

## REPAIR OF THE SELF PROCESSES AND SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONTEXT OF ADOPTION

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The subject matter of these clinical observations concerns the perception of the sibling relationship and the negative experiences observed in the construction of the Self. Compared to the affective and emotional situations experienced by these children and adolescents, the acting-out situations have highlighted how some aspects, tendentially negative of the construction of the Self, are manifested in the sibling relationship.

Not only is the adopted child brought into the events that are happening or have happened, they also - and especially - are introduced to their ability to formulate hypotheses regarding the meaning of the environment in which they have come to live. The ways in which they make hypotheses regarding the meaning of others' behaviour and their own behaviour determine the feelings of alienation/proximity and confusion/understanding experienced in the same family relationships.

On a relational level, there is a central theme for understanding the sensitivity of the communicative exchanges and this emerges from the *semiotic competence* developed by children as they interact with the environment. During their development, they put in a great deal of effort in order to learn how to handle different semiological criteria with their affective and cognitive implications. This semiotic competence allows the children to differentiate the nuances of the various forms of expression, both verbal and not-verbal, from the consequences and actions that these cause.

Unsuccessful attempts to operate on this competence involve departures from the surrounding reality, which generate particularly intense *narcissistic outbreaks*, which, in turn, can result in symptoms<sup>3</sup>. Subjective mental constructions can, in severe cases, lead to situations of withdrawal from reality and self-absorption with the onset of real dissociative processes. Mental activities (which primarily involving the register of the imaginary), in an attempt to stabilize an internal reality that differs radically from the consensual and shared reality<sup>4</sup>, paralyze that original need to feel real and true. "Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself, and to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation"<sup>5</sup>.

We often find, in these children's backgrounds, a history of discontinuity, maltreatment and neglect - not to mention abandonment - which, inevitably, are repeated in the new

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<sup>3</sup> Symptoms such as: mergers of identity, aggression, compulsive consumption, anorexia, bulimia, obsessive rituals, dissociative states, sometimes related to overinvestment in their own creations or fabrications.

<sup>4</sup> Uguzzoni U., (1981), La collusione fra trauma familiare e trauma personale, *Rivista di Neuropsichiatria Infantile*, 245:1021-1032.

<sup>5</sup> Levenson E., (1983), *The Ambiguity of Change*, Basic Books, New York; Italian translation: *L'ambiguità del cambiamento*, 1985, Astrolabio, Roma.

family situations, regardless of how good and hospitable these may be<sup>6</sup>. Reactive forms, which assume the nature of defensive operations, inevitably activated against new, potentially frustrating experiences<sup>7</sup>. An extreme strategy of protection from the bond has been aptly described by H. Polacco<sup>8</sup> as a *double deprivation phenomenon* between the intersubjective nature of the mind and the intersubjective recognition that forms the family bond.

We can interpret the disorientation and difficulties entering into the family relationships as a consequence of dissonant emotional patterns as regards the present adoptive situation because of feelings, emotions and affections that are not yet adequately integrated with each other in the Self.

Sibling identity relationships are an opportunity for identification, which we could bring closer to the supporting relationship and its implications in the processes of idealization<sup>9</sup>.

Awareness, which develops from the importance of the bond (and therefore from the dependence on the object) and to which the instances of self preservation are addressed, is based on the perception of the positive/negative nature of the received satisfaction. This is a situation where need, which in itself does not have immediate access to the conscience, may later be recognised when and insofar as it is first satisfied and then, as a result of this satisfaction, conceived.

A woman, now an adult, who suffered a traumatic family life when she was little (an alcoholic father who sexually abused her and a prostitute mother who was a continuous source of humiliation for her) concludes the story of her encounter with a primary school teacher who helped her to rebuilt herself by emphasising that, in discovering that there are grown up people who behave differently from her relatives, this would have given her courage and hope. She had seen, with her own eyes, the extent to which this teacher had kind and attentive to her<sup>10</sup>. In this way, the woman is ensured a more solid basis for establishing a renewed attachment and persistence of internal bonds, between needs and narcissistically invested objects. This experience allows her to transform the relationships present in the intrapsychic world into new object relationships located within the interpersonal and intersubjective experiences. This relationship will confer a virtue of original meaning upon the sentiment and will give it the necessary quality of truth for the mutual construction of the Self and of the object relationships. This construction allows for an understanding of the previous representations of the Self in their negative components of shortcoming and absence. This bond between need and object develops intrapsychically, even before it assumes an intersubjective identity<sup>11</sup>.

