



Attachment and adjustment of pre-adoptive parents

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an exploratory study that examined attachment and couple adjustment in pre-adoptive parents. The objective of this research was to analyze the style of attachment, both generalized and specific, and the level of dyadic adjustment in couples judged capable of adoption and awaiting a baby. The research focused within the theoretical paradigm of attachment that connects these constructs to parental capabilities. The sample included 60 Italian individuals (30 couples). The research includes the Adult Attachment Interview and the Current Relationship Interview to evaluate feelings and behaviors connected with attachment in relationships and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to measure the construct of couple adjustment.

The results indicate the strong association between the generalized attachment quality and the specific one, confirming, in general terms, the prototype hypothesis (Bowlby, 1980, 1988). Nevertheless, the results also show little consistency in the relationship between style of attachment and dyadic adjustment.

Key words: couple and foster family, attachment perspective, dyadic adjustment

Several research studies in adoption that refer to the paradigm of attachment have applied various tests to support the hypothesis that an environment care that is stable and able to function as a "secure base" may have a positive effect on the representations of attachment in adopted children (Fava Vizziello and Simonelli, 2004), changing their patterns of attachment that, because of the deficiencies exposed, are located mainly in the context of insecure types (Steward and O'Day, 2000) or are disorganized (Scholfield and Beek, 2005).

Several authors also agree that the representations of attachment to an adult subject depend not only on the significant relationships of childhood; it is also assumed that they undergo constant revisions in the light of subsequent interactions with other significant figures (Crowell et al., 2002, Crowell and Waters, 2005; Santona and Zavattini, 2007), not least those involved in emotional ties.

It should be noted that Bowlby (1980, 1988), for one, drew a line of continuity between childhood attachment patterns and the quality of relationships taken, if conceptualized the theme of the prototype and subsequently taken up by Ainsworth.

Attachment theorizing and research suggest that individuals' more highly generalized and abstracted attachment models are "superordinate" to their more contextualized and relationship-specific models. According to attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1969), these more generalized attachment models have formed over time as a function of early experiences in familial relationships and later experiences in peer relationships. As individuals mature and extend their

network of relationships, these general models are then assumed to influence the more contextualized attachment models that are likely to develop for the specific relationships individuals form (e.g., Collins and Read, 1994).

It is likely, however, that the influence of the different attachment models on each other is bidirectional in nature. Bowlby (1988) has suggested that just as early attachment experiences will have contributed to the formation of individuals' general attachment models, these models can continue to change in response to important relationship experiences later in life, including adulthood. More specifically, in response to salient attachment experiences, the relationship-specific models of individuals are likely to change, which in turn should influence their more abstract and generalized models, particularly if the experiences happened in an important attachment relationship. Recent research provides evidence for this type of "bottom-up effect," indicating that relationship-specific models are much more powerful in shaping general models over time than general models are in shaping relationship-specific models (Pierce and Lydon, 2001).

The study of adoptive couples and their parenting falls within the broader theoretical research framework that deals with couple and parental relationships. An important component of this field focuses on the analysis of "relational devices" to pre-assess potentiality, vulnerability, and paths of well-being. The key questions motivating such research are whether it is possible to identify dynamic characteristics in a couple relationship that may be predictive of a favorable beginning of the adoptive process and whether it is possible to assess if a couple is well prepared for the adoptive project/process. The adoptive process, as parenting itself, is subject to a variety of factors that add complexity to the analysis of the elements showing predictive value in the adoptive process.

The analysis of family relationships in a transforming society poses theoretical challenges as well as challenges in both methodology and interventions for researchers and practitioners alike. Today's society is undergoing gradual change in both meanings and patterns of relationships. With increasing frequency individuals start and end relationships with more ease. This contributes to a vaguer definition of affective life and its organizational characteristics that are no longer viewed, not even conceptually, as permanent – permanence being the presumed nature of parenthood, the true passage into adulthood (Settersten, Furstenberg, Rumbaut, 2005).

