Adoption return trips: Family tourism and the social meanings of money

Johanna Gustafsson
Linköping University, Sweden

Abstract
Through a focus on the planning and making of family adoption return trips, this paper explores how the social meanings of money are entangled with family-making practices and family holidays. Adoption return trips are a global phenomenon, and travel agencies offer tailored adoption return-trip packages marketed as a type of family tourism. The new trend towards conducting adoption return trips as a family when children are still young is growing and has implications for families’ finances because return trips are expensive endeavours. Still, families prioritise these trips, raising them above purely economic values so they stand out as ‘priceless’. The empirical material consists of interviews with 10 Swedish transnational adoptive families. The analyses show that family adoption return trips, despite their original features, are yet one more way of doing family holidaying. Money becomes an important contribution for understanding how family life is being done in and through parental, child and family-holiday ideals, as well as family intimacy.

Keywords
adoption return trips, children, doing family, family tourism, money

Introduction
The fact that family-making practices are intertwined with family holidaying has been acknowledged. Research shows, among other things, the connections between holiday consumption and money and the social construction of the family (cf. Cardell, 2015; Gram et al., 2018; Hall and Holdsworth, 2016). To further this discussion, and by drawing upon a theoretical framework acknowledging the idea that money is both produced by and productive of social relations (Zelizer, 2005), this qualitative article focuses on

Corresponding author:
Johanna Gustafsson, Department of Thematic Studies, Child Studies, Linköping University, Linköping 58183, Sweden.
Email: johanna.gustafsson@liu.se
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the social meanings that money is given when planning and conducting an adoption return trip.

Family adoption return trips are a growing travel industry. Some travel agencies in Sweden, and elsewhere, have specialised in return trips and offer tailored packages marketed as a type of family tourism; a ‘special experience for the whole family’ (https://lotustravel.se/restyp/adoptionsaterresor/ ACS:201005). According to the CEO of a Swedish travel agency, the advice to spend somewhat more money on a return trip than other trips is important. In this way, children can be kept in a good mood, which will make the trip successful (Travel Agency 1). A successful trip is important, not least due to the commercialised format within which such travel is framed. Families have high expectations. This was recently manifested in the Swedish television consumer show Plus, which featured a family with transnationally adopted children who demanded compensation from the travel agency. They had experienced their adoption return trip to China as unsuccessful because they were dissatisfied with the standard of the hotel and the cancelled visit to the child’s orphanage (SVT, 2015).

A family adoption return trip is an interesting example of family tourism because families use economic activities to create, maintain and negotiate intimacy and social ties, both within the family and in relation to the future of the child, the family, the trip and the children’s birth countries. The planning and making of an adoption return trip today is a time-consuming and expensive endeavour and money is a complex, and deciding, factor for adoptive families who want to make an adoption return trip. The ways in which families use their money indicate that the meaning of money is broader than its purely economic value. The investment in the family return trip also has a greater emotional purpose that cannot be measured in economic terms. By investigating how return trips are made by families through the use and spending of money, it becomes possible to understand the ways in which the values of money and emotions turn the trip into a family adoption return trip with touristy elements, while also doing family togetherness. Understanding the social meanings of money (Zelizer, 2005) when planning and making an adoption return trip may also provide insights into how families are ‘done’ in and through the practices of family holidays.

**Literature review**

Tourism consumption is often conceptualised as a rationalised activity outside the realm of everyday life (Su, 2010). However, as shown by Hall and Holdsworth (2016), tourism consumption is entangled with everyday practices, family life and relations. From this perspective, holiday money is not ‘simply’ money but also a social matter that influences the everyday life of families (Cardell, 2015). Money is embedded in economic and social relations, as in holidaying (Desforges, 2001; Su, 2010). The ways in which holiday money is used and spent, for example, through shopping, can also become a way of negotiating family identity, relations and belonging (Powers, 2017; Wagner, 2015).

There is a lack of knowledge about how children and their parents approach and use money in relation to their tourism experiences, and family holiday research has mainly focused on family members’ different roles in holiday decision-making processes (Therkelsen, 2010). Today, family holiday planning has become a shared project between
all family members, and children are perceived as having more influence than previously on family decision-making (Gram, 2007). Up until recently, research on family holiday consumption mainly focused on adult perspectives (Stilling Blichfeldt et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2010). This is why there is a need for further recognition of children’s positions (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2014), because they have both a direct and an indirect impact on family holiday consumption (Cardell, 2015; Gram, 2007; Wu et al., 2010).