This task of ensuring continuity in the intrapsychic and intersubjective interactions is primarily developed by processes of socialization and by the nature of the relationships and

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<sup>6</sup> Some of the difficulties encountered in the adoptive relationship concern the conceivability of the existence of very strong bonds from previous forms of negative caregiving described by Bowlby as forms of *dysfunctional attachment*.

<sup>7</sup> Uguzzoni U., Siboni F., (2011), *La triade adottiva. Processi di filiazione a affiliazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano

<sup>8</sup> Henry-Polacco G., 1987: "*Il lavoro psicoterapeutico con bambini precocemente deprivati*" ed. Liguori Napoli.

<sup>9</sup> Freud S., (1914), *On Narcissism*, published in Italy by Boringhieri.

<sup>10</sup> Lecomte J. 2009, *La Résilience*. Éditions Rue d'Ulm/Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 2010, Paris (Over a period of a few months, she managed to put some heart and hope into me. I already knew there were adults who behaved differently from my parents, that what these adults said actually matched what they did and what I saw of them. She has been so kind to me. [our translation])

<sup>11</sup> Freud clearly shows the archaic dynamic that grounds the hallucinatory realisation of desire, due to lack of the object itself. The world, for this state of non-integrated subjective consciousness, only exists to fulfil needs and desires, even before being perceived as being independent.

interpersonal behaviours expressed within the family context. Appropriate reading criteria of oneself and of others must, however, be established if we are to experience these relational experiences.

This aspect of the absence and loss work does not finish in the mourning elaboration proposed by Freud, but expands involvement in the work of observing the projective and introjective movements present in the situations of emotional immobility and mental imprisonment, which, in psychoanalytical work, characterise situations that are blocked or incessantly open to acting-out. "If only (Green explains), because consciousness cannot even conceive of what this negative term references, if not by immediate intuition, like the opposite of what it is, or even just another way of being, which is again a positive (experiences of love and its absence) to deny"<sup>12</sup>. Reverting back to the above case, reported by Lecomte<sup>13</sup>, it is only when, much later, the therapist asks the patient if she ever had the opportunity to thank the teacher that the work of the negative opens in her; this leads her, after some time, to become aware that she had not done so. And so the patient tracked down her teacher and they met. The words used by the patient to recount this meeting are very meaningful: "for the first time in my life I felt loved". The teacher replied: "but this is normal, I loved you!"

If this recognition does not occur in the consciousness, the absorption of external events leads the person to experience the paralyzing action in the thought, fragments of images of the Self and of the Other, which assert themselves through their pervasive and persuasive imposition on the same mental life.

In contrast, compatibility can be progressively built up between relationships of mutual dependence, such as the relationship that develops between father and son and among siblings (biological or adopted). The non-acceptance of this reciprocity (or mutual dependency) causes a feeling of potential alienation. The subject experiences this alienation vis-a-vis their own needs and desires, rendered inexplicable to oneself by the non-acceptance of the other.

By the age of three, children try to build their own identity by playing the roles of specific characters, by accepting or refusing parents' answers to particular questions and, as such, shaping the idea that they have of themselves<sup>14</sup>.

*The parents adopt two siblings of Russian nationality: Mattia (5 years old when adopted) and Daniela (8 years old). They show no affection, no emotion and no interest in the parents. The children only showed distress during their journey to their adoptive home; once arrived, they continued to interact only with each other and without showing any interest in being understood by others. They spoke only in Russian and later displayed the same attitude at school, with predictable consequences of refusal and exclusion. For this reason the parents requested that the children receive psychotherapeutic treatment, which clashed with their emotional fraternal bond from the outset.*

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<sup>12</sup> Green A., op.cit., page 55.

<sup>13</sup> Lecomte J., (2009), La Résilience. Éditions Rue d'Ulm/Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 2010, Paris.

<sup>14</sup> The process of identification is usually marked by two interdependent moments: a primary moment in which there is no stable differentiation between the object and the representation of Self - and thus from the caregivers - and a second moment in which we find a certain maturity of Self and a selective - albeit partial - ability to differentiate between Self and the object, and thus identify figures or aspects of figures that it assumes as part of its own identity.

