

Learning to 'Parenting': Peer-to-Peer Educational Actions in the Italian Associations of Adoptive Families

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Abstract: We hardly associate parenthood to a state that must be learned or taught according to classical educative models, rather we think that it is an embedded condition arising "naturally" when we become parents. Nowadays, however, with the rise of the so-called "psy" sciences, the certainty and solidity of a noun - parenthood - has been progressively replaced by the proceedings of a verb - parenting. The idea of parenting as a process of learning (emotional, cognitive and behavioral) finds its most concrete expression in the construction of the adoptive parenthood. Based on a two years' ethnographic research, my paper aims at highlighting the training action carried out by adoptive associations towards the infertile couples who have decided to adopt. In a society that is still deeply family-based, such as the Italian one, where kinship ties are grounded in the hegemonic action of the blood paradigm, a widespread cultural belief claims that a failed bio-reproduction deprives the couples of that natural embedded knowledge necessary to be good parents. So, if the rule allows to legitimize the shift from a legal status (the couple) to another (the family), the associations of adoptive families are authorized by the State to carry out an intensive educative action so that the prospective parents can better learn all the qualities, behaviors, responsibilities and emotions typical of good adoptive parents, according to the "natural" model of the biological parenting.

Keywords: adoptive parenting; educational training; families' associations; risk; "psy" sciences; ideology "of aid"; family's "professionalization";

1. Introduction

Although the birth of a child is considered a common event in all world cultures and in different historical periods (e.g. Goody, 1969; Clutton-Brock, 1991; Ariès, 1994; DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000), in recent decades Western societies have witnessed an increase in the presence as well as in the effects of a sort of apprehension feeling affecting those who wish to become parents and the society as a whole (Osofsky & Thompson, 2000; Quinlan & Quinlan, 2007; Furedi, 2008). The idea that parenthood represents a tiring transition experience, not free from risk factors, seems to have become a widespread belief, which lays the foundations for the increase in some "more or less serious" pathological forms, such as the post partum depression, widely reported in the medical literature. However, it is interesting to note how this representation goes beyond the biological event of giving birth to a son and its naturally embedded disposition, to define the parenting experience according to its wider meaning of culturally determined disposition. In fact, infertile couples who choose to adopt are not immune from this emotional state. Indeed, if possible, their potential parenthood is invested with a major discursive and professional concern, associated to the tension about the success of a parenting seemingly far away from the culturally hegemonic vision of a "natural" parenthood (Strathern Modell, 1994; Howell, 2007; DiSilvio, 2008; Yngvesson, 2010).

The ethnographic study of a context like the Italian one, characterized by an exponential increase in adoptions, especially transnational, and by a widespread deeply rooted bio-familistic vision, allowed to highlight the action of devices and practices aimed at educating a potential parenthood. The bodily impairment of infertility deprives the potential parenthood of that attribute which considers parenthood as a "naturally" embedded condition spontaneously emerging when someone gives birth to a child. But the "educational" effort towards adoptive parents can also reveal how this approach is the result of a unique synergy of actions, addressed to the parenthood in general that is considered to be a privileged place for the allocation of the family meaning in the contemporary world.

2. Parenting, risk and educational

2.1 Parenting as learning process

Since Western families have begun to take that particular form which we call the “nuclear” family, almost entirely unknown in traditional societies, it has become increasingly evident that parenting can be a far more complex experience. In particular, the lack of the additional support provided by other family members (usually female and often belonging to different generations), has made increasingly important the contribution of the father figure (i.e. Sandqvist, 1997; Hewlett, 2000), which is now considered crucial, starting from the time when the birth produces an emotional transition on the mother. This particular condition of the contemporary family has greatly reduced the ability to distribute the emotional and practical weight of the tasks that parents often face in complete solitude. It is a condition that derives not only from objective impediments to receive help from other family members, such as the grandparents (even though they may still be active at work or want to spend more time on their hobbies in this period of their life), but also from a common “ideology”, according to the Gramscian sense of “conception or vision of world” (Gramsci, 2001:1490). This ideology claims that the main responsibility to raise and educate children lies with their parents excluding other reference figures belonging to the same kinship group even. In other words, if it is true that particular socio-economic factors have driven the transition to this form of family which we all know, it is equally true that a range of culturally and historically determined representations, ideologies, discourses and practices have built its meaning (Rose, 1999; DiSilvio, 2008) .

