

Discourses of Health in Peruvian Adoptions

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Discussions of adoption often unfold in deliberate contrast to discussions of the biological, precisely because adoption complicates Euro-American ideologies of “blood-based” kinship. But in fact, local and global understandings of both biology and adoption are actually deeply intertwined at several levels and on several linked planes. In this paper, I draw from ethnographic research in a Peruvian adoption office to show how international discourses surrounding children’s rights in adoptive practice are bolstered by globalized discourses about biomedicine. This happens when Peruvian officials engage with international norms about mental health and malnutrition in order to justify legally declaring children adoptable. But biomedicine appears in other arenas as well. Potential adoptive parents are deeply enmeshed in the biomedical, both in the increasingly common pre-adoptive step of attempting assisted reproduction, and in the sometimes invasive medical exams and checkups required of adoptive parents. I also address the discourse of nation: biomedicine is a clear anchor for North Americans’ and Europeans’ calculations of health risks and concerns when choosing a country from which to adopt. In these three instances of medicalization, biomedical discourse is mobilized to create and reify understandings of kinship.