The perceived relationship between life stages and the progressive achievement of adulthood by the individual has become less defined. Today's development towards adulthood is more diversified and less determined by specific events or stages, both in a societal and psychological sense, resulting not into less defined individual, couple, and family group trajectories (Migliorini, Rania, 2008). Couple relationships are based on fiduciary agreements anchored in reciprocity. The core is the couple itself, its relationship as such and the affective bond on which it is founded (Cigoli, Scabini, 2006).

Developmental obligations expected of a couple, from the initial falling in love to the subsequent phases of evolution and maturation of their affection and establishment of their relationship (Hazan and Zeifmann, 1999), include the development of a common identity through reciprocal adaptation, a strong protection of their intimacy, and a balancing of both intimacy and independence based on the requirements of the two partners (Crowell, Treboux and Waters, 2002).

Social expectations associated with the speed and stages of development have both personal and societal implications for the well-being and behaviors of individuals whenever what is viewed as a key developmental stage is achieved. Today, however, we are witnessing a significant change in the perception of the objectives and life choices defined by biological and societal times. The progress from life at home to adulthood occurs in a very complex social context that is characterized, much more than in the past, by uncertainty and challenges that make adulthood more fragile in itself and within the couple.

The study of dyadic relationships identifies both fundamental processes that support relationships and aspects that contribute to defining a relationship as satisfactory, a key influencer of the quality of care given to children (Curran et al. 2005; Carli, Cavanna, Zavattini, 2009).

The birth of a child can be viewed as the most important event in the couple's life: it differs from all others because it is an irreversible choice (Vegetti, Finzi, 1992) at a time when life paths are pro-

gressively more reversible starting at the planning stage. While parenthood is no longer an unavoidable life stage but a couple's choice, becoming parents still implies a transformational evolutionary step that cannot be reversed (Malagoli, Togliatti and Zavattini, 2000; Zaccagnini, Zavattini, 2007). The adoption process involves both couples with children and infertile couples. If in couples with natural children the emerging issues may concern the motivations of the adoption by members of the family and the relationship between brothers, the condition of absence of children affects the transition to parenthood and modifies internal relations on the basis of the impact this has had on both spouses.

Here it was decided to deepen the condition of the couple without the children for two reasons: firstly, potentially these couples are more fragile, and secondly, in the Italian context, to these couples is given an adoptive baby more frequently.

What happens when birth parenthood is prevented by sterility or infertility? A couple applying for adoption has completed a joint-journey to arrive at this decision. The journey often starts with acknowledgment of the inability to procreate, often a source of suffering and conflict (Fava Vizziello and Simonelli, 2004). This is linked to the necessity for the couple to develop an adoptive project through the re-formulation of the original idea of biological generativity.

Specifically, the couple must go through a specific developmental task that leads from infertility to the definition of an adoption project in terms of social generativity. This engages the couple in an evaluation and maturation process affecting both its values and expectations. Adoptive parenthood therefore has very different characteristics from birth parenthood.

There is general agreement that adoption constitutes a stressful experience for both the minor and the family. This is held as true by both theoretical and research works focused on adjustment problems of the adoptive couple and on the outcomes for adopted children (Howe, 2002), including psychosocial analysis and attachment theory.

Infertility, uncertainty with respect to the completion of the adoption project, and the stigma associated with adoptive parenthood are reviewed in the literature (Bozzo, Cavanna, Diotti, Migliorini, 2001), together with other factors such as additional sources of stress associated with the move to adoptive parenthood, which could have a negative impact on the parent-child relationship in the early years of the adoption experience (Hanna, 2007).

The last decade has seen a significant increase in the number of couples applying for adoption as the cases of infertility and sterility increase, as does the social acceptance of adoptive parenthood. However, many couples seeking this "affective fecundity" need to acknowledge the considerable gap between adoption requests and available children. This has made the adoption of an Italian child a long and difficult process, with similar challenges recently affecting the adoption of foreign children.

This causes many requests to go unmet and implies that adoption requests will have to be assessed on the basis of the child's needs versus the aspirations of applying couples.

