'You Were Born Again With Us': Narratives of Italian Families Formed Through International Adoption

Thesis

'You were born again with us': Narratives of Italian families

formed through international adoption

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Abstract

This thesis presents a qualitative study of adoptive parents, childrens, young adults and experts' accounts of communication within families about a child's past. Until now, this particular aspect of international adoption in Italy has received little attention. The aims of this study are to understand how both parents and adoptees' deal with and manage the origins of adoptees, and also experts' views of this communication. In addition, this research explores the potentiality of the use of 'life-story work' amongst this specific sample. This study uses in-depth interviews to unravel the experiences of ten adoptive parents with their five adopted children and five young adopted adults. It also includes the perspectives of seven experts. The findings are embedded in the Italian social and cultural context, which contributes to shaping the meaning of the accounts collected. The findings show that all of the families had developed an adoption story. Visual aids and documents help and support the telling of these stories. Furthermore, the various stories served different functions: they enabled communication, they presented challenges, and they emphasised the relationships with the actors involved in international adoption. The findings show diversity in the approaches to communicative openness: the practices presented by the sample families in this research are organised according to four different approaches to communication. The differences amongst the families, children and young adults are linked to the amount of information available to the families; the child's attitude to his or her past; the influence of the actors involved in the adoption; the way in which adoptive kinship is understood; the way in which the laws are applied, and the ways in which children's voices and needs are accounted for by families and accredited bodies.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

International adoption involves the transfer of children for permanent family care from one nation to another (Bartholet, 2005). The couple from one country become the parents and legal guardians of a child who is a national of a different country (HCCH, 1993). This practice is well established in Italy and it increased until 2011, despite the downward trend worldwide. Since 2011, there has been a fall in the number of international adoptions in Italy, similar to that recorded in the rest of the adopting world. In 2013, in Italy 2,825 children were adopted, as reported by 'Commissione Adozioni Internazionali (C.A.I.)', the central authority for adoption, via 67 accredited bodies from more than 50 sending countries (C.A.I., 2013b). Up to 2009, at the global level, approximately 40,000 children were adopted from more than 100 sending and receiving countries (Selman, 2009).

The thesis is concerned with international adoptions completed by Italian families. It seeks to understand how communication about the adoptee's past takes place within the family. As the title suggests, it is assumed that adoption challenges the dominant cultural belief that the best and strongest family relationships are necessarily based on blood and, as an institution, that adoption challenges constructions of parenting as a process of child-bearing and child-rearing (Kirk, 1964). Adoption is remarkably powerful, not only in its legal effects but also in the way in which it works to construct relationships (Logan, 2013). This thesis investigates the ways in which adoptive families deal with the child's origins and it includes adoptees' views on the communication in the cultural and social contexts in which this transition takes place.

Aims and Rationale

My interest in this topic is linked to my work experience with an association that arranges adoptions from Moldova to foreign countries. I worked with its department dealing with adoptions between Moldova and Italy. My awareness of the topic grew during my time there, especially after closely following the finalisation of the adoption of an older girl to an Italian family. The family had waited several years for this to happen, and the girl had already given up the idea of permanently being somebody's daughter. Being present at the 'exchange' between the carers highlighted some of the potential weaknesses in the process of adoption. The daughter-to-be did not speak Italian, and the future parents did not understand Romanian or Russian. With my basic Romanian, I helped them in their communication and I could perceive the daughter's distress. Her concerns were about her future in Italy and what would happen to the foster parents who had taken care of her in Moldova. The realisation that she had not been given the answers to these questions earlier in the process of adoption indicated the limitations to her right to be informed about this big change in her life. This particular case triggered questions in my mind about the process of adoption and queries about the perspectives of the child as well of the adoptive parents with regard to the adoption process. It also raised questions about the rights of the future adoptee and her involvement in the process.

Considering my background in children's rights, my initial interest mainly concerned the child's involvement in the process. I aimed to understand the extent to which children were informed about their future adoption and whether or not they would have liked to be informed about it. However, the difficulty in gaining access to families and

adoptees prior to and after adoption precluded this type of research. The thought that in the case I had witnessed, the parents and the child could not share communication nurtured questions about the ways in which the family would deal with the child's questions about her birth and foster families, her country of origin and what would happen about everything that she had built up in Moldova. This approach to adoption raised questions about the availability of information to the adoptee, and the possibility of using this information.

This experience and my interest in children's rights led to this research, which aimed to explore children's and parents' experiences of communication within the family about the child's past, in the Italian social and cultural context. The narratives explored both reflect and are reflected in the families' accounts, and they also draw attention to the adoptees' perspectives. Communication about the child's origins is at the centre of the research, with two different meanings. Firstly 'communication' is understood as the sharing of adoption-related information with the adoptee; and secondly, communication encapsulates a broader meaning, which includes and is included in the meaning of family, the formation of identity, children's rights and the culture of adoption itself. Experts are also included in the research, with the aim of understanding the views of those providing statutory support to the families. In addition to this, the families were introduced to the 'life-story work' tool used in the UK, with the objective of understanding how they would deal with the openness offered by this tool, as well as to prompt conversations about this topic.

Research suggests that open communication within an adoptive family can lead to better outcomes for the child's identity (Wrobel and Ayers-Lopez, 1996; Brodzinsky and

Palacios, 2005; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Secrecy has characterised Italian adoption for more than three decades, and only recently has this started changing towards a more open approach, although it could be argued that the situation is still far from being as open as in countries like the United Kingdom or the United States. This research aimed to explore families' understanding of communicative openness, considering it within the specific context in which these interactions take place. Many studies on adoption focus on the factors that may influence psychological outcomes, such as age at adoption, levels of deprivation, and the conditions in the care system prior to adoption (Lanz et al., 1999; Bimmel et al., 2003; Juffer and van Ijzendorn, 2005). Another strand of research has recently developed, and it is looking at the influence of the family on the adoptees' adjustment, the economic situation of the parents and their relationship, and their education level (McDonald et al., 2001; Brodzinsky, 2006). The aim is to provide an insight into openness with regard to communication in international adoptions in Italy. In this study, the accounts around adoption are explored in order to identify parents' role in ensuring the transition from one country to another, and the adoptees' perspectives are explored in terms of their understanding of communication within the adoptive family.

The structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the social and cultural context in which this research took place. It describes the statistical data about the adoptive families, the meaning of the 'Italian family' in its context, and the laws framing international adoption.

Chapter 3 presents a review of the current literature concerning adoption. It covers the main theoretical traditions informing the topic of international adoption, such as family

and identity as well as the empirical research that has looked at the various aspects of international adoption. This chapter draws upon the concepts of openness and the conflicting notions that it can entail. Empirical research conducted with children is provided, giving a rounded picture of their experiences of adoption.

Chapter 4 focuses on the methods used to conduct this research, bringing to the fore the in-depth interviews used to gather the data. It also includes theoretical considerations that justify the chosen method. Since this research includes an exploration of children's views, particular attention is dedicated to describing the interview process used with them and the ethical considerations. The difficult process of gaining access to the sample is discussed, as well as my role as a researcher.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe the findings of the interviews conducted with the families, children and experts. In Chapter 5, the findings that emerged from the interviews with the families are presented, where key themes show that families use an adoption story to speak about adoption, and that each story covers a particular function involving various actors from outside the adoptive family. Chapter 6 identifies the key themes developed in the interviews with the adoptees, both with the children and the young adults. Children showed knowledge of their adoptive status, and the use of memories from the past to explain their story. Young adults presented a tension between a desire to be 'normal' and an acknowledgement of their life prior to adoption. Chapter 7 provides the main points discussed by the experts in their interviews, highlighting the variety of perspectives on communicative openness.

Chapter 8 pulls together and discusses the findings presented in the previous chapters, drawing attention to the adoption stories told by the families during the interviews, and the different ways in which they understand communication. These different practices are placed on an openness continuum, where they are clustered into four groups. With this, the factors that influence openness in the Italian context are examined.

Chapter 9 draws together all of the issues presented and discussed in the thesis, summarising the main arguments developed.

Chapter 2 International adoption in Italy: the social and cultural context

The aim of this chapter is to set out the social and cultural framework within which the research took place. It aims to provide knowledge about the current situation with regard to international adoption in Italy, starting with statistical data about the families, children and sending countries up to 2013. The subsequent section provides a sociological context to the Italian family, illustrating issues of fertility; the influence of the Church; and migration. The last section explains the laws governing international adoption and highlights their influence on the understanding of communication about adoption.

Statistical information

The families

Who is adopting and who is adopted internationally in Italy? Based on the data from 2013, produced by CAI, the Commission for International Adoption (C.A.I., 2013a, 2013b), 2,825 children were adopted from 56 countries. Starting with the demographics of the adoptive parents, the predominant age for both mothers and fathers is between 40 and 44 years. For the adoption process to start, a request has to be initiated by a heterosexual couple who have been married for at least three years (as will be thoroughly explained in the legal background section). Since the average age at marriage in Italy is around 32-34 years for men and 30-32 for women, it can be said that Italian adoptive couples begin the journey that will lead them to adopt a child from another country, on average, about eight to nine years after marriage. In 2013, adoptive families with biological children formed a relatively small proportion of the total

number of the adoptive couples; this finding has been consistent over the years, with no significant fluctuations in the period taken into account. In 2013, almost nine out of ten couples who were adopters (86.1%) did not have children, while the other couples had one (12.1%) or more than one (1.8%).

The fundamental characteristics of the adoptive couples described in the previous years are confirmed for 2013. In relation to their level of education, the high prevalence of couples who have completed college is confirmed. Then we have spouses with university degrees, followed by adoptive parents who completed high school. Adoptive parents that only completed primary school represent approximately 0.5% of both the husbands and wives: this number has reduced year after year. This data reveal, therefore, that the level of education of adoptive couples is higher than that of the Italian population taken as a whole. For example, a high school diploma is taken by 56%, whereas a university degree is taken by 20.3% of the population in the same age group (ISTAT, 2011). Adoptive mothers have, on average, a higher level of education than adoptive fathers.

The parents' education
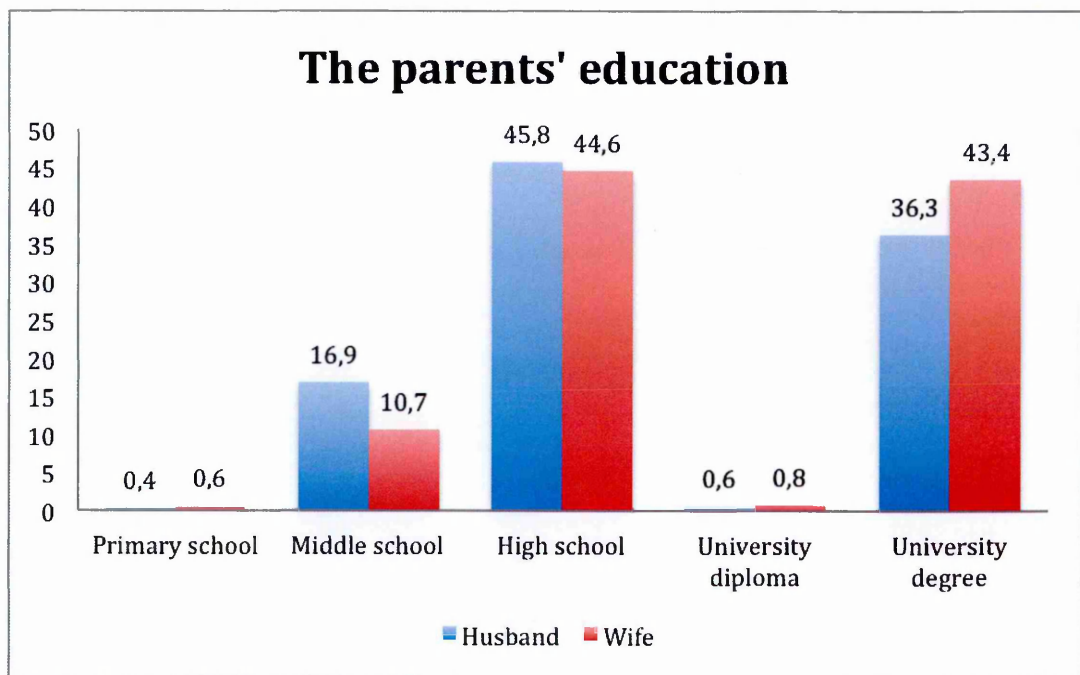
Figure 1 – The parents' educational status

As for their professions, adoptive couples were classified according to the types listed by the National Statistics Institute (ISTAT, 2011). Amongst the couples who adopted in 2013, 29.8% of the husbands and 36.2% of the wives were in a profession of a highly specialised intellectual type. With regard to the remainder, for the husbands, some performed technical occupations (21.3%), some were employees (15.8%), some were artisans (15.1%), while the rest were in skilled professions in commercial activities and services (10.6%). With regard to the wives, 23.2% were engaged in white-collar professions, 17% were in a technical profession, and 6.7% were engaged in a commercial activity or services. Housewives accounted for 8.5% of the total and, this figure is in constant decline.
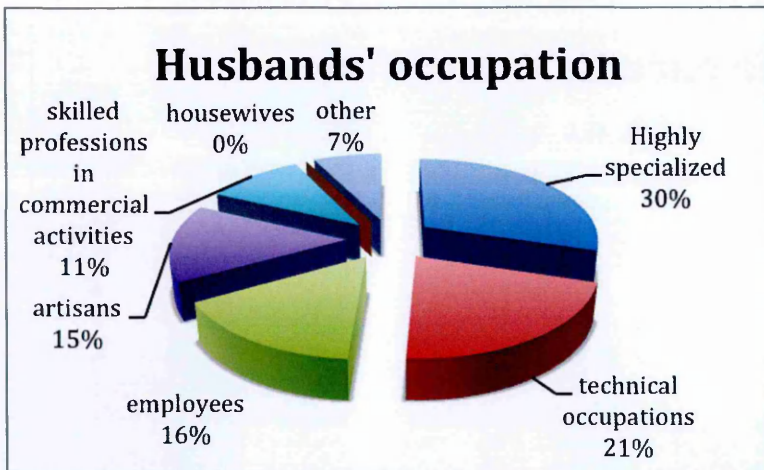
Figure 2–2013 Cohort - Husbands' occupations
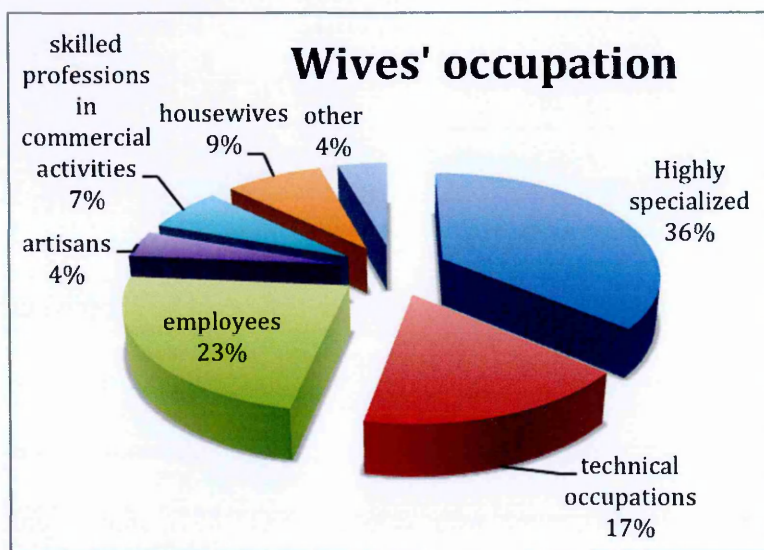
Figure 3–2013 Cohort - Wives' occupations

The reasons for adoption

The Commission for International Adoption has offered an analysis of the reasons for adoption (C.A.I., 2013b). Through the study of the court reports, analysing psychosocial relationships, personal histories and the couples throughout the process, it was possible to find three main categories of motivation. However, it is important to note the limitations of this data as not all of the courts sent the report in conjunction with the decree of suitability: in 2013, only 1,774 out of 2,291 files contained this specific report. It is noted that the most common motivation is linked to infertility. Amongst the

couples who completed the adoption process in 2013, 95.3% chose to begin the process because of infertility.

