

A socio-cultural perspective on parenthood: the case of adoptive parenthood

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The paper discusses parenthood from a socio-cultural standpoint. Mainstream psychology despite the different theoretical perspectives describes parenthood as an autonomous and processual function depending on intra-psychological dimension or micro-social, interactional dynamics impact individuals inner world. Differently the present work intends to recovery the cultural dimension of parenthood analyzing such higher human function as the result of cultural dynamics. Specifically we will suggest that the way the parental function is enacted is contextual-cultural specific, namely the way it is deployed depends on and is comprised by the cultural meanings mediating the enactment of parental activity. In order to develop such a view the present work focuses on a “borderline” condition, such as the adoptive parenthood, focusing on the dynamics paving the arising of the parental competence. Then, we outline some pragmatic implications dealing with the role and the aim of psychological assessment with adoptive parent-to-be.

Keywords: Parenthood, adoption, socio cultural theory.

Una perspectiva sociocultural acerca la paternidad: el caso de la paternidad adoptiva. El documento analiza la paternidad desde el punto de vista socio-cultural. La psicología contemporánea, más allá de las diferentes perspectivas teóricas, reconoce a la crianza de los hijos una función autónoma y procesal, en gran medida dependiente de dinámicas intra-psíquicas o de dimensiones intersubjetivas y microsociales que, sin embargo, pueden ser capaces de tener un impacto en los aspectos subjetivos internos. Este trabajo propone la recuperación de una perspectiva culturalista de la crianza, con el objetivo de analizar esta característica humana superior, como el resultado de las dinámicas culturales. Esta perspectiva sugiere que el ejercicio de la función de los padres es contextual y cultural-específica; es decir, que la forma en que se lleva a cabo depende de, y está constituida por los significados culturales que median su acción. Para el desarrollo de esta perspectiva, el presente trabajo se centra en una condición "límite", la adopción, centrándose en la dinámica subyacente a la competencia parental. En la segunda parte se definen algunas implicaciones pragmáticas sobre el papel y el propósito de la evaluación psicológica con los padres su interés en la adopción.

Palabras clave: Paternidad, adopción, teoría sociocultural.

Mainstream psychology looks at parental competence as a higher human function used by each individual in various daily situations in order to interpret others' needs and to provide protection and care to others. Accordingly, parental competence is acknowledged as (almost) universally available to each individual, being a set of psychological abilities needed in order to address parental, caregiving and educational functions. Parental competence (henceforth parenthood) is thus acknowledged as arising in the individual's emotional-relational development and can be observed from early childhood where at the end of the first year the development of a theory of mind pushes the baby to try to understand the needs of others and to find ways to satisfy them (Lavelli, 2007).

Parenthood is thus understood as an autonomous and processual function (Fava Vizziello, 2004; Stern, 1995; Fava Vizziello & Simonelli, 2007): its autonomous nature is related to its being a quite independent, though not completely separate, pattern as compared to other domains of individual or affective-relational functioning, and in this sense it is a skill that is preserved despite difficulties and dysfunctions in the individual adaptation to the environment. For instance addicted persons may still be able to answer adequately to their children's needs even if without continuity and/or stability over time. The processual dimension of parenthood has to do with the idea that parental competences are not given once and for all, but are the result of each person's own history, receptivity and sensitiveness to that particular relational experience. The development of parenthood therefore impacts on the evolution of the person and, conversely, the developmental changes of the child determine the development of parenthood skills.