In the last few decades, in addition to the increase in couples applying for adoption, we have also witnessed a profound cultural shift. The traditional approach of providing young babies to childless couples has evolved into an approach centered on the child and the search for families suitable for older children often experiencing difficulties, such as physical or mental disabilities or multiple fostering experiences (Kaniuk, Steele, Hodges, 2004). This change in the population of children for adoption gives greater consideration to the children's needs but has also generated a substantial increase in "failed" adoptions (Cavanna, 2003).

This occurrence leads to further reflection upon the ways to assess the individual's and the couple's disposition to tackle the parenting issues associated with a child different from that envisaged and with "special needs" (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, Tuckey, 2001). These situations involve the additional challenge of confronting one's ability to accept and live in perpetuity with the past of a child who might have been mistreated or abused.

The increase in failed adoptions and in the number of couples willing to take a baby who has been deprived proper family care leads to the consideration of the stresses and difficulties challenging adoptive couples in order to identify opportunities and resources that are predictive of successful adoptions. It is also important to understand when and why an adoption is successful.

These questions open up a field that is not exclusive to the adoptive family but encompasses the analysis of processes of well-being and lack of well-being of any communal living strategy and the quality of affective transactions between individuals connected by stable relationships in light of a confirmation of "schemas of being-with" (Stern, 1995) significant others (Paley, Cox, Kanoy, Harter, Burchinal, Margand, 2005).

Adoption failure is defined as the permanent or temporary taking of the minor away from the adoptive family. The adoption interruption, in its extreme forms, is understood as the statement by the family of its incapability to proceed with the adoption, with the consequent "restitution" of the baby, or with the removal of the baby from the family by social services. However, the failure can also be understood in a more qualitative sense to indicate those cases in which the relationship difficulties between the child and the couple indicate that neither partner has found an answer to its emotional needs.

Adoption, however, seems to be affected by a multitude of variables so interconnected as to make it particularly difficult to identify objective parameters indicative of success or failure. Besides the extreme decision of taking the minor away from the adoptive family, there is, in fact, a range of circumstances that could be defined as characterized by high "emotional complexity", in which there can be frequent varied levels of dysregulation between parents and adopted child, whenever the parental responsivity is coupled with the capacity for "affective attunement" (Stern, 1995). The latter is appropriate for sharing adopted children's emotional states, these being the means of expressing the deprivation experiences they have lived in their early development.

In the last decades the adoption literature has paid particular attention to the potential parenting capabilities of the adopting couple. These not only include responsiveness to the needs and signals of the child but are also viewed as a more articulated and complex relational pattern that enables the parent to understand the emotional, even negative, states of the child, which are then accepted and detoxicated (Schofield, Beek, 2005). This capability to validate emotions (Emde, 1999) based on complex cognitive and affective processes has signaled the change from an exclusively representational model of attachment to the parents to a more communication-oriented perspective. Within the relationship with the parents and according to the attachment quality, the child does not acquire internalized contents, but rules of interactive functioning and affect regulation strategies (Fonagy et al. 2005; Barone, 2007).

In the literature we find other variables that appear to play a role in determining maternal responsiveness and the transmission of regulation models between parents and children. Among these, reference can be made to the parenting background of the couple and the role of the father, as yet not sufficiently studied. Other contextual variables, such as support networks in the extended family, education structures, grandparents, and important friends, are among the subjects of study as relevant to a successful adoptive experience (Cowan, Cowan, 2000).

The couple's quality of life is also viewed as crucial to parenting, and, within attachment theory, the choice of a partner is viewed as an expression of the quality of the Internal Working Model built in infancy (continuity hypothesis), which variously influences the quality of an attachment. A different very recent perspective (discontinuity hypothesis) pays particular attention to the coexistence of generalized primary attachment bonds with specific subsequent ones (Crowell, 2007). This perspective is based on the hypothesis of permeability of the representations of attachment to the partner, in a way that, as to the attachment bond with significant others, it is possible to foresee a shift of the Internal Working Model from insecure to secure and vice versa. The capacity of the couple to be attuned to one another and to respond, reciprocally, to the base function and secure refuge has major implications on the developmental tasks and the quality of the parenting function (Benzies, Harrison, Magill-Evans, 2004).

