

‘I want to give myself the opportunity and be adopted’: the production of subjects and meanings in adoption processes in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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Abstract

Based on the biographical accounts of young women who were adopted when they were children or adolescents, this work analyses the management techniques that are deployed in institutional care devices located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, Argentina. These production processes of *adoptable* subjects can be considered in light of several techniques that operate through different logics of power and that unfold in the web of social relations that the children of said devices maintain with each other and with the institutional agents.

Keywords: adoption; management techniques; biographical stories; subject production.

“Quiero darme la oportunidad y ser adoptada”: producción de sujetos y sentidos en los procesos de adopción en el área metropolitana de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Resumen

A partir de los relatos biográficos de jóvenes mujeres que fueron adoptadas cuando eran niñas o adolescentes, este trabajo analiza las técnicas de gestión que se despliegan en los dispositivos de cuidado institucional ubicados en el área metropolitana de Buenos Aires, Argentina. Estos procesos de producción de sujetos *adoptables* pueden ser pensados a la luz de diversas técnicas que operan a través de distintas lógicas de poder y que se despliegan en la trama de relaciones sociales que los niños y niñas de dichos dispositivos mantienen entre sí y con los agentes institucionales.

Palabras clave: adopción; técnicas de gestión; relatos biográficos; producción de sujetos.

“Quero me dar a oportunidade e ser adotado”: produção de sujeitos e sentidos nos processos de adoção na região metropolitana de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

Resumo

A partir dos relatos biográficos de jovens adotadas quando crianças ou adolescentes, este trabalho analisa as técnicas de gestão que são implantadas em dispositivos de atenção institucional localizados na região metropolitana de Buenos Aires, Argentina. Esses processos de produção de sujeitos *adotáveis* podem ser pensados à luz de várias técnicas que operam por meio de diferentes lógicas de poder e que se desdobram na teia de relações sociais que os filhos desses dispositivos mantêm entre si e com os agentes institucionais.

Palavras-chave: adoção; técnicas de gestão; relatos biográficos; produção de assunto.

‘I want to give myself the opportunity and be adopted’: the production of subjects and meanings in adoption processes in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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Introduction

Based on the biographical accounts of young women who were adopted when they were children or adolescents, this work analyses the population management techniques (Foucault 2007) that are deployed in institutional care devices located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

According to institutional agents in the field of child protection policies, these devices – called ‘residential homes’ – house boys, girls and adolescents who were found to have had their ‘rights violated’, such that agents of organisations for the promotion and protection of rights determined they had to be separated from their families of origin. These interventions initiate the transfer of children or adolescents, in which the adults responsible for them change and their life trajectories can lead to a declaration of adoptability, the assignment of a guardian, their return to their family group, or their departure after reaching the age of majority, based on assessments made by institutional agents.

In this work, I am interested in focusing on one part of the process: children and adolescents enter an institutional care facility and begin to consider the possibility of being included in another family. The approach of this analysis is based on the lived experiences of ten young women who were adopted, since it enables the elucidation of the heterogeneous processes and practices through which, according to Rose (1998), human beings come to relate with themselves and with others as persons with certain characteristics, in this case, as subjects who are eligible for adoption. Here, I refer to techniques of power that operate in the constitution of the subjectivities of young women – formerly girls – from which they become *adoptable* subjects. These processes for the production of persons can be thought of in light of such techniques which operate on the web of social relations that the children and adolescents who circulate through these devices maintain with each other and with institutional agents.

Together with their effects, the techniques can be read based on the category of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault 2007) – understood as the art of ‘the conduct of conduct’ (p. 389) – since it enables the consideration that, even under certain rules, a game of freedoms occurs that empowers individuals to carry out a series of operations on their body and soul. These operations become necessary given that the adoption of children and adolescents – as a horizon of meanings and as a possible outcome – is constituted throughout a process at the end of which children gain their ‘status of adoptability’, as institutional agents point out.

Based on this approach, this article seeks to analyse different power techniques that are deployed in institutional care devices and whose purpose is the protection of children and adolescents. The methodological strategy is based on a body of data composed of ten biographical interviews with female adolescents (13 to 18 years old) who were adopted, or who are under the care of another domestic group that assumes the category

of guardian¹. The field material was produced during 2019, in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, for the purpose of comprehending and documenting the ways in which children and young people experience these processes and give them meaning, in interactions with their peers, with adults who form part of their domestic groups, with judicial and administrative agents, and with institutional care devices. Given that the interviews were conducted in educational institutions, the consent of the school administration staff, the interviewees in question, and those responsible for the adolescents were required. In all cases, in order to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the participating institutions and persons, anonymity was maintained and the required identification data were modified to ensure individual identification was impossible.

The theoretical-methodological perspective: childhood and first-person accounts

The interviewees whose accounts are presented in this work were adopted or transferred to another domestic group under the category of 'guardian'. Thus, their stories are traversed by the experiences they lived based on the intervention of institutional agencies (administrative, judicial, institutional care devices), which aimed to ensure their protection and considered adoption as a measure of protection for their childhood, much as this legal institution has been conceived since the twentieth century.