The children

Overall, from November 16, 2000 until December 31, 2013, 42,048 foreign children were authorised to enter Italy for the purpose of adoption. These children were adopted by 33,820 couples, with an average of 1.24 children being adopted per couple. In 2013, the average number of adopted children per couple was 1.24, which is lower than the average of 1.26 children per couple adopted in 2012 (C.A.I., 2013b). This data confirms that the average number of adopted children per couple is very similar to the fertility rate of Italian couples, which is about 1.4 children per woman (ISTAT, 2011). The data disaggregated by region reinforce the trends seen since 2010, confirming an increase in the number of couples adopting, in a scenario in which the central and northern regions are still predominant. In 2013, Lombard couples applied for the adoption of 488 children, the highest number among the Italian regions, followed by Tuscany (299 children), Lazio (287 children), Campania (270 children) and Veneto (239 children).
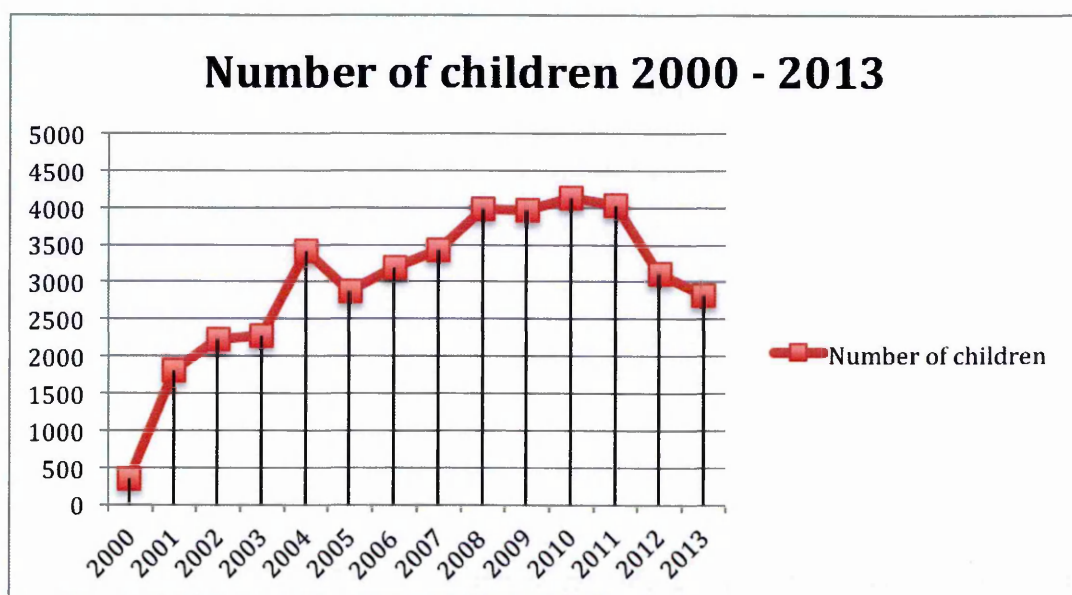
Figure 4 - Number of adopted children 2000 - 2013

Countries of origin

Examining the data on the origin of the foreign children adopted in Italy in 2013, the country of origin with the greatest number it is still the Russian Federation, with 730 authorised entries, which equates to 25.8% of the total. Looking at the total authorisations granted to enter Italy in 2013, the numbers show an increase in children coming from countries in Africa, which in 2013 accounted for 20.2% of the total, compared to 16.3% in 2012. An increase was also noted in relation to children from Asia, which rose from 10.6% to 13.1%. The percentage of children from Latin America has decreased, from 25.3% in 2012 to 19.1% in 2013 (C.A.I., 2013b).

COUNTRY	*Children entering Italy in 2013*	
	%	No.
Russian Federation	25.84	730
Ethiopia	10.37	293
Poland	7.15	202
Brazil	6.62	187
Colombia	6.34	179
China	5.7	161
Dem. Rep. Of Congo	5.63	159
Ukraine	5.17	146
Bulgaria	3.72	105
Vietnam	2.8	79
India	2.69	76
Chile	2.51	71
Peru	2.05	58
Hungary	1.56	44

Table 1 - Countries of origin and number of children

Gender, age and health

With regard to the gender of the children adopted in 2013, 60.7% were males and 39.3% were females. The average age was 5.5 years, lower than the figure recorded in

2012 (5.9 years). More precisely, more than 4 out of 10 children adopted in 2013 (42.1%) were aged between 1 and 4 years; 43.8% of the adopted children were aged between 5 and 9 years; 8. 7% were aged 10 years or over; while only 5.4% of the adopted children were under one year of age.

For countries from which more than 20 children were adopted in Italy in 2013, the average age of the children was: Ukraine (8.9 years); Bulgaria (8.1 years); Brazil (7.9 years); Hungary (7.8 years); Poland (7.7 years); Lithuania (7.6 years); Burkina Faso (4.4 years), Burundi (3.9 years); the Republic of China (3.5 years), Ethiopia (2.3 years), and Vietnam (1.9 years)(C.A.I., 2013b).
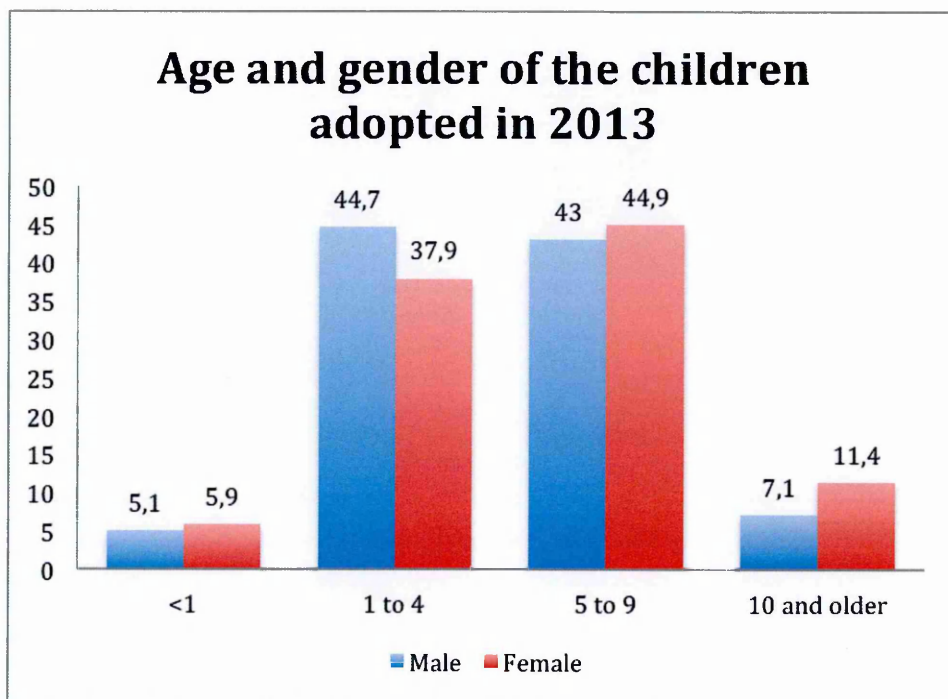
Figure 5 - Age and gender of the children adopted in 2013

The data presented by C.A.I. (2013b) show the basic distinction between those that are referred to as having special needs and those with particular needs. The first group indicates children with serious illnesses that are often incurable, such as neurological

and mental conditions; this differs from particular needs, which imply a recovery over the course of time, leading to a possible total cure.

In 2013, 21% of all adopted children were reported as children with special and or particular needs. The largest number of reported children with special needs and/or particular needs was found in Asia, where 52.6% of the children were reported to have a special and or particular need. In Europe the figure was 29% of the children adopted while in Latin America it was 1.7% and in Africa 0.7%.

Year 2013	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Total
Particular needs (%)	-	1	6.3	92.7	100
Special needs (%)	2.4	2.4	31.7	63.4	100
Special and particular needs (%)	-	2.3	91.3	6.4	100
Total children with reported needs (%)	0.2	1.5	32.7	65.7	100
No. of children who entered Italy	527	539	369	1345	2825
% of children with reported needs	0.2	1.7	52.6	29	21

Table 2 - Children with particular and special needs divided by continents

Accredited bodies

The accredited bodies, which are the intermediaries between the families, the States (both sending and receiving), and the child/ren, have offices in almost every national territory and, as at 31 December 2013, a total of 212 operational sites were active. The largest number of accredited bodies is present in Lazio (32) and Lombardy (27), followed by Tuscany (19), Piedmont (17), Puglia (15), and Campania and Sicily (with 13 each). In 2013, all of the authorised institutions followed at least one Italian couple in their adoption of a child from another country. Eight bodies followed the adoption process for more than 100 children for a total of 1,247 children. Nine other accredited

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bodies followed the adoption process of a number of children: between 50 and 100 units for a total of 661 minors. All of the other bodies shared the remaining numbers of adopted children in their process of adoption (C.A.I., 2013b).

The Italian family

Although the family is a universal phenomenon, it shows a high degree of variability. In fact it develops different structures and carries out specific functions in relation to the social context to which it belongs. This section presents a picture of the meaning of the Italian family, as well as some details that give a framework within which to place the results of this study.

According to the Constitution of the Italian Republic, the family is founded on the institution of marriage, which constitutes its pillar. The articles in the 1948 Constitution that define 'family' are no. 29:

> The Republic recognises the rights of the family as a natural society founded on marriage. Marriage is based on the moral and legal equality of the spouses within the limits established by law to guarantee the unity of the family.

And article 30:

> It is the duty and right of parents to support and educate their children, even if born out of wedlock. In the case of the inability of the parents, the law provides for the fulfilment of their tasks. The law ensures children born out of wedlock every legal and social protection, which is compatible with the rights of members of the legitimate family. The law lays down the rules and limitations for the determination of paternity.

To understand the recent changes in the concept of 'family' that relates to this research it is necessary to go back to the 1970s, when the law to regulate divorce was approved, and in particular to 1975, when the reform of family law was enforced. With this reform, children born out of wedlock, or illegitimate children, acquired the same rights as legitimate children and were defined as 'natural' as opposed to legitimate, but they were no longer called illegitimate. Additionally, the role of the head of the family was abolished, and with it the dominant role of the male in the family. In the Civil Code there is an article that requires people to provide food to their relatives in cases of need (I text, section XIII, art. 433-448-bis). If, for example, a grandmother cannot provide food for herself, her relatives such as her sons, daughters, nieces or nephews are required to support her. This obligation of the relatives to provide support is unique in the western world (Saraceno, 2003). Some sociologists, such as Saraceno (2003), see the extended support provided by family as an action or reaction of the family to the lack of social policies in place in Italy. Other authors, like Naldini (2002), find Italy, together with Spain, Portugal and Greece, to have a distinct welfare system which they call 'Mediterranean'. This is characterised by a high degree of fragmentation of social policy, in particular when it comes to family policy, as little attention is given to families with children and investment in them is low or non-existent.

Despite the changes with the law of divorce, solidarity remains a strong feature of the family, as it was in the past (Bargagli et al., 2003). The cohesion of the family is demonstrated through the economic assistance that parents give to their married and unmarried sons, the role of grandparents in the care of their grandchildren, the care of the elderly in the family by the younger generations, and the handing down of family

business (Hodgart, 2002). Zincone (2006) explains *familismo* (familism) as a way of perceiving the family bond: it is an intense bond of solidarity among the members of the family and it prevails over community bonds and general community interests. She confirms this through her research, in which it emerges that *familismo* is still strong in the Italian context because civil society does not provide enough support (Zincone, 2006).

Historically, in the southern countries of Europe young people left their family home only when they married, as opposed to young people in the United Kingdom, where marriage takes place years after leaving the family home and after some savings have been accumulated. The study by Bargagli et al. (2003) on family formation in Europe shows two main patterns. The first pattern sees sons leaving their families at a young age in order to study or work, possibly forming cohabitations or civil unions and having children before being married. This model dominates in countries like the United Kingdom, Finland, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Sweden. In the second model sons leave their family home late to get married and buy or build their own home, and have children after marriage. The countries that follow this model are Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. There are geographical similarities, apart from Ireland, but religion appears to be a common factor. In fact the countries in the first group are mainly Protestant, whereas the countries in the second are Catholic (Bargagli et al., 2003).

Looking at some statistical data, the number of both civil and Catholic marriages in Italy decreased from 392,000 in 1972 to 174,582 in 2012 (ISTAT, 2013). ISTAT also highlights the higher age at marriage, which changed from 27 for men and 24 for women in 1972 to 34 and 31 years respectively in 2012. This information needs to be

considered together with statistics that show that the number of cohabitations reached one million in 2012. The changes in the Italian family are also evident from the number of civil and Catholic marriages: the number of civil marriages is growing whereas the number of religious ones is decreasing. However, there is a difference between northern Italy, where the civil marriage rate is 53.4%, and southern Italy, where it is 24.5%. This data could also be influenced by the larger number of marriages between Italians and non-Italians (ISTAT, 2013).

