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What price a child? Commodification and Australian adoption practice 1850–1950

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ABSTRACT

The issue of premiums has always proved problematic for advocates of benevolent adoption for whom the involvement of money tainted an exchange that was meant to be grounded in love. This paper argues that the shifting relationship between supply and demand has meant that there has always been a market in children and that adoption was one of the more prominent mechanisms used to regulate that exchange. Drawing on a database of 25000 advertisements placed in Australian newspapers during the so-called century of the child, it analyses the ways in which children were rendered desirable in a competitive market. Analysing the more than 3000 advertisements in which it was made clear that money, known at the time as a premium, was to change hands, it casts new light on the commodification process involved in adoption, identifying a mismatch between the preferences of those seeking and those needing to dispose of children. It identifies a market that was highly responsive to the environment in which it was operating and proved remarkably resilient in the face of the increasing regulation of adoption. By viewing adoption through the lens of the market, it questions the notion that the 'best interests of the child' have always necessarily prevailed.

1. Introduction

The model of adoption practised in the West today is both comparatively modern, dating only from the late nineteenth century, and regionally specific in its emphasis on the 'best interests of the child' as the key motivating factor. In the broader and much longer history of adoption, in both Ancient and Asian societies, the desire to provide an heir to safeguard a family's financial and political interests was central (Lindsay, 2009; Wolf & Huang, 1980). While the possibility that adoption might be advantageous to the child, and meet the affective needs of the childless, was not discounted, the transaction was understood in instrumental rather than altruistic terms (Goody, 1969). Advocates of the now dominant altruistic model of adoption position their practice in sharp contrast to such notions of transaction and exchange, arguing that the legally controlled process by which strangers are made kin is an emotional act from which the influence of the market has been expunged (Modell, 2002, p. 4).

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Contemporary debates as to who should be entitled to adopt a child have destabilised such assumptions. Arguing that the focus on altruistic adoption had been used to place barriers in the way of non-heterosexual and other non-normative partners adopting a child, American legal scholar Amanda Pustilnik (2002) advanced what she called a 'counter-history' of adoption, positioning the era of legislation, regulation and professional control as a temporary disruption of a much longer history of contractual exchange. Part of her evidence lay in the newspaper advertisements offering or seeking children for adoption which long predated the introduction of formal adoption statutes and coexisted with legal adoption for much of its history. This paper draws upon a similar source base in Australia to question assumptions about the rise and dominance of altruistic adoption in an environment in which the practice has been highly regulated since the early years of the twentieth century, and a private market was assumed not to exist (Marshall & McDonald, 2001). However, as the wider study of which this paper is a part has shown, adoption has always been a market which professional regulators have never been able to fully contain (Quartly, Swain, & Cuthbert, 2013). Using the recently developed national newspaper archive (TROVE, 2008), the article analyses the advertisements which it argues constituted the public face of the adoption market, providing an alternative means through which both relinquishing and prospective parents were able to organise an exchange. Central to contemporary debates as to who should be eligible to adopt a child, both in Australia and beyond, are concerns that unregulated adoption would render children commodities able to be bought and sold in the market. By focusing on that subsection of advertisements in which the exchange of money was made explicit, the article is able to study commodification in practice, identifying the factors that were believed to render a child attractive to potential purchasers.

2. Adoption advertisements

'Want ads' constitute the oldest form of classified advertisements, dating back to the early years of the eighteenth century. Published initially as a service to readers rather than a source of revenue, they grew in volume in US and British markets from the 1830s and were increasingly grouped under categories for ease of access. Over time the classified columns came to be understood as a 'voluntary marketplace' (Lorimor, 1977, pp. 17–18) through which buyers and sellers could meet. They also provided, as Karl Christian Führer (2012, p. 74) has argued, 'an opportunity for individuals to address an anonymous mass in private matters'. Australian newspapers displayed a similar pattern, with the number of classified advertisements rising rapidly from the mid-nineteenth century. Adoption advertisements were located in almost half of the newspapers surveyed, including all the major daily newspapers published in capital cities, and many regional newspapers as well. The proportion of newspapers containing such advertisements varied by jurisdiction, however, with Victoria the lowest at 16%, and South Australia the highest at 57%. The advertisements were scattered across a range of classification categories although most commonly clustering under such non-specific headings as miscellaneous, public notices, popular cash or personal. Like the personal advertisements studied by Harry Cocks (2009, p. 4) adoption advertisements provide an insight into a phenomenon, in this case the traffic in infants, 'hidden in plain sight' on the back, or in some cases, the front pages of the newspapers.

The model of adoption introduced by legislation passed in most states of Australia from the 1920s, and increasingly controlled by the new profession of social work, presented itself

as altruistic, designed to counter an older, darker practice which involved a monetary exchange. 'If a person wants the companionship of a child in his or her home, that should be enough', an early newspaper article in support of benevolent adoption argued. 'Surely a child is a valuable enough possession, and anyone who really loves children will not need any money with them' ('Child Adoption in Tasmania', 1925, p. 3). Most histories of adoption (Herman, 2008; Homrighaus, 2001; Keating, 2009; Marshall & McDonald, 2001) take a somewhat teleological approach, positioning the model that dominated practice from the 1940s through to the 1970s, when adoption was at its peak, in contrast to its darker past. For these authors the classified adoption advertisements that proliferated in newspapers prior to legalisation are evidence of the need for the reform which their histories go on to document.