At this stage of the research², I was interested in distancing myself from official documents – such as judicial, administrative and institutional files – in which children and adolescents appear as the object of administrative discourse (Favret-Saada, in Goldman 2005). Nor is it the purpose of this article to investigate an institutionalised narrative, that is, one that children and adolescents produce when they know that they are being assessed and recorded in an official report that shapes their lives (Elizalde 2004). Indeed, in family courts, in organisations for the promotion and protection of rights, and in institutional care devices, children and adolescents know they are subject to control and assessment by agents – whether they adapt to the new family configuration or remember and miss the previous family, whether they comply with the established parenting guidelines, whether their academic performance improves, whether their health and behavioural indicators improve, and so on – and therefore their responses are often configured in dialogue with the expectations of their interlocutors.

Moreover, in these institutional spaces, different social actors interact (including members of the family groups of origin of the children and adolescents and their adoptive parents) with different hierarchies, the capital of authority and legitimacy, together with perceptions regarding the needs of the children and adolescents, and significations regarding what a 'correct upbringing' is. Therefore, this process in which 'children are guided toward adoption' is one that is contested. In turn, principally in judicial spaces, and in residential homes, children and adolescents occupy a subordinate position in which adults define their 'best interests' based on what they evaluate as 'the good of the child'.

For these reasons, the interactions that I had as a researcher with children and adolescents within these institutional frameworks were coloured by suspicions: who was I? (Was I social worker from the court, the protection agency, and/or the home?) And what will this information be used for? Thus, I was interested in generating a relationship with children and adolescents that would not place me in the role of an authority who assesses 'their violated rights' in 'an interventionist tone' and then makes decisions about their future, as Silvia Elizalde (2004) warns in her works.

1 The female gender of the interviewees is not based on a specific research policy, rather it is due to the impossibility of interviewing male adolescents who have gone through an adoption process.

2 The previous stage of research refers to the field work conducted within the framework of my doctoral thesis (between 2007 and 2014) – in different institutions located in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires that conduct child protection policies: organisations for the promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents; and family courts and institutional care arrangements, in particular, residential homes, collective care establishments for children and adolescents when they are separated from their family environment. Although this work is based on interviews with young people who were adopted, it continues to dialogue with this prior stage of field work.

Due in part to these reasons, the methodological strategy elaborated sought to access the interpretations of children and young people in social spaces that were not linked to the institutions that intervened in the adoption processes. Their secondary school turned out to be a favourable space to establish such contacts with young people who had been adopted or whose guardians were changed through legal-administrative interventions. Although this choice did not allow me access to the daily lives of the homes or places of residence of the interviewees, it did facilitate a dialogue whose performativity collaborated with a presentation of themselves, without being surrounded by the expectations of institutional agents. The body of interviews was conducted during 2019 in the city of Buenos Aires. Following mediation by the school staff, I presented the objectives of the research to the adolescents and their guardians. Through one of the administration staff members at the first school, I was put in contact with more adolescents – students from other institutions – and this snowballed to the point that I was able to interview others in the school space, and some of their mothers. My presentation to the young women was based on an explanation of the network of relationships that enabled me to be at the school, the clarification of my professional insertion as a researcher, and my concerns regarding their experiences throughout the adoption processes, in order to understand these processes from the perspective of children and young people. In these meetings, I affirmed my commitment to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality regarding what they said, that is, no member of the school or their family groups would have any knowledge of what was discussed. In all cases, I clarified that they could always refuse to answer a question or ask me not to record any of the parts they wanted to disclose, but this did not happen on any occasion³.

Since the interviews were conducted following the logic of the institution that hosted us, the encounters were agreed according to the possibilities of the students: their class schedules, rotating the interview encounters so that they did not have to leave class during the same subjects, taking advantage of the absences of some teachers due to study trips or postponing the encounters due to educational outings, events or school celebrations. These moments of interaction with the interviewees were interrupted by typical school situations: adults or adolescents looking for other people, at breakfast or during lunch break; the bustle of recess, conversations in the hallways that diverted our attention outside the classrooms⁴.

The purpose behind considering the constructions of meaning elaborated by adolescents – inserted in numerous relationships that compose the social fabric of their existence – is for them to have a more direct voice in the production of social data (Pires 2008). From this perspective, I do not propose the autonomy of the universe of the child in relation to the universe of the adult, which would end up reifying such separation, but I do understand that a relationship of complementarity exists between these universes and that boys, girls and adolescents can strain the conventions of the adult world (Rifiotis et al. 2021). In this sense, research conducted with children and adolescents contributes to problematising aspects of social life that are central when addressing social issues (Milstein 2021).

In turn, this work considers that subjectivity is not exclusively an aspect of the individual, the personal, or the intimate, but something socially constructed, configured in the interaction and relationship with others (Abramovski 2017; Cabrera 2014). In particular, in the power relations in which the young women were involved in their process of being guided towards adoption. Therefore, although people can interpret the same experiences in different ways, or these can be expressed through psychological categories, this does not mean that they are exclusively private and singular in nature (Jimeno 2008).

³ Although interviews with the mothers is not be the object of analysis in this work, it is worth clarifying that the vast majority were conducted at the time I met with them to explain the objectives of the research and my institutional references; therefore, they constituted a step prior to contact with the young women. On only one occasion was the interview conducted subsequently, and I had the approval of the young adopted woman.