One is reminded of Jung's essay about siblings in Native American mythology, where the bond of brotherhood is highlighted as a symbolic place (archetypal), a place for meeting and for containing the elements that are profoundly different between them, but which is closed off. Unable to create an individual therapy for each sibling, I agreed to start both on the same therapy, deferring the creation of an individual treatment plan to a later date. I am able to reconstruct, with some difficulty, the representation of the sibling relationships that Mattia and Daniela guarded in their inner experience. Mattia and Daniela had initially lived with three other biological siblings, who did not follow their institutionalisation and, later, their adoption process. With the passing of time, the self-confinement in solitude and the communicative inhibition that pervaded the sessions (and which evoked their apparent emotional complicity), turned into seemingly mannered and impulsive behaviour<sup>15</sup>. The difficulty experienced with regard to the transference and countertransference stemmed from the difficulty in achieving a shared representation of the feelings of loss and absence, the elaboration of which would have allowed us to gain greater authenticity in this report.

*They live in their own little world, silent to the ears of others, with whom they communicate through gestures or facial expressions only. They are inseparable, including at school. Everything is done with complicity without one having to say it to the other. Even during the transfer they made me feel excluded, without a role. They draw and laugh, they address neither me nor their parents.*

*They display a moment of emotional authenticity when they see the parents hug each other; it is only then that the two siblings want to be included in the hug.*

It is as though they are only able to access the awareness of their need in the presence of the fulfilment of the need (for a collective hug), which makes them understand the meaning by default. Sometimes, a younger sibling will stay with a relative while the other is institutionalised because of various social and family reasons that have developed in the meantime. Or, if, for reasons of the institution's internal organisation, they are entrusted to the same institution but are separated and only meet each other when reunited in the adoptive family. Feeling that they are not in a position to think about their own history limits - sometimes in an obvious way, sometimes only on a deeper level - the ability of the child to feel free to pay attention and to imagine, with awareness, what happens to him and around him.

*Seven years ago, Alessandro arrived in Italy from St. Petersburg in January together with his brother Alessio, who was 5 at the time and who he only met 24 hours before coming to Italy.*

*During his sessions, Alessandro, who is now 12, talks about how he felt comfortable with his Italian teacher at Primary School, a person who commands respect but at the same time is very tender with the children. To this day he continues to write her love letters and dedicate drawings to her.*

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<sup>15</sup> Meltzer D., 1992, *The Claustrium. An Investigation of Claustrofobic Phenomenal*, The Roland Harris Education Trust, Cambridge. Steiner J., 1993, *Psychic Retreats*, Routledge, London.

*Alessandro currently finds himself in a situation of open defiance with a teacher to the extent that he displays evident difficulty in summing up what he is studying and in understanding what he reads.*

*He often says he is afraid, but he does not know what he is afraid of and cries until he is able to stand beside his adoptive mother. He says he has a wonderful relationship with his brother but if something happens that he doesn't like, he tends to set his brother up so that he gets into trouble. Here are some examples: Alessandro has hidden his maths exercise book under his brother's mattress, a toy inside his brother's rucksack or thrown his pyjamas on top of the wardrobe. All of these acts have been carried out to get his brother into trouble.*

*In the transference relationship, the uneasiness connected with anxieties of sudden mood swings and sudden demands to leave the room and go home - which cannot be explained by Alessandro but are impulsively expressed - are slowly structured alongside a positive and explicitly collaborative emotional relationship from the outset. During the course of working on these moments, Alessandro tells how every time he finds himself in new situations, he feels a strong and impulsive need to escape. The fears that Alessandro refers to are increasingly related to these transient and dissonant conditions (states) of polarisation between what he feels is permitted and what he feels is forbidden, between what he feels ties him to others and what he feels alienates him from the others. Losing his way seems to take the meaning of acting out his feelings of alienation, which, in his opinion, differentiates him from his younger brother, whose status he idolises: that of the son who receives every form of recognition and appreciation from the others.*

The fraternal bonds are part of this subjectivism of the family experiences, implicating the birth of the differentiation between personal identity and social identity thanks to their being in a different register than the original triadic parental one.

