

Duplicity and illusion in families formed by international adoption

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Summary

"Duplicity and illusion in international adoption." New family compositions created by international adoption grow hand in hand with globalization. Beyond the socio-economic or political implications, the author focuses on the psychological processes at work in these families. Duality of countries, cultures and families, associated with the intensity of the needs and demands involved, induce multiple distortions of reality promoting deception. In the light of two examples of international adoption, one drawn from literature, the other from a psychoanalytic family therapy, he studies the emergence of fantasies and representations in connection with deception and mystification. Considering their hidden effects detrimental to the creation of new links and of respect for vestigial links, he argues that the implementation of a TFP contributes to redevelopment in the psychic space of the family envelope in formation. In this therapeutic setting, where a vast psychic work occurs, defenses will soften and give way to a more cohesive group illusion. In conclusion, the author considers that, in many ways, this kind of family is a paragon of "new families" and of the pitfalls that threaten them.

Keywords: international adoption, psychoanalytic family therapy, primal fantasies, intersubjective family links, duplicity, deceit.

« This duplicity man has is so obvious that some have thought we have two souls. »

Blaise Pascal

Introduction

On both side of a virtual line separating the donor country and the donee, two opposite and complementary issues enable families to be created thanks to international adoption which is currently the main source of children for families formed through adoption. Beyond the socio economic or political implications, we shall look into and put in the foreground the psychical equipment and process used to set up the adoptive family links and leave in the background without ignoring them those which came previously. The intensity of the needs at stake in the process of adoption leads to multiple distortions of reality: delusions, lies and deception. From the unavoidable duality (two countries, two cultures, and two families) which opens the way to deception, we shall make our way towards the illusion needed to build stronger intersubjective filiation links. As a conclusion, we shall highlight that international adoption and its pitfalls represent the paragon of various new contemporary families.

The composition of adoptive families

To be adopted is to change parents, to get new ones because of the failure or defecation of the original ones. To adopt a child is to create filiation links through both a narcissistic reinforcement and an altruistic surge. The « false » parenthood will become the true one when new intersubjective links will be set up and strengthened on the basis of gender and generations differences. To outline what is adoption, I will dip into Jules Supervielle's novel *Le voleur d'enfants* (The children thief) which describes its complexities. This writer, (1880-1960) spent his life between Uruguay and France. The simultaneous death of both his parents from the same illness when they came from Uruguay to Béarn (South West France) to show the family their first born when he was two, left the small orphan in the care of his uncle and aunt, who were themselves respectively his father's brother and his mother's sister and who also lived in Montevideo. All the conditions are there to perform an identity sleight of hand: Jules Supervielle will not know his real identity before the age of 9. The theme of adoption appears in his books when he is 42, the age he gives the main character in his novel.

The children thief is the colonel Philemon (1) Bigua, an extremely wealthy South American gentleman, who lives with his wife, Desposoria (as a noun, the word means « spouse, wife » in Spanish), in a chic area of Paris. When he captures the young Antoine, he had already stolen abandoned twins in London, and kidnapped a young boy, Joseph, neglected by his parents. Later on, he will look after Marcelle, an adolescent entrusted to him by her father.

Affects and active fantasies in the newly formed links

The couple's sterility hurts Colonel Philemon's narcissism: « *He found humiliating that a man like himself couldn't have children.* ». If he steals children, it is to make up for them having been abandoned. His goal is to make them happy and to his mind, the end justifies the means. He is confounded when he sees the lost children posters in London: « *So there are people who have so many children they can lose them and there is a whole system in place to find them and give them back!* » The rescuing fantasy, together with the feeling he is a hero and an ideal of what is happiness, does not necessarily find an echo in the adopted child, who doesn't fancy recognising itself in the being in distress it may have been. His thoughts attack the link to preserve his narcissism to the detriment of his adoptive father's, a movement the author describes thus: Facing Philemon, « Joseph's sardonic eyes... seemed to blame him for taking advantage of a child's misfortune to make him look like a hero ».

