Adoptive parenting and group space

Giuliana Mozzon

Abstract

Through an analysis of the experience of working with groups of adoptive parents, this paper highlights that the real reason behind their more general request for help is actually the need to work through their decision to adopt, their difficulty in accepting a family identity without biological roots, and the uncertainty concerning their child's affective attachment, which is potentially threatened by the phantasms of his biological parents.

The use of a "group" allowed the parents to fuse a "gnostic" with a "practical" approach, that of rational knowledge with emotive feeling, in order to rediscover a wholeness of the self through good affective relations, leading in turn to the creation of a common history between them and their children.

Key words: sterility, emptiness of origins, emotional network, reparation, group space.

> *"There's a tree that grows in Brooklyn.*
> *Some people call it the Tree of Heaven.*
> *No matter where its seed falls,*
> *it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky."*
>
> *Betty Smith, 1980*

The experience I shall illustrate here concerns the work done with adoptive parents through a course of group therapy that took place over a period of time, and that focuses on clinical work in the area of adoption. This work requires that the therapist make her mind available to receiving the pain of both the adoptive parents and their children and try to present the pain in such a way as to allow it to be worked through. Furthermore, the child in the mind of the parents and also in the mind of those involved in the adoption process has to be reflected on in order to become creative and facilitate the building of positive relationships.

Adoptive parents often feel cut off from everyone else and alone in their pain, and guilty for not being competent enough or adequate to the task required of them. In recent years there has been much discussion about parenting, on both a psychodynamic and social and cultural level but, paradoxically, it is extremely difficult to build a space that is really at the service of parents, a space where they and the therapist can relate on a deep, psychic level.

Working directly with these parents implies a special approach and activates profound emotional dynamics, which I shall try to illustrate below.

Within the well-defined field of analytical psychology, I chose to establish and maintain a shared emotional relationship with the adoptive parents, the only way, in my opinion, to effect change and transformation. Through the narration of what takes place in the analytic space, I set out to highlight the similarities and differences, the continuity and discontinuity between the experiences of the parents and those of their children, which through the "group space" lead to building a shared family history.

Creating a participatory listening space allowed me to be the repository of questions and needs, sometimes unexpressed, that facilitated the development of reflection. This allowed a new and seemingly anxiety-provoking situation, such as that of adoption, to be transformed into an experience of being listened to, which in turn progressively stimulated new possibilities of thought and representation.

"The group space": mirroring each other in order to think.

The groups with adoptive parents came about as a means of thinking about and answering "mute questions". Why mute? Because adoptive parents are often unable to express their suffering and distress and tend to hide behind their "fantastic" child to such an extent as to make the "real" child "transparent" or "invisible". Paradoxically, they relate to the *image* of a child, not to a living, flesh and blood child.

The group sessions arose from the hope that adoptive parents could express their concerns through an exchange with others in the same situation. It was an opportunity for the parents to change from "legal" parents (a public act) to "natural instinct" parents (an intimate-private act) where the "natural instinct" is not related to the physical but to the "creative urge"; in this way they could express their potential for being complete, undamaged human beings and retrieve their ability to feel the suffering, anger, wonder, pride, fear, and curiosity aroused in them by their adoptive children.

In what way can this experience be made significant?
In order for a learning experience of this sort to be significant, it is necessary to take into consideration the anxiety that often accompanies new experiences, even when they are something desired and chosen, as in the case of an adoption. But, as we well know, the unknown is dangerous and creates many anxieties that prevent or hinder "thought", leading us often to hide our doubts and fears.

"We must therefore extrapolate the routine, the ordinary, the "deja-vu" and show it in a different light from that of the usual stereotype: in this way the routine and the ordinary change into objects of research and learning because the unknown is also present in everyday phenomena" (Bleger J., 1966, p. 176). It therefore becomes important to allow parents to distance themselves from stereotypes (with which adoption is heavily loaded) and to broaden their knowledge of their "internal world" and their external relational world, particularly in relation to their function as parents.

The groups were started up approximately fifteen years ago with the support of the "Senza Frontiere" Association, for which I was then a consultant. I remember the first group that was formed, with a highly significant name: "One is not born a parent, but becomes a parent". The members of the group expected me to be the person who could give them advice and show them the right and most educational way to behave towards their children; they wanted guidelines on corrective behaviour, under the illusion of finally becoming satisfactory parents.

