The adopted child and his double origin

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Abstract

In order to highlight the persistence of a double connection of the adopted child with the family of origin as well as with the new adoptive bonds (e.g., Brodzinsky, Schechter, Marantz Henig, 1992), two clinical cases are presented in this work: The first one regards a young woman who was adopted in early childhood through national adoption; the second one regards two adoptive parents dealing with the grief involved by the distancing of their adopted son when he becomes a young adult. This double connection tends to persist over the life of the adopted child even though one of the two poles, or both, might seem to "disappear" from the subjective and relational experience of the adopted person and his adoptive family; in fact, these two dimensions inevitably reemerge through time with different paths for each individual. On a psychic level, the adoption is situated for all protagonists in a "meta-familiar space", where the dimensions of psychic filiation, instituted filiation, and "de corps à corps" (i.e., "from body to body") filiation are organized in a particular way (e.g., Guyotat, 1980; 1995). With regard to these dimensions, both the adoptive parents and the child who came from far away are involved in a process of integration for their entire life, although with alternating events.

Key words: Tattoo, adoption, double connection, meta-family, return of the repressed.

An indelible sign

«You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you» (Genesis, 17, 11).
Claudia, aged 27, asks for psychological help because her boyfriend broke up the relationship with her a few months before their marriage and she is still suffering from this. Perhaps this abandon, which was totally unexpected, reactivated thoughts and feelings related to the abandon that led to her adoption. This young woman was adopted when she was eleven month old through national adoption. She knows that her biological mother left her at the hospital, and her parents adopted her after she spent a short time in a community. Claudia says that she and her family have never talked about the adoption very much, she was told that her biological mother was probably single and that thinking about the past was actually useless.
Her adoptive parents, both graduates, were very demanding as regarded her academic performance and she did not disappoint their expectations; in fact, she went to a secondary school focusing on sciences with good grades, and then she graduated on time at the Faculty of Geology. At the moment she works in a public institution and

she lives by herself; however, she would really like to get married in order to have a child.

During the sessions she talks about her life with the adoptive family: Two years after her adoption her parents had two twin daughters. Claudia has always had a positive relationship with one of the two sisters; sometimes, the other one tells her: "You know, it's strange: Although you are an adopted child, we get along pretty well as sisters…". In the course of the seventh session, after having clarified that she has never thought about her family of origin – "I was a little baby" –, she adds nonchalantly: "You reminded me that last year I got a tattoo of the name I was given by my biological mother and I wanted it where I knew it would have been very painful…". Then Claudia reports that her adoptive parents, by consensus of the judge, changed her name because the original one – Mirtia – was too unusual and thus not effective in protecting her in case the biological parents would have been looking for her.

Dario, aged 22 at the moment of the consultation with the adoptive parents, was adopted through international adoption from an Eastern Country when he was two year old, after he spent a couple of years into an institute. The adoptive parents ask for psychotherapeutic help a few months after the death of the maternal grandmother; the old woman, who lived with her daughter and her son-in-law for the last twenty years, actually since Dario's arrival, was very sick in the last years and Dario's parents had to take care of her the whole time. After her death – as reported by Dario's mother – both parents were not that busy anymore and they started to miss their adoptive son more and more, as at that time he was living in England, where he has spent the last four years.

Dario, who has always been a very smart and lively child, did not have any problems at nursery and elementary school; in particular, the fact that his racial characteristics are "very similar to ours" protected him from being "annoyed", and his parents said they were very surprised when he became very oppositional and defiant during his adolescence. At middle school he started to hang out with friends in the afternoon, coming back home later and later and thus creating a state of tension in the family. Then, in order to force him to study, the adoptive parents put him into a stricter private high school, but Dario seemed to be "out of place" among his quiet and diligent schoolmates; his oppositional behaviors at school increased and when he was attending the second year he was expelled.

At home, Dario's leitmotif was: "You are not my parents, you don't have the right to impose anything to me". During those years, he had a positive relationship only with his maternal grandmother, Serena, who was in her seventies at that time and with whom the guy was able to establish an immediate emotional contact.

Moved by his parents into a public school, Dario was often absent so that he was not allowed to enter the next grade and thus he decided to abandon that school. The parents, who have always been very conflicting as regards the educational methods, tried to follow Dario's fleeting interests by putting him into different professional courses (e.g., goldsmith's art, pastry-making …). Moreover, a psychologist tried to

help him, but nothing worked and Dario spent three years (between the ages of 15 and 18) without being able to find his own path and getting into drugs. Sent into a therapeutic community at the age of 18, he ran away after a few months and came back home just to communicate that he was going to England to find a job; the reason was that he was not willing to share anything with a family that was not truly *his* family.