The issue of parenthood has been addressed mainly by attachment and internal operative models, theoretical perspectives which tried to explain its origin and its psychological components and causes. It has been suggested that the repeated real and fancied interactive sequences realized through parent-child play, caregiving and being in an intersubjective relationship, allow the emergence of parenting patterns in the child, in the sense of pleasure at being able to provide the other person with care, which will be internalized by the baby as a model of the parental relationship (Beebe, Lachmann, 2003a, 2003b; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). In this way the child's early interactions with caregivers allow the construction of procedural models of "being with" the other (Stern, 1995). Such procedures will be displayed in future relationships throughout life, including the parenthood experience. On the other hand the integration of attachment and motivational perspectives (Feeney, 2008; Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002) suggests that the development of parenthood is linked to the evolution of the attachment, sexual and caregiving motivational systems. Similarly, according to a narrative perspective (Bastianoni & Taurino, 2007) parenthood is conceived as the result of specific dynamic narratives, namely, internalized assets of events, words, emotions,

scripts and thought patterns related to the construction of self that individuals experience during the developmental process and which regulate not only individual action but also the organization and structuring of future parental identity.

Taken as a whole, these approaches have provided considerable insight into the psychological aspects of parenthood. Yet they are strictly focused on the intra-psychological dimension. Even when micro-social, interactional dynamics are considered, this is done in terms of the analysis of the impact of such dynamics on the inner world. In so doing, attachment and motivational approaches underestimate the role played by cultural factors in grounding, shaping, orienting and motivating parenthood. This is so in spite of how evident the context of feelings, acts and values associated with parenting is: a person who would be considered a good parent in a certain cultural context might run the risk of being judged a very bad parent in another. The present work intends to contribute to the recovery of the cultural dimension of parenthood. It analyzes parenthood from a socio-cultural viewpoint assuming higher human functions to be the result of cultural dynamics (Cole, 1996). Such a perspective disputes the biological/innate mainstream conception of parenthood, as if it were resulting from invariant scripts. Although the universality of this function is acknowledged, we suggest that the way the function is enacted is contextual-cultural specific. In other words we argue that while parenthood in se is a universal function (on the other hand, being born is a fact that happens in any human context); the way it is deployed depends on and is comprised by the cultural meanings mediating the enactment of parental activity. In order to develop such a view the present work focuses on a "borderline" condition of parenthood, adoptive parenthood. We do so in accordance to the assumption that the best way to understand a cultural phenomenon is to analyze it in the conditions that challenge its boundaries (Salvatore and Pagano, 2006; Salvatore and Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2007). The paper is divided into two parts. First, we discuss adoptive parenthood from a cultural perspective, in this way providing a more general view of parenthood. Second, we outline some pragmatic implications from the cultural perspective adopted. In so doing, we intend to highlight how the recognition of the cultural background of experience may change life.

Parenthood as emotional enactment

The psychological analysis of the development of the identity of parenthood from a socio-cultural view point could be seen as emotional enactment: the decision to become parents, although represented as the result of a rational choice, is firstly the expression of a desire, therefore, a process of affective symbolization of the self, of the couple and of their life context. The parental role (and thus the desire to assume such a role) is closely bound to an image of the self that could be described in terms of irreversible and unconditioned availability to an affiliative relationship, namely a

relationship characterized by being in relation to a dependent otherness in terms of acceptance, care-taking and affiliation. Such availability is irreversible, in the sense that it is a state to which one feels totally tied, and is unconditional since it is characterized as persistent and independent from the contingencies of the context. In sum, the decision to become parents entails and is based on a process of identification of the self with an absolute representation of the self as fully available for a binding relationship with the desired object (the child). In other words: a person who is determined to have a child experiences themselves (or rather, invests in an image of themselves) as a mother or father for the rest of their life.

The affective needs that contribute to this process could be varied and reflect the huge amount of intra-psychic and inter-subjective conditions in which the choice arises and is made (i.e. narcissistic reasons, intra-psychic defense mechanisms against anxiety about death or marital breakup, or the denying of critical aspects of reality and so on). At the same time, the characteristic of absoluteness of such role investment defines the emotional, and pre-reflexive, nature of the decision to become a parent. On the other hand, this entails a basic adaptive role since it allows to protect the parental investment from real life contingencies –to which rational thinking processes are bound– and to root it in the deep intra-psychic structure of any subject ensuring its persistence and psychological ubiquity.

