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***The “truth that can be told”. Re-writing broken identities to inventing a  
‘true’ family tale in transnational adoption<sup>1</sup>***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Based on two years fieldwork research with Italian adoptive families, this paper gives an insight into the devices - used by the complex of discourses, actions and professional practices – that work towards compounding the fracture of meaning existing between the paradigm of exclusive kinning, embedded the hegemonic biogenetic model, and the imperative of revealing the child’s origin dictated by International Conventions. The production and the narrative use of body metaphors, as happens in the construction of a new family tale through the “verità narrabile” (the “truth that can be told”), reinvents the “live story” of couples and children, producing a twofold process of relational “emptying” of adopting children and – meanwhile - family feeling “filling” of adoptive couples and bodily re-writing the issue of infertility through the myth of a “destiny meeting”. But, in the Italian scenario, - and despite official rhetoric that ratifies the equality between bio and social parenthood -, I suggest that these practices still reproduce the primacy of biogenetic family so transnational adoption is produced like an oxymoron. This condition of trans-contextual confusion in all members of family, this feeling – as I describe it - of cultural “double-bind” in belonging, seems to be at the roots of the recent increase in family “ruptures” and adopted children “returns” toward institutionalized conditions or clinical programs.*

**Keywords:** transnational adoption; family tale; body metaphors; fated meeting

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Sterility puts forcedly the couple who decides to adopt, to face the issue of birthplace and origin of the child, which cannot be drawn "naturally" to the couple themselves. Many international studies on adoption show that reproductive failure is, statistically, the most common and emotionally more important reason in choosing to adopt, perceived both by couples and social community as a "cure" for infertility (Selman, 2004). Today, couples who want to adopt, try to satisfy the desire to be parents and, at least in the Italian case, to reach a new social status that make them feel included in their own social community in accordance with the model, culturally shared by which there is not a family without a child. On the other hand, in a society where parental reference model defines belonging from blood tie, infertile couples live their status not only as an organic defect, but as a social handicap, a fault and a blame overall. Thus, the "tragedy" of infertility – as is defined by many adoptive mothers encountered on the field – represents a key point of adoption discourses and dynamics, personal and social, not just in Italian society or in Western (Talle, 2004).

In the Italian scenario, the social character of infertility occurs immediately through a crescendo of action which, forcibly, pushes the aspirant adoptive couple in the public arena through a laborious and complex process of ritualized bureaucracy. The outcome of the rite is to establish the couple as a legitimate member of the social category of families (Bourdieu, 1996), according to a horizon of meaning provided by institutional actors authorized to perform that actions. The meaning is that of an "ideal" adoptive parenthood which re-produce, according to principle of "imitation naturae", the "natural" model of parenting by age, marriage, social status requirements (DiSilvio, 2008).

However, the shortage of babies – the most request – on domestic adoption and the consequent growth of international adoption puts to the fore the question of somatic difference and child's origin. It is evident that on social relations close up, somatic diversity of son inevitably leads to the fiction in the kinship construction, to the Otherness of biological origin of the child and to the public stigma of couple disablement. In fact, besides the sense of incompleteness - subjective and social - raised by the revelation of the inability to generate, couples testify during the research the emotional cost, or rather the shame, to put their disabled image under the eyes of others (Bourdieu, 1998; DiSilvio, 2008). The blood filiation, father's blood, on which the rule,

Italian and Western, founded the order of kinning and the family as a social category, expressed in these circumstances his profound ability to steer collective dispositions and all its powerful embedding in the actions and emotions of social subjects.

Although new theories on kinship (Schneider, 1968; Strathern, 1992; Carsten, 2000) have shown that the relationship cannot be regarded only as a network of social relations based on biological ties, Western rules and devices still emphasize biological link between parents and children, so that adoptive parents perform countless efforts to 'naturalize' the legal bond with their children, since, in everyday life, adoption has not a special social prestige, neither in Western nor, particularly, in Italy. In this perspective, adoption can only exist as a practice of construction of social relations of belonging that are expressed through metaphors from biological language. As we know, the closing function of metaphor is to link terms from two different domains of reality, relying on criteria of similarity of certain characteristics or qualities shared by two terms. Metaphor is therefore as a "bridge" to make possible to transfer quality and relationships between the domains, to understand the less known through the familiar or to consider an already known object under different point of view, conferring it new attributes and characteristics (Fabietti & Remotti, 2001).