Some disciplines, whose paradigms and categories have provided that universality and scientific nature on which a specific classification of inclusion/exclusion is based (Rose, 1998), have greatly contributed to build this sense of family in general and of parenthood in particular. The rhetorical or instrumental use of the notions of “good” or “bad” parenthood is the clearest expression of this constructed sense of family/parenthood, which also produces the perception of that state of tension that seems to underlie and permeate the parental function, considered as a place of production and expression of a potential “educational risk” (Furedi, 2008:119), as we will better see in the follow of the present exposition. Since the so-called “psy” sciences collected the legacy of the ideology of the “pastoral exercise” of the Church (Foucault, 2005:89), they have quickly established themselves, in both the academic and the social context, as the repository of a knowledge addressed explicitly to the domestic sphere as a whole and specifically to the interactive space between parents and children (or more precisely between the mother and the child). This space indeed is conceived as the founding joint of the parental function.

Thus, in the effects of the synergic actions between history and disciplinary discourse, it is possible to identify that particular transition of the sense that is culturally assigned to parenthood: a noun - parenthood - which recalls something firm, stable, and existing - has gradually transformed into a verb - to be parent or parenting - which recalls a process, a movement in time, something to gain and to learn (Gauchet, 2009). I would highlight that this conceptual transformation has been established together with the growth of a new category of social actors which have an increasing influence on both in the institutional field and the common life of families. In fact, these social workers can be fully identified as the carriers of the diffusion of the disciplinary paradigms of the “psy” sciences: they are led by the State itself to enforce that classification which establishes, in the living history of parents and families, the “inclusion” or the “exclusion” from the shared and dominant cultural model of the “good” or “bad” parent.

2.2 Parenting ‘as’ educational risk

Some scholars have highlighted how the progressive spread of the notion of “risk” (soon shifted into a concept), and of its specific perceptual interpretation and assignment of meaning - historically and culturally established - marked out the change of the parenting culture in Western countries (e.g. Pain, 2006; Roche et

al., 2008; Furedi, 2008). As we know, the perception and meaning of risk are rooted in the distinction between reality and possibility, although often one may observe a gap between subjective perception and reality of hazard. However, in the last years the measure of the gap is considerably grown and, overflowing from the individual level, has begun to involve more and more the collective perception and the *doxa* (Tulloch et al., 2003, Bourke, 2005). It is evident that the notion of “risk” takes a meaning within the relation between the present and the future and, obviously, it depends on how the present is (culturally) conceived (Boholm et al., 2011). So, the fears regarding the future are strictly linked to the anxieties concerning the present, and it is interesting to notice how the subjects on whom Western contemporary societies center their anxieties more are the children, particularly in regard to their growth and life experiences. In the last times, indeed, children are being involved into the ambiguous turning of the term “risk”, shifted toward the new conceptual and more and more pervasive declination of “to be at risk”.

The concept (or the notion) of “to be at risk” breaks the substance of the traditional relation between the subjective action and the probability to experience some hazards, because nowadays this concept is not linked to what one does but to what one is. In some way, it becomes a fixed trait of the individual, an immanent attribute within the subject and, as such, it is autonomous from the agency of the subject itself. It concerns a very different meaning from what was assumed in the past, since the openness toward the positive as well as negative possibilities, has been replaced by the sureness of the adverse effects. In fact, “to be at risk” is used to point out some categories of people who are considered, by themselves, as particularly vulnerable to the hazard. So, children who are classified as “to be at risk”, are usually associated to specific life styles, to “not conforming” life experiences (within or outside the family), that will unavoidably produce individuals for whom the range of present and future life possibilities will be circumscribed by the several risk factors to which they have been, are, and will be surely subject. A certainty that the society faces by pushing people, especially the parents and their educational function, into a kind of responsibility (or agency) of “diminished subjectivity” (Furedi, 2005).