As children initiate, gather information, evaluate and make actual decisions, just like their parents, they are active holiday consumers. Thus, the decision-making role is not only held by the person who possesses the economic power, the parent, but also by the person who possesses knowledge about the activity/product, that is, the child. In this way, the child becomes involved in the family economy (Wu et al., 2010). This means that, although children are not necessarily always in positions where they can easily access money, they are involved with how holiday money is used and spent (Cardell, 2015).

The rationality of family holiday decision-making processes is not clear-cut and does need problematisation. This is because, as argued by Therkelsen (2010), decision-making processes have indistinct beginnings and ends, and both children and their parents play undetermined, shifting roles in these processes. The outcome is that family holiday consumption often depends on compromises between children and parents, whereby each has to accommodate the other (Carr, 2006). Focusing on holiday consumption decision-making processes as shared therefore enables more complex and heterogeneous insights into family holidays (Obrador, 2012). This is especially important if family holidaying is considered to be an integral part of family life, and how family life is performed and done in practice (Gram et al., 2018; Haldrup and Larsen, 2003; Hall and Holdsworth, 2016).

Although viewed as a way of easing the tensions of everyday life, family holidays intertwine with everyday sacrifices and are sources of stress, conflict, disappointment and frustration (Hall and Holdsworth, 2016). ‘Ups and downs’ are thus part of family holiday consumption, just like any other family practice (Gram et al., 2018: 194). ‘The downs’ however often require legitimisation. ‘Downs’ caused by outside factors are usually dealt with more easily than problems, such as irritation, caused by for example, the intensive time spent together (Gram et al., 2018). Irritation can also be explained by the fact that the children are tired or miss things from home. ‘Downs’ are sometimes dealt with, after the trips, through humour by turning poor experiences into good stories. This in turn creates a sense that, in hindsight, the downs of a holiday can not only be turned into a good story but also become signs of family togetherness (Gram et al., 2018; see also Cardell, 2015).

In the limited research on family adoption return trips, the concept of family and identity has often held a central position (Chin Ponte et al., 2010; Gustafsson et al., 2019; Yngvesson, 2003), whereas aspects such as money have been more or less overlooked. An American study, in which the researcher joined three adoptive families with young children on their return trip to China, reveals culture clashes, especially since divergent economic realities were experienced during the trip (Powers, 2011). To avoid the difficulties, the families involved themselves in activities in the birth countries that made them feel comfortable – often the easily accessible and consumable parts, such as shopping for souvenirs. In this way, they distanced themselves from the things they found...
uncomfortable about the visit, which most often turned out to be poverty (Powers, 2011, 2017). Even though the study shows that the parents’ desire was to integrate their children’s birth culture, in this case Chinese, into their family lives, family consumption during the trip reinforced the families’ and the children’s American, rather than Chinese, identities and family bonds (Powers, 2011, 2017).

The findings from Powers’ study (2011, 2017) could thus be compared with the study by Gram et al. (2018), as they both indicate that family holiday consumption, and the ‘downs’ experienced during such activities, has the potential to strengthen family ties. As such, family adoption return trips are both similar to and different from ordinary family tourism. Comparing the two research fields, it is interesting to note that, despite the obvious relevance of money, both seem to have neglected to examine the mingling of money with intimacy when making a family adoption return trip or going on an ordinary family holiday. Based on ideas which acknowledge that the planning and making of a family holiday falls under the realms of family practices (Morgan, 2011), and that the family is an important site for reproducing the social meanings of money (Zelizer, 2005), this study will reveal how money becomes integral to family holidays and family life. Taking into account the complexities and tensions described within family holiday and family adoption return trip research, and the consumer values connected with them, this article sets out to explore how children and parents talk about money, intimacy and social relations when conducting a family adoption return trip. The study begins by drawing on the theory of Child Studies which acknowledges children as competent, active actors and contributors to family consumer practices (Sparrman and Sandin, 2012).

Theory: A social approach to money

This article is situated at the intersection between travel, money and doing family life through investigating a social approach to money in practice (Zelizer, 1994, 2005). This means acknowledging the mingling of things that in everyday life are described as incompatible – the organisation of economic activities and the maintenance of intimate social relations (Zelizer, 2005). Following Zelizer, the idea is that economic activities do not necessarily corrupt or degrade intimacy; this mingling happens all the time and can create strong ties, as both earlier research has indicated and this article will show. To describe how this mingling takes place between family members in practice, and how it instructs decisions about how, when, where and why to spend money, I will use the term ‘negotiation’.