*Carlotta is the eldest sister of three children who were adopted because their biological mother made them take part in situations of a strong sexual nature.*

*Although aware of the tragedy of her family life, Carlotta has, in her adoptive experience, struggled to defend, within herself, the persistence of the bond with her native family. At the same time, she has sought to justify her feeling part of an adoptive family, from which she was aware to be receiving protection and help. The pain of being unable to inhabit such a complex place (that of her self-image), leads the adolescent to begin an analytical therapy. As a high-school student, she follows some subjects with passion but dislikes others without any particular apparent reason. She is a strong reader of contemporary novels and her commentaries, whether these be of what happened at school or quarrels at home, or sudden short and intense crushes on boys her age always end with a comment that ignores what has previously been said and observed in the analytical work. Or, with a restless and distraught expression that leaves no room for response, she points out: "But do you think that all this is really possible?" During preadolescence and adolescence, deviant behaviours (small thefts, falsifications, lies) exacerbate the irreconcilability between the two diverse family areas to the extent that symptoms of anorexia begin to surface, leading to her estrangement from the adoptive family and introduction to walks of life that are increasingly foreign to said family.*

But what happened to the sibling relationships? Following the vicissitudes of the psychotherapeutic relationship, the transference contents concern feelings of incredulity in seeing the possibility, in her opinion, of integrating and adapting to the demands of the current reality without any apparent problems.

Her anger about always being the one to protest and cause problems: “but how do others manage to be satisfied with the situation?” she seems to repeat to herself, to them and to the therapist, failing to give herself the chance to find a way of interpreting the situations she experiences that can be shared with the others. How is it possible to understand one another?

The analytical work is interrupted when she is moved to a community in another town. Her life as an exile seems to be confirmed without the possibility of understanding the others’ whys and wherefores and her own needs against a set of facts (her mother’s violence, the abuse, the new mother, the rules, the prohibitions) where the only meaning that remains seems to be blame. Guilt from which her siblings and everyone else seem to be exempt.

*Francesca is the younger of two Colombian sisters adopted, respectively, at the age of 3-and-a-half and four. The sisters have different biological parents. During her second year at primary school, Francesca is brought into therapy by her parents because, according to the mother, who is also of Colombian origin, she is an unmanageable and disobedient girl who doesn't listen to anyone and doesn't follow the rules. She beats up other children and the school does not know how to deal with her. The school informed the mother that, while the first born is very diligent and attentive, the other risks having to repeat the year. The mother and the daughters live alone for the greatest part of the year because the father works abroad and only comes home every now and again, without ever giving much notice. He only returns to the family home two or three times a year and stays for a few weeks. Francesca and her father are very close and get along.*

*The social worker that handled the adoption in Colombia had enthusiastically been very positive about this girl, loved by everyone at the Institute, and about what great things she would bring to the life of their family. The parents, who feared that the sister already in the family might be jealous, felt heartened by these words and thought that a good and calm young girl would facilitate the integration. It became a difficult experience, however, now that they were sure they were going to adopt her. The social worker was wrong! The girl had already been promised and nothing could be done but apologise and find a new one! At that point it was suggested that Francesca be adopted, and so she was taken in by the parents as a “second choice”. The mother's fears and anxieties about having adopted the “wrong” girl were constantly backed up by both the teachers' and her sister's negative opinions. The sister is Francesca's preferred victim for her jealous outbursts, reports by the mother. Every year, during the summer, the mother goes back to Colombia, to her own mother's home. During these months, the relationship with Francesca seems to calm down somewhat. The girl seems to live much better in her homeland, while her sister, according to the mother, has integrated well in Italy. The mother also feels that the older sister suffers from the problems that the little sister causes in the family, in addition to the fact that she is always the victim of her sister's teasing and harassment.*

*The meeting with Francesca in psychotherapy does not match the image of the girl as described by her mother. Francesca is sociable, open, spontaneous and appears able to articulate her fears of being marginalised because of her aggression. There are silent sessions during which she plays at farms and these alternate with sessions where she appears more*

*anxious, depending on soon her father is due to return or leave. The latter are sessions in which there is a preponderant need for talking. During twice-weekly therapy sessions, Francesca and I pretend we live on a farm with lots of animals and Francesca is responsible for taking care of them.*

*Francesca behaves as if we were sisters, without parents, asking me to help her make all the decisions concerning caring for the animals and for the farm. Francesca speaks of her sister as being the best at everything and as having a good personality, but says she's not good with her, that she doesn't let her play with her toys because she might break them. Francesca says that she'd love to have friends to play with, but that she's unable to contain her outbursts of anger caused by the idea that others are the favourites and better than her. And so, transferally, I find myself in a situation - Francesca's farm - in an emotional atmosphere that is positive and idealized but which strikes me for the fluidity and ease with which I can be placed as a good sister, but also as a daughter. In these situations, Francesca has an affectionate and thoughtful disposition towards me, and can even be ironic when she tells me to "come back soon" from my summer holidays and to take care of me during periods that we are apart.*