The cultural representation of the “diminished subjectivity” is inscribed into the therapeutic ethnos and leads to the “professionalization” of the family as well as of the emotional and private life in a considerable way. With its specific language, body of values and set of norms, it offers a new sensibility through which people reshape the sense of themselves and others. In other words, when the form of thinking subtending the therapeutic practice broadens out to the social perception (of a great range of matters), it ceases to be a simple clinical technique and becomes a tool of interpretation, representation and management of the subjectivity, producing culturally established visions and practices. In the new framework produced by a particular assignment of sense to life’s hazards as well as by the distinctive intertwining between risk and childhood, family is positioned at the core of the discourse and is considered to be a privileged and collectively recognized place of social production and reproduction of habits and meanings. Although the family has been analyzed for long by several points of views (e.g. Bengtson et al., 2005), during the 1980's the “culture of fear” intersected the culture of parenting. In the discursive precipitate spearheaded by this intersection, parents are assumed to be the exclusive place of production of the good or bad qualities of the present and future life of their children, seen more and more as without control and “at risk” (Furedi, 2008). The emphasis on childhood rights and on children protection as a category “at risk” includes not only a mere safety meaning but also a well-being concept as a whole. It is a vision that has been widely spread by International Conventions, scientifically recognized by the disciplinary paradigms of “psy” sciences, boosted by local norms and made collectively pervasive by media discourses. These media discourses have deeply permeated the domestic domain, urging parents to adopt a set of emotions and behaviors ascribable to a particular parenting practice called “intensive parenting” or “hyper-parenting” (Shirani, et al., 2012; Hoffman, 2010). It concerns a child-centered rearing practice that demands a great parental commitment in terms of time, money as well as of emotional involvement. The practice of intensive parenting, as well as its ideology, are founded on a deterministic vision of the life and of the individual outcomes: this vision is inscribed into a wider neoliberal narration, which emphasizes the individual responsibility toward the public goal of risk

management. By following this vision, the practices adopted to educate and rear children are determinant for the development of the children themselves and of their future choices. Thus parents are expected to acquire a specific knowledge of what the experts consider to be suitable for the child well-being. So nowadays, differently from the past, parents are called to perform a sort of expertise "ordeal" (Furedi, 2008:97), where what is done is never enough, where rearing a child is often represented as a permanent crisis and where the act of taking care of offspring is permeated by a feeling of widespread anxiety. Consequently, because of its own features, the intensive parenting is not an ability "naturally" created by the procreation or by the bodily presence of a child, as the traditional belief claims. In turn, it is an ability that needs to be acquired through a specific training, managed by professional teachers (the "psy" ones) and possibly prolonged along the time. In fact, since a growing child requires specific parental skills according to the different needs of his development, parents are expected to follow a proper training in order to contain, step-by-step, the immanent effects of belonging to the category of those who are potentially at risk.

3. Field, subjects and methodology

3.1 *The ethnographic field*

From several years the phenomenon of adoption, especially the intercountry one, has become a relevant topic in the international landscape of the studies of new forms of kinship in contemporary world (e.g. Howell, 2007; Yngvesson, 2010). Nevertheless, in Italy the ethno-anthropological interest remains curiously low, although the country has registered, for some decades now, one of the highest density in intercountry adoptions in the Western countries (DiSilvio, 2008).