Read through such eyes, the advertisements are seen as providing evidence for the practice of baby farming, which the legal regulation of adoption is assumed to have overcome. Jim Hinks (2014, p. 566), for example, uses the prevalence of such advertisements in Scottish newspapers to illustrate what he describes as the 'ambiguous position' of the supposed baby farmers 'required to give enough information to make their purpose clear, yet at the same time present a veneer of respectability'. However, he looks only at advertisements placed by those offering to take in children to nurse and appears to assume that all such advertisements involved a monetary exchange. Sherri Broder (1988, p. 141) suggests that advertisements offering infants for adoption served as coded messages that midwives were prepared to accept unwanted infants for a fee. In a more sophisticated reading, Gill Rossini (2014, pp. 38–39) noted differences between advertisements, particularly in relation to the issue of money, but still analysed only those which appeared to be indicative of baby farming. While not discounting the influence of campaigners against baby farming in persuading legislatures across the West to introduce legislation to control adoption, this paper demonstrates that the regulation that followed did not completely eliminate the market, even if it tempered, somewhat, its approach.

3. The advertisement database

The article draws on a database of more than 25,000 classified advertisements placed in Australian newspapers between 1842 and 1955, analysing the ways in which children were rendered desirable to prospective parents in a competitive market. The research was made possible by the National Library of Australia's newspaper digitisation project (http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper) which covers almost 900 local, regional and national newspapers, from the early nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century. The collection currently includes complete runs of at least one major daily newspaper from every capital city, and a growing range of regional, suburban and denominational publications. The classified advertisement sections of all available newspapers were searched electronically using the primary search term 'adopt' with the additional terms 'orphan', 'baby', 'infant', 'boy', 'girl' used to prioritise results. The search terms were derived from the researcher's previous familiarity with the advertisements, drawn from chance encounters in newspapers researched prior to digitisation. The database makes no claim to be comprehensive. The coverage of newspapers, while improving, is still uneven, and as the search is dependent on optical character recognition, advertisements in which the original is not clear are not detected unless they appear in company with others which have proved more legible. However, the size and spread of

the available collection are comprehensive enough to facilitate research that would have been impractical in the past and to identify trends and core differences over time and place.

The number of adoption-related advertisements was small until the 1880s but rose rapidly from that point, before declining sharply in the second decade of the twentieth century. In addition to the impact of adoption legislation, and a general fall in the ex-nuptial birth rate during and after World War I, the decline reflects the decision of key outlets to cease accepting such advertisements. Concern about the advertisements was expressed from their earliest appearance ('Adoption of Children', 1870, p. 6; 'Baby Farming in Sydney', 1885, p. 8; 'Child Slavery', 1891, p. 4; 'The Kapunda Herald', 1892, p. 2; 'A Social Evil', 1892, p. 2) but it was left to individual newspapers to decide whether or not to continue to publish them. In deciding whether to accept such advertisements an individual newspaper was more likely to be concerned about the threat to the credibility of its advertisements generally than to have a regard to legal restrictions (Lorimor, 1977).

Adoption advertisements appeared only sporadically in the establishment paper, the Melbourne *Argus*, from the 1890s, and were withdrawn completely by the *Sydney Morning Herald* after 1915. The *Argus* does not appear to have offered an explanation for its change in practice but the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s decision followed an earlier attempt to regulate the practice ('Venereal Diseases', 1915). The State Children's Relief Board in New South Wales ('Adoption of Children', 1915; 'The New South Wales Government & Baby Farming', 1894) and, later, the State Children's Department in Western Australia ('State Children', 1913) did try to follow up advertisements in an attempt to identify baby farmers and inform mothers of alternative assistance available to them but their efforts were insufficient to eliminate the practice. There were also calls across the country for advertisements to be made illegal ('Advertising Private Diseases', 1915; 'A Terrible Traffic', 1913). In 1920 Western Australia claimed to have acted on these calls ('Control of Children', 1920), but advertisements persisted there and in many other newspapers in both urban and rural areas well beyond the regulation of baby farming and the introduction of legal adoption in all jurisdictions.

There is very little information as to the impact of such advertisements. New South Wales child rescuer George Ardill claimed to have received 80 replies to an advertisement he placed in an attempt to identify baby farmers in 1892 (Select Committee on the Infant & Child Protection Bill, 1891–2, pp. 1116–1117). Fifty years later a Sydney woman who advertised for a child to adopt claimed to have received replies from 250 expectant mothers ('Babies for Adoption', 1944, p. 6). These slithers of evidence, and the fact that the advertisements persisted over such a long period, including, sporadically, in newspapers which had disavowed the practice, would suggest that advertisers continued to consider them an effective way of obtaining or dispensing with a child.

This article focuses on more than 3600 adoption advertisements which offered or sought a one-off payment known at the time as a bonus or premium.[1] However, the absence of any overt mention of money in the bulk of the advertisements cannot be read as evidence that no money changed hands in such cases. That claim can only be sustained for the 1825 advertisements which specifically stated that no premium would be offered or expected. Cossins (2013, p. 65) argues that the term 'no premium' indicated that the mothers hoped that the placement would only be temporary, but given the period during which the term is at its most prominent it seems more likely that it indicates the advertiser's awareness of the link between premiums and baby farming. The intentions of the overwhelming majority of the advertisers, who made no mention of premiums, are impossible to ascertain, as there
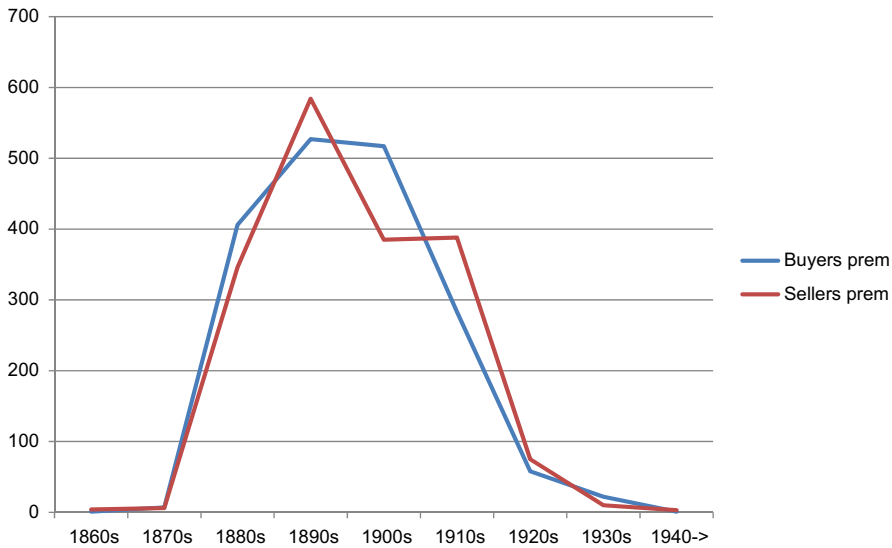
Figure 1. Total number of advertisements in which a premium is mentioned by buyers and sellers. Source: Adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

is nothing to indicate whether, once the initial contact had been made, money might not have been offered or requested.