Highlighting the emotional feature of the parental identity process doesn't deny the role of the rational components, and thus the planning and reflexive value of the parental function: these features are related to the enacting of the parental role, that is, the way a person plays their parental role, and has nothing to do with the identification of the Self with the parental role.

This perspective means that the emotional and pre-reflexive nature of the parental identity represents the basis and the motivational support for the parents' plans for bringing up a child: it is the investment/identification with the image of Self as having a limitless affiliative availability at disposal that allows critical-reflexive thinking processes to be used to sustain, develop and direct the parental relationship to the purposes of bringing up a child.

The peculiarity of adoptive parenthood

This viewpoint has deep implications in the case of adoptive parenthood: in adoptive parenthood the specific conditions framing the parental role work as additional factors that specify the process of parental identity construction and also the reproduction of the parental identity. This is so for three main reasons.

Firstly, it has to be underlined that the affective matrix of parental identity is based on a wider cultural model that sees the reproductive function as an inherent aspect of the couple and of nuclear family life. Even though this cultural model is in decline it

still entails a normative role in different western and eastern cultural contexts, with a fertility criterion which holds that the lack of offspring represents a deviance, a breach in the couple's symbolic order which the couple has to face - both for themselves and for society. The fact that parenting is highly regulated by norms protects the parents from reflexive thinking about the reasons for their decision.

Secondly we need to take it into consideration that for natural parents the construction of the sense of Self as parents is the result of the recursive experience of relating to their own offspring. In acknowledging their parental role, from the beginning of the pregnancy, the parents-to-be attribute sense and value to the signs of their offspring's presence (from intrauterine movements to baby's later unconditional smiles) defining an intersubjective relationship that nourishes parental identity. In sum, individuals work as parents in order to become parents: they build relationships with their child in order to develop an affiliative bond leading them to treat otherness as their child and themselves as parents. Pregnancy in this case has a major role in preventing the process of developing a parenting role identity from recognizing that it is the product of a recursive relationship rather than its presupposition. The experience of pregnancy attenuates the offspring's otherness thus not endangering the idealization process of the parental role, which is experienced as the source of the relationship rather than one of the actors involved.

In contrast, in the case of an adoptive relationship the idealization process underlying parenthood has to face the reality of the mutual intersubjective nature of parenting, denying the omnipotent image of the Self as unconditioned and absolutely generative. In sum, adoptive parents are more exposed than natural parents to the acknowledgment that parental love (thus the sense of self as parent) is not the foundation of the affiliative bond but its product, and this feature weakens the idealized image of self as parent.

Lastly, the cultural and symbolic nature of parental identity should be taken into account. The image of self as parent, in fact, doesn't arise in the individual's mind but is the product of the identification of the person with a specific symbolic model belonging to the cultural environment. The ability to be and to behave as a parent is not a biological structure (an instinct, an innate behavioral schema) but a symbolic model: a code made available by the social environment and to which people are related mainly in an emotional way. Parenthood is thus an institution: a set of unquestioned and unquestionable meanings structuring experience of the world and identity, acting as a powerful regulatory model of subjectivity, prescribing and substantiating parents' feeling and acting in the relationship with their children and with the context in the way parents are expected to feel and act. Such a perspective doesn't deny the biological aspect of the parental role: the inter and intracultural variety of parental models highlights the

prescriptive function in parental action, suggesting that the biological parental function doesn't direct parenthood but is the playground of culture.

Seeing parenthood as a cultural institution connotes parenting as a biological fact. This connotation has an important role, as it provides the attributes of un-conditionability and irreversibility of the parental bond: establishing the biological basis of the affiliative propensity means asserting its indissolubility. It is worth noticing that for adoption applicants it is not possible to use this institutional model as the basis of their pursuit of parenting: the very existence of adoptive parenting is a destabilizing factor for the assumption of the naturalness of parenting as it makes it even clearer that this role is a social construction that is structurally remote from biological nature .