The research on which the content of this paper has been based, took place mainly in Lombardia and Veneto, two regions of Northern Italy characterized by the most high presence of adoptive families in the whole country. My ethnographic field unfolded thanks to a net of local contacts, and has been going on for more than two years. Within this favorable framework I was in the position to interact with a range of adoptive families associations, representing a wide social spectrum. Each one of these social realities have distinctive history and features but, in any case, they managed a network of some hundred families, many of which were attending the activities of the association from a long time, while others participated occasionally and only in some fewer cases no contacts were maintained after the child arrival.

The prevailing interest of my fieldwork concerns with the study of the adoptive kinship as "social fact". Within this frame I also devote a particular attention to investigate the meaning that the adoptive families assign to their private experience within the community life of the association. Thus, I placed the associative life of the adoptive families under a thick and prolonged participant observation, investigating also the families members' personal experiences and their individual stories. By highlighting the specific intertwining between the devices of the State, and the paradigms and professional practices of the social agents - which have been authorized to establish the adoptive family as juridical subject - as well as the agency of associations in negotiating the social meaning of their members in the public space, the ethnographic field unveils how the actions of these forces, working side by side within the Italian social scenario, produce a culturally distinctive vision of the so-called "good adoptive parenting", which is not given but that must be achieved.

3.2 *The associations of adoptive families*

From a historical and cultural perspective, the Italian social tissue presents a wide variety of what we may call "grassroots" forms of social agency, whereby a particular attention is dedicated to issues related to the family.

The spreading of the phenomenon of adoption in the social scenario has inevitably drawn a great deal of attention, involving mainly the people who are directly involved into the experience itself. This has produced the springing up of a number of families associations which often are yet to be registered, though being well-

established. Practically, in any municipal district, even in those showing small dimensions, the families which have a direct experience in adopting have gathered in small or larger groups which have set up a consistent number of contacts among the families themselves, which at times are maintained for long periods.

Initially recognized as spontaneous groups providing peer-to-peer support in relation to the long waiting-phase connected to the arrival of the child, the associations of the adoptive families have become over time “supporting” agents to the State action in establishing the “social” positioning of the aspiring adoptive parents. Having often acquired some official recognition from public services, these associations do in fact contribute to the establishing and the completion of the process leading to the production of adoptive parenting, which aims at becoming mimetic with the dominant model of the “true” parenting, that is the biological one.

On the other hand, the action of a long lasting network of relations makes these associations a social live body. As structured and structuring system, they may be understood as a place where the meaning on the subjective experience and the world is produced, thus providing a re-signification of “being-in-the-world” to those who are to enter the world of adoption. Although harbingers of distinctive *habitus* and practices, these “subcultures” are not founded on an ideological construct but rather on a material and symbolic presence within the social texture (Clarke et al., 2006). Hence, the models that the families’ associations express are mimetical to the hegemonic ones of the culture they stem from, which have been embedded by every member through the daily practices of socialization, but also through the interaction with institutional devices and the agents authorized to the production of social conformity, that is social workers and ‘psy’ professionals (DiSilvio, 2012).

So, being “meaningful” symbolic constructions, these associations make the private experience of adoptive kinship visible, both claiming for its social recognition and providing their members with specific strategies in negotiating their collective experience in the social scenario.

4. Becoming adoptive parents

4.1 *Being ‘equal but different’*

In the last thirty years, Italy has met with a consistent decrease of birth's rates. However, although this country shares the same datum with many others Western countries, the Italian case nowadays records the lowest number of births among European countries (DiSilvio, 2008). This phenomenon can be explained in relation to various political, economic and cultural causes. In general, Italian youths tend to postpone the time of marriage and/or procreation till they have acquired a professional and economic stability because the welfare system fails to adequately support the family needs. But this social fact has to be also understood in the light of an overall cultural milieu, produced by a traditional familistic vision, where the individual accomplishment is still directed to the realization of the family unit and where the marriage is still conceived as the privileged place to have and rear the children (DiSilvio, 2010). Indeed, while the Italian society has gone through, since the end of the second world war, an extensive process of secularization, to a good degree it remains deeply imbued by values and representations that entail a social import of the family model, through which the biological unit itself finds its shared expression.