The advertisements fall into two categories: advertisements placed by those wishing to acquire a child who stated the premium they would expect to be paid for providing this service, and the much larger group lodged by those with a child to be placed who specified the amount they were prepared to pay. I use the categories of buyers and sellers to distinguish between these two groups. This terminology may appear crude given that the commodity being traded is children, but it serves to identify the advertisements as a key part of what was essentially a market exchange.

Only rarely are the advertisers identifiable. Most used initials, pseudonyms or a box number at the newspaper or local newsagency or post office. However, the few cases where names are traceable indicate the wide array of people who were involved in the baby trading business. Midwives, doctors, solicitors, clergymen and local charity workers advertised alongside hotel and boarding-house keepers, registry office proprietors, storekeepers, loan sharks, performers, local businessmen, politicians and community-minded individuals as well as bereaved widows and widowers. The identifiable buyers include several circus proprietors, a family bicycle troupe and rural landholders, many of whom were using adoption as a way of recruiting unpaid labour. Undoubtedly the rapid increase in the number of advertisements from the 1880s reflects the growing activity of baby farmers but this article is concerned not with separating them from the people 'trading' on their own behalf but rather at identifying what factors members of both groups identified as rendering a child attractive in the market.

Although in absolute terms there were more sellers advertising premiums (Figure 1), as a percentage of total advertisements premiums were increasingly requested by buyers with the proportion of sellers dropping away rapidly during the 1890s depression years, the point at which negative publicity about baby farming was at its height. Although only by a small
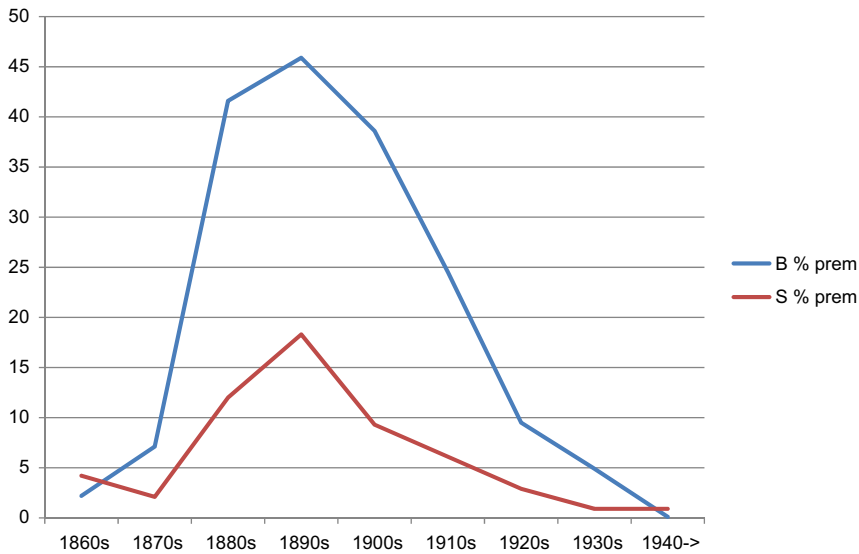
Figure 2. Percentage of advertisements in which a premium is mentioned by buyers and sellers. Source: Adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.
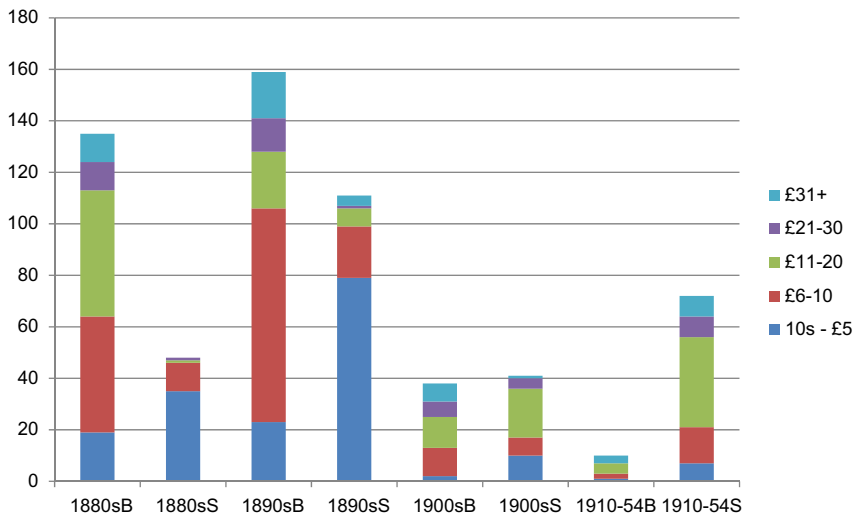

Figure 3. Monetary value of premiums sought or offered by buyers (B) and sellers (S) over time. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

amount, the proportions reverse again in the post-1940s, significantly at a time when the relationship between supply and demand reversed with, for the first time, more buyers in the market than sellers (Figure 2). This shift came later in Australia than in the United States where a market in children as emotional rather than economic assets began to develop from the 1920s (Zelizer, 1988). However, the shift in demand had a similar impact on the form of the monetary exchange. Prior to World War II it was sellers who were expected to offer the premium although from the few cases where an exact sum is specified it is clear that the

amount they were prepared to offer was generally less than the widely varying sums that buyers initially demanded (Figure 3). From the 1940s the money flow reversed with sellers now clearly aware of the value accorded to their child.