Various authors underscore the importance of the presence of solid levels of intimacy, trust, and communication between the partners to face major life stressors (Rholes, Simpson, 2004), among which they list the transition to adoptive parenting. The quality of individual and partner attachment in the adoptive couple can be either a strong or a weak point in the ability to face and share the challenges stemming from the child's difficult experiences and to protect the joint emotional construct between parents and child that is the adoptive experience. These dynamic

characteristics are specific to adoption, which is not simply a wish that becomes reality but an event that outlines a relational configuration that is highly specific.

Objectives

This research is part of a large project to study the development of adoptive parenting within a sample of couples and their children in order to examine the processes that might improve our understanding of the characteristics that make a couple “well equipped” for adoption. This work investigates the quality of individual and couple attachment relative to the adjustment skills in relation to a multidimensional construct (Spanier, 2000) that evaluates, through the use of Cohesion, Affective Expression, Dyadic Agreement and Perceived Satisfaction Scales, some of the key features of adult couple relationships.

With reference to theoretical assumptions and in line with previous research work, which has identified adoptive couples’ specific resources giving value to affections both in important current relationships and in childhood experiences (Salcuni, Ceccato, Di Riso, Lis, 2006; Zavattini, Boselli, Luzzatto, Pace, Santona, Vismara, 2003), we hypothesize that couples interested in adoption share the following characteristics:

- a) the prevalence of a secure attachment model in terms of both generalized and specific attachment;
- b) a bigger number of participants who have a specific secure attachment to the partner, rather than generalized attachment;
- c) a high score for couple adjustment; and
- d) a correlation between the Adult Attachment Interview results, Current Relationship Interview, and couple adjustment (Dyadic Adjustment Scale).

Participants

The study used a sample of 30 couples (60 individuals) viewed as capable of adoption. They were all in the pre-adoption phase. The group was homogeneous with respect to the following variables: age between 30 and 50 years, stable relationship for at least five years, lack of biological offspring and previous adoptions, middle class.

Procedures

The subjects were recruited by an association for international adoption. After a brief presentation of the aim of the study, the subjects were interviewed according to the research protocol. The questionnaire was answered anonymously.

1) Measures

The data collection involved the use of the following instruments:

- a) **Dyadic Adjustment Scale** (DAS, Spanier, 2000). This scale provides a multidimensional assessment of the level of dyadic adjustment of both married and stable couples, based on the representation of the relationship that each member holds. The questionnaire consists of 32 items on a Likert scale, in which the respondent has to assess four components that are included in the dimension of dyadic adjustment: 1) Dyadic Agreement, which evaluates the degree of agreement or disagreement of the partners with regard to topics such as finances,

free time, religion, friends, domestic administration, and management of the time spent together; 2) Dyadic Satisfaction, which measures the perceived happiness or unhappiness in the relationship, the frequency of arguments, the pleasure or lack of pleasure in being together, the taking into account the possibility of split-up or divorce; 3) Dyadic Cohesion, which measures the quantity of time in which the partners share pleasant activities, such as social interests, dialogue, and working together towards shared objectives; 4) Affective expressions, which measure the way in which the couple displays and communicates feelings, love, and sexuality. The scale has been adapted to the Italian context by Gentili, Contreras, Cassaniti, D'Arista (2002).

The couple's adjustment is a multidimensional construct and is understood as the partners' ability to settle again into a dimension of balance, faced with changes that follow one another throughout their lives. For the evaluation of the dyadic adjustment of couples, the cut-off value indicated by Spanier (2000) was used, which corresponds to a score of 114.8 and which several studies confirm is a threshold below which you can identify situations of distress for couples.

- b) **Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)** (George, Kaplan & Main, 1985; Main & Goldwin, 1998). This is a semi-structured interview aimed at assessing the mental state of the parent in relation to early attachment relationships; it is based on the hypothesis that the narrative reflects the modality through which the attachment experiences have been psychically organized. The interview is roughly an hour long and consists of 20 questions related to the respondents' childhood attachment experiences with their parents, the evolution of the quality of the relationship throughout life, and the preoccupations and wishes regarding their own children. This procedure, according to Main and Goldwin's method (1998), involves the coding by two independent raters, who are reliable on the AAI and obtained the required reliability.
- c) **Current Relationship Interview (CRI)** (Crowell & Owens, 1998). This is a semi-structured interview aimed at assessing the quality of the attachment relationship to the partner. The interview lasts roughly one hour and consists of 15 questions, which are elaborated taking into account the reciprocal nature of adult relationships, in relation to six areas. These areas investigate the sentimental background of the respondent, the perceived quality of the current relationship, the quality of the secure refuge and of the secure base, the quality of the conjugal relationship of the parents, and the expectations regarding the future of the children.