When observing the increased age at the time of marriage various reasons need to be taken into account. The first option is that secondary schooling delays the start of work, and consequently marriage; the second is that the difficulty in finding a permanent job delays leaving the family home; and the third hypothesis is that young people's values have changed (Bargagli et al., 2003, p. 22). Italy's university system went through a reform and adopted the European model in 2002, but before that it had various anomalies. The rate of graduation was low, the exams were difficult and the workload for each exam was extremely demanding. Even now the rate of students completing a degree within the prescribed timeframe is only 9.4%, and most bachelor degrees are completed at around the age of 27 (ISTAT, 2011).

Researchers such as Cavalli and Corijn (in Barbagli et al., 2003) support the idea that a Catholic education can influence the way in which a new family is formed and the children's transition to adulthood. Data drawn from the European Union confirm that the higher the percentage of Catholics in a country's population the lower the percentage of young couples cohabiting *('coppie di fatto')*. In Italy cohabiting is not very common compared to the rest of Europe. The reasons for this may be various, as

suggested by the data given by the European Union. The cohabitation of young couples and early sexuality in Italy may be hindered by the high degree of control exercised by the Catholic Church as well as by the family and school. Other researchers, like Fraboni and Rosina (2004), say that the low rate of cohabitation is caused by strong relationships with relatives and parents.

Fertility

The fertility rate in Italy is one of the lowest in Europe, at 1.34 in 2011 (ISTAT, 2011). The low fertility rate is linked to the higher age at marriage and the longer gap between marriage and the first child. Women working and those with a higher level of schooling are certainly influencing this data (Saraceno and Naldini, 2013). In the past 50 years, within Italy there are regional differences: in central northern Italy the number of children seems to have dropped to one per couple, whereas in southern Italy there has been a shift from three children to two per couple. This change in behaviour is drastic for the southern regions, but the figure in central northern Italy has been similar for the past 50 years.

The Catholic Church

The role played by the Catholic Church in Italian society is not the focus of this section, which considers the role it plays in the institution of the family. From the 12th century onwards the Catholic Church has been involved in regulating the institution of marriage. The shift from the Roman Empire to the Church was formalised through the Council of Trento. With this formalisation, the Church and its ministers officialised marriage (Betta, 2011). The act of marriage became irreversible and was made an act of public display. At the time, public exposure served as a way to control who married whom,

and from which class. The public display and the irreversibility of marriage helped the poorer social classes to marry into a different class and the laws protected these marriages. On the other hand, few in the aristocracy had the opportunity to choose whom to marry, as the reasons for marriage still lay in patrimonial and economic advantages. This regulation imposed by the Church anticipated the modern intervention of the state, reaching a peak in the Napoleonic Code, which influenced many European codes (Betta, 2011). The institution of marriage served an economic purpose: it established a clear hierarchy between the genders in which males were considered the owners of the assets. Today these regulations shape the way we think of family, the relationship between men and women, and the relationship between family, state and society (Goody, 2001). The Catholic population represents the majority in Italy, with 51 million adherents in a total population of just over 61 million (ISTAT, 2011). Saraceno (2013) describes hostility between the non-religious state and the Church with regard to family matters, and highlights hostilities over the law on divorce. The same situation, although still unresolved, can be found in the case of civil partnerships, which are still not recognised in Italy, meaning that the cohabitation of homosexual couples is not officially acknowledged. Pope Benedict XVI confirmed the traditional Catholic teaching when he declared that sexuality and procreation should be seen together and not separately because doing so could lead to unhappiness (Ratzinger, 2007). On another occasion Benedict declared that 'the natural family, based on marriage between man and woman, is the cradle of life and of love and it is the first and irreplaceable educator to peace' (Ratzinger, 2007, p. 24). However, the influence of the Church on the laws of Italy, and therefore on some of its institutions, does not reflect the changes occurring in the family (Betta, 2011).

According to ISTAT (2014) data relative to the national demographic balance, as of 1 January 2013 the number of residents from other countries in Italy was 4,370,317, 7.4% of the total population. The official statistics based on residence do not include the number of people living in the country illegally. The ISMU Foundation, which works on illegal immigration, estimated that there were around 650,000 illegal immigrants on the Italian territory in 2013 (Alietti and Augustoni, 2013).

In recent years there has been a marked increase in flow from Eastern Europe, which exceeded those from the countries of North Africa, which were previously very strong, from the 1990s onwards. This is due to the rapid increase in the size of the Romanian community, which has approximately doubled since 2007 from 342,000 to 625,000 people, and thus represents the largest non-Italian community on the territory. The entry of Romania into the European Union facilitated this flow. From 1 January 2011, Romanians, of whom there were nearly one million in Italy, represented the biggest foreign community there. After them the other main communities in Italy are Albanian, Moroccan, Chinese and Ukrainian (ISTAT, 2011).

The distribution of people from other countries on Italian territory is highly uneven: in the Northwest they make up 35% of the population; in the Northeast 26.3%; in central Italy 25.2%; and in the South and the Islands, 13.5%. Within this distribution there is a significant disparity between provincial capitals and rural areas. In the Italian provinces the largest foreign community is in the province of Milan (407,191), followed by the provinces of Rome (405,657), Turin (198,249) and Brescia (160,284) (ISTAT, 2011). Examining the conditions of immigration is fundamental, considering its relevance in contemporary Italy and bearing in mind the topic of adoption and issues of 'difference'.

Sociologist Pugliese (2002) describes the laborious process of the stabilisation of immigrants even at the level of work, which may be seen as an expression of a more general process of integration of immigrants into Italian society. Throughout this process the availability of support is low and the orientation of the population, which is generally benevolent, has been heavily influenced, mostly negatively, by the mass media. It is likely that widespread awareness of the economic advantages of immigration – and there are indications of this – would foster a less negative approach to immigration and wider acceptance of non-Italian people moving to Italy than exists today. The migrant community is dealing with problems that second generations of immigrants experience generally, such as schooling, on which Italian policy has not been comprehensively developed. This partial integration of immigrants in the Italian context, is exposing internationally-adopted children to a reality that may affect them and their integration (Pugliese, 2002).

Italian Citizenship

Italian citizenship continues to be based on *jus sanguinis* (the right of blood).[1] The country's history of emigration seems to influence citizenship more than its present and future position as a country of immigration. The family remains central in the construction of Italian citizenship: *jus sanguinis* and the smooth process for naturalising spouses demonstrates that family links provide the main routes to citizenship. The history of Italian citizenship also highlights the important role of ethnicity and common blood in the construction of the nation.

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[1] A principle of nationality law in which citizenship is not determined by place of birth but by one or both parents being citizens of the state. At birth children may automatically be citizens if their parents have state citizenship.

Italian citizenship legislation still mirrors the emigration of the past and is far from the current reality. In a similar way, the presence of a large number of immigrants has not led to the adoption of coherent multicultural or integration policies. Only at the local level have some multicultural policies been adopted, but these appear to be more a collection of examples than a 'comprehensive' policy (Allievi, 2010).

The citizenship law was not modified until 1992, and it remains the main piece of legislation on citizenship. This Act is still shaped by Italy's past as an emigration country. In relation to immigrants, the Act is intrinsically ethnocentric. It reduces the length of residence required before application can be made for naturalisation from five to three years for people of Italian descent, and to four years for EU nationals (Zincone, 2006). The requirement of five years provided by the 1912 law is maintained only for stateless applicants and refugees, but has been increased to ten years for non-EU foreigners. As a result, in 1999 only 15% of naturalisations were based on residence and 85% were based on marriage. In 2008, due to immigrants' fear of seeing their rights restricted, naturalisation increased by up to 40,000, the majority still being due to marriage. In 2009, for the first time naturalisation based on residence reached 57% of all citizenships given (Allievi, 2010).

The Security Act 2009 included a reform of citizenship acquisition by marriage. To prevent marriages of convenience the duration of marriage required before couples resident in Italy can apply for citizenship was raised from six months to two years, and evidence for the persistence of the bond must be explicit. The right of an illegal immigrant to marry an Italian citizen was abolished. However, the differences between

the requirements for naturalisation by residency and that by marriage are clearly evident in Italy: ten years are required for residency and two for marriage. The clear preference for married couples highlights one of the characteristics of Italian citizenship and confirms what Zincone calls *familismo* (2006). Family links are the basis of a citizenship that implements *jus sangunis* and facilitates the acquisition of citizenship through marriage to the highest degree.

The Legal Background

The legal framework constitutes an important setting for the understanding of adoption, not only in Italy but also internationally. Legal reforms can promote changes and evolutions in the practical procedures as well as the cultural processes of adoption. Simultaneously these legal reforms are mirroring attitudes and practices that are already taking place, but are not formally recorded. The laws can also help to understand and construct the ways in which the family, adoptive family, parenthood and filiation are conceived in the Italian setting.

The context of international adoption

On an international level there are a number of declarations and conventions that have been written regarding international adoption. Their historical development led to the current documents that define the boundaries within which adoptions take place. The 1986 United Nations Declaration on Social and Legal Principles relates to the protection and welfare of children (with special reference to foster placement and adoption, nationally and internationally) and states that 'if a child cannot be placed in a foster or an adoptive family or cannot in any suitable manner be cared for in the country of origin, inter-country adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing

the child with a family (United Nations, 1986, art. 17)'. In this article the main aim is to ensure adequate counselling for all of the people involved in the adoption, especially before it takes place. In addition to the prevention of improper economic gain through adoption, the protection of the child's interests is also essential (Fadiga, 1994). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (United Nations, 1989) refers to the institution of adoption in Article 21, where it sets out the principles to be followed when considering national and international adoption. The original draft of the article began with the obligation of State parties to 'facilitate' adoption, but due to the increased number of adoptions during the 1980s, the final version of Article 21 was changed completely to stress the State party's duty to 'ensure that the best interests of the child' are 'the paramount consideration' in any adoption and that safeguards and procedures are fully respected. Directly related to the institution of adoption is article 35, which states that it is necessary to guarantee children's protection from sale, trafficking and abduction. Articles 7 and 8 refer to the child's right to be cared for by parents and the right from birth to have an identity (which includes a name, nationality and family relations). Article 12 stipulates the child's right to have his or her views respected and to be heard in any judicial or administrative proceedings that affecting them. Article 20.1 affirms the subsidiarity principle, by guaranteeing protection and assistance in the State where they are living. In the same article it is highlighted that when decisions are made about alternative care attention should be paid to continuity in the child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background (Lorenzini, 2007).

The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption (HCCH, 1993) was introduced on 29 May1993 and came into force

on 1 May 1995. The Convention's principal objectives are:

-> to establish safeguards to ensure that international adoptions take place in the best interests of the child and with respect for his or her fundamental rights as recognised in international law;

-> to establish a system of cooperation amongst Contracting States to ensure that those safeguards are respected and thereby prevent the abduction, the sale of, or traffic in children;

-> to secure the recognition in Contracting States of adoptions made in accordance with the Convention (Article 1).

This Convention was conceived to give a practical effect to the articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child on international adoption. Because one of the most important premises is that adoption is an act that involves different parties (not only the birth family, but also the adoptive family and the child), it affirms the responsibilities and tasks that will be shared between the States involved. Therefore the procedures for international adoption should ultimately be the responsibility of the State involved. The article on subsidiarity has been transformed into a rule, recognising that international adoption can offer the advantage of a permanent family for children if a suitable family cannot be found in the State of Origin. Therefore the Convention sets out different options, which are generally established to safeguard the long-term 'best interest' of the child: family solutions (return to the birth family, foster care, adoption), which should generally be preferred to institutional placement; permanent solutions (return to the birth family, adoption), which should be preferred to provisional ones (institutional placement, foster care); and national solutions (return to birth family, national adoption), which should be preferred to international ones (inter-country

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adoption). The foundations and basic principles that are laid down in the provisions of the Hague Convention of 1993 on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption, and thus, indirectly, in the provisions of the Italian Law 476 (1998) are as follows:

- every child, for the harmonious development of his personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.

- every State should take, as a matter of priority, appropriate measures to enable the child to remain in the family of origin.

- international adoption is a means that can offer the opportunity to make a permanent family for a child for which there cannot be found a suitable family in their home state.

For the States party to the Convention, it was necessary to include measures to ensure that inter-country adoptions are done in the best interests of the child and with respect for their fundamental human rights, and that they prevent the abduction, sale and trafficking of children. Through the Convention, therefore, member States felt the need to establish common provisions that take into account the principles established by international instruments, in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989 and the United Nations Declaration on Principles of Social Law, and that are applicable to the protection of and assistance to children, with particular reference to the practice of adoption and foster care, at national and international level (General Assembly resolution 41/85 of 3 December 1986).

The debate around international adoption

Adoption raises a large number of issues that range from the most intimate spheres of life to macropolitics on a global level. There is the relationship between nation-states; the role of agents, and the international conventions; between the sending and the

receiving countries; between parents and the agencies and with the adoptive child; and between the adoptive family and the birth family. The process of international adoption has led to the establishment of guidelines for its processes and supervision, and the guidelines establish the legal frame within which adoption should take place. However discourses around global (in)equalities trigger the formation of different positions in relation to international adoption. These are summarised and identified by Masson (2001) as abolitionists, pragmatists, and promoters.

Abolitionists, the critics of international adoption, (Triseliotis, 2000; Smolin, 2006, 2007; McCreery Bunkers and Groza, 2009) see this practice as a trade in children to satisfy the needs of the growing number of childless couples in the overdeveloped world. One of the points raised by the abolitionists is that the professional resources invested in international adoption could be used for children's services in the sending countries, potentially improving the lives of the children living there. In addition to this, abolitionists are concerned that such practices reflect neocolonialist and ethnocentric attitudes by moving children from emerging states to rich and powerful countries (Hoksbergen, 1991; Saclier, 2000; Smolin, 2007).