From Zelizer’s (2005) point of view, ‘economic activities’, which include the use of both monetary and non-monetary values, are entangled with how people construct interpersonal relations and ways of life. This means that money, in a broader sense, is both constructive of and constructed by social relations (see also Zelizer, 1994) and is given social meanings beyond economic values. An important ingredient in this process is the social and cultural ‘earmarking’ of money (Cardell and Sparrman, 2012). It is therefore important to explore the values that money is given by people themselves, as well as how it shapes them and their intimate relations – in this case, children, parents and families who are planning and conducting adoption return trips – as it can give us important, and unexpected, insights into the lives of both adoptive families and family tourism. In this
text, money involves the spending of household incomes and savings, tourism consumption, caring for children, gifts that send the right message and the provision of an adoption return trip for the sake of love.

Parents, children, foster parents and orphanages all earmark money. This means that they distinguish different sums of money from each other (Zelizer, 1994) by deliberating about what money should, and could, be used for during different stages of the trips. This describes how money is subjected to moral critique, guided by values that influence the process of financial decision-making. The morality of money then emerges as individuals make decisions about which sums of money to spend on what, while also considering how and for what purpose the money was earned to begin with (Wherry, 2017). Through such earmarking processes, categories of money multiply and create boundaries between, and within, intimate social relations (Zelizer, 2005). As will be shown in the analysis, people thus manage their relations, and their expectations of these relations, through how they use money (cf. Wherry, 2017). This becomes obvious when the families undertake what Zelizer (2005) calls ‘relational work’ by differentiating and negotiating between the obligations, rights and intimate transactions specific to each relationship. Hence, the secret is to match the right sort of monetary payment with the social transaction at hand.

Because intimacy is entangled with such transactions, a high level of trust and risk is implied (Zelizer, 2005). Consequently, people worry about doing the right thing and try to avoid moral failures by assessing the outcomes of how their economic activities are likely to impact upon their social relations (Wherry, 2017). This means that they also continuously avoid the confusion that would arise from mixing the ‘wrong’ kind of money with the ‘wrong’ relationship. Hence, different interpersonal relations involve different forms of intimacy and the level of intimacy in a relationship is displayed, or in Zelizer’s (2005) word ‘purchased’, through how economic activities are adjusted (see also Zelizer, 1994).

Accordingly, this study will demonstrate the influence of social life on how money is organised by families making adoption return trips. Zelizer’s work has had a major impact on various research fields; nevertheless, she asks for more empirically situated research on money in practice (Zelizer, 2012). It is important to acknowledge intimate transactions because they are not trivial, they have macroeconomic consequences – not least on family tourism. Drawing on Zelizer, and the notion that intimacy and economics both mingle and draw apart, combined with child studies and family tourism, this article approaches money as a heterogeneous and social concept. This means acknowledging not only the social meanings of money, but also the dynamics of its use and its entanglement with values such as adoption, family life and tourism.

**Methodology: Interviewing children and parents**

The empirical material stems from a wider research project on family adoption return trips and consists of interviews with ten Swedish transnational adoptive families that were carried out during the period 2015 to 2018. Since more than a third of the transnational adoptions during the 21st century in Sweden have involved children from China (https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/artiklar/2018/allt-fler-adopterar-styvbarn/ACS:201005), families were recruited through travel agencies specialising in return trips
to China, and the Swedish adoption agency *Adoptionscentrum*, which mediates adoptions from a large number of countries. Families who contacted the travel agencies received information about the research project through an email sent by the agency, while *Adoptionscentrum* posted information on its Facebook sites as well as distributing leaflets during meetings arranged by the organisation. Information distributed by *Adoptionscentrum* invited all transnational adoptive families, regardless of their children’s birth countries. The families participating in this study were all planning to make a trip, and consist of ethnically white, middle-class or upper-middle-class single parents and heterosexual couples with children adopted from Asia, South America and Africa (Families 1–10). Twenty-six interviews were conducted with a total of 10 focus children aged 6 to 13 years, five siblings aged 7 to 15 years and 17 parents, both mothers and fathers (Gustafsson et al., 2019).

