

# **The fragility of the links in the adoptive family: is it a terminable or interminable adoption?**

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## **Abstract**

**Keywords:** alienness, bond, aesthetic conflict.

## **Introduction**

Heinrich von Kleist (1) in his book “The progressive realization of thoughts in speech” suggests that the process and the dynamics between the speaker and the listener produce the thought.

It is a real participation of the listener in the thought of the speaker such as the listener through his listening literally gives the speaker half of the thought he is trying to express.

The act of Listening which is capable through its expectations to animate the other in the development and continuation of his thoughts.

“It is announced that place between you and me in which, actually, something occurs and is produced” Kleist's perceptions accurately describe the method by which we have collaborated in the writing of this work.

The theoretical core of the article concerns the role of the link, that we call “alienness”, that is the basis of the constitution of the adoptive families and plays a primary role in the identity formation either the children or the adopting family.

The question the work arises is :”what are the consequences of psychic unconscious activities that the family group carries out/implements for denying, splitting or foreclosure, the original relationship of mutual alienness, which refers to relationships, people, places and to times/days prior to their first meeting a to their own lives, that we can call their pre – history lives?”

Pre-history lives that are magically pulverized, and quickly turning their meeting into kinship family.

Without knowing, they remove the originality and the authenticity of their relationship creating a process that could be called “inglobazione of the alien”.

This will have the primary purpose, however, to defend and compact the couple and the family to deal with any risk of disruption and contamination of their identity arrangement.

The experience of alienation towards the “own” and “familiar” is certainly not new, it can see frequently in adolescents towards their parents and vice versa, or in certain stages that precede a psychotic break in one of the members of the family. They are often transitional phases but very important as they indicate that strong changes are taking place.

In the case of the adopting family, we think that the experience of alienation from temporary becomes a fundamental aspect of their links.

We refer the “*relation of allieness*” to the interesting and productive meaning that the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels (2). In his opinion allieness is not a deficit but “the experience of a meeting according to a structure of absence / presence ... in which the alien/stranger appears as that which cannot be integrated in the entire (3) and becomes important only when it is in contact with a “*allieness of myself*” (4) The reference to the term dell’Unheimlich (5) of Freud is inevitable because of its meanings of “disturbing closeness, close distance, absence - presence,” (Curi, 2010) (6).

Therefore the absence of absolute opposition between “home” and “not home”, “between domestic/ familiar” and “alien” comes the sense of uncanny, and the feeling that the threat does not come from outside but from within.

The recognition and acceptance of this quality of the relationship of “aliennesse” can, however, activate unexpected processes of learning, enrichment and changes in the subjects involved.

We can also remember the words of Sartre in his book “Le mots” (7), where he writes that the alien is “absence in flesh and blood”, indicating an experience in which “the other is in the way of not being there”.

This way of not being in the experience seems to us the fundamental quality of adoptive links there where the mutual estrangement is not only not appreciated as a foundation of the ontological but rather comes as a cover up, made that irrecoverable giving rise to a misperception of nonexistence.

We can think, therefore, to an unconscious domestic misunderstanding, whereby what is rendered unrecoverable by their process of denial is mistaken for non-existent, such as the childhood period prior to the adoption of the child or the experiences of infertility of the couple.

This contributes to the creation of a generic “us” and a not differentiated family. In a community meant like this, there is nothing alien, everything is included under what is common.

Starting from this we believe that the adoption is not concluded either in a bureaucratic document or in a bounded experience of a family. It is a process in which the adoption itself is renewed in certain situations where the relational level of alienness can re-appear, giving rise to structural, dynamic and critical movements, through dis-organization and re-organization of the family. Hence the hypothesis of in-terminability of adoption.

We believe that the inability to recognize and accept the alienness as a foundation of their union contributes to the fragility of their links, to a structural weakness, as if the operations necessary for the recognition of the quality of the land were avoided, when you go to build a new house. As if there were an impediment to know their pre-history lives as a foundation of their family.

For the reasons above, we believe that the study and observation of the behaviour of families living experiences of adoption can clarify some aspects of the common

working of a family and especially can help us to think about new parental mode and in particular about what is now called “social parenthood.”

### **Case report - The aesthetic impact: fascination and conflict**

The clinical aspect concern to the analysis of a family consisting of parents and two adopted children: Monica, the first daughter, adopted in Italy when she was a few days old and the second adopted son, baptized at birth Anatoly, but called Andrea immediately after the adoption that took place in a country in Eastern Europe. Andrea was adopted at the age of 3, after 8 years from the first adoption.