In opposition to the abolitionists, promoters of international adoption regard it as a humanitarian response to the plight of children who would otherwise live in institutions or on the streets (Bartholet, 2009, 2005). Generally promoters see international adoption as an opportunity to help children, in particular those with disabilities, by giving them the opportunity to stay in a home with a caring and loving family (Bartholet, 2009). Pragmatists occupy a middle-ground position. They accept that the international demand for and supply of children exists and debate the best ways to achieve high

standards in practice and ensure the regulation of intercountry adoption. They believe that it can be regulated through a range of unilateral, bilateral and international agreements. Amongst the pragmatists who occupy this middle position (Rotabi and Gibbons, 2009, p. 571) are anthropologists such as Howell (2007), Modell (2002) and Yngvesson (2010, 2009), themselves adoptive parents who have developed an academic interest in kinship to encompass the broader cultural context of international adoption.

The debates around social (in)equalities are influenced by globalisation. Easier access to information through television, the Internet, movies and advertisements provides insights into lives in the sending and the receiving countries. These opportunities feed into the different perspectives described above (Dowling and Brown, 2009).

My research does not support or criticise any of these positions, as this is not one of its aims. However, it is important to acknowledge that the three positions described above can influence who is involved in the process of adoption. In addition it is important to acknowledge that international adoption triggers debate around social (in)equalities.

The Italian context

The number of international adoptions began to increase towards the end of the 1960s, a time when Law 431 (1967) permitted them without any further instructions or specific rules that had to be followed. During the 1970s and 1980s the numbers grew steadily. They overtook domestic adoptions and thus gained the attention of legislators. This led to Law 184 (1983), which established a more detailed framework for both domestic and international adoptions. Internationally this law was welcomed, but it was criticised for

overlooking the complexity of international adoption, for both parents and children. In the 1980s, the growth continued, making Law 184 (1983) inadequate, and leading to situations where adoptions were made illegally and also to so called 'do-it-yourself' adoptions, whereby the couple had a free choice to ask for support throughout the adoption process (Fadiga, 1994). It might be that Italian institutions, whether authorised or not, legal associations, cultural associations or charities, missionaries or businessmen, equipped with trusted collaborators abroad, had created a sort of market for international adoption. With this in mind, they often created risky situations for both the adoptive couple, which could result in fraud and deception, and for the children, who where denied the right to a proper adoption procedure. Recent reforms have developed more established principles, and in the 1990s the principles of the Hague Convention were integrated into the Italian legal system (Lorenzini, 2007).

The laws currently governing adoption in Italy are:

- 31 December 1998, n. 476, Ratification and implementation of the Convention for the Protection of Children and Cooperation Inter-country Adoption, done at The Hague, 29 May 1993. Changes to the Law of 4 May 1983, n.184, regarding the adoption of foreign children, with regard to international adoption.

- Law March 28 2001, No 149 Changes to the Law of 4 May 1983, n. 184, entitled 'Discipline and the adoption of Custody of Children', and Title VIII of Book I of the Civil Code, with regard to national adoption.

Law 476 (1998) enforced the establishment of the Commission for International Adoption (in Italian: *Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali*, C.A.I.), which has been active since 2000. The role of C.A.I. is to plan, coordinate and interact with the central authorities of the other countries that are in charge of international adoptions and

promote such cooperation through particular initiatives. By establishing the Commission for International Adoption, it was also possible to overcome the previous practice commonly referred to as 'do it yourself' adoption, mentioned in the previous paragraph. Law 476 (1998) provides that only organisations that have been approved by the Commission for International Adoption are entitled to address the practice of international adoption, in accordance with specific requirements, and they are referred to as accredited bodies. The intervention of the Government is now authorised and required, in order that they can operate in countries for which the Commission has approved them. The Italian law also provides that the accredited bodies performing the practice of international adoption have to deal with other projects that develop and offer support to children in the countries where they operate. Additionally it is established that adoptive couples refer to the accredited bodies for their adoption process, so that they can guide and support the parents throughout the whole process. A few years later, another law was introduced to amend the previous one, Law 149 (2001), this regulated and introduced different requirements for the adoptive couple. With this law, it was made a requirement that couples are followed during their adoption by an accredited body, and furthermore, that couples go through a preparation course prior to the adoption. The preparation of the parents depends upon each accredited body, although a minimum was set. Under this legislation, adoption is permitted for couples who have been married for at least three years (paragraph 1), or who have lived together in a stable and continuous relationship over a period of three years before getting married (paragraph 4). In addition, the spouses must be emotionally fit and able to educate (paragraph 1). With regard to the age of the adoptive parents, in paragraph 3 it is determined that it must be at least 18, but not more than 45 years older than the adopted child (Law 184/1983 provided that the maximum difference in age was forty).

The role of social services

With the significant changes introduced with Law 476 (1998) another aspect that became more detailed is the network of support for adoptive parents. Italy is organised into regions, which work independently from the State in relation to specific matters, and in the case of adoption it is the regions' task to ensure that there are services in place, and that there is cooperation between the accredited bodies and the region themselves. The regions appoint social services and they carry out fundamental roles in the process of adoption (C.A.I., 2009).

Generally speaking their task is to observe the couple and at the same time provide the necessary support along the route of the adoption. The social services send a comprehensive report on their work with the couple, in particular a psychological profile and, based on their evaluation, the court may pronounce whether or not there is a declaration of eligibility for international adoption. It is therefore important that the services provide all of the information necessary about the adoptive couple, for example the risks and issues that the child might encounter, to help the couple to discover their own resources and their limits. The social services check the ability of the couple to take care of a child who is coming from a context outside of Italy. To do this, social workers and psychologists will conduct a series of personal interviews with couples and prospective adoptive parents to enable them to fully understand their capacities (C.A.I., 2009).

The content of the talks, and therefore the contents of the report, which is forwarded to the Juvenile Court, must include the individual history of each spouse, including

information on the family of origin, their educational background, their work context, and critical events in their lives; the relationship of the couple, the current organisation of their family life and the couple's attitudes towards adoption. In addition to that it has to include who had the idea first, what information they received and from whom, their knowledge of other adoptive families, the motivations for those measures, their expectations and preferences, any differences of opinion, whether they believe that they have the resources. The report also contains forecasts regarding the adaptation of the couple to the event, that is, as the couple plan to address the changes in their family's organisation, revelations regarding the condition of the adopted child, biological and ethnic differences, the reactions of extended family and community membership, etc. (Zanardi, 2009).

Furthermore, paragraph 2 of Article 34 provides that for at least one year after the child enters Italy, the social services must assist the adoptive family and the child, as is explained in the next section. With regard to the functions of the social services it is important to highlight the cooperation between those services and the accredited bodies. Even the regions have specific tasks in the field of international adoption: they provide training and information, which include training initiatives for professionals, and they can set up their own authority for international adoption (Zanardi, 2009).

Pre-adoption

Either the accredited bodies or the social services in the area organise the pre-adoption courses or evenings. Every region has different regulations regarding these courses, but generally the couples are strongly encouraged, if not required, to attend. For their attendance at these courses the couple will receive a certificate that will be part of the

documents they will submit to the judge for the declaration of eligibility (Galli and Viero, 2005).

Post-adoption

As described in the previous section, in every international adoption, once the child is in Italy, the Juvenile Court has to approve the adoption, and only then does the child effectively become an Italian citizen. From the time of the child's arrival in Italy, the social services will monitor the family for a 'set time', which is usually one year. To be more specific, for children that have been adopted from countries that ratified the Hague Convention, there is a distinction between the duties of care and support (if any) and those of supervision (mandatory). The social welfare services are required by Law 476 (1998) art. 34, paragraph 2, to provide supervision for at least one year and report to the Court any cases that may present difficulties. In particular, Article. 31, paragraph 3 Law 476/1998 states that 'the accredited body in conjunction with the local authorities will undertake activities to support the adoptive family from the time a child arrives in Italy, at the request of the adoptive family'. In cases where the sending country has not ratified the Hague Convention, the requirements of the sending country will determine the form and the length of support post-adoption. In some cases, the adoption is not fully in place (so called 'pre-adoption custody') for one year, during which time the social services will support the family and write reports for the sending country.

From what was described above, it can be seen that post-adoption support can happen at two levels: the local authority with their social services, and through the accredited body. The social services team writes the assessment of the home study. In some regions this team comprises only social workers but in others it also includes a

psychologist. The social services are managed on a regional level, and the level of economic and human investment in adoption varies from region to region, depending on the number of adoptions taking place in the area. The accredited bodies usually work on their own (they do not cooperate with the local authorities) and offer support upon payment. Depending on the size of the organisation, they usually cover support for: psychomotor education, support groups for parents, and support for integration in school. What the professionals tend to point out in relation to this matter is that there is a lack of cooperation, and that social services should be there to support and assess, rather than just to assess (Galli and Viero, 2005).

The search for origins

When it comes to the right to access information about a child's birth family, Article 24 in Law 149 (2001) governs this. This involves the right to know about the child's identity, as well as the identity of their biological parents and their origins. Before the reform, Law no. 184 laid down a precise *modus operandi* of the registrar, stating that every certificate of civil status issued for an adoptee would indicate only their new name and exclude any reference to the paternity and maternity of the child. The rationale for the rule was inspired by and used to encourage complete and effective integration between the child and the adoptive family. This principle was supported by legislation that favoured the interruption of every relationship and bond between the family of origin and the adoptee (Galli and Viero, 2005).

Historically, the right to anonymity for mothers is linked to the tradition that parents can avoid a legal relationship with their children through leaving them in 'baby hatches' or monasteries; this favoured 'protected' abandonments, guaranteeing anonymity

(Pregliasco, 2013). The 'baby hatch', otherwise known as the 'foundling wheel', is a place where mothers can leave their children (generally new-born babies) anonymously, to be taken care of by someone else. 'Baby hatches' can (still) be found in hospitals in bigger cities, or in monasteries. Traditionally, nuns in the monasteries would take care of children left in 'foundling wheels', but this system was introduced for the first time in hospitals in 1601 in Naples (Da Molin, 2001). All of these prevented mothers from suffering the legal consequences of the birth of their child, and the protection of the infant's life, which was entrusted to the care other people with the prospect of inclusion in an adoptive family. The anonymity of the natural mother goes back to Roman law, where such a provision responded to the need to avoid infanticide (Pregliasco, 2013).

The reform of the right to information for adoptees is radically innovative compared to the previous legislation, stating that, 'the adopted child shall be informed' about its adoptive history, and that 'parents shall do this in the manner and on such terms as they consider most appropriate' (Italian Parliament, 2001). The reform recognises the possibility of accessing information, primarily for the adoptive parents, as they hold the parental responsibility. However, this is only possible with the permission of the Juvenile Court, and only if there are serious reasons; a similar possibility is given to the person in charge of a hospital or a health centre, only where the conditions of necessity and urgency are satisfied, and where there is a serious danger to the health of the child. If both adoptive parents are deceased or they have become unavailable, access to data is possible regardless of any authorisation (Pregliasco, 2013).

However, the most significant aspect is certainly the recognition of the right of access, with the permission of the Juvenile Court, with the following conditions: where the

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adopted child has reached the age of twenty-five years; or the age of eighteen only in the case where there are serious reasons relating to mental and physical health. The authorisation is subject to the outcome of an inquiry during which the court ascertains the positive physical and mental receptivity of the subject, and excludes the possibility of trauma for the adoptee.

However, in cases where the adoptee was not recognised at birth by their birth mother, and even if only one of the biological parents has stated that they want to be appointed, or has given consent for an anonymous adoption, this excludes the right to access information (art.28 mod. l.184, 7th comma). This limit is justified by the right to privacy that should be guaranteed to those who have decided to undergo a critical and difficult act, as giving a child up for adoption would be (Istituto degli Innocenti, 2008).

But the foreclosure to access is not unlimited. According to art. 93: 'the certificate of birth assistance or medical records, including personal data that make the mother identifiable, who has declared a wish not to be named (...) may be issued in full to those who have an interest, in accordance with the law, one hundred years after the formation of the document'. During these one hundred years, the regulation that denies access to more information is applied. After seventy years, access to the documents held in the State's archives is permitted. From this moment, all acts in the file relating to the adoptee are openly available, with the exception of the certificate of service or medical records that enable the identification of the mother. After one hundred years, the adopted person or other qualified people that might benefit from the information can access these confidential documents, without the need for any judicial authorisation (Pregliasco, 2013; Istituto degli Innocenti, 2008).

Summary

Adoption law, policy and practice shape the ways in which adoption takes place. The objective of this chapter was to give an understanding of international adoption in Italy, through explaining who is adopting and the reasons for adoption and describing the children that are adopted. All of this should contextualise the participants in my research. The brief sociological overview of the Italian family pinpoints the main factors influencing it, such as the laws and religion. International and national law play an important role, since they regulate how adoptive families are formed, the support they receive, and the access to information that adoptees have. This background chapter contextualises my research and gives an overview of the distinctive traits of Italy with regard to the subject of adoption.

Having considered the Italian legal, policy and social context of adoption, the focus of the next chapter moves on to explore the existing literature on adoption, with a specific emphasis on the meaning of family, the communication within a family, the formation of adoptive identity and studies that look at the outcomes for adopted people. Understanding the theoretical and empirical research informing adoption studies allows for framing my research and setting out the gap it aims to fill.

Chapter 3 Adoption studies

The task of this literature review is to contextualise this study within the current knowledge and to indicate the gaps in this knowledge, and hence where this research makes a contribution. It covers the main areas of research that has examined adoption, and discussed its influence on the specific subject. It also presents the main theories that shape the understanding of adoption and its influences on the family and the adoptees. In view of the theoretical approach applied throughout this thesis, which will be further explored in the next chapter, adoption itself is seen as a social construction that varies according to the context in which it is practised. The accounts of parents, adoptees and experts are not told in a vacuum, but embedded in a specific context and influenced by various accounts given by each individual. These accounts are related to the understanding of adoption itself, as well as family, childhood, identity and openness. The structure of the literature review enables the building up of a framework of knowledge, starting with family studies. This section takes into account how, within this study, the meaning of family is constructed; it then moves on to openness in adoption, with its theoretical background and empirical research. The next section delineates the adoption identities. This is followed by the large body of research that looks at outcomes in adoption. The later sections look at the contribution of Childhood Studies, which have shaped and informed this research, demonstrating the relevance of understanding the context in which this research takes place, and illustrating the studies that convey children's perspectives on adoption.