In England he did irregular jobs at the beginning, but then he was employed as a waiter in a restaurant whose owner, an Italian man from Naples, started to protect him as a sort of paternal figure, as he told in the only one phone call with his grandmother; during the four years of his life there, Dario never got back to Italy, but his mother visited him four times in order to convince him to leave the UK and come home. However, the guy kept saying that he did not recognize the adoptive parents as his own family.

When his grandmother died, Dario unexpectedly returned for her funeral. Now there is a tattoo on his left arm: "Serena", the name of the grandmother.

Getting a tattoo to "feel" the pain?

The word "tattoo" comes from the Tahitian "tatu", that means "to mark something". The origins of the tattoo are very old; in the primitive populations it was a sign of belonging to a certain social group, but at the same time it pointed out the uniqueness of the individual. Nowadays the tattoo involves a dialectical tension between belonging and distinctiveness, because it might be a message to affirm a group membership and/or to underline the separation from a relational context that is considered as outdated or even opposed, in some ways.

In the current socio-cultural scenario the body is treated as something that can be shaped as one wishes, and not as something that is "assigned"; however, exploring the unconscious reasons why "that" particular individual might decide to mark his body indelibly is actually very interesting. According to Lemma (2001), the motivations for a permanent modification of the body should be searched in the internal world of the person, "under the skin".

In the ancient Egyptian culture people used to incise their face or their body to express the suffering for the death of a close one and the pain of the body, marked by fire, was a sort of echo and auctioneer of an inexpressible sorrow. Similarly, Claudia's and Dario's tattoos seem to have a transparent meaning: To make "objective" something that an individual is not able to receive and elaborate on a symbolic level in his relationships, but first of all in his language and thoughts.

As shown by Jeammet (1992, 2001), the avoidance of the emotions is imperative, because they highlight the existence of an objectual relationship in a context where the dependency from external objects is perceived as threatening: The level of the sensation, more controllable and manageable, is predominant and covers the level of the emotion, which is unstable, destabilizing and connected to the self as well as to the other.

Among the unconscious functions of marking the skin (e.g., Lemma, 2011), the denial of the separation or loss is prevalent, as well as the unconscious fantasy of fusion with the lost object. In the first case, the pain for the lost origin, which has been censured for many years, seems to be perceived so intensely that it has to be incised on the body. Moreover, as Claudia repeats several times, the choice of getting a painful tattoo might mean that she tried to "objectify" the pain of the abandon, that could not be otherwise recognized. She also chose a hidden area of her body for her tattoo, and this suggests that the young woman is alone in dealing with the issue of her origins, perhaps because she is aware that her adoptive family could not help her.

In the second case, Dario decides to live far away from the adoptive parents, with a strong denial and deligitimization of any bond with this family as well as with the biological one that abandoned him – in fact, he finds a third family in his employer; however, this decision digs up the acknowledgment of a relationship, of the fact that "something" has been given in the adoptive context, although with contradictions and mutual misunderstandings. The tattoo, that he exhibits publicly during his grandmother's funeral, reveals that a part of this "something", especially the relationship with the grandmother, who just died, has marked him forever, offering a sort of trace for a possible (although not taken for granted) re-reading of the relationship with the adoptive family.

The choice of getting a tattoo seems to be connected to a certain use of the body: In case of limited awareness of feelings and problems in the communications of an individual's emotional experience, the conflict seems to look for a discharge on a somatic level, in order to become visible to the person only or to the other people according to the area chosen for the tattoo. In fact, when the symbolization of an individual's experience is problematic, words and thoughts are replaced by acts on the body, or even against the body; according to Lemma (2011), the body becomes a canvas expressing the most unconscious fantasies.

A meta-familiar scenario

In the case of adoption, parenthood and filiation have their own properties, and that makes the articulated process of the transition to parenthood and filiation, in which the family is involved, even more complex. Any adopted child and any adoptive parent has to deal with a fundamental "doubt" – how could an individual be fully recognized by his adoptive parents as their child, although he has other biological parents as well as another ethnic group, and how could an individual legitimize himself to be the parent of a child who has other parents at the same time?