As adoption return trips are usually planned over a long period of time, the aim was to interview each family twice; firstly, while planning the return trip, the before-interviews, and secondly on their arrival back from the trip, what I have called the after-interviews. However, some families had to reschedule their trips due to private issues, and some families did not respond to the request for the after-interview. As children are acknowledged in this study as competent cultural and social actors, consumers and tourists (Sparrman and Sandin, 2012), children and parents are approached as equal actors during the interviews (cf. Danby et al., 2011).

The interviews were set up in two ways: (1) family interviews and (2) individual interviews. The idea was to capture the dynamics and interactions between family members as well as to give voice to children and parents individually (Reczek, 2014). The multiple forms of interviewing were not applied to gain a ‘truer’ or more holistic image of the world; rather, the strategy gives a nuanced understanding of both the return trip and money (Reczek, 2014).

The interview setups required the interviewer to smoothly move in and out of loyalties and between children and parents (cf. Reczek, 2014). The interviews required careful methodological and ethical considerations, especially the child interviews, in order to avoid potential asymmetries between the interviewer and the child. Children had the opportunity to influence the interview situation by deciding whether they wanted to be interviewed by themselves or together with a sibling or parent. They could also stop the interview whenever they wanted to. The interviewer spent time with the children before the interviews, and the children were interviewed first, all to make enough space for them to express themselves and to be sensitive to the fullness of their voices, including silences (Spyrou, 2016). This became especially important in family interviews after the trips, when children participated in and shaped the conversations but did not necessarily talk to the same extent as their parents.

Video and audio recordings were made, and the recorded material amounts to approximately 20 hours of audio recordings and 9 hours of video recordings. The interviewing took place in the family homes and the time spent there ranged from 3 hours to an entire day, thus giving the interviews an ethnographic character (Gustafsson et al., 2019). The researcher took extensive fieldnotes and wrote a summary after each family visit (Emerson et al., 2011). In addition to this, the material also includes family travel diaries and two interviews with travel agencies.
The material has been transcribed, manually coded, sorted and converted into visual, thematic maps (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Rather than being a linear process with fixed analytical stages, the analytical work has been flexible and abductive in the sense that it has alternated between inductive and deductive approaches (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018). The thematic maps made it possible to work closely with the material, inductively, and to sift out recurring themes. Three broad themes were developed: memory, motives and money, of which money is the focus of this article. The initial analysis suggested a more specific focus on the social aspects of money; therefore, a more deductive approach was applied to search the material theoretically from the top down. Hence, repeated readings of the material were made, with a focus on both implicit and explicit accounts of the mingling of money and social and material relations. The empirical examples quoted in the analysis are unique in terms of direct content but have been chosen to illustrate recurring sub-themes about money, such as relational work, family doing and how shopping is a way of doing family life.

**Analysis**

**Purchasing adoption return trips**

Planning and saving money for family holidays is often part of everyday life routines. It is an economic practice that involves both budgeting and decision-making (Hall and Holdsworth, 2016). As the cost of an adoption return trip is high, most adoptive parents in this study had put a lot of effort into saving up for the trip, taking out loans and planning all the details. As mentioned earlier, the CEO of one of the Swedish travel agencies that organises family adoption return trips said that it is important to plan for spending more money on a family adoption return trip than usual family trips, for the sake of keeping the children in a good mood and making the trip successful. He also said that they recommend parents to spoil their children because it is important to avoid friction, arguments and tensions during a return trip (Travel Agency 1). Hence, adoptive parents are presented with the notion that a big investment goes hand in hand with an ideal, happy family experience and that the more money they spend, the fewer ‘downs’ (Gram et al., 2018) they risk facing.

Even though it is the parents who manage the financing of the trips, the children in this study are aware of the high costs of making them. During a child interview with 12-year-old Minna, who was going to travel to Colombia with her family, she said: ‘It costs a lot and it’s a long way to travel, so it really costs a lot’ (Family 8). After their family return trip to Ethiopia, 7-year-old Jacob was asked whether he would like to go back. His quick answer was ‘of course’, then he added, ‘when you’ve earned some more money’, while looking at his mother (Family 3).