4. Associations with baby farming

The payment of premiums was first debated in Australia, as elsewhere, within the context of baby farming. British instances of women taking in children to nurse in exchange for a lump sum payment and then allowing or causing them to die were widely publicised in the Australian press.[2] Newspaper reports in most major cities used the evidence presented in coronial enquiries to reconstruct the complex system through which infants who were seen as being an encumbrance to the mother or an embarrassment to her family were transferred into the homes of women who made a business of infant nursing ('The Suspected Baby-Farming Cases', 1885; 'Baby Farming in Brisbane', 1890). These reports not only set off a search for local examples of this metropolitan evil, but also provided clear instructions for anyone tempted to engage in the trade, often detailing the wording used in advertisements to both attract and dispose of the children ('The Adopted Child Case', 1868; 'Baby-Farming', 1868; 'Baby-Farming and Baby Murder', 1868; 'The Baby Farming Interest', 1868; 'The Strange Story', 1868). The articles also set out the process by which money changed hands. The mother, or her connections, made a payment to the midwife at whose home she had been delivered of her child. The midwife then advertised the child with a lesser premium, a transaction that could be repeated several times until the infant was left with the minimally remunerated poor woman who came to official attention when she presented at a hospital with the dying baby ('Baby-Farming at Prahran', 1893; 'Inquest: Strange Death', 1892). The amount received at each stage 'was expected to leave a margin of profit' although clearly the practice was only profitable if the child met with an early death ('Baby-Farming at Prahran', 1893). The most notorious of Australia's baby farmers, the Makins (Cossins, 2013) in Sydney and Melbourne's Frances Knorr ('The Child Murders at Brunswick', 1893) did not fully master this process, and, unable to trade the babies on, gave in to the 'strong temptation … to get rid of the child by some other means' leaving, as evidence, the trail of tiny corpses that would lead to their convictions.

It was this so-called baby farming which the first legislation that mentioned premiums was designed to control. The earliest laws (Health Act, 1898; Public Health Act, 1885; Public Health Amendment Statute, 1883; State Children's Act, 1895) introduced licensing for people taking a child under two into their home for payment or reward. The specific focus on premiums came a little later, with a second raft of legislation (Children's Protection Act, 1892; Infant Life Protection Acts, 1890, 1905, 1907) restricting those taking in a child from receiving any recompense other than periodical payments, made no more than four weeks in advance. Significantly, none of this legislation sought to regulate advertisements. Indeed, the number of advertisements increased rapidly in the wake of the growth in publicity around baby farming and infant life protection, as did the proportion of advertisements offering or seeking payment of some kind, and, a little more belatedly, the number of advertisements that specified that no payment would be involved (Figure 4).

The laws introduced from the 1920s to regulate adoption included some provision to outlaw the payment of premiums. In Tasmania the prohibition was limited, as the legislation (Adoption of Children Act, 1920) explicitly allowed money to change hands subject to the
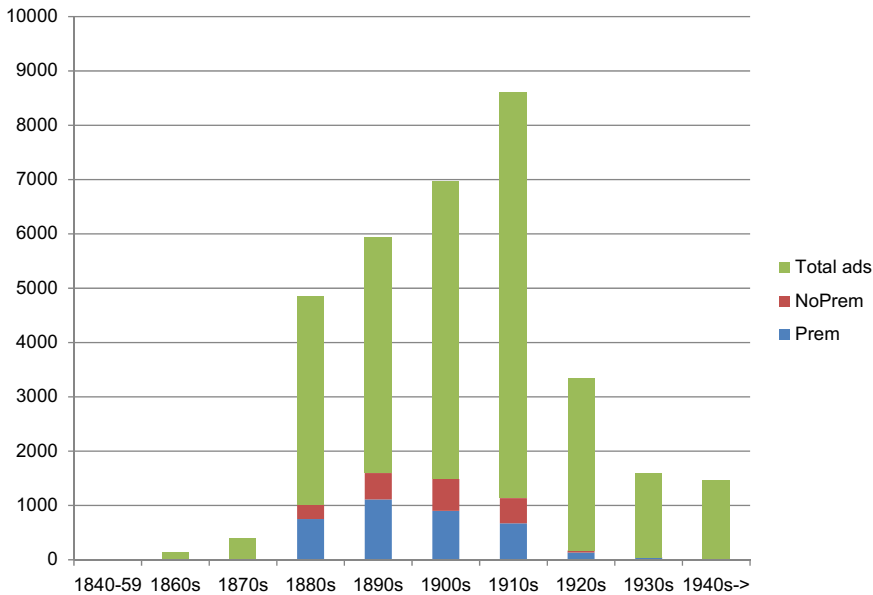
Figure 4. Premium (Prem) and no premium (NoPrem) as a proportion of all advertisements over time. Source: Adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

approval of police magistrates, a provision which remained in place until 1968 (Adoption Act, 1994; Adoption of Children Act, 1968). In the other states the prohibition was absolute, but the legislation (Adoption of Children Acts, 1925, 1928, 1935, 1965) was carefully worded to ensure that it did not prohibit the payment of expenses incurred by legitimate organisations in the process of arranging an adoption, a monetary exchange rendered respectable by its compatibility with altruism (Zelizer, 1988). Although the mention of premiums did not completely disappear from advertisements, the sharp decline would indicate that the legislation was largely effective in casting overt mentions of monetary exchange as incompatible with the way in which adoption was now understood.