The fantasies of parental neglect and abandon haunt parents and children. Antoine, when daydreaming « *sees at first his mother, with her hat on, saying goodbye to him without looking at him.* » He sees, as a hallucination, the presence of a « *new mother, shaped by somebody very careful and knowledgeable, and who has all the maternal feelings needed* ». As for Marcelle's parents, one is an alcoholic, the other a prostitute, representation of natural parents at the same time failing and debased. Besides the fantasies of abandonment, the kidnapping and selection fantasies are omnipresent.

The adopted children wonder: why was I chosen? The selection fantasy, the abandonment's fantasy's antagonist, echoes that of « chosen parenthood » (A. Fine, 1998) in the parents, the first delusion happening before even the adoption.

Added to that are incest fantasies we can see coming up to the surface and going towards being carried out in the *Children thief*. Indeed, because it carries the deep imprint of blood links, this type of fantasies is twice as strong: on one hand within the family, because of the dissolving biological continuity between parents and children, and between brothers and sisters most of the time, on the other hand within exogamy where a love relationship is marked by the potential of a unknown biological parental link.

Adoption and parental functions

When there are no biological links, the filiation link is built on the one basis of symbolic functions, which are fully needed for the necessary affiliation process to occur. In the paternal register, predominance does not necessarily automatically go to the man, no more than the woman is always the symbolic mother and this shows more clearly in this type of family than in an ordinary family.

In the novel there is a strange confusion on this subject. The wife, a shadow of her husband, accepts to have the children there, without managing to feel something for them. On the other hand, Philemon entered into marriage with one and only thought: having children; he feels it as an irrepressible need. His solicitude towards them is of a maternal type, leading to reciprocity: anxious at the thought that his mother does not care about him disappearing, Antoine has a nightmare he wakes up from to seek refuge « *in the arms of reality, in the Colonel's bedroom. The Colonel kisses him, calms him down, puts him back to bed and gives him a drink.* » The paternal is expressed, hidden behind a feminine type activity: « *The Colonel got up at five, and, a poncho over his pyjama, boiled a bit of water on the spirit stove. As soon as he had drunk a few cups of mate tea, he went towards a screen made from pony skin which hid his sewing machine, and his guitar. He put the machine in the middle of the bedroom and started sewing a bit of blue fabric which would little by little become a suit for little Antoine...He had done the same for all his children...* » Sewing takes on here a symbolic paternal impact; what happens here is equivalent to a christening, where the making of the suit establishes the child as a son. At a later date, Philemon relinquished taking Marcelle's measurements to make her a dress. Prisoner of his burgeoning desire, he omits this symbolic gesture and incest comes into the household through two doors, paternal and fraternal.

One sentence in the novel introduces the multifactorial **foreign strangeness** which is a characteristic of international adoption: « *Antoine looks at the hands of his kidnapper, these hands from a different family born under far away skies and for so long fed on wild cows.* » These few words condense the differences which appear so strange in international adoption where duplicity in the literal sense of the word goes hand in hand with deception. Indeed, these differences bring up the biological split between the adopter and the adoptee, the break in the continuity between the original family

and the adoptive family, geographical distances and last but not least, cultural difference. All these characteristics are found in clinical work (Loncan, 2003).

An adoption under the sign of deception

After a few sessions for one of the young girls adopted by the family E., it becomes very clear that the issues linked with adoption are strongly and obviously in evidence and we suggest a psychoanalytic family therapy (PFT) which is immediately accepted.

Assessment and history of the adoption

Nelly has been brought to a session by her mother because of paroxysmic anger, occurring at the slightest frustration and often in rivalry with her sister Emma, who is slightly older. She is officially 8. Two years after the simultaneous adoption of both children, the mother is exhausted.