This disposition or *habitus* (Krais et al., 2009) appears in all its evidence in the juridical body that rules the domestic domain and, most of all, in the attention that it is usually reserved to parenting, for this remains the ground on which the success of the familiar institution is measured (DiSilvio, 2010).

In the *doxa* of common opinion, the family is perceived as a body to which the members related by blood ties belong with full rights, sharing the same residence: it is in this general context that husband wife and their children are recognized as the family unit (Bourdieu, 1996). On the other hand while “strangers” acquire “kinship affinity” through a juridical act, becoming thus husband and wife, the strictest kinship ties are attributed to the members who are closer in their blood ties, which means parents and children (Levi-Strauss, 1984). In this respect, it is precisely because the last share such close blood ties that their kinship is called

“exclusive”, since it cannot be severed, while the juridical type of kinship can. But kinship is also informed by a specific code of conduct, which foresees parents and children sharing a specific behavior and intimacies toward each other, which will be socially and culturally recognized as appropriate (Schneider, 1980). The hegemonic vision over the parental tie is based on the assumption that the biological parent has a predisposition to enact a “natural” code of conduct that awaits only to be reactivated by the biological event of procreation. Hence, mothers and fathers are assigned the role – by law and by common feeling – of being the righteous “owners” of the role and function of parenthood, as long as his/her behavior will conform to the expectations of their culturally shared models.

As the phenomenon of adoption - and intercountry adoption particularly – has become a widely shared social practice, the Italian rules regulating its device had to meet with the necessity to lay down a system of regulations that, while introducing some new factors in the kinning matter, had nevertheless to take into account the common feeling on the so-called “social” kinship. So, if on one hand the adoptive family is juridically endowed with a juridical status being equal to the biological family, on the other the procedure leading to its final inclusion in the category of “true” family requires the overcoming of a complex bureaucratic path (DiSilvio, 2010). Thereby, the process of “family consecration” may assume the features of a particular “ritual initiation”, in which the educative “training” on parenting is understood as a tool to turning the no blood-ties (juridically acquired) parents into subjects “mimetical” to the biological ones (DiSilvio, 2008).

4.2 *Learning to adoptive parenting*

If the condition of infertility hampers the couples who choose to adopt in their resorting to the biological event of procreation to activate the “natural” feeling of parental tie, it becomes necessary to make up for such deficiency by providing a training process through which the aspiring parents will have to learn not only “how” to become parents, but more specifically how to fulfill the social expectation of becoming “good” adoptive parents. And since adoptive kinship is not based on blood ties – and indeed in the case of intercountry adoption it may be all the more obvious – the institutional and social recognition of “good parenting” will have to be measured on the parents’ ability to acquire and enact a code of conduct conforming to the shared cultural expectations.

I would highlight how the great deal of efforts put forward for the parents by public institutions, marks the accomplishment of the parenting roles and duties with high social expectations. As far as the international adoption, this practice may be understood both to the impossibility, by the authorities of the hosting country, to exercise a thorough control on the adoption procedures of the child, and to the effects of the intertwining between juridical apparatus, “psy” paradigms and professional practices of the social workers (DiSilvio, 2008). But it should however unfold a few aspects, if we are better to understand the Italian society perspective.

The Italian rules in domestic adoption implies an extensive intervention of public authorities in all the phases of the proceeding: which involves decisions regarding the delegitimizing of birth parents and relatives, pronouncements on child adoptability, the searching, selection and individuation of a specific aspiring couple (DiSilvio, 2010).

Through all the stages of the process the social workers and the professionals of “psy” sciences of the public services are constantly required to actively intervene in the actions undertaken. In relation to their professional skills they are expected to produce a deeply evaluation (and an accurate classification) of the parenting abilities in efficiently performing their duties towards the child's needs. Very often, the “pictures” emerging from the social workers assessments are the sole element on which the fate of the so-called “adoptive triad” - the birth parents, the child, the adoptive parents – is based on.