In a before-interview with Louise and Karl, parents of 13-year-old Filippa, they said they had bought a 2-week, tailor-made trip to China. The trip was planned by a travel agency and the family later said that they had spent approximately 9500€ on it. When asked if they had had to save money, Louise and Karl said that they had limited options when it came to financing the trip. Karl described family adoption return trips as projects that require long-term planning, that is, savings. In this case, however, Filippa had
previously shown no interest in making the trip, so the parents had not saved up enough
money. Instead, the family used Karl’s pension insurance. Karl explains that, even though
the money might be needed in the future, this trip is the most important thing to the fam-
ily here and now. Later, Karl says that his biggest hope for the trip is that it will improve
Filippa’s self-esteem and provide her with information about her past. He also empha-
sises that the trip will generate experiences that will be ‘cool’ to share as a family in the
future (Family 9).

As well as viewing the trip as an opportunity for the children to reconnect with their
birth countries (cf. Chin Ponte et al., 2010), many parents in this study expressed the
same hopes as Louise and Karl, which suggests that the trips have several purposes and
aims, one being the future benefits of this joint family experience. This makes the deci-

dion-making process rather intricate as it involves the wishes of both children and par-
ents, the family’s future and recommendations given to adoptive parents in the Swedish
adoption context (Gustafsson et al., 2019). This complexity is revealed in Louise and
Karl’s discussion, which indicates that not going on an adoption return trip was never
really an option. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the parents also com-
pared the financing of the trip with the financing of the adoption itself by saying: ‘that’s
also something you take out loans for’.

This suggests that money earmarked for a return trip differs from the money allocated
to a regular family holiday because the parents distinguish between different payments
in order to make a statement about the importance of the return trip. Even though money
enables the trip, it is emotional values and positive family outcomes that serve to justify
the expense. The trip is, in Zeliger’s (2012) words, priceless to the parents, especially
because what is emphasised is the effort required to even realise the trip, rather than the
fact that it becomes an economic loss for the family. Despite future economic uncertainty
and the notable fact that the consumption of the return trip is achieved at the expense of
other extremely important things, the sacrifice made by Karl is gently toned down in
favour of the family value of the trip; an upcoming family experience that is not really
measurable in terms of money. We can thus imagine that the sacrifices made by the par-
ents become a symbol of their investment in the family. The purchase of the trip is an
economic choice that confirms the high level of intimacy between the parents and their
child, and is a way to ascribe further meaning to the family relationship that is made pos-

sible by special money. However, it is also the intimacy of the relationship that allows for
this money to be invested in the return trip to begin with (see Zeliger, 2005).

**Imagining family intimacy through holiday consumption**

In family discussions about consumption-related practices following their return from
the trip, talk about ‘value for money’ becomes important (cf. Desforges, 2001). As
opposed to parents’ talk before the trips, when money was almost invisible, now the talk
is about high and low prices, knowledge of good bargains and where to go shopping for
meals (families 3, 4, 7, 9, 10). One mother, Yvonne, states that her son was not even
interested in the trip until he was told that one could travel there just for the sake of the
shopping (Family 1). From this perspective, the spending of money is not only an impor-
tant part of the trips, in some sense it can be said to saturate and even motivate them. This
makes adoption return trips similar to regular family holidays because they, too, consist of various consumption-related sub-decisions that are made both before and during the trip (see Stilling Blichfeldt et al., 2011).

During the before-interviews, many children said that they were looking forward to buying clothes (see families 8, 9), toys and souvenirs (see family 6) and/or trying different restaurants and food (see families 1, 3) during the trip. Twelve-year-old Minna, for example, said that she wanted to shop for clothes during the trip because it was cheaper to buy fashion items there (family 8). Thirteen-year-old Filippa said that she wanted to buy cheap designer items in China, but also that she was a bit unsure whether these items were fake or not (family 9). The children’s ideas of treating themselves with items purchased at a reduced price are about making their money go further (cf. Hall and Holdsworth, 2016). In this way, children are competent consuming tourists because, not only do they understand the value of money, but their reasoning also indicates that they have knowledge about the value of consumable goods. This is further reinforced by the fact that some children say they were saving money from their weekly allowances and birthdays in order to shop for such things during the trips (see family 6, 8, 9). Hence, children earmarked their money by making it more valuable during the upcoming trip (cf. Cardell, 2015).

During the trips, children and parents mainly did things that were already known to them. For example, they chose a safe track when shopping and went to branded places like Starbucks, Haagen-Dazs, MacDonald’s, Subway and Nike. During a family interview after the return trip, one family explained that they got bored and homesick one day, especially the daughter, because there was nothing to do in the town where they were staying and the weather was very hot, so as a solution, they decided to go to Starbucks. According to the mother, her daughter Astrid then said: ‘oh, how lucky I am you got me away from here, I don’t want to live here’ (Family 7).