5. Rendering the child attractive

In her study of intercountry and interracial adoption Laura Briggs (2003) draws attention to the importance of visual iconography in rendering children attractive to potential adopters. Advertisers in earlier times did not have access to photography so were compelled to use words to achieve the same end, and, as charges were levied for each word, they had to use them economically. Advertisements served as models of what Paul Bruthiaux (1996, p. 4) has described as 'linguistic simplicity', making choices that are appropriate to a context in which decoders are aware of the encoders' expectations. Given these constraints the authors of classified advertisements choose from a well-established repertoire of words and phrases but sometimes sequence them in novel or unusual ways (Bruthiaux, 1996, p. 90). Most of the sellers in this study included information about the age of the child, overwhelmingly infants as would be expected of women lacking a male provider or anxious to free themselves from disgrace. Buyers were less prescriptive. A higher proportion made no specification as to age, but there were also more seeking an older child, perhaps to avoid the perils associated
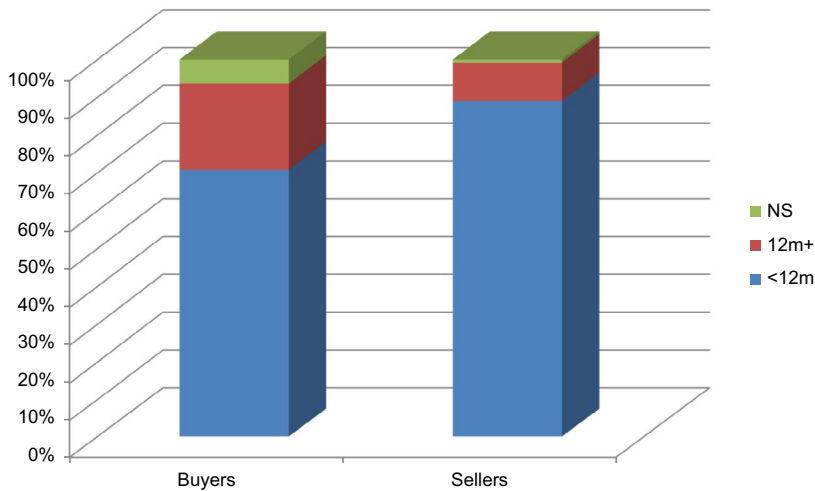
Figure 5. Percentage of advertisements in which age is specified by buyer and seller. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.
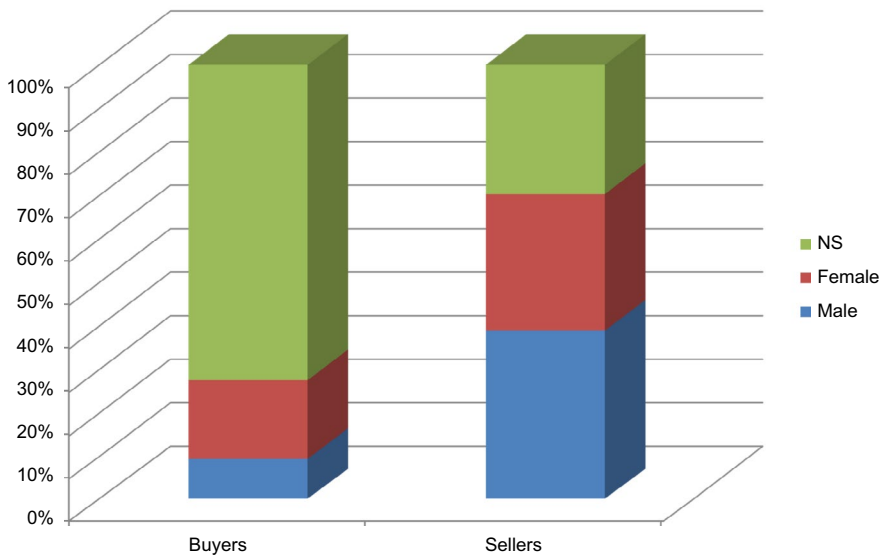

Figure 6. Percentage of advertisements in which gender is specified by buyer and seller. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

with early infancy, or because they were looking for companionship or were keen to put the child to work (Figure 5). However, this difference is less marked in premium advertisements than in the dataset as a whole, suggesting that for buyers premiums were primarily associated with infant adoption. Buyers were also far less likely to specify a child's gender, although amongst those who did there was a clear preference for girls.[3] Sellers were less able to exercise such a choice and, not surprisingly, offered girls and boys in almost equal numbers, although some, perhaps aware of buyer preferences, chose not to disclose (Figure 6).

Advertisers had the option of augmenting this basic information with details which they hoped would help their cause. Forty-two per cent of buyers exercised this option compared
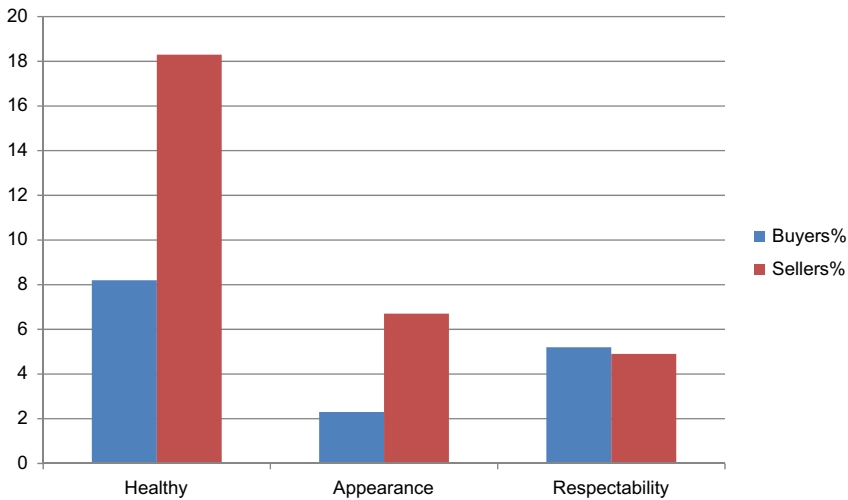
Figure 7. Percentage for each of the key descriptors mentioned by sellers and their comparative importance for buyers. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.
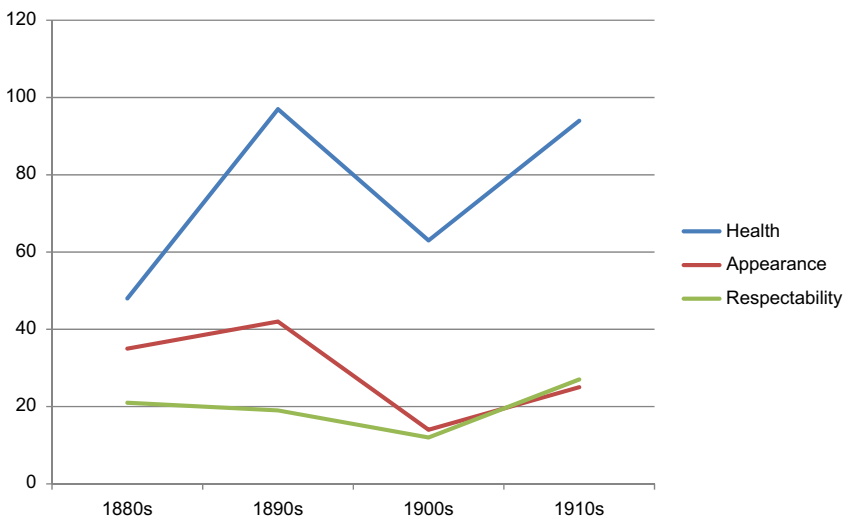

