

RESILIENCY, TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD AND ADOPTION: AN EXPLORATIVE SURVEY

Giulia Carta

Department of Human Studies
Lumsa, Roma, Italy
s.destasio@lumsa.it

Francesca Boldrini

Department of Human Studies
Lumsa, Roma, Italy

Simona De Stasio

Department of Human Studies
Lumsa, Roma, Italy

Maria Cristina Rappazzo

Department of Human Studies
Lumsa, Roma, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Objectives Transition to parenthood represents a crucial process, followed by significant changes concerning individual and familial psychological wellbeing. Adoptive parenthood can be particularly critical. Knowing how to support resilient attitude of adopting families can lead to successful adoption. Our main aim was to analyse coping strategies and processes that characterize adoption. **Materials and Methods** 19 families, attending courses on adoption, were recruited; parental age ranges from 35 to 65 yrs. An ad-hoc semi-structured interview based on the three assumptions of familiar resiliency (systems of belief, organizational set-ups and communicative processes) was used. **Results** Qualitative analysis has been performed by three independent referees. According to 53% of the interviewed, adoption represents the opportunity to expand family; for the 47%, negative circumstances after adoption have been overcome by the attitude of husband and wife to hold out together; in the 37% of the cases, the more apt to give strength to the couple, are the stability of the relationship and enduring dialogue, in order to follow a shared course of action. Out of the family, the social resources most frequently utilized in the first months after the adoption were: extended family (63%), friends (47%) and professionals (74%). The 100% of families feels able to talk about adoption with children. **Conclusions** The attitude of adoptive couples to set-up effective coping strategies and adaptive abilities to the new situation disclose an excellent familiar

resiliency. Supporting families proves of the utmost importance, giving attention to protective factors within the couple, during the transition to adoptive parenthood.

Keywords: adoption; resiliency; protective factors; familial aspects

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades research on adoption was principally focused on the modalities with which children conform with the adoptive process, in relation to the presence or absence of comportsmental issues or emotional difficulties.

In the last years literature has mainly centered around protective factors involved in the adjustment process towards adoption (Ferrari, Ranieri, Barni & Rosnati, 2015). As Scabini and Cigoli (2000) underline, understanding of the various reasons why some families positively face the adoptive challenge while others get into difficulties proves of the utmost interest.

Literature shows that often in the adoptive process a few critical issues come up along the route; as compared with non-adopted peers, adopted children may develop difficulties on the relational level and on self-imagery (Chiostilini, 2010), due to unfavourable patterns of life previously experienced (Malacrea, 2008). As Brodzinsky & Pinderhoughes (2002) underline, adoptive parents must admit that raising an adoptive child is different respect to what happens with a biologic one; the adoptive child maintain his attachments both with his biologic family and with the adoptive one.

The first months after the insertion of the child in his new living context disclose a great variety of cognitive as well as relational changes, requiring a great effort in order to cope with a totally new situation. Due to these considerations, it is of the greatest importance that the first months be devoted to the build up of the relation with the new parents. As a matter of fact, once the child has reached confidence in his relation with the adoptive parents, he will be able to go through other relational experiences (Chistolini, 2010). The adoptive family follows a long journey, with different steps, due to which the members of the couple can mature and grow up together (D'Andrea, 2017). This experience may create a special connection between the two partners, enhancing their strength and boosting the motivations that have led the couple to choose the adoption (Levy Shiff, Zoran & Shulman, 1997; Bramanti & Rosnati, 1998; Binda, 1999).

Various theoretical models (van Ijendoorn & Juffer, 2006; Brooks, Simmel, Wind & Barth, 2005) have describe the family as an important source of well-being, capable to positively sustain the adaptive process of adoptive child; familial relationships are invaluable resources for the biologic as well as the adoptive families in order to face the great achievements related to development. By the way, respect to the biologic family, the adoptive one is called upon to face a larger number of challenges, such as the integration of the adoptive status or communication and its related difficulties (Ferrari et al, 2015).