In this example involving Astrid, several aspects, both tangible and intangible, such as mood, the weather and the lack of attractions are used to explain a poor family experience during the trip, which led to homesickness and eventually a visit to Starbucks where the family could reunite and regroup. The family talk about Starbucks and Astrid’s expressed feelings also turn the poor experience in the birth country into a good family story (cf. Gram et al., 2018). In another family interview, the 7-year-old boy Jacob proudly displayed his purchases from his trip to Ethiopia. He brought out a painting he had bought at an Italian restaurant that was popular among tourists. When asked if many tourists visited this restaurant Jacob said: ‘Yeah, but so were we,’ (family 3).

While it seems to have been quite obvious to Jacob that he and his family were tourists among other tourists at the Italian restaurant, the story involving Astrid, on the other hand, illustrates how the consumption experience during the return trip became a tool for negotiating family identity (see also Powers, 2011, 2017) and bonds. These stories are important because they reveal that children’s consumption during the return trips become symbols, not only of their temporary stay in their birth countries, and their tourist identities ‘over there’, but also of their Swedishness and family belonging. Therefore, they reveal that children do engage in relational work, setting boundaries by talking about the return trip as a tourist experience and creating connectedness within the family (cf. Zelizer, 2005).
Negotiations involving family identity were also conducted through the parents’ talk about the spending of money during the trip. In the travel diary of Karl’s family, who went to China, the father uses the explicit value of money to describe the low cost of eating, shopping and getting around in China. At one point, Karl describes a visit he and his family made to a great mall, famous for its low prices. He describes how his family haggled a lot, to the extent that they found it embarrassing because they were not used to it. He then describes how the family tactics became to haggle the price down to 25% of what the sellers were demanding and that they always succeeded. He then sums up by saying that the family had a great time and that his wife and daughter looked extremely happy with their purchases at the end of the day (Travel Diary 3).

Here, this father positions his family, the ‘we’, both as outsiders to the Chinese community and as Swedes. They are outsiders who finally managed to understand how consumption works ‘there’ by defining the sellers, getting bargains and ending up with a happy experience. This indicates that consumption during the trip becomes important because it is an opportunity to spend quality time together as a family. The shared learning about how to consume becomes a way of doing family and intimacy and is also a situated practice within which family members construct and negotiate the meanings of a successful family vacation (cf. Hall and Holdsworth, 2016; see also families 3, 4, 7). What seems equally important, however, is the fact that the experience involved spending as little money as possible and getting value for the money that was spent (cf. Desforges, 2001).

In the stories told by these families, money becomes central for several reasons. Talk about low prices illustrates the positive sides of the return trip. It is the ultimate way of reassuring others that one truly got ‘value for money’. From this perspective, consumption also seems valuable as a way of balancing the more serious and sensitive parts of the trips. Spending time together, shopping and enjoying the touristy parts of the trip allows relaxation and vacation time together as a family. It becomes a way of defending themselves and their family boundaries through shopping (cf. Zelizer, 2005). These activities also enable family members to participate on equal terms without emphasising the child’s separate relation to the country. Family holiday consumption, and the spending of money, are thus important for the construction of family intimacy (Zelizer, 2005; see also Hall and Holdsworth, 2016), and for reconfiguring family identity.

**Treats and money as relational work**

Although an adoption return trip has similarities with regular family holidaying, the purpose of the travelling differs in some ways because it is a trip to the adopted child’s birth country (Gustafsson et al., 2019). While some families considered it important to meet with people connected to the child’s past and had made plans to do so (Families, 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10), other families had no such intention, they just wanted to experience the country (Families 2, 7). Where such meetings occurred, parents were responsible for arranging them, even though the children also participated in the discussions about them. On returning home from the trip, the families showed the researcher what they had received from early-care individuals and talked about how they had felt during the meetings. It turns out that economic activities (Zelizer, 2005) are central to many of these stories about meetings with early-care individuals.
Orphanage visits and meetings with early-care individuals are described by travel agencies as very important parts of the trips and, as Powers (2011) (p. 140) states, they often become ‘a stand in for biographical knowledge’, a way to fill in the gaps in the child’s past (see also Chin Ponte et al., 2010). However, they are also a way for adoptive parents to show appreciation to those who once cared for their children. One mother in this study, for example, explained that the main goal of the trip was to meet with her son’s foster mother so that she could thank her for taking such good care of him (Family 1). This means that orphanage visits and meetings with foster families are associated with expectations, but also with the potential risk that the meetings will not live up to such expectations.