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated relative to some socio-demographic variables; we used the Chi Square test to compare the distributions of AAI classifications and the CRI. Finally, a correlational analysis was performed to measure the association between the constructs investigated. The coding protocols of the AAI, as well as the protocols of the CRI, were undertaken using two independent and qualified judges (Prof. Cavanna and Dott. Napoli), who signed the interviews according to the system of Main and Goldwyn (1998) and according to the method of Crowell and Owens (1998). The agreement between judges was 85%.

The statistical analyses were performed with the SPSS 13.0 statistical package. The participants had an average age of 39,92 years ($ds = 4,622$); the women were on average (38,83; $ds = 4,27$) younger than their husbands (median 40,90; $ds = 4,82$), although the differences were not significant. As to the academic level, 7% of the sample obtained a middle school diploma, 58% obtained a high school diploma, 25% obtained a degree or other titles, and 10% went through postgraduate education. With respect to the profession, classified according to the categories shared at a national level in 2001, most of the adopting couples were employees (48,3%, $N = 29$), and some were involved in a commercial (21,7%, $N = 13$), technical (10%, $N = 6$), or intellectual (8,3%, $N = 5$) activity.

The average length of the stable love relationship, including the years they lived together before getting married, corresponds to 9,5 years ($ds = 4,3$). As to the background of infertility, 15% of the participants experienced spontaneous miscarriages. Infertility was diagnosed for 53,3% of the couples. The participants, at the time of this study, had started the adoption procedure on average 2,58 years earlier ($ds = 1,24$).

The analysis of the adult attachment highlighted a prevalence of secure attachment models at 65%, against the 35% that resulted as insecure (see Table 1). The interviews were coded by two independent raters.

Table 1
Generalized attachment style distribution (two ways Adult Attachment Interview)

	Frequencies	Percentage
Secure	39	65%
Insecure	21	35%
Total	60	100%

The analysis of the distribution of attachment models, based on a five-way classification, highlighted the following results: 61,7% of the participants were secure, 25% were dismissing, 8,3% of the participants were preoccupied, and 5% were classified as unresolved (see Table 2).

Table 2
Generalized attachment style distribution (five ways Adult Attachment Interview)

	Frequencies	Percentage
Secure	37	61,7%
Dismissing	15	25,0%
Preoccupied	5	8,3%
Unresolved	3	5%
Cannot classified		
Total	60	100%

As to the distribution of specific attachment, namely, the attachment to the partner, the prevalence of the secure model emerged within a two-way classification (Secure: 80%; Insecure: 20%). By contrast, within a three-way classification a distribution of insecure participants resulted as follows: 11,7% dismissing; 8,3% preoccupied (see Table 3).

Table 3
Specific attachment style distributions (three ways Current Relationship Interview)

	Frequencies	Percentage
Secure	48	80%
Dismissing	7	11,7%
Preoccupied	5	8,3%
Total	60	100%

As to the data relative to the couple's adjustment, a mean of 54,73 was found within the agreement scale, 42,10 within the satisfaction scale, 10,08 within the affective expression scale, and 18,83 within the cohesion scale. As to the results relative to the adjustment, a couple profile with a tendency for high adjustment emerged; in fact, the total score of adjustment for the couple was equal to 126,25, and 90% of the participants were located within a high level of adjustment (see Table 4).

Table 4
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on Dyadic Adjustment Scale dimension

	Dyadic Agreement	Dyadic Satisfaction	Dyadic Cohesion	Affective expressions	Dyadic Adjustment tot
Mean	54,73	42,10	10,08	18,83	126,25
St.Deviation	5,1	5,6	1,5	3,07	10,70

The correlation analysis between the main constructs that were investigated shows, as hypothesized, an association between generalized and specific attachment, whereas, on the contrary, correlations with the couple adjustment were not found.