The parents' request for help comes when they report Andrea's problems of conduct and relationship, they think are connected to drug use.

Since the first interview the couple give a strong idea of union and compactness, a fine cultural level and especially affecting are the iridescent eyes of the lady that amplify the emotional state of her story, that it half faint hope and half contemptuous resentment. the beauty and the apparent perfection of the couple affects the analyst, who associates this feeling to the “aesthetic conflict” of the child against the mother's beauty, masterfully described by D. Meltzer (8).

It is quite common to find in each adopting couple the lack of information regarding the history of the child prior to adoption, both for objective reasons related to bureaucratic obstacles and for subjective reasons for resistance to know. What was the original object of Andrew's aesthetic conflict? What aesthetic conflict may be activated against the adoptive mother or perhaps an aesthetic conflict can be activated against the adopting parents?

The psychoanalyst cares about living up to so much beauty and giving to the couple interpretations of value, he tells them that perhaps the family is struggling with a great disappointment due to the difficulty to live up to each other expectations, in particular between them and their son Andrea.

The lady answers talking about Andrea's idea, from childhood throughout adolescence, to be the best and most beautiful, and her belief that it is the truth. She feels she must be refunded for all this suffering! The idea to be refounded is linked to the inability to tolerate the disillusion of mutual perfection. Had the beauty intoxication made them to forget everything else?

Can she talk freely about this feeling because Andrea is not her natural child or because this son is now becoming alien to her eyes and paradoxically he is true as he has never been? How that child must have felt, in orphanage, at the sight of this couple? Probably as a terrestrial kidnapped by extraterrestrials!

It is interesting to note that talking about the aesthetic impact D. Meltzer says, “He (the baby) is, after all, arrived in a strange country, of which he knows neither the language nor the non-verbal modes of expression in use. His mother is enigmatic for him” (9). We can find more than one analogy with the impact of a child in meeting his new parents, a new country and a new language.

The initial aspect of transference / counter-transference has to deal with the emotional impact comparable to a new mutual adoption between the therapist and the couple, between the therapist and the family, a complex impact of fascination, alienness and disturbing familiarity.

### **The impact of alien blood or the lost illusion of consanguinity**

During the preliminary period of assessment Mr and Mrs A. Attend sessions without Andrea. They talk about an episode that occurred a few days before that the mother defines devastating. After another yet dispute, Andrea is very angry and going to his room to have lunch alone, he breaks a glass in his hand hurting himself. This happens just in front of Monica's room who shouts to brother: "How disgusting is blood, clean it, clean it!". Parents arrive immediately to avoid the struggle between the two, but they go each in their own room, both crying! The mother came into Andrea's room, he desperately recriminates that his sister was disgusted by his blood, her brother's blood not that of a bastard and a tramp and that he could no longer tolerate being treated that way!

The therapist indicates to parents that it is true, both have "bastard" blood and maybe both of them are violently realizing that by themselves, with parents and parents with the therapist.

This event is striking for its unexpected drama, that signals just a basic characteristic of alienness described by B. Waldenfels, that is the sudden impact in the absence of the subject's initiative. Sartre said that "we do not recognize the stranger, we meet him."

In this way, I upsets brother and sister, in their absence, they enter the scene of family analysis right from where they were linked to their parents, at the beginning of their history or rather as aliens, and from where they now feel the removal as a real threat. The task that seems to involve them is precisely the opportunity / threat to come together in a different way, compared to their blood, in which one of the most problematic aspects is represented by paranoid deep anxiety of contamination. Which is, *inter alia*, a world social emerging element against the alien, the foreign, the different from the self.

During the story, the therapist is "touched" and understands that he is "moving with them" in a process of violent awareness of an aspect of their links so far separated and removed, the alienness comes from their blood, their stories, their relationships.

Foreigns push to be welcomed, knocking at the door of the therapist so you to take charge of a new adoption.

Following these considerations, the therapist decides to take charge of the family, beginning from the couple, leaving space for the eventual arrival of the children.

The therapeutic space becomes symbolically the place (outside home and orphanage) where to think back to a link in which adopted children can return to reflect if those two adoptive parents can become their parents.