*In my experiences of transference and countertransference, Francesca is a kind of only child - sometimes young, sometimes adolescent - who alternates emotional distances in which she speaks to me as if we were accomplices and friends with closeness, where we are children/friends playing at being mums. In reality, from the episodes narrated, the real sister, as seen by Francesca, emerges as a rival who doesn't understand her and who tells her mother if she doesn't do her homework.*

Feelings of acceptance and devaluation, of investing value in an idealised elsewhere: her father's place of work, the place of her mother's Colombian family, the place of mutual love and perfect appropriateness and balance of daily life, the eldest girl played the role of model child, good at everything she does (sports, school, friendships), and an ideal farm in which different species and different generations come together and exchange roles without any problems while maintaining good relations. Francesca's place is proposed as a small "Eden Valley Farm" where they all live in harmony as long as the parents are excluded. They, in their parental role, have no place in Eden, where relations are always reversible, reciprocal and egalitarian. The asymmetry of the relationships of dependency seem to hinder the reconstruction of a triangle, which gives the transference experience the chance to relive the emotional content within the reality.

*Virna is the second oldest of three biological siblings on her father's side, which is made up of three Brazilian children born to three different Brazilian mothers. The father, who is Italian by birth, takes with him to Italy: Karim, who is eight years older than Virna, and Virna, who is still very little and who was born to a different mother. Because the father lost his parental authority due to substance abuse/addiction and because he was suffering from bipolar disorder, Virna, whose mother has stated that she is unable to take care of her daughter, was adopted at the age of 5, after living in an Institute (in Italy) for a few years,.*

*Virna is adopted by a foster family, which already has two biological children: C., who is 3 years younger and F., who is 5 years older than Virna. Karim lives with his birth mother in Italy. Virna begins therapy at the age of 12 and lives in the idealisation of her sister, who lives with another family, while she deals with continuous feelings of self-devaluation. She displays concentration problems and her adoptive parents - who spend much of their time studying with their daughter - are very worried about her performance at school.*

*In the therapeutic relationship, Virna shares with me her acute feelings of helplessness about being able to view herself in a position in which she can defend herself. She does not know what to save of herself against idealised figures; at the same time, these appear as objects that are distant and alien to her own Self. She portrays herself as a victim of injustice; somebody who is not understood but abused. Others ask too much of her or fail to give her enough consideration. She struggles to gain recognition of a subjective feeling of inner value that breaks an inner ban of being able to identify with the sisters. The need for identification seems to constantly fail, transforming into persecutive content. For her, what's important is what other people see. What the biological sister does is interesting in that she considers it attractive in the eyes of others. Virna also expresses this failure to see herself positively in a brotherly figure in the role plays that she tells me she acts out. She is always the slave of some heroin seeking protection from a king. Throughout the therapy, there is a thin and pressing tension, aimed at exorcising an idealised sister, who invades and seduces her at the same time, through a force that she expresses. Countertransferally, it makes me feel like a fragile, devaluable mother figure fighting for a free speech that, for her, is impossible and unthinkable. In the eyes of other people, what Virna does is of no interest to anybody. In reality, the foster sister is interested in what Virna does, but this fact is of no worth - if not vaguely comforting - to Virna.*

This difficulty in developing an adequate representation of herself - even in the negative elements present in the existential situation - leads these siblings to act towards the Other by knocking them down directly with their instinctual and emotional drive, which is what happens in acting out. We could anthropologically attribute this situation to the Cain complex in which the revelation of the instinct, manifested by acting out (Cain kills Abel because he inexplicably preferred by God), paralyzes Cain by the lack of symbolically reinstatable signs. The hopelessness hypothesized by Cain himself in the eyes of God for the fratricide committed. Neither the sign placed on Cain's forehead by God, lest he be killed for his crime, seems to be enough to preserve Cain from the experience of degradation and horror. The perpetrated act foreshadows the size of his guilt, punishment, exclusion and inability to share his life of solitude.

Often, in our experience, when adult adoptees go searching for their origins, what they are actually looking for is a brother - whether or not they are sure of his existence - because fraternal relations symbolize a bond that lasts a lifetime.