Give this background, it is not surprising that the metaphor has entered fully into the official discourse on adoption as appropriate response, easily shared, to the question of the gap between couple's sterility and child's origin, a response all played on bodily field. As we know, in adoptive relationships is the Court to 'consecrate' in front of social community the legitimacy of a "real" parenthood through the official documents that are, from this moment on, the "instrument of truth" about the legal deletion of the gap .

However, beside the external/juridical legitimacy, adoption involves a thicker and more complex internal/subjective legitimacy, that is the experience emotionally experienced by couple – in behavior than in words – which, according to psychological rhetoric, only occurs when adoptive parents overcome the obstacle that this child is not made from their bodies and positively accept he was born by others (Guidi & Bosi, 1993).

Internal legitimacy is, in Italian adoptive experience, a wide spotlighted element into discourses aimed to discipline behavioral, cognitive and emotional couples dispositions in

the process of construction of the adoptive family. This family, to be conform to the ideal model shows by rule and supported by psychological rhetoric, must be able to combine the principle of exclusivity of dominant familistic model and of law – that “equates” adoptive and biological kinning - with the "modern" principle of subsidiarity, which wants to be protected the ‘otherness’ attributes inscribed in the ‘other’ origin of child. A transaction with multiple ambivalent contents, but from which depends the success of adopted kinning, and that, to be achieved, puts on field the efforts of all social agents entitled, since adoptive parents show a deep and widespread reluctance to operate, not in rethoric way, but in a real shift of value from biological parenting to social (DiSilvio, 2008).The incorporation of powerful paradigms of blood and their devices, will make “revelation” of origin to child a defining moment, full of anxiety, surrounded in mystery and practically feared by all adoptive parents.

But, as we said, the Italian model in adoption provides, beside a legal legitimacy, the need to establish a "good" internal legitimacy by which, through acts of reaffirmation and strengthening of family feeling, fully realizes that horizon of meaning within the family, that can helps social cohesion of this legal relationship and overcomes the sense of estrangement that permeates threateningly the begin of construction of the new family identity. As for non-materhood, also in this case it is necessary to fill a vacuum, the vacuum between sterility of parents and child’s birth, between a body – or bodies – that do not generate and a generated body.

The “truth that can be told” (*verità narrabile*) is the tool “invented” by psychologists and re-produced by all social workers involved in adoption, to accompany the couple in creating an own fitting, linear family history, where, in reality, there is a rupture, an interruption. An identity construction that inevitably occurs from bodies, of parents and children, who act as symbolic mediums of a new family domain. In the effort to harmonize the incongruity between the desire of couple towards a de-historical child and the demands of origin imposed by international conventions, the “truth that can be told” is submitted to parents by social workers as an instrument of self-production of own “family tale”, obtains through the use of a “proportional” metaphor so which womb is to biological filiation as heart is to adoptive. So adoption tale underpin its truth on similarity criterion which, in the perception of common sense, draw the characteristics of these two

places, both as body sites of feelings towards a child, two different body organs but each of them fulfill of one similar potential generative power, the biological and the emotional.

Parents, and adoptive mothers in particular, must therefore be trained to provide, and if possible to anticipate, the answers to questions from children - and their own questions - about the bio-origin, questions that are expected to be inevitable in a social scenario in which blood kinning still play a strong power on kinship meaning attribution (Yngvesson, 2006).

In this scenario, the 'truth that can be told' is the bearer of a constructed truth that is produced - beginning the initial adoption event - from a body of facts, experiences, feelings, memories, present in both parents who adopt and their adopted child and that to exist, requires various degrees of exclusion to act against what is called by social workers a "private feeling and emotions gathered by first-hand" (Guidi, Masi & Tosi, 1994). Following Bourdieu (1992), we can say that the 'truth that can be told' is the primary device that makes it possible to start the process of building of that symbolic capital of which every family must provide to be able to recognize and be recognized as a social body. So, symbolic capital, or the "family tale" of the adoptive family, bases its truth on a common attribution of meaning that produces a specific world view within which is placed as coherent the issue of the origin of that family, both as elementary social body and as special variation of the wider social category of families.