Figure 8. Total number of advertisements by sellers using key descriptors over time. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

with 40% of sellers. In seeking to render children attractive to potential buyers, sellers emphasised their health and, to a lesser extent, their attractiveness and the respectability or quality of their origins (Figure 7). Given the problems involved in sustaining a young baby without breastfeeding in the nineteenth century the claim to good health may have been difficult to fulfil, but, with gradual improvements in artificial feeding from the early years of the twentieth century, the health status of the child became a key selling point. The three factors rose and fell in concert, although respectability displayed a temporary peak during and after World War I when describing the baby as a soldier's child was perceived as giving it an added
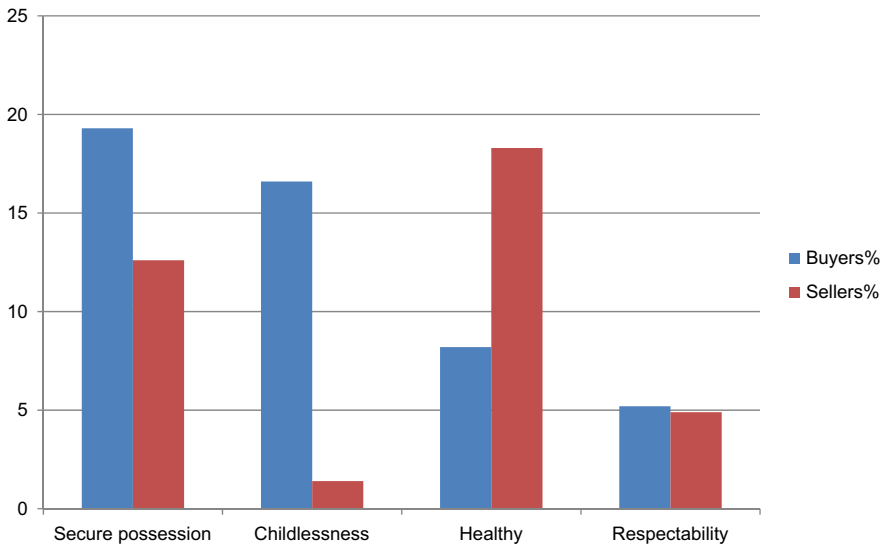
Figure 9. Percentage for each of the key descriptors mentioned by buyers and their comparative importance for sellers. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

cachet (Figure 8). Only in relation to respectability did the preferences of buyers correspond with the expectations of sellers. This shared concern pointed to contested beliefs about the risks and possibilities of adoption linked to wider debates about the influence of heredity versus environment. Advocates of adoption argued that the good mother could redeem a child, but the insistence on respectability from both buyers and sellers would suggest that advertisers shared a view that the failings of the mother could be inherited by the child (Walker, 2006). In focusing explicitly on the quality of the child, sellers were arguing that in their case the inheritance was not as negative as common assumptions about the single mother would suggest.

For buyers, security of possession was the major factor, expressed sometimes by a desire for an orphan, but more commonly simply in the demand that the child be entirely given up. This was a key concern but also a problematic one as, prior to the introduction of legal adoption, there was no way in which this security could be guaranteed and newspapers regularly featured stories of children reclaimed by birth parents long after the adoption arrangement had been made (see for example: 'An Adoption & What Became of It', 1875). In second place came references to their own childlessness, which exceeded comments in relation to the health or respectability of the child (Figure 9). Although sellers recognised the importance of three of these factors in framing their advertisements, they rarely addressed the issue of childlessness, perhaps too anxious to be rid of their child to make demands as to the motivations of prospective buyers. The relative importance of these factors in buyers' advertisements shifts more erratically than amongst sellers before finally settling on the focus on guaranteed quality and the 'solution' to childlessness, interestingly the very same arguments that were used to market legal adoption at that time (Figure 10). The dramatic decline in the importance of security of possession, the third key element in the argument for legalisation, can perhaps be explained by the decline in the prevalence
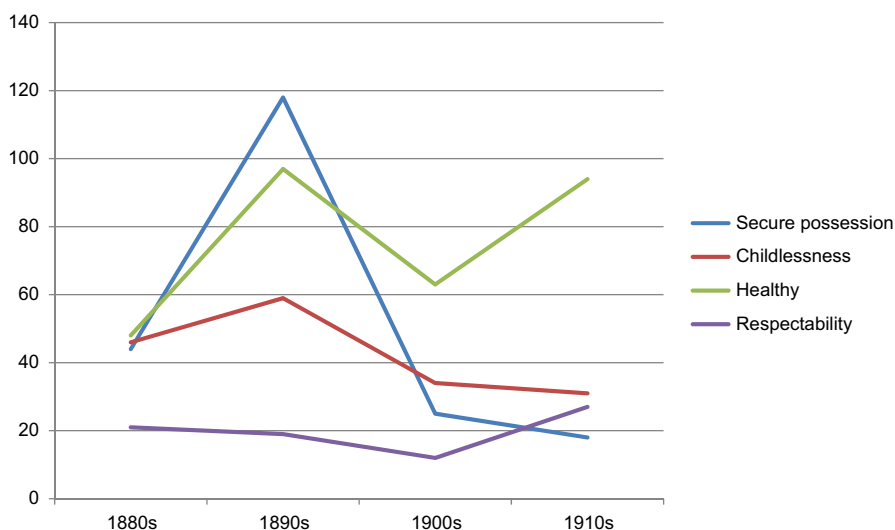
Figure 10. Total number of advertisements by buyers using key descriptors over time. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