⁴ The intersubjective relationship that was established at the time of the interview was influenced by the abilities of some of the young women. This is highlighted by Leonor – a 17-year-old in the care of a guardian – who, when I asked her if she wanted to participate in the initial interview, said ‘Yes, I’m used to telling my story’.

This work also ascribes to the performative character of language, in the sense that saying something again means living it again and this enables an action of self-affirmation (Arfuch 2018) in the face of experiences that sought to deny or undermine the interviewees' exercise of agency. As Bourdieu (2000) poses, the interview can be used by some interviewees as a moment to make themselves heard, to bring their experience into the public sphere, 'an opportunity also to *explain themselves* in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world and to bring into the open the point within this world from which they see themselves and the world, become comprehensible, and justified, not least for themselves' (p. 615; emphasis in original). Therefore, being able to count on their constructions of meaning and respond to their subjectivation processes collaborates in giving entity to those 'protagonist voices in their immediacy' (Arfuch 2018) and understanding the adoption processes from another perspective, focusing on the regulations that are put into effect in institutional care devices.

However, as numerous authors propose, the stories developed in the social interaction of biographical interviews do not have one author, but rather two: the narrator and the researcher (Bertaux 1984; James 2000; Piña 1989). In this sense, the 'data' produced in the social relationship involved in the research encounter are formed in a process of synthesis and attribution of meanings in which the reflexivity (Batallán & García 1992) of the researcher and that of the adolescents interviewed are combined. In the relationship and dialogue that occurs in the interviews, they do not recite their life, but rather reflect on it while telling it, and they do so from their current 'biographical situation' (Piña 1989). Therefore, the interviewees construct a discourse about themselves from their present, inserted in a new family configuration. In the co-production of such stories, a process of *semanticisation* of the past opens up, operationalised through memory and modelled by what is omitted, silenced, and not evoked (James 2000). The stories thus produced in these interviews recreate the pre-adoptive past of the young women – which includes the period of circulation through temporary places of care, such as hospitals, orphanages, foster families and families of origin (Yngvesson 2013), especially those techniques of power deployed in the institutional care devices through which they 'were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognise and acknowledge themselves as subjects' (Foucault 1978: 5).

To conclude the section, I briefly resume the analytical strategies of the material produced. The content was processed from categories constructed based on previously defined dimensions of analysis – according to my prior knowledge constructed in the previous stages of research – and others that arose from reading the material, finding similarities and differences between the answers prepared by the young women, and between these and my previous knowledge. In addition, analysis of the material involved identifying the social relations which the young women participated in, the assessments they made of these, and the reconstruction of small plots of stories within the accounts they offered. Likewise, another of the analytical operations was the reconstruction of the biographical trajectories of the young women given that, in some cases, the accounts were told in a fragmented manner due to the dynamics of the interview. Thus, it was necessary to re-establish transits not only through families or care devices, but through the social relations that were central for the young women in the process of shaping themselves. In addition to the narratives, institutional routines and organisational forms that collaborated in the contextualisation of the experiences lived by the young women were identified, since this assists in determining possible margins of action.

The management of childhood and families: selected lines of analysis

In studies concerning interventions on children and their families – which in recent years have demonstrated high growth and diversification – different lines of analysis converge, in some cases inspired by Foucauldian

notions or derived from them⁵. Many of these studies pursued Donzelot's (1979) seminal work on the discipline model of French families, as well as introducing other interesting problematisations.

In our latitudes, one of these lines of research focuses on the exercise of power that follows a 'tutelary' logic in which an educational, pedagogical dimension is highlighted that permeates the relationship between tutor and ward (Pacheco de Oliveira 2011). Along similar lines, Souza Lima (2002) postulates two dimensions in the exercise of power: 'gestating', which points to a constitutive, pedagogical function, of 'mothering', of 'teaching to be' that is based on the desire for 'good'; and 'managing', which refers to the daily control in administration over segments of the population. For her part, Adriana Vianna (2002; 2010) pursues the approach of these authors in her analysis of the tutelary facets of contemporary childhood management and maintains that it is based on the complementarity between the bureaucratic apparatus and the domestic units in which the children are inserted, or rather to which their direct control is transferred, pairing them in asymmetric relationships. The work of María Gabriela Lugones (2012) is situated among these themes, since she assumes the proposal discussed by Souza Lima and Vianna to analyse 'the modalities of the management of minors' in the *Tribunales Preventivos de Menores* [lit. Preventive Juvenile Courts] of the city of Córdoba (Argentina), through the deployment of 'techniques of minorisation' to which both administered children and adults are subjected. Among these, the 'forms of advice' stand out as being 'difficult to resist because they carried with them the premise of good intentions, that they were done in the "best interests" of the counselee; while also reinstating asymmetric ties, because only those who have (or are attributed with and are recognised as an) authority can advise.' (Lugones 2012: 176). Together with the 'commitment formulas' that are formulas based on which state action and its presence are virtually extended, reproducing obligations that enable it to take certain measures and achieve certain resolutions (Lugones 2012: 187).