Exploring the psychosocial aspects of the adoptive process and appreciating the procedures that support the adaptation to this peculiar familiar unit appears of the utmost importance; factors that stabilize the adoptive link must be adequately focused. Parameters debated in this context can be analyzed in the perspective of "*familiar resiliency*" of Froma Walsh (2008). It is related to "a combination of coping strategies and adaptive processes operating inside the family, considered as a "functional unit" (*ibidem*). The most relevant processes linked to familiar resiliency are related to three different contexts: belief systems, organizative models and communicative processes. In contrast with a clinical model founded on the concept of "deficit", the project of familiar resiliency evaluates potentialities as well as resources lined up in order to face the difficulties that the familiar nucleus can step into (Walsh, 2008).

Within a wider research project, we intend to focus our attention on the belief systems, particularly on the value system, as well as on the communicative processes.

Belief systems

Belief systems are considered as essential functional unit of every family, from which resiliency stems; thus, according to these systems, families can face adversities and critical events, attributing a special meaning to past experiences (Walsh, 2008). Belief systems make up the “optical lenses” through which we look at the world; thus, beliefs influence the way in which people act in the world (Wright, Watson & Bell, 1996). We can add a special meaning to the experiences of our life if we link these to our social context, to our cultural and spiritual values as well as to our familiar history. Values, behaviors, beliefs, prejudices as well as all the perspectives that are part of belief systems do activate emotional reactions, set up decisional processes and guide subjects towards action.

In terms of familiar resiliency, beliefs can be divided into three areas: *a)* add relevance to adversities, *b)* productive attitude and *c)* transcendence and spirituality (Walsh, 2008). Adding relevance to adversities suggests that if we gain comprehension of a critical context, we make it more sustainable. Productive attitude refers to the general orientation related to hope, optimism, attention focused on personal resources, endurance and bravery. Transcendental values allow us to add special significance to life and essential relationships. Single subjects require adequate relationships in order to be successful; similarly, also families require special links with their community, in the context of a wider system of values (Beaver & Hampson, 1993; Doherty, 1996). The area linked to transcendence and spirituality stands as one of the main features of resiliency, as transcendental beliefs assure continuity between the past and the future generations.

The lack of a higher moral level leads subjects to impotence and desperation, due to the absence of a clear perspective reflecting the true meaning of events (Walsh, 2008).

Communicative processes

Clarity, sharing of emotions and cooperative strategies in problems solving are all peculiar features of communicative processes and represent fundamental components of the definition of familiar resiliency. Effective communications are essential for the adequate functioning of a family, thus developing a valid attitude towards resiliency (Walsh, 2008). A great deal of research work has demonstrated that clarity is a fundamental aspect of familiar performance (Beavers & Hampson, 1993; Epstein et al, 2003; Olson & Gorell, 2003). Studies on emotional intelligence (Golema, 1995) have extensively proved the fundamental role of sharing emotions within the familiar context, in order to carry out valid coping procedures and establish a positive adaptation to the challenges of life.

In relation to familiar resiliency, it is necessary to consider the attitude of subjects to manage conflicts and cooperate in problems solving. Conflicts are not per se always disruptive; these may become constructive if balanced by the arousal of positive emotions, such as affection, approval, empathy, humour and active listening, devoided of any defensive attitude (Walsh, 2008).

The main topic of our research is represented by the resiliency of adoptive families immediately after the adoption, and thus in the moment in which the admission of a new child establishes a different familiar configuration. Actually, the main objective of our research is to evaluate coping strategies most often utilized in this peculiar moment of familiar life, at the same time verifying adaptive processes taking part in the same time span.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our sample

Families were enlisted while attending the Courses for Adoption; attendants were selected on a voluntary base, filling an ad-hoc prepared form. The form has been diffused via E-mail.

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Fathers' mean age was 48,15 years (range 41-65); mothers' mean age was 46,84 (range 35-60). The 10,52% of fathers attended the middle school; the 31,57% the high school, while the 57,89 % was graduated. The 5,26% of the mothers attended the middle school; the 36,84% the high school, while the 57,89 was graduated. The mean length of marriage for the interviewed couples was 13,57 years (range 4-34 years). The mean age of the children at the moment of adoption was 6,43 years; at the moment, the mean age of the children is 12,03 years (range 4-25 years).