In sum, an adoptive parent has less chance –if not a real interdiction– of accessing the expectations experiences of early affiliative relationship and ready-made cultural meanings that establish, substantiate, feed and develop the identity of the natural parent's role as a constitutive aspect of the Self. In order to let the absolute willingness to enter into the parental bond take root in their self-image, the adoptive parents are called to a harder process of idealization/emotional investment, that allows on the one hand to scotomize aspects of reality conflicting with the symbolic construction of the decision to become parents and at the same time to surrogate those meanings and experiences that for natural parents are in some ways "ready for use" in the socio-cultural environment.

What has been said leads us to recognize that the emotional enacting underlying adoptive parenthood needs to be deeper and more radical: the possibility for a person (or a couple) to become adoptive parents, that is, their psychological ability to treat another person as their own child, needs access to a magical thinking process. This mode of thinking is not limited to psychopathology, but is extended to everyone, representing a thinking process devoted to assimilating the world to the self in order to build reality according to one's inner desires.

Such a view of the decision to adopt could be interpreted as a radical devaluation of this decision: according to the common sensical view, decisions have a basis and are socially legitimate to the extent that they can be justified as a rational and conscious acceptance of responsibility. This reading, however, would be absolutely misleading: the emotional basis of the adoptive parental identity featuring the magical thinking process is a resource for the psychological understanding of the construction of adoptive parenthood. Acknowledging this starting point makes it possible to activate –and turn into a device that generates the affiliation bond– the “as if” thinking process sustaining adoptive parenting. "As if" is the way the emotions work: it transforms a similarity into an identity. In the case of adoptive parenting the “as if” mechanism allows the adopted child to be treated as if it were one's own natural child, thus turning it symbolically and affectively into a natural child.

Implications for adoptive parents' psychological assessment

The social system assumes that adults have the psychological abilities needed to be a parent and to act as an adequate caregiver. Therefore, no selection measure has been established to test this assumption: in order to become a parent –father or mother– no external enabling is needed, as happens for example in order to get a driving license or to access professional systems. The actual selection check of parenthood abilities is oriented to following logic of –so to say– “marginal de-selection”: a person is supposed to be able to be a parent unless there is any reason to think the opposite. This kind of selection by elimination doesn't look for the absence of parental competencies but for the presence of a relatively small number of critical factors socially acknowledged as preventing parenthood. Such critical factors, on the other hand, are not specific to the parental function, but are related to broader psychological and social factors denoting a person's ability to adapt (e.g. the presence of mental disease or possession of means of survival).

Moreover it is not based on the idea that the parental task of the adoptive parent should be considered different and more complex than that of natural parents. We do not deny the idea that adoptive parents often have to deal with children whose histories are characterized by disadvantages or criticalities, but: a) this is not a typical feature of an adoptive parent; b) this situation could also be found in natural parents; c) it has to be mentioned that if we exclude situations presenting early traumatic experiences, we could discredit the common sensical idea of a strong linear correlation between children's previous critical experiences and difficulties in the parents' role in bringing them up (the idea underlying the assumption that the more critical the children's experience, the harder the role of the adoptive parents).

In the light of this equality of natural and adoptive parenthood, even in the latter case psychological evaluation needs to be oriented by the logic of “marginal selection”: if there are no differences between natural and adoptive parenthood there is no reason to prevent adoptive parents from assuming the same parental competence of the natural parents. Consequently the first aim of the psychological assessment for adoptive parents is to look for critical factors preventing the adoptive parent role, rather than looking for the lack of specific competences legitimating the parental role. In sum an adoptive parent is able to assume the role of parent unless evidence is found of his/her inability.