Another line of research conducted by Carla Villalta (2013; 2021) postulates the 'state administration of childhood', which aims to analyse the 'management techniques of poor children since, by modifying their living conditions, their relationships and in some cases the adults who are considered guardians and representatives of the children are directed towards transforming these subjects into others' (Villalta 2013: 259). This line seeks to analyse the legal-bureaucratic devices intended to manage childhood, moving away from approaches that privilege the repressive facets of the exercise of power to advance a perspective that includes disputes of meanings, the deployment of negotiation, convincing and persuasion strategies that are embodied in a moral language (Villalta & Martínez 2022; Ciordia & Villalta 2012).

A third set of works pursue Foucault's studies on the government of populations (2007), and the reformulations performed by governmentality studies (Rose 2006; Rabinow & Rose 2006; Rose & Miller 1992) who served the rationalities of government, and the technologies to develop them. This perspective focuses on technologies of power read as forms of intervention intended to guide, direct, orient, train and regulate persons, populations and issues (Fonseca et al. 2016). These are deployed in a range of actions that target children, youth and families, including public policies aimed at the protection of children, their care and their upbringing; the tensions generated in the administrative and bureaucratic devices intended to restore the rights of children and adolescents, and their effects on the realisation of citizenship (Schuch 2009; 2010; 2012; Fonseca & Schuch 2009; Fonseca 2009; 2011a; 2011b; Ribeiro 2011; 2015; Grinberg 2016; Llobet 2011; 2013; Barna 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Magistris 2016; Larrea 2021; Aydos 2016; Sabarots 2017; Rifiotis 2019).

In summary, the numerous lines of inquiry placed emphasis on diverse categories – tutelary logic, disciplinary operations, modes of subjectivation, and self-government – that provided numerous keys to analyse distinct exercises of power aimed at controlling, caring, including, and punishing, which are implemented in the daily routine of legal-administrative devices and policies. These categories are amalgamated and combined with each other to carry out the intended protection of children and adolescents.

⁵ Such as biopolitics, pastoral power, governmentality, technologies of the self, processes of subjection and subjectivation (1978, 1982, 1988, 2007).

At the intersection with the literature that analyses the regulation of family relationships in general, and adoption processes in particular, studies on kinship practices are a vitally important antecedent. Since the 1970s, anthropological analyses of kinship destabilised its conceptualisation in terms of descent and consanguinity, advising us with regard to its ethnocentric character (Schneider 1984; Strathern 1992). Nurtured by gender studies and feminism, the field of kinship studies underwent a renewal: it moved away from the classical ('genealogical') paradigm and the opposition between the biological and the social, to consider 'native' ways in which kinship relationships are established and signified in terms of cultural constructions of connection (Carsten 2000; Fonseca 2003). Based on these approaches, kinship refers to modes of being related, forms of 'relatedness' that are produced by the practices of creating kinship (Howell 2006). These new approaches enable kinship to be characterised with a certain 'plasticity', since it has the capacity to adapt and relocate (Thompson 2005). Different authors have formulated categories to account for the 'work' required to form kinship ties between people: kinning (Howell 2006)⁶; but which also work in the opposite direction: the 'detachment from relatives' (Yanagisako 2002). Following this line of research on the social relations that constitute kinship as a process – thus avoiding its conceptualisation as immanent and permanent – the work of Claudia Fonseca (2011c) regarding the 'de-kinning' of biological mothers is an important precedent, that is, the institutional effort invested in undoing the naturalised category of biological motherhood in cases of adoption in Brazil. She argues that full legal adoption emerges as a form of bureaucratic violence in which, although all participants in the adoption triad (the children, the adoptive parents, and the biological fathers and mothers) go through suffering, the plasticity of kinship in this type of state intervention assumes a differentiated modality that alleviates the suffering of some and ignores or intensifies that of others, more specifically that of the biological mothers. Like Fonseca, Jessaca Leinaweaver's (2008) work with Ayacucho families and children in Peru is inspired by Howell's concept of kinning (2006) and suggests that in the movement of children analysed in the Ayacucho area, '*acostumbrar*' [to get accustomed] is generated. This is a process in which boys and girls transform the behaviour, treatment and feelings inherent to kinship relationships by getting accustomed to new practices, social relationships and new or rearranged physical locations. This process is distinguished by 'the young person's memories of origins, self-awareness, and insecurity in the new setting' (Leinaweaver 2008: 100). Getting accustomed coexists with a feeling of fear at the loss of treasured social relations from the previous family configuration. Thus, the counterpart of this process is 'to get disaccustomed' to your social origins, becoming unrelated (de-kinning) to your original family group, which may involve distancing yourself from or deliberately breaking off other relationships.

These works are fertile background from which to advance in the approach of this article. The following section seeks to analyse the deployment of a set of power techniques and their effects, which give life to the institutional care devices in which boys and girls go through the separation from their domestic groups and begin to think about themselves and imagine themselves as subjects who are eligible for adoption.