Instruments

Ad-hoc semi-structured interview. Both parents were requested to fill a self-administered form through which analyze the construct of familiar resiliency in the time interval immediately following the adoption. Criteria generating the interview are related to the fundamental processes of resiliency described by Walsh (2008): belief systems, organizative models and communicative processes. As already specified, in this context we will describe results related to the dimension "belief systems" (ex. item "*belief system*", "*Which has been the role that the choice of adoption has attained in your life?*") and to the dimension "*comunicative systems*" (ex. item "*comunicative systems*": "*Actually, do you think that in your family it is possible to speak out plainly with your child (children) about adoption?*").

RESULTS

Twenty-five adoptive families have been enrolled, 19 of which sent back their completed form. Answers were qualitatively evaluated by two independent referees, in order to detect the more frequently reported dimensions. The exact frequencies of the signaled categories were directly calculated from the answers given by interviewed parents (**TAB. 1**).

In relation to the *macroarea* "*belief systems*", the 52,63% of interviewed parents declared that adoption allowed them to create a new familiar nucleus, with the aim of fulfilling one's familiar project. The 68,42% of these new parents considered self-respect as well as respect for others a topic of the greatest significance, not only from a personal point of view, but also in relation to their child personal development. Parents were also requested to describe in the interview the positive as well as the emotionally more engaging episodes that occurred in the months following the adoption; a certain percentage of parents (31,57%) revealed that they had experienced in that period conflicting feelings, mixing intense happiness with the sensation of a huge distortion of the personal and familiar arrangement.

In relation to the construct "*comunicative processes*", 47,36% of the interviewed parents considered emotional proximity to the partner, intrafamiliar and intramarital communications as a strategic resource in dealing with the critical moments that may follow adoption. The 36,84% of interviewed parents declared they searched for help by healthcare professionals while waiting for the arrival of the adopted child in the family. For the first months after adoption, the original family represented a fundamental reference point for 63,15% of the new parents; the 47,36% has found a valid support in the social net outside the family (friends); only the 15,78% of interviewed parents positively confronted themselves with other couples engaged in adoption. The great majority of interviewed parents (73,68%) asked for the help of health professional specialized in developmental age. The 73,68% of interviewed parents asserts that it is possible to speak out plainly about adoption with one's own child, while the 26,31% states that the children definitely share with their parents the past history of their family. The 100% of interviewed parents considers dialogue and share of the greatest importance, in relation to either positive or negative thoughts. Permanent dialogue and alliance with ones' partner allowed the marital relationship to overcome emotionally demanding circumstances. The 68,42% of interviewed parents considers that cooperation with their partners has

represented an invaluable resource just before the adoption. According to the 31% of the interviewed parents, this kind of cooperation actually involves both the organizative and the educational efforts.

TAB. 1 – Qualitative evaluations of answers given by parents

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<u>Macroarea</u>	<u>Main answers percentage</u>	<u>Category of answer</u>
<i>Belief systems</i>	52,63%	<i>Adoption as fulfillment of one's familiar project</i>
	68,42%	<i>Self-respect and respect for others as a topic of greatest significance</i>
	31,57%	<i>Adpt = Experience of mixed feelings of happiness and distortion of personal and familiar arrangement</i>
<i>Communicative Processes</i>	47,36%	<i>Emotional proximity to the partner, intrafamiliar/intramarital communications as a strategic resource</i>
	36,84%	<i>Asked for help of healthcare professionals while waiting for the arrival of the adopted child</i>
	63,15%	<i>Original family as fundamental reference point</i>
	47,35%	<i>Social net outside the family (friends) as valid support</i>
	15,78%	<i>Other couples engaged in adoption as valid support</i>
	73,68%	<i>Asked for help of healthcare professionals specialized in developmental age</i>
	73,68%	<i>It is possible to speak out plainly about adoption</i>
	26,31%	<i>Children share with their parents their past history</i>
	100%	<i>Dialogue and share of the greatest importance</i>
	68,42%	<i>Cooperation with partner as invaluable resource</i>
	31%	<i>Cooperation = organizative and educational efforts</i>

DISCUSSION

Families enrolled in the present experience faced the challenges related to adoption with a resilient attitude; they used adequate coping strategies and functional adaptive measures. We reached these results evaluating the context through an interview based on the construct of resiliency as outlined by Walsh (2008), based on the dimensions “*belief system*” and “*communicative processes*”.

