

THE EMOTIVE NARRATION

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EXPLORING THE PAST

- A recovery process implies that when the child acquires more and more confidence, experimenting new models of relationships, he/she is also helped with attributing a correct meaning to his/her past experiences.
- If the child perceives the adoptive parents as a safe base, he/she will then be able, if correctly supported, to explore his/her past.

THE ELABORATIVE DIMENSION OF ADOPTION

- It is obviously fundamental that adoption constitutes a successful recovery experience.
- Nevertheless, this process can be made more effective if we develop the child's ability to think and reason about him/her or about his/her relationship with the family members.

ADOPTION AND REFLECTIVE FUNCTION

- The attribution of meanings is unavoidable; it is about choosing whether to support the child along the way or leaving him/her alone, and exposing him/her to the subsequent risks.
- Fonagy (1997) underlined the importance of the ability to reflect on one's internal processes as a protective factor that helps facing stressful events.

REFLECTIVE FUNCTION AND MENTALIZATION (Fonagy)

- Mentalization is the ability to make representations of the own and other people's mental states and to understand one's and others' behaviours in terms of mental states (feelings, convictions, intentions, desires).
- It is fundamental for the mental organisation of the own and the affective regulation.
- It is acquired during the first attachment relationships and it is not linked with intelligence.

THE ATTRIBUTION OF MEANINGS

The reflective function allows to relate the others' behaviours to expressions of mental, cognitive (an intention, a belief) or emotive (rage, pain, joy) states.

It therefore allows to attribute a meaning to behaviours, which become comprehensible and start making sense.

Attributing a correct meaning to behaviours is a fundamental part of daily life, but it is even more important when it comes to facing a negative experience.

Let us imagine the example of a child looked after by a refusing, cold, introvert mother.

The natural tendency of all children to autorefer everything that happens to them (self-centred view) would lead the child to consider his/her mother's refusing and neglecting behaviour to be his/her own fault, because of his/her naughtiness and inadequacy.

On the other hand, the ability to consider the others' behaviours like an expression of a mental state of the person who is acting (reflective function) allows the child to attribute the neglect he/she has experienced to his/her mother's depression, for example, rather than to him/her or his/her naughtiness.

A child who can comprehend the others' mental states will be able to curb the impact of negative experiences. Therefore, to adopted children, the possibility to be helped in going back over their personal story and to correctly interpret painful experiences in which they have been involved in the first person is thus necessary.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CORRECT INFORMATION

- The correct interpretation of behaviours and events cannot take place without correct information.
- Information, collected by those who are placing the child, needs to be given to the adoptive family without any filter.
- The couple, who can be supported by professional help if they feel the need for it, decide how to pass those pieces of information on to the child, including the most sensitive and problematic ones.

INTEGRATION

- Telling the adopted child about his/her past means helping him/her to link the "different pieces" of his/her life together: not just the aspects connected with his/her current situation, his/her present and the adoptive family, but also those of the past, his/her biological family and his/her roots. **(double belonging)**
- In this way, the child will be able to build **integrity** and **consistency** with his/her own.

FRAMEWORK

- Furthermore, a correct transmission of information creates a context that can help the parents to give the child's communication and behaviours a meaning.
- To adoptive parents, the lack of information often leads to the lack of a global framework where to collocate and interpret the child's communication.

IDENTITY

- Deciding to withhold information in order to ease the job of a good adoptive couple, that is nonetheless fragile and insecure, is against the child's right to know his/her identity.
- It would equal to trying to shape the identity of the child in an omnipotent and deterministic way by deliberately measuring out the chosen ingredients and excluding those considered inappropriate, by including or omitting pieces of identity.

NO CENSORSHIP

- If a couple shows fragilities that are believed to represent risk factors, especially in a certain combination, censorship cannot be chosen.
- Withholding or twisting information to adapt the story of the child to the couple's resources, is ethically unfair, as well as being against the law.

- The idea that the information to be given to the couple regarding the history of the child needs to be filtered cannot be agreed on; the couple needs to be fully and carefully informed about the whole past of the child and helped, if in need, to find timings and ways to completely pass that on to the child.

THE RIGHT TO KNOW

- Evidence suggests that adoptive parents need to request full information on the history of the child.
- Information needs to include details on the separation from the biological family, previous adoptive placements, characteristics of the biological parents and the relational dynamics of the biological family, possible occurrences of maltreatment, sexual abuse, or other sorts of traumatic experiences happened before or after the separation from the biological family.

INFORMATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

- This is even truer for placements of children that have been abused sexually; in order for the parents to be able to support the child accordingly, to help him/her to overcome the trauma, it is necessary that they are fully aware of his/her past.
- Some research on adoptive placements of children that have been sexually abused has shown that information on sexual abuse or on abusing behaviours have not been given to caregivers: according to Farmer and Pollock (1997) this percentage reaches 45% of cases where as according to Monk (1996) it is 40%; in another study conducted by Macaskill (1991), in 32% of cases, adoptive parents have not been informed on the sexual abuse experienced by the child prior to the placement.
- This evidence suggests that the adoption process fails in the attempt to pass this information on.