Becoming an adoptable subject: techniques of power, social relations, and regions of experiences signified by adopted young women

To begin this section, it is important to refer to the origin of the young women interviewed. All of them report that at the beginning of the institutional interventions in their domestic groups, they were not free from all social ties, rather they recognised themselves as members of a family configuration and during this process,

⁶ Signe Howell describes the 'kinning' process as that in which a person with no ties to a certain group of people is included in it through a significant and permanent relationship, expressed in the language of kinship. This process occurs through what she calls 'transubstantiation', that is, the effort of adoptive families to find and build a substantial, or substantive, connection with their adopted or future child through the 'construction' of similarities, abilities, qualities and interests or the existence of a predestination that reunited that child with those adoptive parents, and not others, transforming a stranger into one of their own.

at the very least, those ties become 'breakable' (Ciordia 2014) and, in some cases, ruptured. During this process, the young women also modified the way they thought about themselves and the people with whom they were associated. This work is based therefore on the premise of considering the process of guiding of children towards adoption as a process that produces specific subjects, in particular, *adoptable* subjects. Thus, this section seeks to analyse through what techniques of power, social relations, and regions of experience this type of subject is formed, based on the ways in which the young women experienced it and attributed meaning to it.

One of the modalities that the regulation of the adolescents' behaviour assumed, as I argued in another work (Ciordia 2022), is linked to physical punishment and the suffering inflicted as a pedagogy to create obedient wills (Das 2008)⁷. Hence, physical punishment and the promotion of certain relationships between peers – based on stigmatisation and rivalry – become modalities through which the bodies of children and adolescent are made docile, willing to accept new authorities, a subordinate position in these spaces in a manner that promotes the acquisition of – supposedly – poorly learned behaviours and accept new outcomes for their destinies, even when these were not initially desired by them. Indeed, according to the young women interviewed, in some residential homes, physical punishment was sometimes promoted by the institutional agents who were in charge of caring for these young women, even though it ended up being carried out by other boys or girls. In other reported experiences, the institutional violence – physical, verbal and psychological – exercised by the people in charge of their care was replicated in the relationships between the children and adolescents, to the extent that many conflicts ended in blows, shoves and insults. In others, punishment was associated with the performance of certain tasks that was overly gruelling for the young women's bodies and wills.

While not overlooking the disciplinary nature, the logic of punitive action, the logic of the child's welfare (Llobet 2015), the search for social control by many of these devices and the repression of certain behaviours and the ordering of others (Daroqui & Guemureman 2001), incorporating the fissures, interstices, and agencies that children and adolescents can generate in these institutions and processes into the analysis is essential. In this manner, recollecting Certeau's 'ways of operating' (1984), silent and cunning practices and actions from which the young women take advantage of the punishment by occasionally turning it to their own benefit can be identified. One 16-year-old, Aldana⁸, thus recounts how she used certain punishments and how her reappropriation of the categorisation that institutional agents had placed her in, 'misbehaving', could be converted into access to more and better food:

Aldana: They always chose me [to pick up the bread they ate in the residential home]. Going to the bakery meant walking two blocks, to the back of the home, to reach one of the corners of the property. It was, go there, pick up the huge bags of bread and bring them back. Or go and look for the sources of croissants or buns. I remember that I took great advantage of going to the bakery, because the person who cooked them would say to me, 'Shhh! They're going to tell me off!' And he would sit us down, sometimes he would wait for us with breakfast prepared.

Researcher: Ah! Then they could have breakfast there and they'd repeat breakfast.

A: Of course, I took advantage of it since they always told me that I behaved badly, 'so, I behave badly'.

R: It was a kind of punishment.

7 These practices could indicate a legacy regarding the exercise of discipline and control of these populations, sediments of the tutelary model in force until the beginning of the twenty-first century (Daroqui & Guemureman 2001). Thus, in child protective policies, logics associated with the language of human rights coexist with others linked to punitivism and welfare.

8 The interviewees names have been changed to protect their identities and to respect their privacy.

A: Of course, they sent me to get the bread in the rain, whether it was hot, or cold, or whatever, I had to go get the bread or the buns from the bakery. And... the baker sometimes gave us two extra buns to eat on the way back and he added more *dulce de leche* [caramel spread]. We got along very well with him. And we made little drawings for him, we hid them in our clothes and then we gave them to him. But it was heavy for us, sometimes he accompanied us with the heavy bags to where they couldn't see him, because there was a kind of small wood, because if they did see him, they'd tell him off or they could even throw him out and... then we continued our journey alone. But it took us about an hour because it was heavy for us. We were still girls, there were three of us, and there were two bags of bread. Sometimes one went back to look for the other because we couldn't... (Aldana, 23 Oct., 2019)

The imposition of certain punishments, as Aldana relates, is accompanied by a differentiation from the other girls and a classification regarding her behaviour, in her case, she is the bearer of the label 'bad behaviour'. Do these institutional classifications – which girls know and learn in these devices – represent a totalising configuration of their subjectivity? Following Nikolas Rose (1998) – who in turn is inspired by Gilles Deleuze's (1993) notion of folding –, I begin by considering the interiority of people without essences, a folding of the exterior, where the folds incorporate without totalising, internalise without unifying, while discontinuously bringing together the experiences they live in social space in the form of folds. Therefore, subjectivity is shaped by all these experiences and through contact with the exterior. The concept of fold enables an understanding that the classifications received are not simply accepted by the young women and that they do not determine their subjectivity in a totalising manner, since they coexist with other social relations that dispute the meanings of these classifications and they eventually enable them to put into practice micro-resistances and establish *affective ties* with other adults.

