, what would I have had? I would be married, with children and a job I would not like. And here, instead, my future is better. (Suraj, Spain-Nepal, 23 years)

As can be observed, the supposed opportunity to have a "second life" is more marked in transnational adoptions between Spain and Nepal since inequalities between the global North and South are more evident. In summary, these accounts show how the complex and tense field of negotiation of kinship relations varies from case to case and is influenced by the circumstances of each adoption, family histories and broader social circumstances and structural inequalities. In this way, they contribute to a more complete and contextualised understanding of sibling relations and feelings linked to guilt, gratitude and solidarity, among other emotional dynamics.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Sibling searches and reunions raise new questions about how kinship and identity are framed and imagined. Our study seeks to advance research on relationships between birth siblings in Ibero-American contexts. In this multi-sited study in Chile, Argentina and Spain, we explore searches for origins and, in particular, processes of construction of identity and kinship related to meetings between birth siblings. Without attempting to generalise or extrapolate, our material helps to show how, in different field sites, relationships between birth siblings are recognised, experienced and reorganised in a plastic way, adhering

to or resisting the hegemonic model of kinship based on consanguinity, the principle of exclusivity of filiation and the "clean break" principle. Our results indicate a need for a singular understanding of searches for origins, the construction of personal life stories and identity and the subjective sense of kinship, as well as their broader social and cultural contexts. As Martial, Côté and Lavoie (2021) suggest, the notion of origins, whatever its uses, implicitly runs through personal and family itineraries, opening a new perspective on our conceptions of kinship and identity.

First, in the vast majority of the cases analysed, the figure of the birth siblings is central to the adoptees' narratives. The emotional experience of adopted adults when meeting their birth siblings fluctuates from a sensation of magical connection to feelings of rivalry, jealousy and injustice and implies a reflexive exercise of reconfiguration of the kinship structure and relationships. The meanings acquired by relations and feelings among birth siblings are heterogeneous and dynamic, and are strongly influenced by the social and relational context of each story. In addition, sibling relationships can be understood as a frontier area or "liminal" experience (Van Gennep 1960; Turner 1974). This liminality encompasses and heterogeneously combines a series of dynamics of temporality, distance/intimacy, equality/difference, rivalry/solidarity and exclusion/belonging. They are mediated by other kinship ties (for example, the birth mother) and by the significance and reflexivity of each person regarding the weight of the biogenetic factor as well as the structural social inequities of domestic and transnational adoption.

Second, reunions with birth siblings provide "constitutive knowledge" that, albeit partial or incomplete, is central to the construction of identity (Strathern, 1999), enabling the adopted person to piece together a little more of their past, present and future in a context of contradictory and fragmented narratives that are full of loose ends. It can be argued that birth siblings are a key source of this constitutive knowledge. Given their closeness in age and physical similarity, the encounter with this lateral kinship figure appears to operate as a "mirror" in the framework of crucial identitary work that permits imagination of an "alternative life". This allows interviewees to reflect on their personal identity and different life trajectories or, in other words, the other life they would hypothetically have led were it not for their adoption. This comparison with a birth relative who has no responsibility for the adoption or the related circumstances provides the adopted person with another point of view about their life history and identity. These reflections are also influenced by broader social narratives about adoption, in particular, those of "rescue" and "opportunity". It is particular interesting to see how the comparative "mirroring" exercise that takes place in the meetings exposes the deep inequalities and local and global social inequities involved in both domestic and transnational adoptions.

Third, we identify various aspects that it would be interesting to consider in future research and professional interventions at the Ibero-American level. Knowledge and understanding of adoptees' experience of birth sibling relationships over the lifespan may help today's adoption practitioners to understand more about the consequences of sibling separation and, through their work with adoptive families, to foster safe and meaningful sibling relationships. These relationships can help adoptees to better understand their origins and identity and have the potential to support them throughout their life. Professionals who develop relationships with children and families have a key role to play in identifying and recording sibling connections in order to uphold children's right to family life (Jones *et al.* 2019). For this reason, more studies are essential to deepen our knowledge about the standpoint and experiences of today's adopted children as regards their birth siblings, in the case of both adoptions of sibling groups and post-adoption contacts with birth siblings in different families. In addition, it would be interesting to know more about relationships that are "raternal" beyond a biogenetic connection, such as those established between activists of organisations focused on searches for origins and between children who, in the context of alternative care, share their daily lives. Finally, another aspect of the study of sibling relationships relates to the importance that the question of identity and origins has acquired in the field of assisted reproductive technology (ART) (Jociles 2016). A final avenue has to do with the interest expressed by some donor-conceived and adopted people in knowing their origin for fear of unwittingly forming incestuous relationships. Together with international research on third-party reproduction (e.g., Hertz, Nelson and Kramer 2017; Jadva *et al.* 2010), it would, therefore, be interesting to continue exploring the perceptions that donor-conceived people of different ages have about their genetic siblings.

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