Advice can certainly be of help when a parent is in the right internal emotional state to receive and accept it, but this is not always the case. If a mother feels the need to punish her child but stops doing so on the advice of the therapist, she is likely to go back to punishing him at any time, increasing her sense of guilt, both towards her child and towards the therapist. If the internal situation in relation to parenthood is not modified through understanding and interpretation of the conflict involved, any advice will be only temporarily useful.

Their appeal for help to become good parents with all the right answers is a consequence of the confusion they feel within their own family group. Confusion and fusion obstruct the flow of emotions; emotions then do not have a channel through which they can be expressed and there is often such a strong sense of oppression that psychic emotional life is completely numbed. Affects in the group are generally disguised by verbal and non-verbal behaviour that express the contrary of that which they actually are.

These self-same appeals for competence, arising from a psychic state of profound confusion and, in some cases, of fusion, illustrate the importance of a containing space where emotions are free to flow and to be named. Their family space was occupied by "some thing" that they had not been able to digest, tolerate or accept and, paradoxically, they were in the group precisely because of that "some thing" that they did not want: "to be adoptive parents". By asking me for appropriate and "right" behavioural models, they were asking me to help them make the "some thing" disappear. This search to find other ways also demonstrated their awareness that something might not have been right in their responses. The group fantasy was that the co-ordinator be the idealised mother who knows how to behave, gives the right advice and protects her children.

This was the impact the first group made and I have often found these characteristics repeated in subsequent groups.

Very gradually, the group became the space where its members came to learn that they were present not only as parents but that being parents was part of a much more complex mosaic: a vital space where emotions could begin to flow again. Correale maintains that it is essential to build up an emotional network, a supporting framework, in order to begin to tolerate emotions, one that allows us to experience emotions, to accept them and to recognise them. In fact, one element that was common to all members of the group was the feeling that they all had the same problem. But rather than strengthening a feeling of belonging to the group, this generated the phantasy of "'we're all in the same boat', we are shipwrecked on this

sea of anguish and injustice, with the same feeling of being persecuted by life, and all the more so because this is not the life we desired, thought about or imagined".

I shall try to trace the main features of my experience with the groups, paying particular attention to emotions that emerged during the course of the sessions. I recall well the parents with whom I worked and their unconscious quest to understand and accept themselves in the difficult process of defining their identity.

"We were considered second rate because we were unable to have children", says one father.

A mother echoes this, "I used to hide when I saw pregnant women".

Another says, "When I was told how great I was to be adopting, I felt like a 'nothing'".

The general feeling in the group is that sterility is a wound that does not easily heal.

One mother shares her painful experience: "I have a sixteen-year-old white son who doesn't know he was adopted. My husband and I have not been able to tell him".

At this revelation, the group buzzes into life as they discuss the need to tell him, how to do it, and the boy's possible disappointment at finding out that his parents are not his real mother and father. Words and sentences begin to express the inner fear of being damaged, of never being able to become good parents:

"We are afraid of being incomplete", says one father.

A mother adds, "I think that for all of us, at least this is what I feel, it is very difficult to accept that the child we want to be ours belongs to another mother who generated him. I find this difficult to face up to; it is easier to think that the child just came out of nowhere, from some world unconnected to reality".

The others in the group are disturbed by this and begin to talk animatedly:

"That's not true", says one mother, "my daughter wants us to tell her about her real name".

"I would also rather they didn't remember their country of origin, let alone talk about it. It just makes them suffer".

"I can't bring myself to speak about the birth mother".

"Why should we feel afraid of being abandoned by our children just because we are not their biological parents?" asks a father.

How can these emotions be contained?

Being able to bring feeling and thinking closer together allowed both the unconscious phantasm of their sterility (reflected in the unknown origins of the child) and the fear of abandonment common to both the child's and the parents' family narrative, to be projected into the group's psychic space. "Who is the child's real mother? Who is the other mother of the child?" are the questions running through the group.

Evoking the 'dangerous' mother gives rise to a series of images that in words could be described thus: facing up to the presence/absence of the mother always leads back to the pain of and nostalgia for one's own baby who was never born.

A sense of inadequacy and guilt resurfaces: "The embryo does not want to stay in my womb" whispers one mother.

Another mother echoes this, "You know you have a body that instead of generating life generates death".

Some parents gave examples of their feelings of disconnectedness in relation to the adoption: "It was a shock when I first saw my daughter. She was ugly and fat and I tried to find some possible resemblance to me, but I couldn't see anything familiar. Everyone told me that she was beautiful and I felt increasingly strange and doubtful".

"I would look at my wife and look at our daughter and see no likeness between them and that for me made her a stranger".