Mr. and Mrs E. wished to adopt a child aged 6 at the most so they turned to an NGO in French speaking Africa. They were presented with two young girls instead of just one. They were in reality two years older than had been at first said and to encourage simultaneous adoption, it was made believe they had the same father. The outcome of the adoption case was delivered during the adopting parents' second trip to Africa. Dealt with in 15 mn, it was an absolute « nightmare » for the adopting parents: not only they found out that the children were neither orphaned nor abandoned, but also that they lived with their respective family, represented in court by Nelly's father and Emma's mother and grandmother. Distressed, their back to the wall, the applicants for adoption signed their access to parental status without the children who were there too saying a single word. At a later date, Emma and Nelly denied having the same father; Emma's, not present at court. He was apparently actually opposed to his daughter being adopted. Mr. and Mrs E. have to conclude: « They (the girls) must have been lying ». A few months later, Nelly said that she went through a « horrible » time then, and her sister agreed.

The family E. was already recomposed. Mrs E had two daughters from a first marriage, who were both adult and currently part of a couple, and she could not have any more children for physical reasons, but Mr E wanted some. In Africa, the biological parents did give some reasons to the future parents why the girls were put up for adoption, but the girls have no memory of these conversations.

During the talks before therapy, both parents and children relied on their stock of photos, quickly dug up, to find memories again. I notice a lot of things are confused or forgotten. For example, Nelly can't remember her second name (her African name), on the other hand she knows her sister's. Her bursts of anger seem linked to the adoption itself, signalling moments when the somato-psychical integration becomes undone. What's more, her voice changes register from one sentence to the next: a put on voice, soft and reedy is replaced by a deep and loud voice. Mrs E mentions her own violent reaction. When faced with tantrums, she found herself slapping Nelly or putting her in the shower. The other young girl, Emma, has speech difficul-

ties, is a slow learner and seems lethargic, always tired. According to Mrs E, it took over a year for them to feel they were a real family. This feeling seems still somewhat precarious to me.

After these first very prudent sessions, we can see trust beginning to settle in the transference, thus confirming the hypothesis of PFT. Echoing the catastrophic experience of the adoption itself, I notice that their original families are like a magnet for the children's thoughts: they wonder if their brothers or sisters, also put up for adoption, might come, if their African parents will have more children ... The sessions shall occur regularly every fortnight.

Duplicity and strangeness

I have already mentioned Nelly's two voices; it seems to me to be a trace of the trauma linked to breaking the cultural envelop and the duplicity this implies, a voiced illustration of the false self which threatens migrants (A. Eiguer, 1998, 2007). There are other physical signs of duplicity and discontinuity, mainly through the children's hairstyle which goes from short to long thanks to hair extensions. Duplicity is active in both their real and their fantasy lives, as shown in Nelly's first drawing: a double house. Its echoes extend into the family: each girl has built a doll's house in her bedroom. Nelly's is the better built. It is double, the children's area is located in a different building to the parent's, both areas being linked by passageways and stairs. Emma's house is exactly the same.

The children's strangeness is highlighted by the parents, especially Nelly's attitude, often sulky and mute. To try and understand them, they play charades, often without results. « She is half angel, half demon ». How much better could we link duplicity and strangeness?

Symmetrically, the girls feel the foreign strangeness of their new environment and show this through details which seem bizarre to their parents: they are frightened of pets, particularly cats they are really afraid to touch: they'd never seen any in Africa. And little by little Africa is not so familiar any more, the memories are injected with imaginary. Nelly maintains that over there, « babies, at 3 months old, they walk, it's not like here»! Another huge difference is the taste of food, much better in Africa. And what do people eat there? Spaghettis! The girls have even totally forgotten their mother tongue, even if they keep a trace of an African accent.

From deception to illusion: a stony path

Marked by duplicity in all its meanings, the links come within a family envelope not clearly defined, full of representations carrying as much inhibitions as sources of psychological construction. The groupal illusion is labile, quickly curtailed by Nelly's paroxysmic bursts of anger or Emma's incongruous comments. These problems means the family is becoming estranged from the outside world and they hurt the parents, while they are also somehow bringing together the family group with the prospect of a healing upturn. The deceptions surrounding the adoption bring about shared denuncia-

tions which also play their part in bringing the family together, on the basis of the persecution they all lived through.