After their return trip, mother Jill described the meeting with her daughter’s foster family as the best part of the trip because the foster parents told them everything about their daughter as a baby and shared their theories about her unknown biological parents. They had lunch at the orphanage together with the foster mother, and described how the foster mother had been very intimate. For example, she fed their 8-year-old daughter, Simona, during the meal, which Simona herself said she found a bit strange. On top of paying a visiting fee, Simona’s family also gave gifts and money to the foster parents and, together with the other travelling families, gave money to the orphanage (Family 4).

Elisabeth, mother of 7-year-old Stina, described their rather close connection to the orphanage, how they had hung around with the staff and children. Like many other parents in this study, Elisabeth said that it was important to travel back while Stina was still young, so that the staff would remember her. Elisabeth also said that if she had not seen the positive sides of the orphanage, she and Stina would only have gone there for a short visit and guided tour. In this case, however, the mother and daughter took the entire orphanage, consisting of approximately 20 children plus staff members, on a day trip to an amusement park. This visit was paid for by Elisabeth and included a chartered bus, entrance fees and lunch (Family 10).

These stories illustrate that the boundaries around the relations between the families and early-care individuals are partly negotiated through money. While the overall aim of the economic activities is to demonstrate care and appreciation to those who once cared for their child, the involvement is ambiguous because, at the same time as they are a token of gratitude, they are also interwoven with social expectations. The early-care individuals are expected to show engagement, add to the history of the child and contribute to an overall positive experience. Hence, the families’ imaginings and expectations of genuine engagement also instruct their consumption (cf. Wherry, 2017; Zelizer, 2005; see also Desforges, 2001; Su, 2010). The experiences at an orphanage can also become a way of doing family because the meetings with early-care individuals add to the child’s baby story. Visiting the orphanage, then, not only connects parents and children to the child’s past and people from it, but also provides a deeper context for building/creating a family history (cf. Powers, 2011).

Similar expectations, although with a different outcome, are explicitly described in one of the travel diaries. The mother writing the dairy explains that the orphanage, and its staff, were in a poor condition, which made the family sad and disappointed. The mother describes how a woman from the staff asked the parents for a donation of money, a request they turned down because: ‘If we had spotted the slightest glimpse of hope at
the orphanage, that the manager wanted to make things better for the children, we would immediately have reconsidered our decision not to give anything other than fruit and sweets. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find that reason’ (Travel Diary 1).

Because the orphanage did not live up to expectations, and because, rather than being blissful, the experience involved anger, despair and disappointment, the financial donation was withheld. Due to her concerns about doing the right thing, the mother assesses the outcome of a potential economic transaction (cf. Wherry, 2017; Zelizer, 2005) and decides to give fruit and sweets instead. These are gifts that we can imagine are intended for the children at the orphanage rather than for the orphanage or its staff. What is interesting about this story is not just the money and how the withholding of money becomes a symbol of a disappointing family experience at an orphanage. It is also about how money is intertwined with the moral adjustments made by the family that dissolve, rather than strengthen, their ties to the orphanage, its staff and the child’s history as a baby.

This kind of deliberation about matching the right sort of monetary payment with the social transaction at hand (Zelizer, 2005) was also undertaken in the talk of another family, where the father, Gunnar, said that he was a bit sceptical before the meeting with the foster family because: ‘I wondered if there was something shady, I mean, they got paid for being foster parents at the time, 19€ a month, and 1 kilo of sugar that they put in the formula, so we thought they had been paid too little and wanted more from us’ (Family 4). It turned out, however, that the foster parents gave money to their daughter instead of asking for money. ‘And then we were ashamed’, Gunnar said, referring to his initial thoughts (Family 4).

Apart from illustrating how the complex mingling of intimacy and economic activities serves as a valuation of an orphanage visit, this story further reveals how relational work becomes highly important and that money can serve as a moral compass and a way to negotiate what it is appropriate to give and receive within a caring relationship (cf. Zelizer, 2005). The experience eventually became a successful one for Gunnar and his family, partly because money was never requested. This, in combination with the gift given to their daughter, then becomes a symbol of a genuine relationship between the foster parents and the child.