In order to solve this apory, which is defined by Kaes (2002) as a "paradoxical dream", the individual should put himself on a *meta* level where both terms of this dilemma are contained. The search for the integration of the double origin is destined to last the whole life of a person; in this regard, according to Brodzinsky and colleagues (1995, 2002), adoption is a *long-life process*, because the issue of complexity and the dialectic between opposites never find a definitive solution and

tend to emerge at each critical transition, such as the child's transition to adulthood. According to Darchis (2009), the access to parenthood involves a path of search for the past family experience, with two main identification processes: (1) with the child you were and with the one you would have liked to be; (2) with the parents you had and with those you would have liked to have. This double identification process allows the individual to get an image that is more compatible with the parental function, and thus to reach a precise position in the hierarchy of family relationships, to move from being a child who needs care to being a parent who is able to provide care. However, the identification of the adoptive parents with their own parents is partial, because these individuals had no access to procreation, whereas their parents did.

At the same time, when the adopted child becomes an adult who is going to think about his own child, the identification process involves two different parental couples: One has actually been present for many years, providing care and attention; the other one has been on the background, although very active on an emotional level, combining the power of the procreation with the lack of the parental function.

The adoptive filiation requires a particular articulation of the three filiation logics described by Guyotat (1980). The instituted filiation, with the symbolic acknowledgment of the child by the parents, regards the community and the cultural dimension according to which everyone's role is codified, so that the kid is designated as the child of a specific parent. At this level, the filiation reveals its nature of social construction, which is closely connected to the subject's identity, as it represents a psychic phenomenon that is built in a social context to which it refers (Zurlo, 2002).

The second logic of the filiation bond – imaginary, fantasmatic, narcissistic filiation – refers to the child's experience as regards the place that is assigned to him in the generational chain. Peculiarities or diversities in the instituted and symbolic dimensions have a remarkable impact on a psychic level, so that the imaginary, narcissistic aspect of filiation might become more important either in the construction of an imaginary filiation or because of a greater need to rely on the third filiation logic, that is "de corps à corps" (i.e., "from body to body") filiation (e.g., Guyotat, 1995); this kind of filiation is more connected to a biomedical conception of the filiation bond, that regards the transmission of genetic traits from the parents to the children.

According to Zurlo (2009), because of the close twist among these three vectors, the pure psychic level of filiation is inevitably influenced by the changes on a cultural level or on a biomedical level. In the last decades the Western culture has been characterized by two opposite trends: On one hand, the separation between instituted filiation and biological filiation is increasingly legitimized in multiple situations (e.g., adoption, stepfamilies, donor assisted conception), favoring the instituted filiation; on the other hand, the biological filiation is particularly valued and this leads into the field of the test of the natural filiation, which is considered by the law as equivalent to

the legitimate filiation. This kind of contradiction might affect the understanding of the issue of adoption by those who are directly involved as well as by the community. As regards the adoption, the positive articulation of the three logics requires that the symbolic acknowledgement of the child by the new parents, which yields the full legitimization of the new family, is based on the non-ambivalent clearness of the adoptive origin of the new bond. In fact, instituted filiation and biological filiation are not connected to the same parents in the adoption process, so that a "third", although lost in the reality, will always be actual and present in the fantasies of each individual, as well as in the experience of the relationships into the family. It might be that the affective dimension of the adoptive relationships is based on the twist of the other dimensions and none of them could be denied.

According to Grange-Ségéral (2009), the adopted child provides evidence «of the split with the biological dimension, with the famous "voice of the blood" that represents a sort of frame in the ordinary filiation. The initial relationship should be created and developed in a purely psychic dimension, which needs a very intense imaginary re-elaboration» (Grange-Ségéral, 2009, p.107). The Author refers to «phantoms of physical contiguity»; in the case of the biological family, these phantoms provide a sort of «barrier against the feelings of strangeness» during periods of crisis, such as adolescence, but this protection can not be activated in the case of adoption (Grange-Ségéral, 2009).

At the same time, the adoptive parenthood is based on the *legitimateness received by the law*, but on a psychic level it has to deal with the strangeness of *biological filiation*, which is continuously phantasmatized through imaginary revisitations. These revisitations involve the issue of loss and its psychic transcription. For the child, the loss is represented by the fracture of the original relationships, and for the parents the loss regards the desired child and the chance of a natural procreation.

Winnicott (1971) and Green (1998) worked on the issue of absence and the *mark* that it leaves in the psychic world. According to Losso and Losso (2006), the grief elaboration involves the maintenance of the lost bond through its transcription in symbolic terms: «The grief process is developed by the psyche in order to face the loss or the death of an important object, so that the different qualities of the bonds with the lost object can be re-introjected into the Ego, and the individual can actually accept the impossibility of a reunion» (Losso e Losso, 2006, p. 121). In other words, the lost object finds symbolic ways to ensure the continuity of its presence.