Understandings of adoption and family are linked to each other: the way in which family is defined automatically sets boundaries around the meaning of adoption. The complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of family mean that it is articulated around a plurality of discourses in the fields of sociology, psychology, religion, morals, law and politics. Moreover it is known that the size, structure and functions of the family have mutated in different historical periods, under the pressure of economic, social and cultural rights (Donati, 1998). Defining the family is therefore a daunting task in the first place, firstly, because its meaning varies according to the discipline with respect to which you want to define it and, secondly, because the family is in constant evolution. Family can be outlined from different angles and disciplines, as described in this definition:

> Family is a powerful and pervasive word in our culture, embracing a variety of social, cultural, economic and symbolic meanings; but traditionally it is seen as the very foundation of society. It is also a deeply ambiguous and contested term in the contemporary world, the subject of continual polemics, anxiety, and political concern about the 'crisis of the family (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 9).

Family is constructed in discourses and so images and ideas of family carry particular systematised meanings within these discourses (Gunnar et al., 2000). Discourse has different meanings, depending on the theoretical and methodological method used to frame the research. For example, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2012) define discourse as 'frameworks of meaning that organize the social world and make a difference to it' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012, p. 12). Using their definition, meanings are described in two ways: either they are interpreted as 'individualised', which means that a

particular interpretation is given by a single person, or meaning can be explained considering a social group. It is 'culturally systematised' and the specific meaning is shared amongst members of group. Discourses are therefore defined as 'systematised meanings that are available in a culture as resources for sense making' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012, p. 127).

When defining family, Murdock (1949) for example saw sexual coupling and the raising of children as biological imperatives, such that societies could not continue without the existence of the 'family' – hence its universality. One possible response to this view is that while the presence of a younger generation of workers and carers may indeed be necessary for social life to continue there are historical variations in what constitutes families. By insisting on the universality of the family, a form of cultural imperialism may occur, potentially blinding researchers to the ways in which various aspects of social reproduction are embedded within, and take their meaning from, particular and variable contexts. An universal approach can provoke some tensions, as on one hand there could be the need to generalise the meaning of 'family' globally, however such universality could overlook variability and differences (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012). For this research for example it felt important to describe the local Italian context that shapes the concept of 'family'.

Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sociological theories, like functionalist theory, conflict theory and the interactionist theory about family contributed to sustained biological and social discourses, often drawing on quite contradictory frameworks of thinking. On the one hand, the family was assumed to be a universal biological unit. On the other hand, sociologists were preoccupied with the

effects of social and economic change on family structures (Chambers, 2012). Although the family was mainly viewed through a biological lens, this lens was used selectively to authenticate and legitimate an approved, monogamous, patriarchal, nuclear version sanctioned by a companionate partnership (Donati, 1998). Many early sociological ideas about marriage, the family and kinship in the late nineteenth century were influenced by the related discipline of anthropology. During this period, anthropology was preoccupied with the biological discourse of relatedness. The institution of marriage was traditionally viewed as biologically determined to address three needs: procreation and the rearing of children; the lengthy period of children's dependence on their parents; and the need for prolonged parental care and training (Chambers, 2012). Through biological relatedness, individuals recognised as kin were divided into those related by blood (consanguine) and those related by marriage (affine). Clearly, biological blood ties dominate the ordering of social relations in societies where procreation is a defining characteristic of relatedness (Chambers, 2012). However, contemporary studies of kinship, presented in the next section, acknowledge that forms of family relatedness are also socially constructed, as in cases of adoption, same-sex unions including those with children, single-parent households, step-relations and donor-assisted conceptions. Another area of concern was the effects of the industrialisation and urbanisation of family structures and the to promote a recent, nuclear model as the norm (Donati, 1998). A major issue was the decline of family, which was being compromised by encroaching individualism and privatisation. The ideal companionate marriage was promoted to strengthen modern conjugal relationships in light of a decline in the traditional community. Based on positive intimate relationships between partners, it acted as proof that the 'modern marriage' was becoming more egalitarian. By narrowly defining a small, mobile nuclear family as

universal, functionalism treated all other family types as deviations. The fact that the nuclear family was neither universal nor permanent was repeatedly confirmed by statistical evidence in western societies. Attitudes changed drastically in a short time between the middle and the end of the twentieth century (Donati and Di Nicola, 2002). Yet certain values and practices persist. One of the major distinctions between traditional and more recent approaches to the family is the shift away from the idea of 'the family' as a social institution governed by rigid moral conventions to an idea of family and wider personal life as diverse sets of practices (Morgan, 1996).

Adoptive Kinship

Anthropologists and sociologists have studied kinship for decades. However, in recent years, new kinship studies have challenged the traditional perspectives on kinship. The studies that have emerged from gay and lesbian studies have investigated the changing nature of the family, highlighting the processes and practices of forming families (Logan, 2013). The demographics of families have changed, leading to diverse family structures. These transformations lead to a growing importance of the distinction between biological and social kinship and parenting.

This new kinship study is recognising the diversity and fluidity of family relationships, and it is focusing on the routes to become a family, over the actual family structure. (Logan, 2013). Weston's (1997) work on lesbian, gay men, and families shows the unstable nature of biological connections, and based on that she describes the forms of families that she observed as 'chosen'. Modell affirms:

> Opening adoption weakens the boundaries of family, defies conceptualization of
> kinship, and undermines customary regulations of placement in ways that have

no precedent in American history. In short, open adoption throws a gauntlet at the consanguine core of kinship that until now adoptive relationships scrupulously, vividly, and persuasively represented (Modell, 2001, p. 247).

Although biology is not the only basis of kinship, it maintains a powerful impact on what is thought forms kin. The importance that is given to the 'blood' ties can be explained through examples, like the DNA tests to prove biological parentage; the search of adoptees for their biological parents; and the interests in the genealogical tree and family history. Contact after adoption raises questions about the relationships constructed by adoption. The debates around openness have created a dichotomy within the adoption community: only a few challenge the need for openness about children's pre-adoption history but the debate on the form of continuing contact after an adoption has taken place is more lively and contested (Smith and Logan, 2004). March and Miall (2000) state that because of the cultural bias towards the blood ties as way of forming family, adoption is seen as second best to the biologically related nuclear family. This bias could mean that adoptive parents and children are stigmatised and their experiences pathologised. This is evidenced by the fact that adoptive families are more likely to be considered in psychological and child welfare literature than in literature on family and kinship (March and Miall, 2000).

Through their research, Jones and Hackett (2011) showed how adoptive families work at constructing family life. They established that adoptive parents continuously face challenges finding their way of 'doing' adoptive family life that recognises both, biological ties and legal kinship. In their analysis they identified three tasks that adoptive parents deal with: developing and maintaining family relationships between

the adopters and adoptees where none previously existed, finding a place for birth relatives within an adoptive kinship model, and developing a positive identity as a non-conventional family. With these tasks, they also suggest that 'openness' could be part of the 'family practices'. In addition they conclude that biological and adoptive kinship do not necessarily have to be experienced in one fixed way, but they can be real and enduring, fictive and fragile. Building on that Jones (2013) concludes that all forms of kinship can be considered fictive, as they are made and remade over time, they can last as well as be lost.

Similarly, Carsten (2004) questioned the dichotomy of 'fictive' versus 'real', and suggested that the importance of biological connections is fictive. Based on her research conducted with adult adoptees that had been reunited with their birth mothers, it emerged that 'reunions expose a fiction at the heart of biological relatedness, that biology encapsulates the relation' (Carsten, 2000, p. 700).

Doing and displaying families

The previous section shows the need to develop concepts that are sensitive enough to identify and explain the complexities and diversity of family life. From the 1990s, new ways of thinking have been advanced in studies of families, relationships and kinship. Morgan's (2011) practices approach is based on the recognition of a mismatch between the ideological notion of the nuclear family and the variety of ways in which real people conduct their family lives. In his view, the family should be defined by its customs and practices rather than exclusively by co-residence or even simply by kinship and marriage. Morgan explains that family members are 'social actors' who engage in actions and activities that comprise the routines of doing family life. Morgan's approach

to the definition of family is an alternative approach to that which stresses universalism. Family is seen less as a noun and more as an adjective or possibly a verb. He refers to family in terms of 'family practices', which are used to explain a sense of interplay between the perspectives of the social actor, the individual whose actions are being described and accounted for, and the perspectives of the observer; a sense of the active rather than the passive or static; a focus on everyday life; a sense of fluidity (Morgan, 1996). From Morgan's perspectives, 'family' is a facet of social life, not a social institution; it 'represents a quality rather than a thing' (Morgan, 1996, p. 186).

Finch (2007) introduced the concept of 'displaying families', explicitly linking it to Morgan's influential idea of family practices in which the activities of families – the doing of family life – are prioritised as a research focus over the construction of what a family is – who 'counts' as family. However, she develops her argument further, stating that this idea needs to be explained because 'families need to be displayed as well as 'done' (Finch, 2007, p. 67). She defines this display as the process by which 'individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions constitute "doing family things" and thereby confirm that these relationships are "family relationships"' (Finch, 2007, p. 67).

Finch's concept is overtly concerned with interactions, because family practices take place in a social context. Family practices associated with family life cannot just be carried out; they also need to be recognised as such. Relevance is given to the transmission of meanings through social interactions and the acknowledgment of this by significant others (Finch, 2007, p. 77). This shifts the attention to the audience, the 'relevant others' (Finch, 2007, p. 77) and to whom the displaying of the family is aimed at. Finch suggests that some of these reflections on the role of those outside the

immediate network of family relationships combine observing display and experiencing display. However, other authors (Seymour and Walsh, 2010) described the potential of the audience, as external individuals, as direct participants in the creation of 'displaying families'.

In her work, Finch (2007) suggested the use of 'tools' for display, such as giving gifts, or showing photographs. However, the 'tool' that she defined in a more detailed way is the use of narrative. Narrative is defined as a way to formulate and communicate understandings of the lived social world (Roberts, 2002; Finch, 2007). Weeks et al. (2001) also underline the use of narrative: 'through narratives individuals give meaning to their lives, and affirm their identities and present relationships as viable and valid' (Weeks et al., 2001, p. 11).

In the work of Finch and Mason (2000), the authors make a clear connection between 'displaying families' and the use of narratives. This tool is seen as stories that are told to the family and others, 'which enable them to be understood and situated as part of an accepted repertoire of what "family" means' (Finch and Mason, 2000, p. 165). The authors highlight the use of narrative in such a way that it is compatible with this discussion of displaying families. Narratives are stories through 'which people attempt to connect their own experiences, and their understanding of those experiences, to a more generalized pattern of social meanings about kinship' (Finch and Mason, 2000, p. 165).

The family and the public sphere

The family is considered simultaneously both as a 'group', a private place, the environment in which it is possible to meet the intimate needs of people, and as an

'institution', a public place, a reality that is in continuous dialogue with company (Donati and Di Nicola, 2002). Some discourses of family are particularly powerful: legal discourses, and those tied to institutions and professional practices in the welfare sector are examples. Relevant to the field of adoption is Edwards' (1999) analysis of family discourse: her focus is on the legal and biological view of family, together with the sociological ties that build family. The legal discourse dominates because it is supported by the power of law and it is linked to a prominent branch of child-welfare science. In fact, the author states: 'the everyday discourse was eclipsed by the legal one, which looks at biological parenthood and refers to a dyadic relationship between a parent and a child' (in Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2012, p. 127). However, the everyday discourse is differentiated from the legal one as it invokes a definition of family as a social unit to which parents, step-parents and children alike all belong.

Edwards' (1999) definition of 'familiarisation' aims to highlight how society governs its citizens through the construction of family relationships and meanings. This interpretation of familiarisation is considered within a broader system of governance. In Edwards' conceptualisation of family there is a linkage between these discourses of family that help to shape people's own desires against a background of expertise and institutionalised power.

Using the concept of 'family practices' to explain the dynamics following divorce highlights the role of legal and public institutions within families. As Smart and Neale (1999) describe, after a divorce former partners find themselves engaged in the shared parenting of their children in a new kind of 'divorced parenting' partnership, which calls for them to be 'separate yet connected' (1999, p. 67). The authors emphasise how

people practise family life in these circumstances, involving different parents and different groupings of children. They suggest that for people involved in co-parenting, the need to demonstrate that one is engaged in 'good parenting' is paramount. The probability that a person will be a 'good parent' can influence legal conclusions during a divorce. 'Good parenting' also has ongoing legal and moral importance. Thus, the public performance of good parenting practice has profound consequences in a legal context.

Adoptive parenting

One important piece of research on differentiating the different parenting styles and the different generations of adoptive parents is Kirk's (1964) study, which discusses the concept of the rejection or acknowledgment of differences in relation to biological versus adoptive family life. Kirk emphasises that in raising their children, adoptive parents are challenged with unique difficulties that are not experienced by biological parents. He describes these challenges as 'role handicaps' and highlights that they often create stress for adoptive parents. After conducting research with adoptive parents, Kirk observed two coping patterns with regard to how parents deal with the stress of adoption: rejection of difference, or acknowledgement of difference. Parents that demonstrate the coping pattern 'rejection of difference' minimise the differences in their adoptive family life and try to act as a biological family. Accordingly, these parents avoid discussions about the past and the reasons why the child has been adopted. Kirk identified that in these families there will be less empathy towards the birth families and fewer conversations on this topic. For parents taking the other approach, Kirk noted that there is a recognition of their different way of forming the family and the children's dual connection to both their adoptive and birth parents; there is also more empathy

towards the latter. The parents that present this pattern show more understanding of their children's feelings about their past and their origins. Kirk noted that children raised in families that present the acknowledgment of different pattern show better adjustment to adoption. He noticed that the 'rejection of difference' approach can be sustainable in the early years, but that parents reported challenges when children reached school-age and adolescence, as then they question their origins, background and feeling of loss, and therefore it becomes harder to maintain this attitude.

Based on research conducted with adoptive parents, Rosnati and Bramanti defined a so-called 'adoptive pact' (1998). The pact is: 'a curious and unique amalgam of needs, expectations, and the personal histories of all those who enter into the contract, that is, the child, the parents, and the parents' own families of origin' (Rosnati, 2005, p. 192). The pact includes the different ways in which the different generations face the issues of differences and belonging. On this matter, Brodzinsky (2005) developed Kirk's categories and definitions, but maintained that families use different coping strategies to face these issues. In his words, the various approaches move on a continuum, with one extreme being the rejection of differences, and 'insistence' being at the other end. At one end, families deny the differences, and at the other end families show a tendency to blame the child's adoptive origins for all of the difficulties that sooner or later may appear. Rosnati adds that, 'the pact that is drawn up between the two generations – parents and children – depends on the way in which the issues of difference is treated' (2005, p. 192).