of baby farming, practitioners of which were most likely to be over-represented in advertisements demanding premiums. For these advertisers the inclusion of terms promising security of possession indicated not the desire for a child but rather the assurance to potential sellers that once the money was received they would have no further responsibility for the child.

A third group of preferences, though far less commonly included, point to deeply held beliefs and/or prejudices that were common in Australia at the time. For sellers complexion could function as an indicator of race or ethnicity, and of the 6% who chose to mention this factor two-thirds clearly believed that a fair child was more marketable than a dark one, an unsurprising assumption in a country which stressed whiteness as a key component of national identity. However, for buyers, complexion appears not to have functioned in the same way. Here the proportions were more even, with almost half of those who mention complexion specifying a dark child, suggesting that they were using this descriptor in an attempt to replicate the features of a dead child, or to procure one who could pass for a member of their own family. The greatest disparities appear at the peak of the baby farming era, which coincides with a time when concerns about preserving Australia as a white nation were at their height, with the difference declining in the lead-up to the introduction of legal adoption when the idea of replacing a missing or longed-for child became more dominant (Figure 11).

Denominational preference, where mentioned, displayed stark difference between the two groups, with sellers far more concerned about religion than buyers. It was one of very few areas where sellers attempted to specify anything about the people who would parent their children. Two-thirds of the sellers who mentioned religion identified as Catholics, anxious that their child grow up in the faith, but they faced a particularly difficult market, with less than half of the few buyers who mentioned religion sharing their faith. This disparity was at its greatest in the late nineteenth century. When references to denomination revived
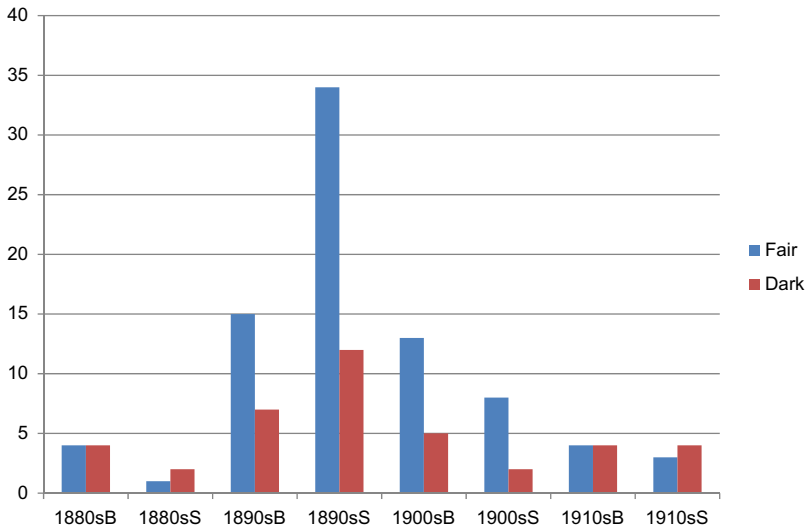
Figure 11. Total numbers of buyer (B) and seller (S) advertisements specifying complexion over time. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.
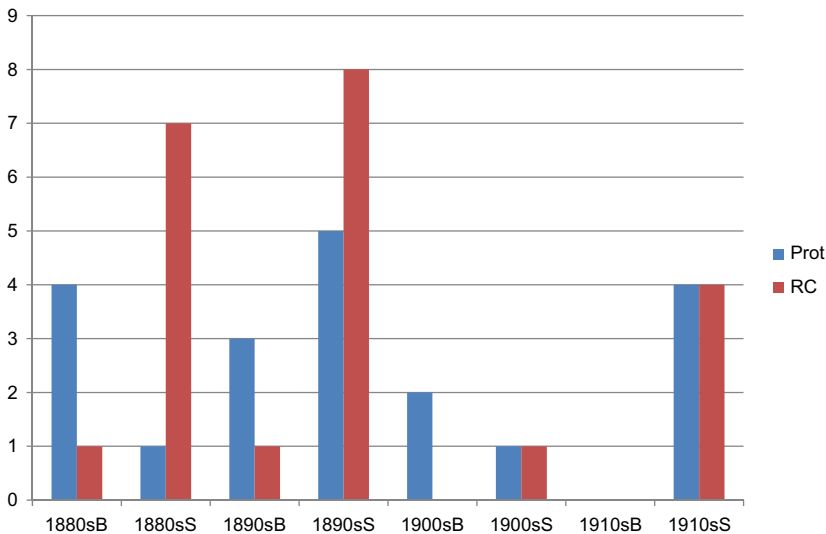

Figure 12. Total numbers of buyer (B) and seller (S) advertisements specifying Protestant (Prot) or Catholic (RC) denomination over time. Source: Premium only adoption advertisements database as of 23 December 2015.

again briefly in the wake of the intensified sectarianism during and after World War I the numbers were more evenly distributed (Figure 12).