However, in the case of intercountry adoption, the very first steps in the procedure, that eventually establishes the adoptability status of the child itself, are carried out in the original country, according to

conditions that often widely differ from the rules of the receiving countries. The last having thus only a say in the requirements regarding the aspiring couple and its suitability to adopt.

Comparing to the other western countries involved in the adoption of children from abroad, the Italian institutions engaged in the adoptive proceeding show a pervasively attitude towards the adopting couples, a stance which at times comes close to being excessively demanding. However, in spite of the fact that the trials demanded for achieving a successful result in the suitability to adopt are rather strict, very few couples drop out the path. Within the proceeding, the Italian adoptive device may also require (and often urge) the future parents to follow a parenting apprenticeship, with the scope of acquiring all those behavioral abilities, emotional inclinations, attitudes, that are established as “natural” skills showed in being “good” parents.

Because of their distinctiveness in being spontaneous social aggregations, the associations of adoptive families are been requested to take up the training task of the aspiring parents, which previously was carried out by the social workers and by the professionals of the “psy” sciences, by using own specific tools. This means to provide the possibility for the perspective parents to experience a peer-to-peer education. In fact, the consistent participation to the association activities of both aspiring couples and “experienced” adoptive families, represents for the perspective parents the living evidence of the realization of a longed-for event. Thus, just because the event of the child arrival is charged with such a great emotional value, the sharing of time and space between aspiring and expert parents would positively help the first to “enter” in a particular parenting framework, both in its the practical and in the emotional which they have had the opportunity to witness in the latter.

The mimetic action of this prolonged contact appears to be deeply significant for perspective parents. It enhances the acquisition of a coherent language ability and of a distinguished emotional responsiveness that parents are usually enact, and boosts the exposing of situations and contacts that were not previously experienced in the conjugal relationships: namely the schooling setting and the extended family - in which the grandparents acquire a prominent role. The gradual shifting of the way of felt and experienced themselves as couple, reshapes in a considerable way the forms and contents which have so far characterized the communication between husband and wife, triggering shifts in the couples’ attitude towards their professional life or in the use of their leisure.

In this “educational” framework, it must highlight the importance of the several celebrations and festivities scheduled by the associations for its members and with them. These gatherings, to which are often invited the biological families, are meant to point out the emphases on the children, especially in the occurrence of those celebrations that are traditionally intended to underline the role of family.

Although several spontaneous relationships regularly take place outside the association life, the contacts between the members within the association are not casual, but they are carefully planned, so as to maintain formal occasions for the meeting between all members. Sometime such meetings are directly managed by “skilled” psychologists and social workers. More often, however, they become the occasion for experienced parents to talk about their personal experience and acquired knowledge on adoptive parenting or to invite young adoptees to talk about themselves as adoptive offspring. These social frameworks respond to the need of handing on, in practical and through the practices, the adoptive personal experiences and stories. And it could be underline how, in the first type of gatherings, more attention is placed on the learning process and on the modulation of the conceptual aspects of parenting, while during the festivities what prevails is an interest towards the emotional and bodily disposition of being parents practiced through a kind of “learning by doing”.

5. In the mirror of adoptive parenting

Since the beginning, the prevalent action of the concept of risk shows itself within the adoptive ties. Thus, the concerns of State agencies - and of the society as a whole - toward a rigorous educational training of the aspiring adoptive parents become reasonable, due to the risk that this kind of kinship seems to carry

“naturally” from within (DiSilvio, 2008). Indeed, the need to arrive well prepared to the experience of “creating” a filiation tie between strangers - in order to make this experience as close as possible to the “true” bond, which is blood-rooted - is a vision shared by both professional experts and the common sense. It is a vision widely reproduced through the rhetorical discourses of the International Conventions as well as through the State rules governing adoption, especially intercountry adoption.