REASONS AT THE BASE OF A LACKING OR AN INEFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION

- The reasons for the professional not to tell the adoptive parents about their child's traumatic past are different, but they are all meant to simplify, in a reductionist way, the experience of adoption.
- By doing so, professionals have a partial perception of the complexity of adoption and develop a lack of awareness of the need of the child to be helped in the elaboration of traumas

WHAT INFORMATION TO GIVE

- Studies suggest that caregivers need to request information on the abuse children experienced before the placement. Information needs to include details on the time, the place, the circumstances of the abuse; the age of the child when the abuse started and when it was interrupted; the age, the gender and the identity of the abuser; the strategies used by the abuser to obtain the collaboration and the silence from the child; sexual activity – if it took place – with siblings or others sexual behaviours like prostitution.
- This information needs to be given to the caregivers in order for them to decide how to take care of the child as well as how to understand his/her behaviour.
- The spreading fashion of writing fairytales and tales for adoptive parents to help them speaking to children about their past, seems to be a way of filling the information gap

with the result of making their situation similar to others' and to reinforce the parents' idea that the true story of the child should stay unknown.

- Even the subtle distinctions between the different types of truth seem to try to elude the main problem. It is not about making up a story that the child can be told, ("verità narrabile", tell able truth, Guidi, 1996), neither is to find a way to abscond or to reveal information to the child ("verità sostanziale", substantial truth, Chistolini, 2003).

EMOTIVE NARRATION

COMMUNICATION AND ELABORATION

- The ability of parents to provide effective support in the due elaboration process is strictly depending on the presence of an open and transparent communication, with an effective interaction and mutual support since the beginning of the adoption.

CHANGING MEANINGS

- For these reasons, one of the most essential tasks for adoptive parents is to transform, through narration, the controversial story of the child into information that can be constructive for his/her self-esteem and psychological development (Dallos 2006).
- **THE CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF THE TELLING OF THE STORY (information, memories, representations)**

INFORMATION

- A story that can be told to the child needs to be truthful.
- It has to avoid omitting any detail, as they will help the child to link his/her feelings and his/her current behaviour, to the real-life experiences he/she had and to the adaptive strategies he/she has developed.
- The story has to start from the "raw experience" of the child, from what can be retrieved of his/her story and from which the narration can be developed.
- The creation of correct meanings stems from correct information.
- Pieces of information can work as pretexts to which relate the child's painful experiences; they can give his/her sufferings a sense so that their presence inside of him/her can be justified.
- It is essential to link the child's feelings and his/her current behaviour to the actual experiences he/she had in the past and the adaptive strategies he/she has developed. It seems therefore advisable to provide the parents with the real information possessed on the past experience of the child, without any attempt to make it better or to deprive it of its painful aspects. Only by doing so, the couple can get in touch with the pre-existent sufferings of the child.
- It is fundamental that not just the "good" parts are included in the story: the child needs to be given a truthful and not sweetened account because he/she needs to be helped to cope with **all the aspects**, even the most painful, damaged and upsetting ones. The aim of adoption is not only to provide good parenting care, but also to allow the child to have an integrated view in his/her mind

MEMORIES

- Memories represent a first important contribution the child can give to the creation process of his/her story.
- The comfort experienced after the placement is a suitable context for the recalling of forgotten memories.
- The mind gets free from the strong emotions that had blocked the child's memory, so that stored memories can emerge again.
- Nevertheless the recalling of traumatic memories is not an on-off process; it is a complex and continuous process.

Memories usually emerge when the child goes through emotional states experienced at that particular moment when the memory was created. So, in the creation process of the story, not only do the child's memories need to be taken into account during the making of the plot, but it is the same tale that, in a circular process, will activate and rouse lost or repressed memories.

The fixation of memories

As we know, during the early years of childhood, as it is for first ones of adulthood, children memorize more efficiently what they have been told. For this reason, adoptive parents need to be aware of the fact that the recalling of memories, the attribution of meanings through their integration in the story and the subsequent account given to the child, have the consequence of reconstructing the child's memory.

- **REPRESENTATIONS**

Representations can be a valuable contribution to the reconstruction of the story; developing the narration by integrating information and memories with the specific representations the child has of himself/herself and of the caregivers he/she had in his life before being placed.