### **What can be more alien and familiar than a dream?**

The dramatic question Andrea asked to the whole family on the quality of his blood and therefore to their mutual membership/alienss, is answered by the mother with a dream that introduces the fundamental elements of the relationship between her inner world and the family group, in particular reports precisely the urgency point of the family.

The lady said that throughout the dream she had an 'urgent need to evacuate, but it was difficult because he was travelling with her husband in a bus to the airport. Before getting into the bus they had found a one year old girl, they were both anxious to find her parents, they felt that they could be accused of kidnapping, so they rose the girl up to show her. Even if the girl was plump she was very light. She had the distinct feeling of having evacuated her pants. Off the bus she realized she had dry feces on her stomach, she is very embarrassed and needs to wash, to find a toilette. Searching the toilet she had to across cathedrals a strong feeling of alienss, where she can hear children singing. She finally finds a toilette, of which she remembered golden reflections, where she can finally wash and change. The lady tells the therapist that the reflections were very similar to those reflecting in the glass of the library of his office!

After the dream the couple tells of the three spontaneous interruptions of pregnancy and a ectopic fourth that preceded the adoption, all of them represented in the dream by lumps of dried poop on her belly. Her husband remembers that it was his decision to embark on the road of adoption because he could no longer bear that his wife risked her life during last ectopic pregnancy. This is a strong element of closeness and sharing of the couple. The lightness of the girl indicates the function of "relief / reduction" to the couple who had adoptions after the failures of gestation, however, accompanied with feelings of guilt as a complement to feelings of kidnapping.

However, the central aspect of the dream was just the urgency to evacuate.

The lady is reporting with great anguish that the conditions for a new loss / evacuation of another child are re-creating, this time is Andrea, she can no longer hold him.

At the same time are emerging as elements of counterpoint, feelings of alienss and the sensation she is not part of the group, represented in the dream by crossing cathedrals associated with cathedrals in Andrea's country of origin with orphanages and unborn children in the children-angels's choir. What was left split, which belonged to their pre-histories, was emerging with an unmistakable quality of alienss here and now just as before.

### **It can happen that who is suddenly running away from home carries away the jewels**

The arrival of the son in session is connected to the parents' discovery that Andrea has stolen the family jewels. His parents decided to expel him from home. He agrees to come to a session by invitation of the therapist.

At that moment, the therapist feels the fragility of their links and communicates the “*absence of feeling that binds the parents to a son and a son to his parents*,” and that a temporary separation could protect what remained of their relationship between them.

The mother expresses this sentiment with the words “*it was as if I was told that my son was dead, and in that moment I felt a jerk! Who I have at home now?*”

Stealing embodies the emergent fragility of their links on the one hand and on the other the complementary alienness that is impacting them.

Their sense of belonging is lacking, their way of family support and containment is resulting in the re-emergence of ways of reactive conduct to situations of insecurity.

It can be said that Andrea's behavior represents the intersection of the vertical elements of his personal history with the horizontal dimension of the traumatic elements of family history.

In this context, as S. Tisseron (10) described in his book, Andrea's slinky behaviour is the expression of a early learned attitude to grab the object stealthily, many children who experience the precarious presence of their mother do that, even if she is threatening or rewarding. In this sense, such behavior appears to be the legacy of the first years of his life spent in an orphanage. Andrea could not explain why, but he felt he could do that because in those moments his family was alien to him.

He stole because he felt as if it was not his own home. So perhaps his behavior is a sort of claim for compensation, just as his mother said during the first meeting.

Andrea's mother is able to say what she felt on the other hand he was acting; it is an obvious symmetry in the context of a transformation of their link.

Stealing and grabbing affection are the implied fantasies of all adopting processes. Only developing the emotion of guilt for not being fertile and generative or have been rejected because inadequate and therefore abandoned, can soothe the pain resulting from traumatic experiences that may never be overcome.

### **If I recognize you as an alien, you are no longer an alien: the feeling of alienness as a foundation for new links**

The session report we refer, is an important clinical support to the hypothesis concerning the endless adopting process primarily due to the fragility of the link of filiation.

The first reason for the fragility of the filial link in adoption is due to the superimposition of the adoptive filial link on the natural filial link, it makes a mess that slips into a misunderstanding. If this is necessary from a legal point of view to guarantee the protection of all subjects involved, it is not right at the level of psychological and emotional inner world of the subjects themselves.