The first dimension is referred both to the meaning and the value that the new parents tribute to adoption.

A positive attitude, based on persistent hope in front of problems, remaining close and mutually loyal even in the worst circumstances, leads to the abatement of nuisances, thus promoting the construction of the adoptive link (Walsh, 2008).

The qualitative analysis of the collected answers shows that according to the 53% of interviewed parents, adoption proves to be an opportunity to integrate their families, overcoming the difficulties related to the absence of a natural offspring. Different papers (Antonovsky, 1998; Patterson & Garwick, 1994) report that giving relevance to a critical situation (in our sample, the absence of natural offspring) and maintaining a positive attitude greatly contributes to its sustainability.

The 47% of interviewed parents wishes for the future of their children peace of mind and happiness and show a strong feeling of prospectic resiliency. The answers show the expectation of a

safe world in the future of their children, founded on strong familiar links built on mutual love and indissoluble in time.

The interviewed parents give value to the respect for themselves, the families and the neighbor, as well as to education, loyalty and honesty. Various studies confirm that resilient families share values such as responsibility, loyalty, familiar links and tradition, considering these as essential points through which give strength to the familiar asset (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999).

The dimension "*communicative processes*" is related to the sharing of emotions and cooperative strategies in problems solving. When the members of the family are able to share information and to plainly discuss the meaning of the events, including the potential consequences that any of the members may attend, the experience becomes more understandable and thus more easily manageable for all the participants (Walsh, 2008).

The collected answers demonstrate that actually all the interviewed parents can plainly discuss of the adoption with the rest of the family; If the term "adoption" is not explicitly expressed, being considered unclear to younger children, these know very well that they can talk freely of their past and of all the memories that time has brought back. The same happens with the possibility for the parents to share positive or negative emotions: the parental answers unanimously underline that it is a real opportunity, and it is considered of the greatest relevance. These results comply with those reported in the literature. Different papers consider clarity one of the main requirements for an adequate management of the familiar group (Beavers & Hampson, 1993; Epstein et al., 2003; Olson & Gorrell, 2003). Regardless of cultural differences, healthy families communicate in a direct, clear and authentic way (Satir, 1988).

The evaluations of emotional intelligence clearly demonstrate the great importance of sharing emotions, in order to achieve a valid style of coping, positively conforming to the various events of life (Goleman, 1995). Furthermore, sharing emotions, either positive or negative, establishes and strengthens reciprocal confidence, so that every member of the family can make use of spontaneous messages, remaining nevertheless attentive and respectful of the feelings and differences of other partners (Beaver & Hampson, 1993). According to literature, positive feelings actually compensate negative interactions. Human relations are indeed capable to tolerate substantial levels of conflicts, if only these are balanced by a higher presence of positive communications (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Markman & Notarius, 1994).

Also considering the scarcity of our sample, it is possible to detect encouraging demonstrations of familiar resiliency, in terms of attitude of adoptive couples to adapt themselves and actualize adequate coping strategies, in order to give answers to the deep changes triggered by adoption and to bring forth positive reactions. This study suffers from a number of limitations which should be considered. One concerns the size of the sample; our sample not fully consider all the different types of existing forms of adoption (on the national territory or from abroad); all the recruited families chose, in fact, international adoption. It should be of great interest to deepen characteristics of the national, on territory, form of adoption, in order to gain a better comprehension of the considered process.

Even considering that the enrolled group of families may not prove fully representative of the various critical features of the adoptive process, the results of our survey clearly underline the need for support by Social Services in charge, particularly in the very first moments of the arrival of the adopted child in the receiving family. Cooperation, strength of the couple, reciprocal support and everlasting dialogue represent protective factors for the partners in facing potential drawbacks, particularly in the first times of the adoptive process.

Further studies with larger samples and a longitudinal evaluation of the consolidation as well as the efficiency of ongoing coping strategies would be for sure advantageous for all concerned individuals.

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