In this sense, it is possible to locate the episode recounted by Aldana within a broader web of relationships in which care and affection also take place. Although Aldana refers to the relationship developed with the baker – the drawings given as a token of gratitude – other young women referred to operators with whom they developed emotional relationships, either because they identified their actions as signs of care, because they held them in situations of a lot of anguish, or because, as other works maintain, they assumed the role of their guardians so that the young women could 'leave' the care system (Salazar 2018). Thus, through 'emotional work' (Hochschild Russell 2003) in which they invest affection and dedication, the operators act in the management of the affections of girls and adolescents, work that is no less important insofar emotionality is a central component in the process of becoming related to (Howell 2006) other adults, as underlined by the young women in different passages of the interviews.

Although practices linked to punishment that are intended to regulate conduct and obedience to the authority of institutional actors can be identified – as we saw in Aldana's account – this should not lead to crude images of constant, excessive surveillance, nor the simple imposition of an adoptive project. Rather, I propose that since the regulation of conduct within residential homes is chiefly concerned with provisions related to thinking of yourself as a person eligible for adoption, its practice is achieved through the co-existence that takes place in these devices, sociability among peers, the sharing of common socio-biographical experiences and, therefore, with relative margins of freedom and capacity for manoeuvre.

It is essential to consider the intramural universe as a producer of new ties (Prestes 2011), principally regarding the social relations of friendship, solidarity and camaraderie that are formed between boys, girls and adolescents. Through these relationships, adoption takes shape as a possible alternative to life in the residential home, since the vast majority of the young women interviewed stated that they knew of the existence of this kinship relationship from observing what happened to other children in the homes or thanks to the relationships of friendship they maintained with their peers.

The generation of new ties with other adults consequently constitutes one of the practices through which the possibility of integrating with a new family is presented as something desirable, such that giving boys, girls

or adolescents up for adoption or the possibility of transferring them to another family group is celebrated and promoted in many of these care institutions, as I addressed in a previous work (Ciordia 2020). One of the ways to encourage this is to ensure that the possibility of connecting with other adults outside their family groups is made available to the children and adolescents – people who are known as ‘volunteers’, ‘godparents’ or ‘collaborators’ in institutional jargon – who are not part of the permanent staff of the residential home, but contribute to the work of the institution by performing different tasks: they provide school support, organise weekend outings, attend school events, accompany them to the doctor, and they also open up their domestic groups so that some of them can spend the end of year parties and vacations with such groups, and so on. The relationship between collaborators and boys, girls or adolescents is (re)created from the interactions and activities involved in raising them and involves sharing and exchanging elements that refer to the symbolic sphere (affective, emotional, moral, cognitive) and the material sphere (different resources). In some cases, through these activities between the collaborators and the boys, girls or adolescents, solid, lasting emotional relationships can be built that may eventually result in an adoption.

Offering these opportunities for bonding – necessary for the children’s upbringing – sometimes occurs in a diffuse manner through existing social ties between peers, rather than vertically, through the planned intervention of institutional agents. Thanks to the girls’ capacity for action and initiative, a more economical management of these adoption processes occurs, anchored in affinities, relationships, desires, and wills shared between the children. Ileana, a 17-year-old girl who was adopted by a couple after living in a residential home for three years, told me how thanks to Bárbara, a companion in the home, she began to bond with other adults as a prior step to her transfer to a new family:

I remember that we had a classmate named Barbara. That girl, I don’t know why, people always came to visit her, and I asked her ‘And are they your family?’ ‘No’, she told me, ‘they’re people who want to take me home’. I said, ‘Ah, but that’s what I want’. Then I discovered that at the home, I could choose a family and a family could choose me. [...] Once, Barbara asked me ‘Do you want to come with me when the man comes to pick me up?’ ‘Sure,’ I told her. She took me with her and I remember that she ended up going back inside the home and I stayed with the man and we talked and played, and he brought delicious things to eat.... (Ileana, 10 Oct., 2019)

This paragraph from Ileana’s interview also enables the affirmation that the management of life in residential homes and the adoption processes that take place in these devices are based on a certain degree of the young women’s autonomy and self-management. The young women demonstrate their ability to evaluate institutional logic, appropriate these guidelines, interact with them and comply with the expectations of these devices while deploying practices that demonstrate their creativity and their ability to act. As Vaucher (2020) suggests, this concerns a relatively regulated autonomy, since it forms part of the institutional daily life that values behaviours that are consistent with institutional functioning. These institutional strategies that promote, or tolerate, self-regulation can be linked to neoliberal rationality that postulates choice as a fundamental value of government (Rose 2006) and that encourages people to subjectively review their life circumstances (Gaitán et al. 2015) and constitute themselves as subjects based on the governance of their capabilities, competencies and desires (Schuch 2008).