The protection of mental health in this case goes in the opposite direction, not that of equivalence “adopted children and biological children are equal at law” but the direction of differentiation and discrimination of the latent level in which the

developing processes of filiation and parenting impact with the experience of alieness.

The second reason of fragility is the unidirectionality of the adoption act, we do not say that a child adopts a family but that parents adopt a child. This can have consequences in children claim of identity, especially during adolescence.

The third reason is the real threat of reversibility of the adopted link because of the lack of consanguinity.

Under certain critical and conflictual situations it is possible to desire or be afraid of realizing the dissolution of a link by virtue of the historical assumption “you are not the parent who gave birth to me, I'm not a child born from you” or “I did not give birth to you and therefore I do not recognize you, I reject you”.

In these dramatic contexts can emerge a feeling of alieness that will characterize the link between children and parents, a quality of relationship that remains silent, mute for many years but set deep in their early history.

The session opens with the notice of the death of Andrea's grandmother. He lives temporarily in a hostel but he can go home only when there is someone in.

Days before many relatives visited their house for their condolences and Andrea points up he can not bear all eyes on him as they remind him of being a thief and a drug addict. He says he only wants to disappear and in a crescendo of mutual recriminations he says to his parents they are aliens to him and precisely: “I can not look at you and think you are my mum, you are an alien to me, the same is for dad, I do not know any more what it means to have a mother, a house ... I've already lost once my parents and now I'm losing these as well. I'm leaving you forever. We in session just to tell these things.”

In this dramatic but true debate/discussion Andrea indicates his feeling of alieness, but still calling his parents Mum and Dad, highlighting the complexity of this feeling including either familiarity or its complementary opposite. The extraordinary thing about this passage is in the explanation of such a complex and disturbing feeling that rarely finds the path of awareness and that actually we can defined it as “the dark side of the moon”, a real unheimlich.

Just from this painful insight, the family began the arduous work of developing of their links identities.

A. Bauleo (11) defined a family in attitude of active and dynamic structural transformation as “operative” and we like to call it so.

Andrea is in charge of this transformation through his proactive attitude At the end of the session, talking to his parents who reiterate their willingness to help him.

Andrea intimates: “Hold it now. I come to you, do not come and get me”.

This is an indication of the direction of the changing process, the reverse path of adoption: from parents who adopt a child, to the child adopting parents... In this sense, adoption must be considered as a real link.

We want to conclude by recognizing the great opportunity that this family, so brave and tenacious in their search for understanding and truth, has the offerd to us to

reflect on a central point of human links which is the alieness, as a complementary and inseparable aspect of familiarity.

In some ways, the process that sees them protagonists as adoptive family is nothing more than the process involving any family in paths of discrimination. Each member of a family pass through the experience of being an alien in his own family in order to be able to differentiate and separate.

But the adopting family intends to have an initial unconscious task that makes the operation of discrimination more complicated: it must accelerate the process of inclusion at the expense of the recognition of the extraordinary quality that binds them, which is the link of alieness.

In our case, as in most cases, was a teenager to convey the need to be recognized in its originality of its history.

By the family psychoanalysis, this family was able to transform the experience of alieness into the touching experience of extraordinariness as well.

## Notes

- 1) H. Von Kleist, *Samtliche Werke*, Waisbaden, Vollemer Verlag.
- 2) B. Waldenfels, Estraneo, straniero, straordinario. *Saggi di fenomenologia responsiva*, a cura di U. Perone, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino 2011.
- 3) Ibidem, p.75
- 4) Ibidem, p.73
- 5) S. Freud, *Il Perturbante*, tr. in Opere, a cura di Cesare L. Musatti, 12 voll., Boringhieri, Torino 1977
- 6) U. Curi, *Straniero*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2010.
- 7) J.P.Sartre, *Le parole*, Il saggiautore, Torino, 1964.
- 8) D. Meltzer, M. Harris Williams, *Amore e timore della bellezza. Il ruolo del conflitto estetico nello sviluppo, nell'arte e nella violenza*, Borla, Roma 1989
- 9) Ibidem, p.41
- 10) S. Tisseron, M.Torok, N.Rand, C.Nachin, P.Hachet, J.C.Rouchy, *Lo Psichismo alla prova delle generazioni*, Borla, Roma, 1997
- 11) A. Bauleo. *Clinica Gruppale Clinica Istituzionale*, Il Poligrafico, Padova 1994

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