In this regards, the specific configuration characterizing the adoptive family can be considered as a *metafamily*. This concept was first introduced into the field of studies about stepfamilies (e.g., Sager, Walker, Brown, Crown, Rodstein, 1981) and then applied to adoptive families (e.g., Hajal, Rosenberg, 1991), and it refers to a family representation that involves both the new nucleus and the original one (or its substitutes); both people who are present in the current context and absent or far elements, although perceived as in some ways involved in the "family area" (Greco, 2006). In my opinion, Tisseron's clever intuition (e.g., Tisseron, 1994) – according to which it is impossible to be good parents if <<the grief of your own perfection >>, as

well as your parents' perfection and the perfection of the expected child, has not been elaborated – in the case of adoptive parents regards the need to deal with an atypical and more complex beginning of the family as a necessary condition to create a place for the actual child and his needs of love and care.

The return of the repressed

A very intense and tough psychic work is required in order to keep the metafamiliar space open or, in other words, to avoid the reduction of the picture to a monochromatic vision, where one of the two dialectic poles is distanced or actively removed (Greco, 2010). This psychic work is renovated at each crucial passage of life, such as the transition to parenthood of the adoptive child once he becomes an adult. In this stage, the twist of the psychic, instituted, and biological vectors is modified in favor of the de corps à corps" (i.e., "from body to body") filiation. Fantasies, fragments of memories about the biological origin are reactivated and lay claim to a position in the psychic and symbolic space, both for the adopted children and for the adoptive parents (Greco, Rosnati, Ferrari, 2010). Before and after this passage, any reductionist operation is in most cases an unstable and forcedly temporary solution. Suddenly, the underground presence of the third element emerges and its power, although denied for long time, is finally revealed.

The two clinical cases reported above provide evidence to the deep mark left by something that might have been officially absent for long time (twenty-five years in the first case!). Claudia lived in an adoptive family that has always guaranteed the gifts of care to her; however, in this family the conflict between strangeness and belonging has been managed in a split way on an intrapsychic level as well as on the level of family relationships. In fact, the issue of her diverse origin is explicitly addressed through the years only by one of the sisters, that reminds her how strange it is to get along pretty well although Claudia is an adopted child; according to the other family members, and apparently to Claudia as well, the adoption should be left in parentheses because it belongs to the past. It is almost impossible for a child to explicitly address such a crucial topic if he is not allowed by his parents, who first decide to get into this emotionally risky area. The very surprising salvage of the name that she was given by her natural mother through the tattoo suggests that the young woman is trying to rebuild her own filiation from her biological mother on the level of the narcissistic and imaginary logic.

In his parents' opinion, Dario's relationship both with his biological origin and with the adoptive family seems to be very precarious, so that it has to be managed through a sort of distancing. His parents' requests, perceived by Dario as excessive during his adolescence, and conflicts as regards the educational methods, which did not provide him with a solid holding, in some ways pushed him to a fantasy of autogenesis (he found his "real" family in the owner of the restaurant), with a complete denial of the adoptive bond and the absence of any word about his origins.

According to Kaes (2002), the subject pretends not to be generated. Thus Dario, at a very young age, decides to search for adventure in a land that is far from the conflict – neither the East of Europe nor Italy – perhaps in order to be born again, in a sort of imaginary, autarchic filiation. The death of the beloved grandmother, although he had "abandoned" her during the four years spent in England, is a good chance for Dario to come back and to declare to himself and to the others that not everything of the adoptive origin (as well as the other one on the background) should be rejected: Something remained as a "mark" deep inside of him.

The work of preparation/accompaniment to adoption

The preparation of the future adoptive parents is very important, as well as the accompaniment of those who have already received an adopted child, in order to help these people open a large space for the child, so that through the years he may find and always renew his own point of balance between the two indelible dimensions of his origin, even though the path is not constantly linear.
The maintenance of a metafamiliar openness in the representational world of the parents is a necessary condition for them in order to be affectively attuned with their child, both when he needs to distance his biological origin and, on the contrary, when he needs that the adoptive family is able to accept the part of himself that comes from elsewhere.
Only within a free dialectic relationship between these two dimensions, which are sometimes integrated at some levels, or twisted, or antagonists, or victims – one or both – of an armed ostracism, a creative adoptive history might be developed, so that the return of the repressed can be accepted and managed through time.

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