In her work, she describes four ways of establishing the pact:

1) Negate differences: expulsion by both parents and child of the adoption story, as this was experienced as painful and difficult to manage. In their daily routine there is no reference to adoption, and the differences are negated.

2) Assimilation pact: the adoption is acknowledged but not discussed. Similarly to the previous pact, there is an effort to simulate a biological family, and adoption is considered like birth. Although the differences are not denied, they are juxtaposed to the family history and only superficially integrated into it.

3) The pact of recognition and appreciation of differences: adoption is not only integrated into the family history, but is also seen as bringing richness to the family. The parents feel fully legitimate, and acknowledge that they are different from the birth. This type of family feels free to retell their adoption story, including positive or negative feelings about it.

4) Impossible pact: the parents have such a distant position that it is impossible to establish a pact between them and the children. Their expectations were so different from the reality that the child is genuinely experienced as a stranger and their difficulties are blamed on the child's origins.

Following Rosnati's work (2005; Rosnati et al., 2005), the adoptive pact can be seen as a 'relational modality' influenced by the way in which belonging and differences are handled within the family. The chances that the child has to feel settled in the family depend upon the family's acknowledgement of their different origins. The real challenge emerging from her work is that of integrating aspects of similarity and belonging with the differences. The way to avoid this challenge is to eliminate either the similarities or the differences, in particular when the parent-child relationship is suffering due to increased tension (Rosnati, 2005; Rosnati et al., 2005).

Similarly to what Rosnati described with the 'adoptive pact', a study in the Nordic countries (Hoksbergen and Laak, 2005) defined the different adoptive parents' generations. In their description, the authors highlight how the social, political and economic context influences each different generation. They describe four different waves of adoption generations. Firstly, there is the traditional –closed generation (adoptions before the 1970s) in which the adoptive parents had little or no guidance in creating their roles. They were guided by normative values regarding families, and simulated the biological family. The reasons for adopting were mainly due to infertility, a response to the emotionally painful reality of childlessness. The characteristics of the adoptive couples in this group were rather homogeneous. They were typically married, infertile and Caucasian, between the age of 30 and 45, healthy and free of disabilities, and financially stable. The second generation (from the 1970s until 1982) presents an open and idealistic generation, featuring a decreased number of domestic adoptions, influenced by the widespread use of contraceptives and the acceptance of single parenthood. As a consequence of that, adoption from outside the country started to rise. The placements arranged also featured inter-ethnic matches, which were influenced by civil rights, a higher tolerance for diversity and openness towards racial differences. The approach was optimistic, and these parents were described as having high expectations. Often they developed unrealistic expectations about their abilities as parents and their daily life experiences reflected a different reality. As a consequence of that, adoption agencies started to respond and the awareness of potential vulnerabilities of adoptees emerged and grew over time. The third generation, the materialistic-realistic one (between 1982 and 1992), coincided with an increase in academic research on the psychological adjustment of adoptees, and with this a more realistic approach being

taken to adoption by future parents. Agencies started to invest more time in preparing couples for the potential risks that adoption could bring, although this was not as formalised as it is nowadays. In 1993, this concluded with the establishment of international guidelines on adoption and the protection of the child (HCCP). In the authors' description, the current generation (since 1993), is characterised by a rise in the number of international adoptions, and influenced by the improved economic conditions of the prospective couples, the individualistic approach whereby having a child is considered a 'right', and rising levels of infertility. Families in this generation are looking to fulfil their desire to become parents, and the research on adoption influences their will to adopt younger children as they believe that a younger healthy child will lead to a positive adoption experience (Hoksbergen and Laak, 2005).

Openness and communication in adoption

The core focus of this research is on communication within the family about the child's past, and in adoption studies this specific aspect of communication is also known as openness. Openness, however, is a broad concept that can be applied to a variety of fields, and it generally refers to an 'accommodating attitude or opinion, as in receptivity to new ideas, behaviours, cultures, peoples, environments, experiences, etc., different from the familiar, conventional, traditional, or one's own' (Hawkins et al., 1995, p. 450). In adoption, it refers to the opportunities that children are given to openly discuss their feelings, and mature their sense of belonging and identity. Also, openness looks at the extent of children's knowledge about who they are, and the parents' level of comfort with this (Neil, 2012). The way in which communication and openness are constructed and understood within this specific context influences the dialogue within the adoptive family, and since the story about oneself is formed largely in the context of the adoptive

family, it is important to explore how this is made possible and the extent to which young people feel comfortable discussing their adoption.

Definition of openness

Openness is a concept that stands in opposition to the practice of secrecy that dominated adoption in the twentieth century. The changing social attitudes towards sex outside of marriage, research evidence on the potential harm of closed adoption or secrecy, and pressure from interest groups of adoptees and birth parents have made the development of openness in adoption possible (Rosnati, 2010).

Kirk, in his work of 1964, was the first author to discuss the idea of openness in adoption. He was interested in the relationship between professionals' advice to tell adopted children that they are adopted and the adoptive parents' coping strategies. He conceptualised these coping strategies as a 'rejection of difference' or an 'acknowledgement of difference'. This was discussed in the section on adoptive parenting. In order to encourage open communication and deal with confusion about belonging and identity, Kirk recommended that adoptive parents directly address their adopted children's misunderstandings about their adoptive status; ensure the adopted children feel able to deal with questions about adoption; and create rituals such as adoption anniversary celebrations to confirm the children's membership of the adoptive family. In order to promote empathy with birth parents, Kirk also promoted the value of practices such as adopters meeting the child's birth mother, a letter from the birth mother to the adopted child explaining the circumstances of the adoption, and annual updates on the child being provided to the adoption agency by the adopters so that these could be accessed by the birth mother (Kirk, 1964). In the adoption literature, the

concept of openness is often used together with, or instead of, terms like 'open adoption', 'direct contact' and, 'links'. Triseliotis et al. (1997) gave a useful definition of openness:

> It is an umbrella term used to cover a variety of patterns and scenarios. Patterns of openness range from the most minimal sharing of information to continued visits between birth and adoptive families. Not only are there possibilities for infinite variations along this continuum, but the patterns may change during the life of the adoption as the needs and wishes of two families and the life change (Triseliotis et al., 1997, p. 79).

This definition combines two aspects of openness, one that deals with shared information and another that looks at the contact with the birth family. In an attempt to apply openness for the purposes of empirical research, McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) described three types of adoption openness: confidential adoption, which is characterised by a complete lack of information, mediated adoption, where the information is non-identifying and it is administered through an agent, and disclosed adoption where the birth family and the adoptive family have each other's contact details and can arrange meetings without the intervention of the adoption agency. Grotevant, Perry and McRoy (2005) have described openness in terms of a continuum and there has been a recognition that patterns of contact and information exchange between adoptive and birth families may change over time. The representation of the concept of openness on a continuum also reflects the influence of theories of child development. It is argued that the degree of openness changes according to the stages of the child's development (Brodzinsky et al., 1984).

As has been shown, a number of different authors have discussed the idea of openness in adoption (McRoy and Grotevant, 1998; Kohler et al., 2002; Brodzinsky, 2005; Grotevant et al., 2008). Through their writing, and specifically through Brodzinsky's (2005) work, two separate concepts have arisen: structural openness and communicative openness. *Structural openness* means examining the structural arrangements between the adoptive and the birth family. This involves the mutual sharing of identifying information and some degree of contact between the parties, which may or may not involve the child. Another way to look at openness is in terms of *communicative openness*, which Brodzinsky defines as:

> General attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioural inclinations that people have in relation to adoption. It includes among other things, a willingness of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share the meaning with others, to explore adoption-related issues in context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families, and perhaps to facilitate contact between these two family systems in one form or another (2005, p. 149).

In a study examining communicative openness in domestic adoption in the UK, Jones and Hackett (2008) observed the challenges faced by adoptive parents, and their approaches to managing them. Drawing on adoptive parents' narratives, they reconsidered the definition of communicative openness, and suggested that:

It is both a lifelong issue and an evolving challenge facing adoptive family members. The value of adoption talk is typically presented in the literature in terms of the rights and the well-being of the child. While it can play an important role in shaping the adopted child's identity and helping the child to make sense of his or her past, present and future, this study suggests that it can also have a much wider role in developing the identity of all adoptive family members and forming a shared sense of family values. It is important, therefore, that adoptive families have adequate information and support made available to them to allow them to be the families they aspire to be (2008, p. 177).

Drawing on the same study, but in another publication, Jones and Hackett (2011) challenge the three different levels of interaction described by Brodzinsky, which they argue look only at the system within the family, and suggest that there needs to be a further level that allows the exploration of the adoption, which focuses specifically on the interactions between the adoptive family members and the wider community.

For the purpose of this thesis, the concept of openness is understood as 'communicative openness', according to Brodzinsky's definition, including the further definition developed by Jones and Hackett (2008; 2011). Since structural openness is not even an option for the Italian law on international adoption, it will not be considered in this context.

Rating communicative openness

In the work of Brodzinsky (2005), openness is seen as the adoption communication process that happens on three different levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal and a

systematic process or an interfamilial level. The first level represents the self-exploration of thoughts and feelings on adoption. For the adopted child this process starts when they are told about their adoption status. For the adoptive parents it starts when they are considering adoption, and for birth parents this process starts when they are contemplating adoption as a solution. The exploration of these feelings is a lifelong process for all three parties in the adoption triad. The second level of the process is interpersonal, and represents the exploration of adoption-related issues among the members of the family; it is described as an 'emotionally attuned dialogue between adoptive parents and their children' (Brodzinsky, 2005, p. 149). The third level of the process is interfamilial. This level relates to the adoption issues between the adoptive and birth parents. As already stated above, the third level of the adoption communication process would not fit in the Italian system for international adoption. This adoptive communicative theory places its focus not only on the mutual sharing of adoption information, but also on the expression and support of adoption-related emotions.

Taking Brodzinsky's definition as a starting point, and looking at the scale developed by his team (Neil, 2009), communicative openness is broken down into five spheres, which will be explained below. These spheres consider parents' perspectives on communicative openness, and are applied in a context in which it is possible to have contact with the birth family.

1) Communication with the adopted child about adoption:

-   Willingness to talk about adoption issues

-   Promotion of an open climate

-   Emotionally attuning to the child and his feelings

2) Comfort with, and promotion of, a dual connection:

- Comfort with the reality that the child is connected with another family

- Steps taken to support the child's connection to the birth family

3) Empathy for the adopted child:

- The extent to which the parent is able to deal with the child's feelings about being adopted (loss, rejection, love, loyalty, fear, identity)

4) Empathy for the birth family:

- Adoptive parents' capacity to take the perspective of the birth relatives

5) Communication with the birth family:

- How contact with the birth family is managed

(Neil, 2009, p. 12).

Developing Brodzinsky's work, Neil (2009; 2012) described five key elements of communicative openness. These include communication with the adopted child about adoption; comfort with, and promotion of, a dual connection; empathy for the adopted child; willingness to communicate with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family. As can be seen from Neil's elements, the concept of parental empathy, which was first highlighted by Kirk (1964), continues to be closely linked with the concept of openness in the literature, either in relation to adopters' empathy for birth parents (Neil, 2000) or adopters' empathy for their adopted children (Neil 2009). As already stated, Brodzinsky (2005) also referred to the importance of emotional attunement between the adoptive parent and adopted child in order to achieve communicative openness. Neil (2003), in her work on the relationship between empathy and direct contact, identified four key aspects of empathy shown by adoptive parents towards birth parents. These key aspects should help to understand the meaning of 'empathy' itself:

1. The recognition by adopters of issues of loss for birth relatives and an appreciation of birth relatives' need for information about the child.

2. Adopters' understanding of the current and past difficulties and disadvantages faced by the birth relatives.

3. An awareness of the contribution that these difficulties and disadvantages may have made to inadequate care of the child and/or the decision to relinquish the child.

4. A realistic but not overly sympathetic understanding of the past, current and potential future difficulties of the birth relative.

Neil (2003) also made a distinction between comprehensive and moderate empathy. The former describes the adopters' awareness of their adopted children's need, both for information about their birth family and to understand the reasons why they were adopted. The latter was applied to adopters who showed empathy in one of these areas, but not both.

Research on openness

Extensive research on openness in domestic adoption has emphasised the importance of this practice. Both parents and children can influence conversations within the family about adoption, and the articulation of this influence changes over time (Wrobel et al., 2003). According to Noller (1995), communication helps to regulate the emotional distance between family members during transition periods and especially during a young person's transition to adolescence. Communication in the family should ideally provide an environment in which adolescents can learn appropriate social skills that will enable them to deal with interpersonal situations effectively and to find constructive solutions to their problems. Openness has been promoted as an issue of human rights

and individual wellbeing (McRoy and Grotevant, 1998). In fact, according to the Hague Convention on the Protection of the Child (HCCH, 1993), an adopted child shall be ensured access to information concerning the identity of his/her parents, but only to the extent that the national law permits it. Similarly, Wydra et al. (2012) stated that communication about an adopted child's birth family and the sharing of adoption-related information across their life span has a positive impact on adoptees.

In addition, parental openness about adoption has been linked to children demonstrating better emotional and behavioural development (Brodzinsky, 2006) and enhanced self-esteem (Hawkins et al., 2008), children's ease in talking about adoption (Freeark et al., 2008; Freeark and Rosenblum, 2010) and narrative identity development in adopted young people (Von Korff and Grotevant, 2011).Neil (2012) suggests that in the process of the formation of identity it is understandable that children ask for information about their birth family. The child needs this background information in order to be able to deal with their status as an adopted child in 'public'. The results of her research suggest that it is necessary to have information on the child's past, and that this information should be constantly updated. In the light of her research, it emerges that parents are considered as the gatekeepers of children's understanding of their adoption and they are responsible for their feelings about it.

Similarly, Wrobel and Ayers-Lopez (1996) state that more information about a child's own adoption yields a higher level of understanding of their adoption and consequently a better adjustment to their experience of adoption. One study in particular Kranstuber and Kellas, (2011) aimed to analyse the topics emerging from adoption narratives and how the story content impacts on adoptees' self-image. One of the topics that emerged was openness and, as analysed by the authors, it was found that openness influences

adoptees' perception and acceptance of their status as adopted children. Neil's research on post –adoption contact (2009) confirmed the result that there are no significant differences in CBCL (Child Behaviour Checklist) scores between children having face-to-face contact and those having letter contact, with their birth families. The different types of contact influenced the way in which adoptive parents related to their children about their status: adoptive parents whose children were having face-to-face contact were more communicative about adoption than parents whose children were having letterbox contact. The revisited book on the study, 'The adoption triangle' (Triseliotis et al., 2005), showed that adopted people who search for their origins are not looking for a new family, but for news about the well-being of their birth relatives, information about their background and the circumstances of their adoption and answers to questions about their identity. A significant finding of the study conducted by Tresoliotis et al. (2005) was the importance of preparing the life-story work, which takes the shape of a book that most children in the UK now take with them to their adoptive homes. These books contain information on the child's birth, where they lived before the adoption and who was looking after them. They contain photographs, eco-maps and sometimes a video of the birth family.