On the other hand, the new ties and social relations between peers also take on another character in light of the management processes that I seek to explain here. Indeed, in institutional care devices, together with the spaces of sociability that these devices institute, the relationships between the children and adolescents themselves result in modes in which girls and young women experience, understand, judge, and conduct themselves in relation to their future. In effect, knowledge of the experiences of other companions reflects on their own, generating a subjective reflection on themselves, on their kinship ties of origin and those that could be generated through adoption, as well as on their future and the possibilities of their ‘departure’ from these

institutions. In this assessment of the possible ways in which protection measures can be triggered – when adolescents get close to the age of majority (18 years old) –, while the experiences of their peers have some weight, their own biography also carries weight: the members of their family configuration at birth and their personal desires, as stated very clearly by 17-year-old Macarena, adopted at the age of 14 by a married couple:

[My mother] never changed, and I saw the kids who left with other parents, and it was like I wanted to give myself the opportunity to experience something better, knowing that my mother wasn't going to change.

R: What did you see that seemed good to you, that made you want to have the same experience?

M: The kids from the home told their stories, they were feeling bad and, suddenly, they began receiving visits, they went out, they came back happy, they told us about their families, and it was like... 'I want that, I don't want to stay locked up here, forever' (...) I didn't want to miss the opportunity to experience something better, knowing that my mother was not going to change, so I said, I want to give myself the opportunity and be adopted.

R: Well, because the options were those, be adopted or stay at the home.

M: Yes, because I wasn't going to go back to my mother, that was for sure, it was something that I already knew wasn't going to happen. And my brothers weren't going to take care of me either, so... I had to leave the home or live in it. (Macarena, 13 Dec., 2019)

In this case, she fully understood that her stay at the home would necessarily end when she was 18 years old and, therefore, it became necessary to manage her time and her future. Thus, as mentioned above, adolescents narrate experiences that allow them to think about forms of self-regulation, which sometimes occur with a certain autonomy from the group of adults, as noted with Ileana. While some protection policies seek to ensure that the children reflect on their life circumstances, make rational choices about them, and establish themselves as responsible, self-governing persons, in this search, it is also important to highlight that sometimes individual, psychological characteristics prevail in interventions that culminate in holding boys, girls and adolescents responsible for structural issues or definitions of protection policies that extend beyond their individual circumstances (Villalta & Borzese 2020; Gaitán et al. 2015; Llobet 2009; Fonseca et al. 2009). This individualising perspective reduces a social-political issue to a psychological problem, thus making the political nature of such interventions invisible, together with the contexts of inequality in which they take place.

Essentially, living in the residential home encourages young people to lead their lives in a certain way. It stipulates that upon reaching the age of majority a young person in these institutional care arrangements must manage to build an 'autonomous life project' composed of a job and a place to live. What is interesting to highlight here are the effects on the way these young women lead their lives, which are corroborated by how they transfer the norms that govern this institutional field to their family life, once they enter a new family group. Macarena, adopted at age 14, thus describes how the same 'autonomous life' project that she incorporated during her stay in the residential home, was present in the early days of her life with the adopting couple:

At 18... being at home, you always consider that at 18 you already have to do everything by yourself, because by 18 you have to have a job, continue studying if you can, and prepare yourself for where you're going to live. So, it was like... paying attention to all that and... and when I arrived here [her new family], my idea was to work at 16, continue studying, maybe look for an apartment. (Macarena, 13 Dec., 2019)

The practical precepts that are mobilised in these institutions and that serve to organise the lives of girls and young women within the residential home and orient their departure, also shape their subjectivity and forge

an understanding of themselves, of their unique characteristics, and of what an *adoptable* child means based on the expectations of one of the participants in the adoptive triad: the adopters. Hence, the young women, who defined themselves as 'adolescents' at the time of being adopted, throughout their experience – which was intersubjective –, conceived a way of understanding themselves in opposition to younger children who represent the ideal for adoptions. According to Camila, an 18-year-old girl adopted by a couple at the age of 13, adopters have a preference for younger children who 'they can take by the reins, adding customs or things', while adolescents are already 'assembled/equipped'⁹.

And it was also complicated to adopt a 13-year-old girl because normally everyone prefers smaller kids, who they can take by the reins, adding customs or things, and I was already upright and assembled [laughs] [...] Let's be clear, if the adoptee is a teenager, it is even more complex because you're already developed, you have an idea and you have loads of complexes and fears, and you go to a world where you don't know anyone, a family can accept you or not... (Camila, 5 Sept., 2019)

The idea that underlies Camila's story of younger children being malleable and incomplete – aspects that are also components of social representations of childhood that inform common sense –, and its opposite, the idea of the 'assembled' adolescent – their completed constitution and as bearers of tools and instruments – somehow suggest that the difficulties in the parenting process are greater in adoption of adolescents. Knowing that you are 'loaded with complexes and fears' is a form of judging and understanding yourself, and of submitting more rigorously to self-government during the beginning of relationships with adoptive parents. Thus, the expression 'a family can accept you as not...' reflects the feeling of vulnerability in which she found in herself, at least in the initial period of forming ties with the adoptive family. For her part, Macarena puts it in these terms:

R: And from the experience of being adopted, how would you explain it if you had to explain it to someone?

M: It's a complex thing but... [...] I think it's taking the risk of being adopted, you can't turn back [...] it's like going for a walk 'starkers' [naked] and seeing what life brings.