"He was so different from the baby I had dreamed of. I didn't feel he was mine. He was a stranger".

An excess of suffering emerged as this group set about facing the psychic work necessary to heal the narcissistic wounds caused by sterility. This led to their anguish being discharged externally (an associative shifting) and an over-investment in the role of institutions.

"When I went for my adoption interviews, I felt mortified, interrogated; the psychologist and the social worker were two judges, two Inquisitors, or at least for me they were", says one mother. "Not only do the institutions not provide us with help, they boycott us", says another.

At the heart of these thoughts that reintroduce the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion and inside/outside is the need to repress doubt (Will I be able to procreate symbolically? Will I be able to raise a child?) and to give voice to the need for certainties (I shall be a parent "par excellence"), not only to counteract depression but also to exorcise the past, in function of the present, to be able to control the future. It is an omnipotent way of projecting outside oneself the impossible aspects, the limitations and the unmanageability of the relationship with one's own children.

"In my son's class the other children often reject anyone who is different", says one mother. "They called my son a "loser" and "dwarf" because of his height".

"Lively children my foot"! Protests a father. "When I think of what my son goes through, I think I would behave much worse than he does. I wonder what it is about the teachers that they are not able to control my son's class".

Another mother relates that her daughter claims not to be good enough for school. She feels that the teacher does not like her and that "she doesn't like my hair".

The target is now the school, which becomes the repository of all "evil". This ideological stance in relation to "stepmother" institutions allows the parents to rid themselves of undigested elements by projecting them onto both an external enemy and onto a system, whose capacity for rêverie is compromised and attacked.

Embracing these associative sequences provides an occasion for reflection on the containing function of the co-ordinator, who receives and holds the anger and disappointment that pervade the representation of "bad parents". From a Bionian perspective, we may say that we are confronted by the formation of a new "idea" that produces suffering and frustration and activates the most indiscriminate and primitive

part of the personality. Bion identifies three types of mental organisation, which he calls basic assumptions: dependency, fight-flight, and pairing, which represent the intense primitive emotions that emerge at any given moment. When the basic assumption of fight-flight prevails, then the "stepmother" institution becomes the enemy that attacks the narcissistic family organisation, continually preventing the removal of the origins of this child who is so patently different.

A fear of being rejected and condemned leads the family to clash, in their imagination, with the adopted child's original family because it is an obstacle to the fulfilment of their compensatory, but not reparatory, desires. Anger and impotence take over and renew that terrible feeling of frustration at realising that the biological parents cannot be cancelled or killed because they are the stronger, that in challenging them one will always be defeated.

What can be done so that the parents can repossess the distress of a "failed reparation"? What can be done to ensure that the "enemy" is not an external enemy and to enable each parent to be responsible for his own duties?

Like characters in search of an author, the adoptive parents began to imagine a story in which the main characters are a parent in search of his own identity and a child lost in the maze of memory. In the first draft of the story, the pain of being unable to procreate, having been rejected and removed from the unconscious, cannot be tolerated and is denied and placed on the child as an extension of one's self. This pain cannot be borne by the child who re-enacts towards his parents the problematic behaviour that has been attributed to him.

The parents' unresolved conflict, which they cannot express verbally, is manifested through an alternation between maniacal moments of exalting the adoption to the status of a "gift", and moments of feeling persecuted, where the adoption is seen as a "theft".

"We were often considered by the staff of the institution to be "the ones who take the children away", says one parent.

"My husband had the horrible impression of having stolen the child. At the institution we were hidden away in a room, and then we were hurriedly bundled out of the building… like thieves", says a mother.

Another father who had the same feeling said, "The worst thing to bear was the fear that sooner or later they would come and take him away again".

The fantasy of theft accompanies feelings of guilt concerning the birth mother being a "bad mother" in contrast to their being "good parents". The inability, during this phase, to combine the two aspects into one significant emotional unit led to the group once more entertaining unconscious phantasies concerning psychogenic and organic sterility. The origins of these phantasies can always be traced to the oedipal prohibition of procreating and to the parents' own belittling of themselves for not being able to provide a natural continuation of the family.

There seems to be no point of contact between the inner reality of the child and that of the adoptive parent in wanting to create a family history made of memories in common, to counteract the painful elements that were a feature of each one's family

background. Being "able to remember" then becomes the soundtrack to the group's discussion as they attempt to recognise that, with regard to origins, memory is represented by the mother. If, on the one hand, removing the natural mother from one's experience relieves the suffering caused by one's own sterility, on the other it prevents acceptance of the one trace they (parents and child) have in common and which provides an opportunity for transforming the connection with a damaged and therefore dangerous internal object.