Hodges, Steele, Hillman et al. (2005) define the representations that the adopted child projects onto the new adoption settings as: "a set of perceptions and expectations arising from past experiences and relationships, which led the child to the placement. These experiences are related to unavailable, rejecting, or abusive attachment figures, to an idea of self as helpless and vulnerable, and to defensive type of behavioral, cognitive and emotional predispositions, necessary for survival "

"Un set di aspettative e percezioni derivanti dalle passate esperienze e relazioni, che hanno condotto il bambino al collocamento. Queste esperienze riguardano figure di attaccamento inaccessibili, rifiutanti o abusive, un'idea di sé come impotente e vulnerabile, e comportamenti, cognizioni e predisposizioni emotive di tipo difensivo sentite necessarie per la sopravvivenza"

out enabling the child to express his/her perceptions and expectations of the attachment figures that, as well as for the traumatic episodes recalled, will provide material to form rather accurate hypothesis on the perception of family roles and of the relationship patterns with previous caregivers.

- **Collecting the representations**
- There are different ways of collecting representations, mainly of two types:
- Spontaneous narrative games, which are autobiographic accounts not based on fantasies, but on the child's real experiences and emotions (Hodges, Steele, Hillman et al., 2003).

- Narration activated by the use of specific tools, such as the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP) (Hodges, Steele, Hillman et al., 2003), which is specifically used in the study of the representations of attachment in children.
- **THE ELABORATION PROCESS**
 - It entails three different stages:
 - The first one is marked by the child's developed awareness of the ways his/her current feelings and behaviour are the product of his/her past experience.
 - During the second phase the child reacts protesting against the loss, the trauma and the feeling of inadequacy he/she has experienced. In this phase the anger towards the biological parents, that abandoned, maltreated or abused him/her or let somebody else doing so, arises.
 - The third phase consists of the child coming to terms with his/her past, becoming aware of the impossibility to escape its modelling influence, realising that even though biological parents are to blame, they are the result of their personal story themselves.
 - It is advisable not to rush this process to the end, to the reconciliation of the child with his/her past too rapidly.

COMMUNICATIVE OPENNESS (Brodzinsky 2006)

- Communicative openness refers mainly and firstly to a state of mind and heart.
- It reflects the attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions and behavioural inclinations that people have towards adoption.

AREAS TO EXPLORE

- Communicative openness covers different areas:
 - Willingness to explore the meaning of adoption in the parents' life and also the child's;
 - Sharing that meaning with the others;
 - The exploration of themes that are relevant to the adoption in the context of the family life;
 - Supporting the child in managing his/her double bond to the two families;
 - Backing the contact between the two family systems, if scheduled in the plan.

EMOTIONAL TUNING

- Furthermore, openness in an adoptive setting not only does depend on the communication of contents, that is to say the interchange of information, but primarily on the experience of emotional tuning and the sharing and support of the emotions linked to adoption within the adoptive family and between the adoptive and the biological family.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PROCESS

Even though in adoption the communicative process is mutual, it is the child's attitude, curiosity and communication to initially reflect the parents' attitude and openness, rather than the contrary.

Ways to manage the process

In other words, the way adoptive parents' initially share information on adoption with the child, the way they support this/her questions and how well they can stay emotionally in tune with the child's emotional states linked to the different aspects of the adoptive experience, will determine the depth of the exploration.

RECIPROCITY

- When the child grows up, it is assumed that the communicative process regarding the adoption will become mutual and the ability to exert a circular influence will increase.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ADOPTION PRACTICE

- Implications for the adoption practice are important.
- If it is reckoned advisable that children in adoption have the space to express their feelings and to think about the particular experience they are going through, this approach needs to be backed by the social workers who are in charge of the adoption and have the guardianship of the child.

CHANGES IN THE PROCEDURES

- Changes that need to be implemented are various and located in different points of the process.
- The training of adoptive parents prior to adoption should focus mainly on their abilities and on their willingness to learn and explore the issues of adoption either at a personal level or with the others.

ATTITUDES OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS

- Another area that needs to be taken into account during the training, and subsequently monitored during the following phase of the integration of the child into the family, is the ability and the willingness of the adoptive parents to talk about difficult and emotionally involving issues linked to adoption, without making judgements or expressing embarrassment.

OBSTACLES

- Adoptive parents that are judgemental in their evaluation of the child's past or that find some issues too difficult to discuss with him/her, will have greater difficulty in creating a friendly atmosphere characterised by a truly open, empathic and supportive communication.
- Of pivotal importance is the way the parents picture themselves and the biological family in the eyes of the child.
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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

- Social workers need to ensure that the adoption setting is only structurally closed towards the biological parents, but is open as communication.
- Indeed, adoption, contrary to fostering, should not be structurally open.
- The child loses his/her surname; biological parents do not have any detail about the placement and any relationship is interrupted.

THE PROCESS OF OPENING

- The concept of communicative openness suggested by Brodzinsky has more to do with interpersonal and systemic processes than with a specific type of structure.
- This approach emphasises the communicative process taking place in the adoption setting, from an informative and emotional perspective, within the child himself/herself, between the child and the adoptive family members, and the members of the two family systems.