R: Well, you have to have a lot of courage, right?

M: Yes... it is something that I think... as you say, you need a lot of courage but... in the case of being in a home, it's an experience that must be lived, if there's no possibility of going with the family, it's an experience that must be lived. (Macarena, 13 Dec., 2019)

In short, young women actively participate in the construction of the outcomes of separation from their family environment within a limited range of alternatives that become even more limited when none of the members of the families of origin can assume responsibility for their care. The resolution of the process that began with the separation from their family groups, in many cases – as Macarena pointed out – ends in being 'trapped': the more or less forced departure from care facilities or inclusion in an adoptive family, which is even more pressing in the case of adolescents when they come of age. Thus, the way in which age is socially processed in this institutional setting is very significant: reaching adolescence – a category that the interviewees contrasted with younger children – means that those identified in this age group gain greater autonomy,

9 As a good judge of the institutional field, Camila's conceptualisation regarding the 'adoptive suitability' of people registered in official records as guardians for the purposes of adoption is not wrong. According to the statistical information provided by the national organization that compiles these registrations in said registries (*Dirección Nacional del Registro Único de Aspirantes a Guardas con Fines Adoptivos; Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos del año 2023* [National Directorate of the Single Registry of Aspirants as Guardians for Adoptive Purposes; Ministry of Justice and Human Rights 2023]), more than half of these potential guardians are concentrated in the age group of children from 1 to 5 years old, decreasing to almost single digits from the age of 9 onwards. See: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/justicia/adopcion>

becoming 'individuals' – situated in the contemporary notion of being the agents in their own lives and the relationships that have meaning for them (Cadoret 2012). This obscures how the institutional process itself constrains the alternatives and further places them in a position of vulnerability and insecurity – returning to Leinaweaver's (2009) analysis – or of bureaucratic violence, as postulated by Fonseca (2011c).

Final considerations

The decision to analyse the stories of adolescents who were adopted allows us to understand how adoption becomes 'a possible solution' (Fonseca 2019; Villalta & Giordia 2011), one that is desirable not only for those interviewed, but also for institutional agents. In this process, a linear domination is not imposed, it is not a question of the simple imposition of the norm, but rather – to paraphrase Foucault (2007) – the possible field of action of boys, girls and adolescents is structured, beginning by offering adoption as an alternative to the measure of being separated from their family group, and aligning their wishes, hopes and desires for themselves with government objectives, such as the proclaimed 'protection' of childhood. Thus, adoption is configured as one of the forms that 'departure' from these institutions takes within a limited range of options. The social processing according to age that occurs in this institutional field accounts for a childhood classification that further narrows the field of action for those who are considered 'adolescents'.

Based on the stories of the interviewees, I show that in these institutional care devices the relationships between boys, girls and adolescents themselves become an instrument of government, from which different experiences linked to the creation of ties with other adults are fostered and a subjective reflection operates on their wills, the management of their emotions, and their potential perception as *adoptable* subjects. Based on the experiences of their peers, boys, girls and adolescents understand the need to self-regulate their conduct within the home, to incorporate practical precepts in the configuration of their lives (maximised when they reach the age of majority) and to define what it is that they want for their lives and how to achieve it. In this sense, coexistence between peers is in itself an instrument of 'economic' government, since it uses the experiences of other boys, girls and adolescents to model conducts and discourage others. This work enables us to perceive how conditions are created for the emergence of certain ways of becoming a subject: both in an 'adoptable' child or adolescent, and in a young person who must graduate from these devices based on an 'autonomous life project'. Hence, a way of regulating the lives of children and adolescents emerges that uses their capacities for action and creativity, and, in certain situations, their vulnerability. Knowing that they could 'stay locked up' there – as Macarena suggests –, the mistreatment received by their peers or institutional agents, the discouraging horizon of coming of age (since they have no other network of relationships to embrace them), establishing relationships with adults outside their family groups without the supervision of institutional agents, together with the insecurity they feel when deciding to accept integrating into a new family through adoption, are all experiences of precarity that more clearly indicate the production of defenceless rather than 'assembled' subjects, as Camila suggests.

I am not suggesting ignorance of the capacity to create micro-resistances and ways of moving forward with their projects, as Aldana and Ileana reported, despite the techniques of power that seek to produce subordinate positions and reproduce asymmetric relationships, which reveal the permanence of certain logics linked to the tutelary complex of yesteryear. From their current biographical situations, these young women provided accounts of the different ways in which they overcame such experiences. As Rose states, 'Human beings are not the unified subjects of a coherent regime of government that produces persons in the form in which it dreams. On the contrary, they live their lives in a constant movement through different practices that subjectify them in different ways' (1998: 35). Based on the stories of these young women, a kaleidoscopic aspect can be reconstructed regarding the different modalities of the exercises of power that are employed in

the processes of child protection. Through these operations, the girls – now young women – were producing an understanding of adoption as a feasible alternative – given the few that existed –, while also constituting a way of understanding themselves and the social relations through which they were transiting. This enabled an active process that involved the 'distancing' (Leinaweaver 2008) of members of their families of origin – in some cases definitively – and kinning (Howell 2006) with other family groups.

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