The psychological assessment of adoptive parents does not lie just in the assessment of functional personal characteristics using the approach discussed above. Although adoptive parenthood from a functional viewpoint cannot be distinguished from natural parenthood, it marks a specific area of social identity to which specific psychological patterns and criticalities are linked. It is therefore on such dimensions that the psychological assessment acquires a further role: the assessment of parental identity

role construction expressed through the pursuit of adoptive parenthood. On this level psychological enquiry needs to answer the following basic question: “what are the subjective features leading to the decision to adopt –the meaning involved in this decision, the meanings underlying the state of a parent seeking adoption, the imagined relationship with the adopted child, the images aroused by the new social role– and to what extent do such aspects determine a basis for assuming and maintaining a parental identity over time?”.

Once the nature of intrinsic emotional enactment of the decision to become parents is acknowledged, it cannot be considered by clinicians as a limit for the quality of the parental competence. For this reason it has to be regarded as one of the exclusion criteria and/or a psychological dimension to be treated in order to favour its elaboration which will promote a higher expression of reflexive thinking processes. In other words, it is not possible to assess the adoptive parent-to-be according to a normative model in which the ideal reference criterion is a choice made in the light of a critical-reflexive thinking process. Instead, the emotional nature of the parental choice needs to be recognized and assessed, accommodated and strengthened. The need for strengthening is the result of acknowledging the destabilizing role of the institutional assessment procedure when it exposes the conventional process of identity construction in which the future parents are embodied. Assessing the consistency of the emotional investment entails focusing on how applicants feel and conceive themselves as parents, or in other words how the “as if” logic acts efficaciously. In order to do so, of all the parameters, there are three that it seems useful to assess: intensity; structurality; specificity. Intensity concerns the extent to which the emotional investment is deeply rooted, namely how far the individuals are able to protect their parental identity by facing up to critical events. Structurality concerns the role parental identity assumes in the adoptive couple: to what extent it acts as the basis for the couple’s bond, organizing the couple’s relationship with the external environment. Finally, specificity has to do with the degree of connection between motivation and personal meanings sustaining the decision to adopt and the symbolic context of parenthood.

CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The work reported here offers a socio-cultural perspective of parenthood framed as the result of an emotional enactment focusing on the case of adoptive parenthood. As we have seen, the fact that the parental choice is based on a recursive process of emotional idealization and negation highlights the main role of the emotional component in parenting and the need for adoptive parents to develop a reflexive elaborative process focused on their decision to adopt in order to promote the enacting the competencies of the parental function. According to this perspective the main aim of

the psychological assessment of adoptive parents is the evaluation of parents' ability to access a reflexive process focused on the symbolic value of parental identity construction. This ability means that adoptive parents assume the role of caregiver for the child, framing the parenting relationship in a time perspective, and thus think about the parent-child relationship in a developmental perspective.

The psychological assessment of the critical-reflexive thinking competencies is not to be focused on adoptive parental identities: as previously mentioned, in this domain the clinician has to strengthen the emotional investment and the identity of the parental couple. The reflexive component has to be sought in different identity domains not directly solicited by the institutional assessment procedure (i.e. conjugal role, professional identity, social identity): individuals psychological competencies (meanings, reflexive functionings, ability to relate to others) has to be assessed in the way such domains are symbolically treated. This aspect has a key role in the assessment procedure. It is not a basic premise defining once for all the adoptive couple's ability to respond adequately to the child's needs and thus to act according to an parenting competence. Clinical psychology has no models that can predict future behaviors in view of current psychological states. Nevertheless such clinical work allows the psychologist to support the adoptive couple in their journey, helping them to adapt their parental model, and to elaborate a new and more adaptive parental model better suited to the new developmental task.

Acknowledgments: This paper results from the discussion authors were engaged with a work group promoted by the Community Health Center of Lecce (Italy), aimed at defining guidelines. The work group was composed by Brizio Colella, Emanuele Gerardi, Francesco Gravili, Anna Maria Lucarelli, Franco Murciano, Anna Rosa Prete VitoVersienti. We want to thank them for their insightful comments and feedback.

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Received: February 27th, 2013

Modifications Received: March 9th, 2013

Accepted: March 12th, 2013