Here, the role of the extended family is predominant, the adopted girls becoming in effect younger sisters for the older ones. The older girls have regularly one or the other younger ones for the week-end, they plan holidays and suggests things. Similarly, the paternal and maternal grand-parents are very close, involved and welcoming. Visits, short stays and family meals help establishing a genuine groupal illusion. During the session there are moments of good mood and laughter which bear witness to this. This work is reinforced by the external contribution brought by families who used the same NGO, thus limiting the feeling of separation between the family and the outside world. These contacts are full of positive involvement, with a yearly meeting of all the families concerned and help shed some light on the nature of the first links, as well as contributing to the establishment of the current links.

Filiation has difficulties getting stronger through reciprocal affiliation

In the months following her arrival, Nelly cried a lot. The parents thought: « This little girl will never love us. » Throughout the sessions, I notice more or less explicit hateful emergences. Emma accuses her mother to have bought her old women's shoes; the father mocks the children on their fear of cats and asks if they would prefer monkeys. He mentions how lucky they are to be able to go skiing or to the skating rink and regrets the lack of gratitude on Nelly's part « She's proud! » When Nelly complains at dinner of the smell of cheese, he thinks she accuses him of stinking, like she did with his aftershave. He is very hurt by this. Nelly is accused of overdoing it and of lack of respect. « But they taught her to respect adults in Africa ».

The mutual hostility is shaded by some ambivalence in the father who feels that Nelly and him are growing further apart, and this saddens him. Emma wonders: Are they going to divorce? She is not talking about her parents, but of Nelly and the father. The mother challenges this: « You don't know what you're saying; divorce does not exist between parents and children! » Emma carries on: « Yes, they could divorce. To divorce is to be separated and never see each other again. » A shadow of incest fantasy looms; associated to the threat of separation (could father and daughter be married?). The mother insists: « Do you have any example of children who were separated from their parents and never saw them again? That's not possible! » Faced with everybody's blindness, I simply remark that that's what happened to Nelly and Emma... And what if the parents divorced? Emma carries on. Far from such a thought, Mrs E says that, if it ever happened, things would be just like for any other child, they would spend time with each parent in turn. In a burst of omnipotence, Emma replies: « No, I would live in a house with Nelly, I know how to cook. » And when she's grownup, she'll live in her own house without working and she'll go and eat at her parent's. The ghost of separation brings back the words of the African NGO manager who talked up the advantages of being adopted in France to the children, saying it's a generous country where you can live well without working. The abandonment fantasy insists: the girls were really very frightened during the presidential

elections, fearing that the extreme right candidate might be elected: they were told at school that all the Arabs and Blacks would be sent back to their own country if she was elected.

So that the links blossom

The links created by cohabitation (A. Eiguer, 2009), support and witness of the whole of the family intersubjective links, are precarious, but always at work. Breaking up fantasies, negative work which attacks the groupal illusion (D. Anzieu, 1975), are noticeable and active; but their being put together and the echoes they create are still proof of elaboration.