Thus, the reference model of family tale beginning cannot be other than the traditional history of each family, marked by the usual stages of marriage and child's desire. So, the origin of the adoptive family will be placed in couple's feel of existence, somewhere in the world, of a child destined to be their son, alone and only him, a child who could only be so, as he had been created by adoptive parents themselves. This specific emotional space, the space of the 'fated meeting', thus becomes the place of conception of the adopted child, a son of desire and expectation, therefore, as a "good" biological conception, located in the heart and will of parents.

It is the powerful symbolism that permeates this emotional space that will allow to produce the narration of a real, concrete history, made tangible by a set of elements -

poems, drawings, photographs - which will fasten into the time the iconographic memory of the construction of that network of ties which creates obliged affections and affective obligations that make "family feeling" (Bourdieu, 1996).

This action, and its success, based on assumption of 'clean break', on the emptiness of child as a person. Social and psy disciplines engaged on adoptive process in Italy states that "in all countries the cause of abandonment is never poverty but lack of care, neglect, mistreatment and abuse "(Perichon, 2003; Guidi & Nigris, 1998): and this puts emphasis on the character of choice in waiving own son, not on abandoning action often dictated by force . A markedly ethnocentric view, as shown by several studies in so-called donor countries (Fonseca, 2002; Hubinette, 2006; Fonseca, 2006), but which serves several functions.

First it allows to disciplinary discourse maintain a dominant position in the process of production and reproduction of family meaning as social category through the use of validation paradigms of "good" or "bad" parenting; secondly justifies the social stigma against biological parents according to a vision culturally and politically determined; finally allows a functional relocation of birth parenthood within the construction of the 'truth that can be told'.

So, bio- mother will become the "ex-mother" or "mom when you were little," if the child is old enough to retain memories of his childhood in birth family, or if child is too small to preserve such memories may be appealed "with the first name, if it is known or, agreed with the child, it will be to invent a name to qualify her" (Guidi, 2000).

"At the table of the family cannot sit two mother," says one of possible declination of the metaphor about 'truth that can be told', to make clear to child - but also to parents themselves - that "adoptive plot is just"- and cannot be otherwise – “the intersection of two choices: one to be not parents of a child that has been generated, and the other to be fathers and mothers of a child who has not been able to generate "(Guidi & Nigris, 1998).

The legitimacy of "heart's mother" is therefore the result of an ambiguous procedure which in fact re-classify the different assignments of meaning, because it involves a repositioning of the meaning that social dispositions traditionally confer to the biological mother - but a biological mother "other" by us, one who embodies the attributes of "bad"

mother, who despises the fruit of her womb - in behalf of an increase in value of adoptive kinning which can only arise from the ashes of this defeat, conveniently established.

Thus, if on the one hand adoptive practices tend to produce families "as if" miming those "natural", on the other hand institutional strategies push for a more complete absorption of adopted child into his new family and new nation. So adoptive family is - in spite of - being a place of domestic and social tension due to inclusion of a child who "naturally" belongs to another parent and another place.

The security displayed by official social agents on success of adopting procedure is therefore to conflict with collective dispositions and, although silently, with subjective also of most adoptive parents, still oriented towards a full membership to blood kinship model, from which the same subject cannot escape.

Legitimacy created by legal fiction is not, therefore, enough to feel like natural parents, but even the effort to achieve internal legitimacy can fight and win all of the embedded dispositions that unequivocally characterize a social group and the sense of belonging of individuals. Then, it can probably say that Italian adoptive parents are forced to position themselves perpetually between the past dictated by the origins of children and the future imposed by the principle of exclusive kinning, ultimately a condition, as many scholars argue (Yngvesson, 2002; Zelizer, 1985), dangerously unstable and alienating.

This condition of trans-contextual confusion in all members of family, this feeling – as I describe - of cultural “double-bind” in belonging, seems to be, in Italian scenario, at the roots of the recent increase in family “ruptures” and adopted children “returns” toward institutionalized conditions or clinical programs.

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