Concluding discussion

Zelizer’s (2005) notion of ‘the social meanings of money’ has made it possible to explore how, and which, money shapes the adoption return trip and how children’s and parents’ talk about, and use of, money creates family. The value that money is given spreads out across what it is used for in relation to the trip. Children mainly talk about money in relation to enjoyment, focusing on shopping and consumption. This has a tendency to turn the trip into more or less any holiday. However, the children’s talk about money before, during and after the trips shows that they are a part of, and involved with, the family economy and how holiday money is being spent (cf. Cardell, 2015; Wu et al., 2010). Parents’ talk about money is strongly linked to the moral dimensions that motivate which money can be used for what. The different ways in which the trips themselves are paid for shows how the cost and the financial value of the trip are both immeasurable and
indisputable to parents. The price of the adoption trip, and the fact that it must be paid for, is more or less unquestionable, even if the trip empties the retirement account. The moral values connected to money also become visible in relation to orphanage visits. Money is used in these situations to create, maintain and/or disclose social and emotional relations with foster parents, orphanages and staff.

Focusing the analysis on the mingling of intimacy and economic activities during this specific type of family holidaying – family adoption return trips – contributes insights into how the ‘ideal adoptive family’ on holiday is being constituted. For example, money becomes a unifying entity when children and parents discuss it. This mutual process even creates a bond of togetherness when the family invests both money and emotions (cf. Sparrman et al., 2016).

In the sense of ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ described by Gram et al. (2018), the analysis has shown that adoption return trips both resemble and differ from regular family holidays. However, the ‘downs’ during a return trip seem to have less to do with internal family problems caused by the intense time spent together than with how they relate to external frictions and conflicts connected to the birth country. For example, the families highlight the lack of available activities, unwanted weather conditions and poor experiences at orphanages as explanations for homesickness, feelings of discomfort and dissatisfaction. And, as shown, such ‘downs’ in mood are often solved by spending money. The families, both children and parents, in retelling the return trips’ shared moments of ‘downs’, seem to be bringing the family members closer together as a family, rather than bringing the child closer to her/his birth country.

Drawing on family tourism and child studies, in combination with the theoretical framework of the social meanings of money, this study suggests that, not only can family adoption return trips be seen and understood as an example of family holidaying, but also that family holiday money and family adoption return trip money negotiates how one becomes and makes a family. That is, families’ mingling of intimacy and economic activities while holidaying contributes to our understanding of yet one more way of shaping holiday, parental, child and family ideals. It is important to note that children are always part of how families are constructed and how the values of the family, money and even parenthood, are constituted (cf. Sparrman et al., 2016). This is equally true when studying family holidaying or, as in this case, adoption return trips.

The argument is that it is precisely this complex combination of travel, money and intimacy that demonstrates how adoption return trips are an integral part of adoptive families’ everyday lives, as the trip is negotiated before it is made, while it is occurring and after it has been completed. To understand family holidays, the analysis shows the importance of including both children and parents in research because this broadens our understandings, in this case of adoption return trips. However, the study also contributes to our understanding of contemporary family holidaying in general, by displaying the heterogeneity of what a family holiday, and a family, might be.

Finally, from a broader perspective, these stories also reveal that intimate transactions are not trivial in any sense because they have macroeconomic consequences in generating cash flows between rich and poor countries; adoption payments, global travelling, return trip payments, gifts, donations and local hospitality consumption. Hence, they
reinforce inequalities between countries and people (cf. Zelizer, 2005; see also Powers, 2011). However, the economic challenges presented by some of the parents in this study also reveal the global reality as somewhat messy, and perhaps even more complex.

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**Data availability statement**
The data can be found at Department of Thematic Studies – Child Studies, Linköping University, Sweden, only on special grounds through the author.

**Ethical review**
The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board of Linköping University (Reg. no. 2015/34131)

**ORCID iD**
Johanna Gustafsson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0741-1761

**Note**
1. The study follows the general ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) and has been approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board of Linköping University (Reg. no. 2015/34131).

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**Author biography**

Johanna Gustafsson is a PhD student at The Department of Thematic Studies, Child Studies, Linköping University, Sweden. Gustafsson is working on her thesis about adoption return trips conducted by families with young children. She is combining theories from child and childhood studies, tourism studies and adoption research with the aim of exploring and challenging the ways in which we think of adoption return trips today. She has a special interest in child and family consumption and tourism.