Research has documented that healthy parent-child communication patterns are vital for children's long-term adjustment (Lanz et al., 1999; Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005). Furthermore, adoption studies illustrate the higher well-being of adoptive families who engage in active, on-going, sensitive communication concerning adoption (Berge et al., 2006; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Communicative openness suggests that adoption-related communication processes occur and change across a family's life-span (Brodzinsky et al., 1981; Jones and Hackett, 2008; Neil, 2012). Brodzinsky (2006)

conducted a study looking at the links between openness and the developmental advantage of children. To measure and assess these aspects, children were asked to complete self-report questionnaires: higher reported levels of communication in the family were linked to lower levels of child behaviour problems (measured through the Child Behaviour Checklist). The outcome shows that structurally open placements enable better communication. However, this relationship was not confirmed by Neil's study (2009). The methodology applied by Neil was different, as in Brodzisky's study the children were interviewed directly whereas Neil looked at the parents' perspectives instead. These differences raise interesting issues, since it might mean that the dissimilarities between the perspectives could help to work on openness, or the 'match' between parents and children can suggest that there are different approaches to openness. By 'match' it is meant for example, a curious child that has open parents that respond to his needs; or a child that grieves for their birth parents and has adoptive parents that are trying to understand or explain what motivated the adoption. Interestingly Neil affirms that 'children's views can be influenced by parents, especially when children are placed at a young age, and parents' views can be shaped by children, especially when placed at older ages and with strong views on adoption' (2009, p. 19).

In their study on parent-adolescent communication, which compared foster, inter-country and biological Italian families Rosnati, Iafrate and Scabini (2007) looked at the communication patterns between parents and adolescents. They did this through a self-report questionnaire, and included the 'parent-adolescent communication scale' by Barnes and Olson (1985). In their study, they concluded that within foster families difficulties are experienced on both sides: from the parents and the adolescents. It also emerged that communication within inter-country adoptive families was of a higher quality than in biological families.

The adoption stories

Apart from the research presented in the previous section, what forms can openness take in families? A small but consistent body of literature has explored the ways in which adoptive parents initiate, share and maintain conversations about adoption. Storytelling is integral to the human experience (Fisher, 1987). Through narrative, individuals begin to make sense of their lived experiences (Bergen and Braithwaite, 2009). Adoptive parents shape the narrative-building process that is so important to their children's adjustment, identity and sense of belonging (Wrobel et al., 2003). In international adoption, disclosure of the identity of a child's birth parents is rare and confidential adoption is the most common; yet internationally, adoptive parents make myriad choices about how extensively they discuss adoption stories or share whatever information they have about a child's birth parents or early caregivers with their child. Differences in physical appearance in transracial adoption provide a frequent reminder of the absence of a biological connection, which can be either acknowledged or avoided. Styles of adoption communication in internationally adoptive families may be a significant protective factor in adoption outcomes (Juffer and van Ijzendorn, 2005). Creating a story for families with international adoptees might pose a challenge, because the details of the child's history are often unknown by the parents (Grotevant et al., 2000) and some information might be difficult to discuss.

Commonly shared within families are creation stories or stories that describe how the family came to be (Galvin, 2003). Creation stories are told to produce shared family histories and 'to help members to build coherent personal identities' (Galvin, 2003, p. 241). Galvin asserts that researchers have paid minimal attention to the communicative

processes involved in creating and maintaining internationally adoptive families. Feast and Howe (2003) argue that having information about their history helps adopted children to begin the journey of identity formation and 'being open and frank provides opportunities for the child to acquire information and gain confidence in asking questions about origins' (2003, p. 129). Adopted children whose parents openly discuss their adoption more often rate their experience as positive. Parents are no longer faced with the question of 'whether' they should tell their children that they are adopted; instead the question becomes 'how' they construct the adoption-related talk (Feast and Howe, 2003; Galvin, 2003; Wrobel et al., 2003).

Research on adoption stories shows some of the common themes that emerge (Krusiewicz and Wood, 2001). For example, Jones and Hackett (2008) discuss the challenges experienced by adoptive parents as they prepare the story, and Freeark et al. (2008) highlight the sensitivity related to the process of storytelling.

Wrobel et al. (2003) presented the Family Adoption Communication model (FAC), which illustrates the 'evolving process' of adoption-related talk. This model shows that families typically begin with the original adoption story, then move onto the child questioning the process, and end with the adopted child engaging in direct information gathering.

This model (Wrobel et al., 2003) explains that the adoption story typically contains information regarding the child's birth parents and the circumstances surrounding the adoption, and it is told during the child's infancy or preschool years to ensure that the

adoption revelation comes from the parents rather than from other sources, and sets the tone for future adoption-related talk.

At the moment when parents tell their adoption story, they must decide to share or withhold known or newly acquired information. In fact, some parents may choose to share all of the available information, share some information or withhold all of the information (Wrobel et al., 2003). Parents that adopt internationally often lack information and details, and as a result they are faced with having to make choices about how they construct their story (Freeark et al., 2008). Understanding the intricacies of storytelling is imperative because this communicative process can constitute the relationships (Kellas and Trees, 2006) and personal identities (Tracy, 2002).

In the work by Harrigan (2010), it appears that the families told interactive stories and used 'objects' to help in sharing those stories. The stories the mothers told their children were evolving stories, as they were changing and developing over time. The stories helped to construct a positive experience of adoption; they built familiarity with the adoption experience. It helps to build a complete story and avoid the use of fantasy in filling the gaps. Adoptive parents are encouraged to realise that telling a child about their adoption is not a one-time only event, but an on-going process (Grotevant et al., 1999). Telling is only the first part of the process; the continuous part is talking with the child over time to make sense of what happened and why (Watkins and Fisher, 1993).

From Krusiewicz and Wood's (2001) study, it emerges that the stories report contradictory feelings about adoption. The adoptive parents feel lucky, but they acknowledge the difficulty that the birth parents may face. The parents they interviewed

referred to destiny, saying that the children were 'meant' to be with them, and linked to that they felt an immediate and strong connection to their children. Another theme that emerged was the legitimacy of their adoptive families.

Even in Jones and Hackett's (2008) research on the making of the adoptive family, it is reported that the adoption talk presents challenges, because it touches upon sensitive topics; it has to be positive yet honest; and it has to respond to children's needs. In addition to that, stories are created in a child-friendly way and those stories could have been used as openings to talk about adoption.

Similarly, in the study by Pryor et al.(2011), the interviewed families reported positive experiences of adoption, and it emerged that they spoke about 'loss and choice', the process of adoption in terms of the emotional side as well as the logical aspect, the history and heritage of the adoptive child and the difficulty in gathering this information, the process of becoming a family, and the desire to accentuate the positives of the adoption experience for their adopted children.

Their conclusion is that it was possible to draw out some information about what the adoption stories include, but mostly they learned what adoption parents tell themselves. Their stories affirm their families and validate adoption as a legitimate way to form a family. This underscores Grotevant et al.'s (1999) finding that parents tell their stories to legitimate their family.

Secrecy

Although the main subject covered in this literature is 'openness', it is necessary to discuss the previous prevailing tradition. Secrecy is an approach whereby some

information is kept secret from the adoptees, and where there is complete interruption of the contact with the birth family. This approach to adoption was given theoretical legitimacy through Bowlby's (1951) work on maternal deprivation, in which he stated that children need to have continuous attachment to their mother and that this should not be disturbed or interrupted. For adoption this research meant that on-going contact with the birth family would jeopardise the placement, in fact he stated that secrecy 'is essential if the adoption is not to be jeopardised' (1951, p. 106). The 'clean break' from the birth family was legally required and at the time this was justified by developmental psychology. Nevertheless, Bowlby also noted that children needed to grow up with an awareness of their adoptive status, and be told of this as soon as possible: 'sooner or later the truth will be known' (1951, p. 106). At the time of his research, which mainly focused on the influences that maternal relationship has on the children's development, he saw residential nursery for infants and toddlers as harmful, due to the lack of consistent care figures. Similarly, he emphasised the importance of the parental figures in the group home living, as opposed to living in large institutions, where they are divided by gender, with lack of consistent care. The relevance of Bowlby's study is mentioned and acknowledged for its importance in Triseliotis et al.'s (1997) study, in relation to the 'clean break' approach to adoption.

Similarly, in Goldstein et al.'s (1973) work, the authors concluded that children would not be able to form attachments to their adoptive parents if they continued to have contact with their birth relatives. They stated that children need an 'unbroken continuity of affectionate and stimulating relationships with an adult' (Goldstein et al., 1973, p. 6) and that 'only a child who has at least one person whom he can love, and who feels loved, valued, and wanted by that person, will develop a healthy self-esteem' (Goldstein

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et al., 1973, p. 20). The authors stated that it was fundamental for the child's development and health, to let develop the bond between the mother and the child, and that it should not be interrupted by the contact with the birth family.

The theories developed by Goldstein et al. (1973, 1986) were based on their clinical observations and they viewed their work as extremely child-oriented. They highlighted the need to minimise the delay when placing children, however the importance of maintaining links with the birth family, and potential help for adopted children to maintain and develop their adoptive identity were not considered. Although children's needs were considered paramount in this work, it also legitimised secrecy and the 'clean break' model of adoption, by stating that children could not develop a sense of permanence in their adoptive families if they continued to have links with their past, because they would not be able to develop secure attachments to their adoptive parents.

Search and reunions

The purpose of this research was to explore how adoptees experience communication about their past. It did not aim to investigate whether adoptees look for their birth families or whether they want to visit their country of origin. However it is necessary to mention the body of literature on this subject, as it provides insights into, and an understanding of, the psychological processes of identity development, attachment issues and loss and grief. The process of searching for and being reunited with their birth relatives can answer crucial questions for adopted people such as, 'who am I?' and 'why was I adopted?' (Howe and Feast, 2000). Therefore this has the potential to help tackle issues of identity, loss and attachment. From the perspective of an adoptee, adoptive families are not families of choice for them, because others make this decision.

Conversely as adults, adoptees have some choices, which depend upon the context in which they live, but these choices are about how much the birth family and adoptive family is present in their life.

The reasons why adopted people search for their birth families have been documented over time. Early studies on search and reunion explained searching behaviour as a pathological identity crisis (Triseliotis, 1973), whereas later studies (Walby and Symons, 1990; Carsten, 2000; Howe and Feast, 2000) explain that searching is a normal part of understanding one's self and one's background in order for adopted people to construct a narrative that makes sense of their adoptive status. Search and reunion is also understood under the concept of 'rights', with movements, especially in the USA, campaigning for the right for birth records to be unsealed (Carp, 2009). The study by Howe and Feast (2000) puts forward the idea that a person's evaluation of their adoption experience within the adoptive family is important in deciding whether or not to search for their birth family members.

Research on this subject is helpful in understanding why and how adult adoptees look for their birth relatives. It demonstrates that when information (if available) on the past is not shared, adult adoptees can decide to look for it. What influences the length of the relationship after the reunion is less clear (Carsten, 2000; Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis et al., 2005), as a complex interplay of factors is present, including the physical, psychological and social characteristics of the adopted person, both families, the feelings of connection and the commitment that both have to maintaining the relationship.

Adoptive identity

For the purpose of this research it is essential to explore and understand the social construction of identity, given the complexities of the children's journeys. The influence that international adoption has on the formation of a child's identity is undeniable. First, adoption and the related issues of loss and pain become part of the child's history. Second, the change in cultural context shapes the cultural identity of the child (Hoopes, 1990).

Identity has been defined from different perspectives and disciplines. One definition is borrowed from cultural studies. Stuart Hall defines (1996, p. 5) identity as: 'the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to "interpellate", speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions, which discursive practices construct for us'. Hall (1992) defines identity as an on-going process, rather than an established event. The term identification is more suitable to describe this process, because it represents the formation of identity: 'identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a lack of wholeness which is filled from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by others'(Hall, 1996, p. 15).

Taking into account Hall's definition of identity as an on-going process, formed within representation, it is necessary to focus on the definition of 'cultural identity'. In 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (1992), two ways of understanding this concept are presented. The first sees 'cultural identity' as a shared culture, 'a sort of collective one

true self', which gives a stable frame of reference. It refers to a culture where historical experiences are, for example, something that is shared. The second aspect of cultural identity refers to the critical points of fracture among people sharing the common culture mentioned in the first point. Cultural identity should be understood as a shared past, but it should also rely on the future. Hence, 'it is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. [...] Like everything that is historical, it undergoes constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, it is subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power' (Hall, 1990, p. 225).

Specifically in relation to adoption, a number of authors have dealt with the definition of *adoptive identity*,(Grotevant et al., 2000; Von Korff and Grotevant, 2011; McAdams and McLean, 2013) an identity that is concerned with how an individual constructs meanings about his/her adoption. Grotevant et al. (2000) cite Erikson's extensive study on identity, in which three aspects of identity are identified: self-definition, coherence of personality, and sense of continuity over time. Identity refers to self-definition, which is understood as a set of characteristics by which one identifies oneself and others within a particular social and historical context. Secondly, identity is seen as the subjective sense of coherence of personality or how the various aspects of one's identity fit together. Thirdly, identity refers to one's sense of continuity over time, linking past, present and future together. Following their definition, identity links personality, subjective awareness, relationship and external context: 'the essence of identity is self-in-context' (Grotevant et al., 2000, p. 381). In addition to the first definition, the authors think of adoptive identity as being related to three different levels: the intrapsychic component, the relationships within the family and a component involving the social

world beyond the family. These three levels have to work with each other when the fit with the core – the sense of self-and the family context is explored, evaluated or challenged (Grotevant et al., 2000). Yngverson (1997) stated that adoption transgresses the notion we have of identity, meaning that the process of the development of identity can be complex and potentially problematic.