Table 5
Correlation coefficients between generalized (AAI) and specific (CRI) attachment style and couple adjustment (DAS)

	Measure of attachment	
	AAI	CRI
Dyadic Agreement	.127	.100
Dyadic Satisfaction	.136	.058
Dyadic Cohesion	.122	.028
Affective expressions	.132	.178
CRI	.332(**)	.100

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Discussion

Love relationships are characterized by stability and endurance, which are typical traits of those couples who are willing to adopt. The sample average age and length of the relationship are aligned with the data included in previous studies on adoption (Santona et al., 2006); such couples are characterized by a particularly long affective life, considering that most couples who decide for adoption have already attempted a birth pregnancy or artificial insemination (Cudmore, 2006).

By comparing the results on adult attachment with those of other Italian studies regarding adoption, it is possible to observe that a study carried out on a sample of 40 couples in the pre-adoption period (Salcuni et al, 2006), displaying a distribution of 47,5% of secure participants, 30% of dismissing, 17,5% of preoccupied, and 5% of unsolved loss or trauma, highlighted a smaller percentage of secure participants and a more significant percentage of preoccupied participants.

Another study (Santona, Zavattini, et al., 2006) conducted on a sample of 50 couples, to whom the AAI was administered during the assessment period of adoption suitability, presented the following distribution: 76% secure, 10% preoccupied, 9% dismissing, 4% unresolved, loss or trauma. Compared with this study, the data show a smaller percentage of secure participants whereas the dismissing category was larger.

Furthermore, it should be considered that the literature provides evidence of the influence of the individual's early attachment representation involving the parent on the adult parenting capacity (Schofield, Beek, 2005). A secure model of attachment is characterized by sensitivity and valorization of the affects surrounding a care-giving behavior. This model is considered the prototype of "well-equipped" parenting skill, including responsiveness and attunement, facilitating the capacity to metalize the emotional states of the child (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). However, other models of attachment (dismissing and preoccupied) cannot be simplistically associated with completely inadequate behaviors that will lead to psychopathological outcomes in the children (Dazzi, Speranza, 2005). In fact, insecure models of attachment can include "islands of coherence" (Stern, 2004); it should be acknowledged that among normal populations there are changeable percentages of insecure attachments. A rigid classification of the attachment models should be avoided, in favor of a dimensional perspective that considers the quality and quantity of the subjective experience and the relational patterns of the adult involved in the care giving. Moreover, the plasticity of Internal Working Models should always be considered given the transformative quality of significant love bonds in adulthood, particularly with respect to the couple (Treboux, Crowell, Waters, 2004).

We used the Chi Square test to compare the distributions of AAI classifications of the participants with normative data on population, non-clinical (Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn 2009); the comparison does not show statistical significance ($\chi^2(3) = 0.00009$ ns) compared with normative data, which show the following distribution: 40% of subjects secure/autonomous, under the category of insecure (25%) of subjects and distancing (10%) of subjects worried, and 25% unresolved.

The data concerning the distribution of specific attachment do not match both the normative data from Crowell et al. (2002) and the data from an Italian study (Santona, Zavattini, Delogu, Castellano, Pace, Vismara, 2006) conducted on a non-adoptive population.

The studies that have utilized the CRI comparing the attachment to the partner with the individual attachment (Grossman, Grossman, Waters, 2005; Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, Egeland, 2005) have highlighted the strong association between the generalized attachment quality and the specific one, confirming, in general terms, the prototype hypothesis (Bowlby, 1980, 1988). The latter is based on the assumption that the quality of early experiences with the caregiver contributes to modeling of the representations that adults build with respect to love relationships in general, as well as the perceptions and expectations related to a specific partner.