Giving voice to pain, like the choir in a Greek tragedy, allows the parents to be closer to the pain of the child whose wound, that of abandonment, is complementary to theirs. The symmetry of this double mourning becomes crucial to giving substance to the group phantasy concerning the "mute questions" that initially seemed so unutterable. Who is the character without memory in the adoption story? Who is trying to forget?

To find a way out of this anguish-ridden confusion the parents feel the need to express their own internal reality, in which the child without memory is superimposed, in their internal scenario, on a child in search of his own roots. In this duplication, the image of oneself as a child becomes confused with that of the adopted child and then re-forms as two distinct images. Although they are reminiscent of a "faraway other place", they have an internal reality in common containing black holes that can begin to be filled on a narrative level through group discussions.

The group begins to reflect that denying this double reality means losing their treasure chest of memories and losing part of their lives. To think that the adopted child does not possess a past or has at any rate forgotten it or wiped it out, presents the parents with the same distressing prospect: that of playing the role of the parent, when the child arrives, with an empty treasure chest.

There are signs that the members of the group are willing to undertake a sort of "partial regression" in order to make contact with a "very early" self, who is able to initiate an intimate dialogue with a stranger. In the imagination, being able to review one's relationship with the parents of one's infant self intensifies the ability to work through issues and to be aware of how close the main organisational phantasms of the psyche are to the events of the actual adoption; this triggers an attempt to "restore" a damaged image of the self, both for the parent and for the child.

Despite the distress of being involved in something acutely painful, the "group" begins to sense that there is a sole matrix that interconnects the difficulties of the adoption; for the child it is the consequences of an early abandonment and for the parents it is not having worked through the grief related to their sterility. The adoption is seen as the chance to heal the narcissistic wounds of each one involved in the adoption relationship. The interweaving and similarity of the parents' and adopted child's unconscious phantasies highlight the fact that both find themselves engaged in filling a void with an analogous and complementary phantasmic creation.

The feeling of a void begins to make way for a space that the characters in the story can fill with affects and sentiments, incorporating their past and building a sense of

continuity of the self. The group has therefore provided support in the painful process of piecing together those parts of the self that were split off. The feeling of extraneousness is replaced little by little with a feeling of greater intimacy and a recognition of common needs.

Shifting the focus of the group's work onto building up the adoptive relationship allows us to centre reparation on the bond, implying a capacity to be able to tolerate the pain, firstly in the imagination and then in reality and to experience it as a stimulus to use each other creatively. As the group work progresses an idea takes shape: that adoption can be seen by the child as a "second birth" only if the parents have been able to have access to a sort of "symbolic maternity". It is considered an internal prerequisite for approaching the child's needs with tact and sensitivity in order to decode and subsequently fulfil them.

When constructing the group's narrative with the parents, it is important for the therapist to maintain an open and sensitive attitude and be receptive to those signs of their phantasies about adoption that transport them to a "faraway other place" which they feel not only excludes but threatens them. When faced with these signs, we risk not giving enough importance to the parents' "internal time" and not recognising their entreaty to help them explore the "foreign country" inside themselves, whose language they do not speak. Only fragments of this place are left and they resurface and become ritualised in the adoptive relationship.

For these fragments to emerge and merge into something meaningful, voice must be given to emotions and fears related to the unknown and listening space be given to something that is still cloudy and shapeless. As the co-ordinator listening to the doubts and fears that ran through the group, I found it important to take on the role of scriptwriter and then stage our play through the group experience.

At every revelation of each person's relationship with his unconscious phantasm, when memories suddenly re-emerge, when a word creates meaning, the "group" passes from a phase of confusion and persecution to a phase of depression in which it organises itself into a transitional intersubjective structure. Particularly touching moments made me realise how these associations are organised when there are situations of transference, intertransference and countertransference. In order for each member to recognise the psychic work being done during group discussion, the therapist must aid the process of transforming and metabolising the alpha function and the capacity for maternal rêverie. The numerous instances of tension and disagreement that arise in the group make it possible not only to bear uncertainty but also to connect and give meaning to different words and sounds that had initially seemed threatening. Apart from the question of how to be together while being different, the fundamental requirement is to give each participant the opportunity to think, to feel, and to tolerate his uncertainty.

The group space is, in fact, made up of the unknown and the void, elements that facilitate the projection of the most disturbing thoughts.