6. The persistence of the market

From the 1960s, in many jurisdictions, adoption agencies returned to using newspaper advertisements to seek families for hard-to-place children. Studies of these advertisements

would suggest that perceived parental preferences remained remarkably consistent over time. Veronica Strong-Boag's (2005) analysis of advertisements in 1960s Toronto found that gender, ethnicity, race, and disability were key categories, employed strategically to elicit applications. It is clear from the aggregate data that more boys needed to be advertised than girls. However, in the wording of the advertisements, these differences were disguised by an emphasis on the normative nature of gendered parenting. The consistency of these norms was used to minimise the differences in racial and other categorisations in the hope of overcoming the mismatch between the available children and the preferences of prospective adopters. A 2005 study of the effectiveness of advertising strategies in London demonstrates the persistence of this mismatch with the non-response rate increasing for older and darker children (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005).

The shortage of children for adoption which followed increased support for single mothers, introduced in Australia in the 1970s, has seen the return of advertisements lodged by individuals. In the United States websites offer advice as to how such advertisements should be framed (http://www.myadoptionadvisor.com/services/print-advertising/; https://www.facebook.com/pages/Adoption-Advertising/127058827307653). Most of these sites are designed to help prospective adoptive parents market themselves to pregnant women but, despite prohibitions in many areas, advertisements offering children for adoption also occasionally appear. While the former are rarely critiqued the latter attract considerable negative publicity, often accompanied by warnings that they may constitute scams (Morelli, 2010). Given the current situation where demand continues to exceed supply there is little need for mothers to pay for advertising and risk such public condemnation, and, in the lightly regulated US market private adoptions are becoming the norm (Pustilnik, 2002).

While regulation in Australia leaves little space for private adoption the persistence of advertisements into the 1960s and debates around surrogacy today testify to the survival of the idea of monetary exchange in the public imagination. In the immediate postwar period Australian welfare authorities responded to rumours of a 'black market' in infants by denying that such practices were occurring while simultaneously warning anyone tempted to purchase a child of the penalties they would face if discovered ('Baby Traffic Probe', 1950; 'Guard Against Baby-Selling', 1950; 'M.P. Says Babies Being Sold', 1950; 'No Baby Black Market', 1949; 'No Payments for Child Adoption', 1949). The existence of adoptions in which money was exchanged, and the role of advertisements in facilitating such exchanges, was acknowledged in the discussions leading to the Commonwealth's drafting of model adoption laws in the 1960s, suggesting that the existing penalties were not totally effective as a deterrent (Uniform Adoption Legislation, 1961, pp. 68, 136).[4] However, the concern in all cases where the dangers of a black market were discussed was the threat that this posed to the professional control of adoption – the notion that a mother could leave the hospital and freely dispose of her infant – rather than the commodification of the child.

Advertisements survived because there were both mothers and prospective adoptive parents who did not share the professionals' concerns. American adoption historian, Barbara Melosh (2002, p. 20), sees this survival as evidence of the agency of mothers and prospective adoptive parents, wanting to retain greater control over the adoption process, a view supported by Queensland scholar Bernadette McCabe (2000, p. 95) who, having interviewed a woman who advertised her child for adoption in 1965, argued that in so doing the mother found some consolation for what she saw as an inevitable loss. A rare comment by a

Tasmanian columnist ('Olivia Looks at Life', 1950, p. 7) during the 1950 black market scare, supported this approach:

> if a childless couple wish to adopt a child and choose to pay £50 for the privilege of obtaining one a few months or years sooner than through the ordinary, and perhaps more prudent channels, whose business is it except their own and that of the unmarried mother who has a hard choice either way?

As US adoption scholar, Michele Goodwin (2006, pp. 68–69), points out, whenever money changes hands in the course of arranging an adoption, the sum reflects the perceived value rather than the needs of the child. This mismatch is evident even where the money is constituted as agency fees, but is more intense in situations where the market is given free rein. Goodwin's (Goodwin, 2010) concern is not with commodification which she sees as inevitable as surrogacy moves to occupy the place adoption had claimed as the solution to childlessness. Like Pustilnik, she argues that classifying adoption as altruistic denies the market realities which have always underwritten the exchange, but her concern is that this denial deprives the less desirable product, children of colour and older children with disabilities, from the benefits she believes adoption can bring.

7. Conclusion

With its attempts to constrain commercial surrogacy, Australia continues to argue strongly for the best interests of the child as the key principle underlying the regulation of all non-traditional forms of making a family. At the same time, historically low levels of adoption create a market which such regulation struggles to contain. The argument of this paper is that this challenge is not new. Market forces have coexisted and intermingled with altruism throughout the history of adoption. The adoption advertisements analysed in this article indicate a considerable mismatch between the product which sellers had to advertise and the desires of the buyers. However, the market exchanges that the advertisements document were primarily concerned with the wishes and fears of the buyer and seller, rather than ensuring the best interests of the child. Where money was overtly mentioned in relation to this exchange, the preferences, perceived or real, of the prospective adopters shaped the ways in which the children were 'packaged' for sale. The persistence of such preferences in later campaigns where the results of adoption advertising can be quantified would suggest that they also determined the chances of success. In the light of such evidence it may be possible to continue to argue for adoption as a sentimental rather than an economic or instrumental form of exchange, but its claims to altruism prove harder to sustain.

Notes

1. The statistics relate to the database as it stood at 23 December 2015. Research continues as additional newspapers come online.
2. The earliest cases to be reported were Caroline Jagger ('Baby Farming', 1868) and Margaret Waters ('"Baby Farming" in England', 1870). See Kociumbas (2001) for a discussion of the impact of this publicity.
3. The preference for girls has been observed both now and in the past across most jurisdictions where altruistic adoption is offered (Goldberg, 2009; Gravois, 2004; Melosh, 2002; Murray, 2004). For a discussion of possible explanations of this phenomenon see Swain (2012, pp. 404–407).

4. National Archives of Australia, Uniform Adoption Legislation – Material prepared by States, A432 1961/2241 Part I. Retrieved from http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=1172639&isAv=N

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