Nonetheless, the increased number of secure participants within the specific attachment classification compared with the generalized attachment brings about a much debated topic within the studies on couple attachment. Several studies have in fact hypothesized a bigger plasticity of the attachment to the partner compared with the individual attachment. The main hypothesis is that the specific attachment is partly based on individual internal working models and partly on current experiences with the partner, although it is also affected by events in a couple's life (Crowell et al., 2002; Crowell and Waters 2005). The adoption experience can be considered "highly emotionally charged" in the sense that the acknowledgement of infertility, the decision to adopt, and the long adoption procedure allow a secure partner to turn to the other for refuge and support, facilitating the shift in the mental state from insecure to secure. This aspect is supported by data, in that the percentage of secure AAI (65%) reaches that 80% within the CRI.

Given the particularly high score concerning couple adjustment, it is possible to hypothesize that the couple consciously carries out an effort towards matching criteria of social desirability by putting forward an image of the self as hyper-normal and hyper-adaptive. It is possible to highlight a tendency of the couples to display few internal variations, a sort of joint enterprise. This confirms the a typicality of the population of couples that are waiting to adopt, reflecting

the necessity to meet bigger expectations of “adequacy” than the future biological parents. This aspect can also be found in the data in that secure participants, with respect to both generalized and specific attachment, report an inferior score of couple adjustment (mean 125,05), although it is not statistically significant, and locate themselves in the high bracket of the adjustment scale. On the contrary, insecure participants have a higher score of couple adjustment (mean 128,48) that is located, again, at a high level of adjustment. This aspect is particularly interesting and seems to indicate that a secure mental state protects the individual, to a certain extent, from excessive proximity that could represent, as supported by Spanier, an atelicity of the bond and a potential risk factor.

Concerning the relationship among the investigated constructs, some studies have attempted to individuate the possible mediating variables that could affect the relationship between attachment and couple adjustment (Scott, Cordova, 2002), indicating social support as a mediator within the direct relationship (Meyers, Landsberger, 2002), whereas others (Mikulincer et al., 1998) have investigated the mediating role of confirmed infertility. It is possible to conclude that the impact of other mediating variables in the relationship between attachment models and couple adjustments is in part still to be investigated.

Conclusion

The model in the literature based on attachment relationships, both of the individual and of the couple, and on the flexibility and the reciprocal adjustment capacity is aimed at locating parenting in relation to the specific challenge of the adoption process. The couples involved in this study report characteristics of the relational models that put them in a position to potentially provide sensitive care giving. It is therefore possible to assume that, in the light of these constructs, such future adoptive parents result in being well equipped to deal with the opportunities, the challenges, and the critics that the adoption experience normally implies. The birth development of this work is represented by the follow-up outcomes of adoption in terms of individual and family well-being.

The follow-up study of these couples is in progress and will still take much time, so this work is to be considered a preliminary study that has the advantage of reflecting on the equipment of the adoptive couple, with the limit of not presenting the results in the face of a real adoptive experience.

It should be underlined how this potential skill should be adapted to the specifics of every adoption experience, linked to the child's temperament, the child's previous experiences, the evolution of the couple's relationship, the family and social support, and the specifics of the circumstances.

The adoptive couple has experienced its flexibility through the strategy employed to deal with the issue of infertility, which made it capable of accepting the idea of having an adoptive child, who often has special needs, reformulating the problem as solvable and accepting the risks and potential that this experience implies. The adoption project can represent a catalyst for sharing values, aims, priorities, and expectations, offering a point of view of the world.

Couples with a solid project invest heavily on the family unity and give proof of an attitude that emphasizes a common “us” rather than “I”, tending to adopt a more realistic point of view and to show the availability to accept non-ideal solutions to life challenges (Walsh, 2008).

Among the resources and criticalities involved in the adoption experience there is the main challenge of creating primary bonds that are not based on strong bonds, which are typical of a blood bond, both on the part of the parent and on the part of the children, who experience the dilemma of origins between biological parents and adoptive parents.

It is possible to hypothesize that within adoptive families there exists a potential for repair that is triggered by the project of social generativity that allows for multiplying and transferring re-

sources. In these circumstances the family usually reveals its "strength of attraction". In fact, the possibilities offered by new bonds can allow the minors to project themselves in the future and to redefine their network of affective investments and meanings, allowing for a revision of their past in the light of a new perspective and for modifying relational models previously built.

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