The parents expected help from me; therefore I tried to share their uncertainties and declared myself part of the group. By definition this denotes a common group space

where thought is shared and the therapist does not take on the role of oracle but that of fellow-thinker.

The process of association therefore requires narcissistic and object investment by the co-ordinator in both the group and the individual parents. During some particularly difficult moments where projective transformation was dominant, giving rise to unbearable and highly enigmatic thought, it was important for me, through rêverie, to be able to consider the creative aspects of adoption. By so doing, I was able to restore a thought mechanism that, through association, could re-incorporate elements that had been expelled by the members of the group and rendered unusable. When traumatic events related to the adoption reappear violently in the group, this mechanism acts as a device for taking up all the thoughts rendered unthinkable by the force of the emotions experienced, and highlights a sort of "black hole in the system of representation. In this phase, the "black hole" no longer has the negative connotation of "abyss" into which one is terrified of falling; it no longer has a persecutory aspect, but has been transformed into a "dark space".

Some flashes drawn from the group sessions can perhaps illustrate more clearly how the adoptive parents were able to cross that dark zone that prevented them from thinking and from accepting themselves. They gradually reached the stage where they could first of all express and then recognise their feelings of anguish evoked by the many phantasms generated by the adoption.

"I felt uneasy and ashamed when I was in the street and everyone could see straight away that my child was not my son. I felt as though I was walking around with a sign around my neck saying, 'I am sterile, I cannot procreate'. I would have liked the ground to swallow me up".

Another father says, "I hate the word adoptive, I just wanted to be an ordinary parent. I felt different".

"Sometimes, when I was in the park with other mothers who were talking about their pregnancies and the birth of their children, I would lie and pretend that I had had a wonderful pregnancy and delivery. I would even mention the baby's birth weight. I realise that it was absurd but I couldn't help it. I felt awkward and different".

"I think that the adopted child is the one who *is* different and just because he came into our home through adoption, we are the ones who *feel* different because we were not able to have a child".

"We are the ones who make them different, by our insecurity, while we wait to feel legitimised by them and by our family".

"If we do not feel inside ourselves that we are parents, then we risk sending mixed messages to the child that will disorientate him and make him feel an outsider".

"Now I understand what my son wanted to know when, on seeing a puppy, he kept on asking me 'Where's the dog's mummy?' Perhaps he was referring to himself, but I wasn't able to understand that".

Acting as one mind, the group allowed all these episodes to emerge from the depths of each participant thanks to their being able to speak together and share their emotional distress. They were able to transmit very personal parts of themselves to

others, even though they were strangers. To paraphrase Dina Vallino, the group space gives each person the opportunity to travel through the "imaginary place" into which we project our good and bad internal objects and our own internal conflicts (Vallino D., 1994). Passing through this space is necessary in order to build a story common to both the parents and their children. It develops with the narrative that unfolds over the course of the group sessions.

This narrative, as a way of gradually recounting aspects of one's imaginary world over a period of time, may develop into the connective tissue of the self.

"Successful narration", writes Neri "does not mean describing or representing thoughts and feelings but ensuring that they interact directly with the listener and with elements present in the field. The language of the affects, as Bion states, (1961) is not a substitution for action but rather has the same immediacy and force. Successful narration leads to the narrated facts coming to life and entering into the living storyline of the group's thoughts.

It implies more than merely animating thoughts and facts; it implies that the narrator, like a child playing with toy soldiers or cars, makes himself part of the narrative" (C. Neri, 1993).

Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on some of the fundamental aspects of being adoptive parents, putting particular emphasis on the way the device of a group enables the parents to give voice to and answer their "mute" questions.

After having built up a group space with the parents, I endeavoured to introduce a third, in the sense of an opportunity of developing a mental approach which would allow access to the internal dynamic of representation and working through.

Subsequently, through narration, and imaginary and real exchanges, it was possible to rewrite the story that had started with the adoption and relationship between the adoptive parents and children. This meant giving life to the internal family world that is the foundation on which every affective bond is built (Di Chiara G., 2009).

I believe that the operational model I am recommending provides another perspective from which to approach adoptive parenting. It is not pedagogical but analytical, to avoid favouring advice and "homework" at the expense of a thorough and profound examination of one's internal conflicts.

In these years of working with adoptive parents I have encountered a wealth of invaluable experiences and feelings, full of emotion and suffering. If they are not embraced, they often evolve into a "lump" of mistrust and anger that instead of bringing about growth in the family leads to its death, through a failed adoption.

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