In the light of this therapy, as for several others, (Loncan, 2003) it seems to me that the kidnap and abandonment fantasies get through to the rank of original fantasies organizer of adoptive links (Loncan, 2003). Literary works, as for example with Jules Supervielle who was himself adopted, can also bear witness to this constancy. In clinic as well as in literature, it goes hand in hand with other fantasies exacerbated by adoption, but less specific: fantasies of choosing, of rescuing, of incest. The parental guilt linked to the unconscious fantasies of kidnap is counterbalanced by the fantasies of the children being abandoned by their biological parents. From the children's point of view, the phantasmal supposition that they were kidnapped by their adoptive parents discharges the original parents from the abandonment they are accused of. Just like the « ordinary » original fantasies and superimposed onto them, the fantasies of kidnap and abandonment appear with the parents as well as the children, giving a common fantasmatic stock, which will feed the link of adoptive filiation. Quickly identified and shared, they are the chosen vehicle to accede to the deepest psychic levels; they penetrate and echo in each of us and for all of us in the family, thus enabling a multiplicity of viewpoints. Their expression as well as their location is enhanced by the processes of fantasmatic echo, a concept developed by Anzieu (1975) from the unconscious echo theory proposed by Foulkes (1948), and interfantasmatisation. This echo shows the existence of a groupal echo of a fantasy expressed by one or several others, but it is active in the link only if it gets broader and enriched in an interfantasmatisation process where the fantasmatic contents changed into echoes contribute to the groupal associative chain and feed the conscious and unconscious intersubjective links, furthering the creation of a shareable psychic reservoir, where each is able to dip in. This is how the family abilities for mythopoïesis are used, and how the family Ego together with the narcissistic illusion are built. Thus, the interfantasmatisation and the original fantasies on which they rest can be considered as family psychic organisers (A.Eiguer, 1987). In short, the original fantasies specific to adoption turn the quest for illusion towards constructing and enriching the whole of the intrafamily links which go with new symbolic births. If they remain collectively unrecognised, ignored or if they are rejected, anti-processes freeze the interfantasmatisation and leave the memory to lapse, to be marked by lies and deception. To ensure that the first links do not remain as ghosts haunting the links being built, it is important to house all these psychical movements with the negative imprint they carry

(Loncan, Lafage, 1999). The old links will become recognised vestigial links, put on standby, but available. The whole of the process will define a family psychic space where one can store thanks to the beginnings of mythopoïesis, a shared family romance which will create a real place to the current family, within a more strongly defined psychic envelope.

Epilogue

The children's symptoms have evolved a lot; Nelly is back to her natural voice, she doesn't have her frightening bouts of anger anymore. Emma has found more energy; she stopped being a couch potato and can express herself more clearly. The fraternal links have been strengthened and rivalry is more moderated. The house building games carried on for a while longer in sessions, but the space was not divided in two anymore. If the house is the material transfer of the family psychic space, then we can see in this creativity a move towards unification and rooting in a shared family intimacy where the whole of the links gain intensity.

Without going into details, the transfero-counter-transferent movements have worked to carry on with an approach long full of uncertainty and shot through with recurrent depressive dips. The distress of each family member, the scattering of the links and the fragility of identities have brought on in me too a desire for heroic rescue as well as an epistemophilic impulse.

Conclusion: international adoption as a paragon « new families »

International adoptions form some of the so called new families we meet. We can compare them to recomposed families, intercultural families and other family configurations in whose foundation we encounter mystery or even secrets. We're thinking here of, for example, the anonymity of sperm or eggs donors, or the complexities of pregnancy for another, be they for homoparental couples or not. Strangeness leaves an imprint, at least an unconscious one, in the links which sometimes encounter difficulties in truly establishing themselves. The qualification of parent remains thus uncertain, in parallel with the haziness and instability of the feeling of being « the child of », as it often happens in adoption cases. When there are traumatising couple break ups, the filiation and fraternal links can be threatened, swallowed in the conjugal link's dissolution and the break can feel the same as what happens during adoption. If the family becomes recomposed, the child can, on the contrary become the lynch pin between two or more families, the alternation leaving some of his life in the dark for his parents or brothers and sisters, and vice versa. It is not then the unique and definitive nature of temporo-spatial breaks which, as it is the case for adoption, create fantasies of kidnapping or bilateral abandonment, but indeed their repetition. This variability in the area of intimacy also brings about a flickering and an oscillation of the feeling of belonging, causing individual as well as shareable intrapsychical wounds within the biological filiation link. It also compromises the creation of confident and reliable extra filiation links between step parents and step children within a muddled or even damaged family mythology. An intense psychical

work is required to do the necessary redevelopments; just like for adoption, it can happen without therapy, however therapy can find elective indications still too rarely set out, separation actually not being a pathology.

Note

1) Philemon is an adjective meaning « affectionate », « friendly » in ancient Greek.

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