However, as I said above, the adoptive parents’ educational strain reflects the dissemination and the progressive roots of a specific way of conceptualizing the parenting in contemporary Western societies. On the other hand, some researchers have shown how the study of the adoptive family, understood as an expression of a new kinship semantics in the globalized world, can be both a lens for observing the processes of production of the family (and the “parenting”) as a social artifact, and a fruitful opportunity to reflect on the particular mimetic intertwining between biological and “social” kinship in terms of discourses, practices and representations (DiSilvio, 2008; Yngvesson, 2010).

It is clear that the mimesis with the biological model plays a key role in the demand of educational trainings on the “good” adoptive parenting, since parents, as a social category, are called to legitimize the reproduction of new frames of meaning in both the individual and social everyday life produced by state agencies. So, according to the Italian law, the adoptive filiation is fully equal to the biological one, but, on the other hand, the couples aspiring to adopt as well as the associations of adoptive families are deeply immersed in the cultural texture they stem from (DiSilvio, 2010). Therefore, according to the adoptive agencies and the adoptive parents themselves, the concept of being “at risk” perfectly fits with the adopted child and his family.

Indeed, the child is considered to be a “poor” orphan coming from the so-called Second or Third World. Hence, he was surely subject to dramatic living experiences and several geographic, cultural and relational traumatic displacements. Finally, the child kinning within his new family is not “adequate” because it is not based on a blood bond. This framework will mark his/her individual outcomes throughout his/her life: perhaps the effects of the lived hazard will hide for a while but will inevitably come out later on. Therefore, the adoptive family is represented as a family already marked by the misfortune of an unnatural bond at the origin.

Thus, the limited possibilities of transformation and “redemption” imposed by the unavoidable effects of the condition of risk seem to highlight that parental apprenticeship is not only based on a “professional” intervention, as for the biological family, but it seems to need a further peer-to-peer support, carried out by those who are lucky enough to be already legally “included” in the social category of parents, in order to facilitate the acquisition of the new identity of adoptive parents.

6. Conclusion

The idea that trainings can play a prominent role in promoting self-esteem and a better individual awareness is well known in the educational domain (Furedi, 2005). However, it may seem unusual that this vision also applies to a particular social group such as parents. In fact, until the recent past, in Western countries the parents and their function were thought to be closely related to the biological events of conception and birth. These events share the attributes of “naturalness” with the actions and feelings linked to the care of offspring. But in recent years, being a parent has become a social fact more and more frequently than it had ever been before. Parenting is placed into a broader framework, where the family is considered to be a place of potential risk affecting the well-being of children. Nevertheless, the new “style” of hyper-parenting unveils something about the game played between the neoliberal ideology’s individual freedom claims and the issue of the childhood control, to which the “psy” sciences are not extraneous.

By following these remarks, I argue how the thick exploration of the production of a specific parenthood in Italy, such as the adoptive one, reveals ideologies, representations, practices and disciplines that intertwine and all contribute to the “making” of parenting (and childhood), in both representations and practices, through

the use of specific discourses and professional tools. This particular making of meaning on parenting is mostly due to the spread of a therapeutic ethnos, conceived as an ideology "of aid", that promotes on one hand a view of the individual as a "diminished subjectivity" and on the other the growing expectations towards an empowering learning based on introspection, self-perception of vulnerability and risk restraint. Then, the dissemination of this ideology carries out a reworking of the parenthood meaning, making these new ideas coherent with a wider vision on individual conduct in everyday life shared by the contemporary society as a whole.

These aspects are particularly evident in the training practices observed within the associations of adoptive families and represent important elements around which the parental goals of apprenticeship revolve, for both experienced and prospective parents. Hence, gazing through the lens of adoptive parenting, we may argue that the peer-to-peer educational activity, carried out by the associations of adoptive families who participated in the ethnography research, reveals not only the progressive rooting and diffusion of the "therapeutic ethnos" into the social fabric but also the practical declination of the ideology "of aid" as a tool for the "professionalization" of parenting.

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