Social constructionists see Erikson's work as adhering to a fixed notion of identity, with individuals having particular developmental tasks at different stages of their life course. However, Grotevant's use of Erikson's work is of value in exploring adoptive identity. In order to understand how the process of the formation of identity works, Grotevant et al(2000) suggest the need to look at the different components of identity, starting with the intrapsychic component of identity. This aspect refers to the cognitive and affective processes involved in constructing one's adoptive identity. The understanding of the intrapsychic sense of being an adopted person can be approached through narrative: narrative psychology focuses on meaning making, how our story helps us make sense of how and where we fit in the world. The development of personal identity can be seen in the growing sense and coherence of the person's adoption narrative (Grotevant et al., 2000).

For adopted young people, establishing an adoptive identity is one element of identity formation and centres around the questions, 'Who am I as an adopted person?', 'What does being adopted mean to me, and how does this fit into my understanding of myself, relationships, family, and culture?'(Von Korff and Grotevant, 2011). They must explore the meaning of being part of two families, and integrate these elements in a coherent 'story about oneself'. Constructing an adoption narrative can be affected by the

communication that young people have with their adoptive parents about adoption. Family communication about adoption is likely to be impacted by contact with their birth family. The relationships between these three factors (contact, ACO, identity formation) have been analysed in Von Korff et al.'s (2010) study and in Grotevant and McRoy's (1998) work on the Texas Minnesota adoption project . For example, an in-depth qualitative analysis of interviews with a sample of adoptive mothers showed how adoptive mothers used birth family contact as a way of creating opportunities to talk about adoption, often in a deliberate way with identity development being the goal (Von Korff et al., 2010).

Through narrative identity, people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future. The idea that people create identity through constructing stories about their lives has emerged, over the past two decades, as a broadly integrative conception in both the humanities and the social sciences (McAdams, 2001). Researchers have tracked the development of narrative identity from its origins in conversations between parents and their young children to the articulation of sophisticated meaning-making strategies in the personal stories told in adolescence and the emerging adulthood years.

Adoptees' developmental process of identity formation can follow two pathways: the adopted child engages with a family adoption story or narrative, where the story represents what the adoptive family is ready to disclose; or if the information from, or contact with, birthparents is lacking, adolescents will construct a narrative (Von Korff et al., 2010). Surely the circumstances under which adoption happens influence the story that the adoptee will know and develop. Grotevant (1997) also defines identity, starting

from the perspective of personal identity: 'Personal identity concerns the interconnected issues of uniqueness and similarity: how is the individual a unique person, yet how is he or she like others?' (Grotevant, 1997, p. 4). Stated in another way, identity development occurs in the 'dynamic tension or balance between core and context in the midst of developmental change, thus it concerns the self, the historical and cultural context and change over time' (Grotevant, 1997, p. 4).

As the title of Grotevant's article suggests (1997), identity means 'coming to terms' with oneself in the context of the family and culture in which one has been adopted.
In addition to the previous paper and the definition of how identity is formed (self-definition, coherence of personality, sense of continuity over time), he states that there is the possibility of reformulating identity across one's lifespan if one changes the individuals or the context around him.

Identity development becomes increasingly complex as additional dimensions of *difference* from other family members are added, such as differences in physical appearance, ethnic or cultural origins, disabilities or talents. The identity process also involves integrating other aspects of one's pre-adoption history, including experiences such as multiple foster placements. Referring to the aspects of the identity that a person does not have the opportunity to choose, Grotevant (1997) states that: 'most of the unique identity challenges facing adopted persons are about *givens* in their lives rather than about choices they are to make. However, although adopted people did not choose their adoption situations, they do have choices about how they come to terms with them and how these identity components become woven into their personal narrative' (Grotevant, 1997, p. 5).

A narrative approach to identity development in adopted adolescents permits an examination of how a young person makes sense of being an adopted person, and the interplay between their adoptive status and other aspects of their identity. If the integration of identity is going well, narratives give a sense of coherence and meaning to the experience of the individuals constructing them. The coherence and sense of the story can be related to the psychological well-being and resilience of the adoptee (Von Korff et al., 2010).

Grotevant et al. (2000) describes the process of identity formation, as they compare it to the process of identification of race: they are both compulsory features of the self that must be integrated into the person's larger sense of identity. The process usually starts with a lack of awareness of the conflict regarding identity. This may be followed by sensitising experiences, such as, for example, criticisms or external judgments, which then lead to confusion and incongruence and throw the individual into a state of crisis. With the crisis, the person questions their fundamental sense of self and potential selves. The process then leads the person to identification with the found identity and to a certain lifestyle.

Ethnicity, nationality and identity

The body of literature exploring identity and ethnicity is vast. However, only a few studies look at adoptive identity and ethnicity and it felt appropriate to mention those. The selected studies emphasise some of the aspects that adoptees may encounter when moving from their country of origin to Italy.

Ethnic identity refers to the part of self-concept that has to do with identification with an ethnic group and with thoughts, perceptions, feelings and behaviours deriving from membership of that group (Phinney, 1990). One's belonging to a specific ethnic group is acquired by birth, but the construction of ethnic identity is a lifelong process that is closely connected to the social context: it is a process of negotiation and implies the attribution of value and meanings. As highlighted by various authors (Lee et al., 2006; Lee, Yun, et al., 2010; Castle et al., 2011), this process is even more complex among transracial adoptees because they do not share their heritage with their adoptive family.

Emerson (1960) defines national identity as the idea of one's feeling of belonging to a nation. Nationality can be closely linked to ethnic identity, but it often represents a distinct way of identifying oneself, as is the case for transracial adoption. This is because adoptees' ethnicity brings a racial minority status in adoption contexts such as the European one, in particular when the physical traits recall a different ethnicity. This might mean that in transracial adoption national identification may not always be a natural or simple process (Lind, 2012). Age at adoption, which is a factor that is extensively considered in the section on the outcomes for adoptees, is another factor to be taken into consideration as a variable in the identity formation process. It is shown that late-adopted children demonstrate higher levels of ethnic identity, as they have been more exposed to the culture in their country of birth (Wickes and Slate, 1996). Related to age, Reinoso, Juffer, and Tieman (2012) reported a positive correlation between the child's age at adoption and the parents' – mainly the father's-cultural interest in the adoptee's birth country.

Manzi et al. (2014), for example, proposed a study on bicultural identity integration of transracial adolescent adoptees, aiming to analyse the influence that families have on biculturalism and the link to behavioural problems. They suggest that the way in which adoptees combine ethnic identity and nationality constitutes an important element of their identity development, but generally adoptees have limited access to their birth culture; they are supposed to learn about it as a second culture while being immersed in the mainstream culture (Scherman, 2010). Based on the results of their research, they suggest that the bicultural model better explains the identity process for transracial adoptees, as it considers both the ethnical identification as well as the belonging to their current cultural background.

The study by Manzi et al. (2014) confirms the important role that adoptive families have in facilitating adoptees' adjustment (Koh and Rueter, 2011; Rosnati et al., 2013). This result is in line with what Lee et al. (2010) suggest based on their research on conversations about ethnicity within adoptive families. They used the cultural socialisation framework, which refers to the lifelong path during which individuals attribute a certain importance to ethnicity, and a certain meaning to their life. The research highlights that adoptive parents' attitudes towards ethnicity are linked to their levels of practice of cultural socialisation. For instance, parents that negate the differences (defined by the authors as 'colour-blindness') have a total lack of cultural socialisation within their family. They observe though that external factors such as discrimination experienced by the adoptee (or the family) can mediate these practices. Manzi et al. (2014) also emphasise the significance of other factors that might contribute to an adoptee's adjustment and identity formation, such as the social context beyond the family (Rhee and Waldman, 2002), including relationships with friends,

connection to the community and discrimination experienced in the adoptee's environment (Lee, Kim, et al., 2010). Additionally, other research shows that living in an area with same-ethnic others and establishing positive contact with them can encourage positive ethnic identity (Song and Lee, 2009).

Transracial adoption

Like the debate on macro-politics on a global level, transracial and international adoption have been subject of much controversy. International adoption incites strong feelings among both the public and the politicians, social workers, academics and lawyers who set out to negotiate the tangle of human rights interests, child welfare practices, legislation and cultural and political considerations that surround it.

The juxtaposition of cultures represented by international adoption and the bonds that Howell (2007) has called the 'kinning of foreigners' raise dilemmas about identity and belonging. In the past 50 years in the UK, for example, policies around adoption and ethnic matches have changed from transethnic placements to matching the ethnicity of adopters and children. This transition first came to the fore in the 1980s when transracial domestic adoption became the subject of debate in the US and the UK (Harris, 2006; Kirton, 2000; Gill and Jackson, 1983).

At the time there was little recognition that children of different ethnicity to that of their adoptive parents might have different needs to children of the same ethnicity as their (prospective) parents (Kirton, 2000). The Association of Black Social Workers' intervention referred to transethnic adoption as 'internal colonialism' (cited in Wainwright and Ridley, 2012, p. 51) For the professionals working in this field, the main bone of contention centred on the implications of placing black children with

white families, especially regarding how this might affect their racial and cultural identity and their self-esteem.

Research in this area suggests that ethnic matching has been found to be positive for children from ethnic minorities. It is argued that these placements encourage and nurture positive identity formation, which is seen as central to their well-being (Small, 2000; Thoburn et al., 2000). However, research presented in my previous section on adoptive identity, such as that of McRoy et al (1998) and Thoburn et al (2000), suggests that transethnic placement can be successful in terms of psychosocial outcomes, and of resilience in the face of racism. Selwyn et al (2010) argue that the ever-increasing diversity of dual-heritage birth parents provides adoption agencies trying to establish an exact ethnic match between children and adoptive parents with conceptual and practical difficulties.

The ethnic identity of an adoptee is only one factor in determining his or her happiness (Thoburn et al., 2000). The conclusions that follow from Selwyn et al's study are that the current UK government's preoccupation with transethnic versus ethnic matching oversimplifies a far more complex issue which has both political and moral dimensions.

As discussed in the sections on ethnicity, nationality and identity, as well as in the background chapter, the Italian approach to this issue is that adoptive parents should employ ethnic, religious and cultural sensitivity in bringing up their children. This requirement influences the preparation and training of prospective adopters.

The findings presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 show that at times adopted people experience episodes of racism. These results could feed into the debates above, as the 'colour-blind' approach in Italy is challenged by the adoptees' accounts and the strands of research briefly described. As explained in the section about ethnicity and nationality, the studies and research are not focused around ethnic matching but rather mostly around the child's adjustment and the parents' attitudes towards the different races and ethnicities. Considering this scenario, this research does not aim to feed into the debate but looks at attitudes towards the openness about adoption.

'Success' studies

As the number of children adopted internationally has increased, the body of research describing the medical, behavioural, and developmental characteristics of this population has also grown. These disciplines have looked at children's and parents' influence and adjustment to adoption, aiming to tackle the factors influencing 'positive' or 'negative' outcomes. Their research could therefore be considered as aiming to look for what makes a successful adoption. Linking this body of research to this study, it is influential, as it highlights how communicative openness can be interpreted as a factor for successful adoption.

Adjustment

The *stress and coping model*, elaborated by Brodzinsky (1993), is one of the most significant works on adoption adjustment. In this perspective, 'adoption is a stressful event that exposes parents and children to a unique set of psychosocial problems and tasks that may interact with common normative developmental issues' (1993, p. 160). As defined by this author and by others, such as Rosnati (2008), van IJzendoorn and

Juffer (2005), international adoption builds upon challenges that are related to the conditions before adoption and to the difficulties in integrating into an ethnically and culturally different context.
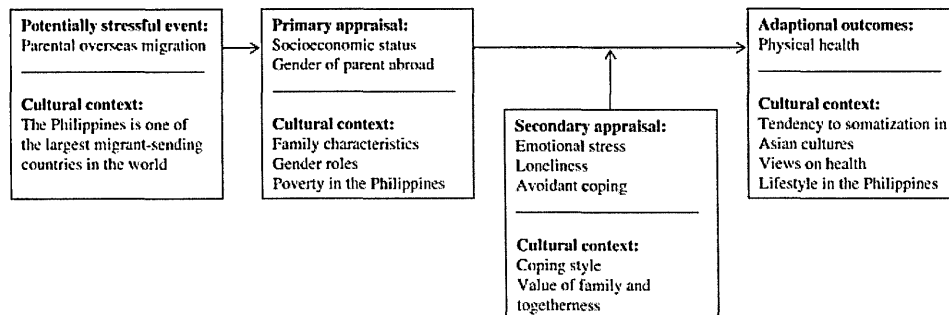
Figure 6 - The stress and coping model by Brodzinsky, 1993.

The *stress and coping model* (Brodzinsky, 1993) relies on a key assumption that children's adjustment to adoption is influenced by how they appraise or perceive their adoption experience and the type of coping mechanisms they use to deal with adoption-related stress. Adoption is assumed to cause distress in children. However, the degree to which children experience adoption-related stress and success is variable.

Another subject that has been researched by psychologists is the child's *'adjustment'*. Traditionally the child's adjustment has been considered mainly as the presence or absence of problem behaviour (Brodzinsky, 1993). The meta-analysis conducted by Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2006) presents a combination of several studies that address a set of related research hypotheses. The aim was to estimate the effects of international adoption on behavioural problems and mental health referrals. Three main areas were looked at: a comparison of all adoptees with non-adopted controls; a comparison of international adoptees with non-adopted controls; and, a comparison of international adoptees with domestic adoptees. The most frequently explored variables in these

studies were the adoptees' age at placement, gender, socio-economic status and age at assessment. In this meta-analysis, the authors concluded that, when compared with non-adopted children, international adoptees demonstrated more behaviour problems overall and more use of mental health services. However, the general rate of behaviour problems was modest, indicating that most of the international adoptees were well adjusted. The comparison between domestic and international adoptees shows that the internationally adopted children had less adjustment problems than the domestic adoptees. The findings indicate that this is not explained by lower rates of pre-adoption adversity experienced by the international adoptees compared with the domestic adoptees, as evidence of pre-adoption malnutrition, neglect or abuse was reported more often in the international adoption studies. Is it possible that in many transracial international adoption, the physical differences between the parents and the child are obvious and therefore adoption is never a secret? Whereas children adopted internationally are often adopted because of lack of resources and poverty, relinquishment in domestic adoption may involve mental health problems in the birth parents.

Age at adoption

Although authors like Verhuist (1990) have suggested that the older the child at placement, the greater the probability that the child will develop behavioural/emotional problems, in this meta-analysis, no association between adopted children's actual problem behaviour and their age at placement was found. Therefore, it is possible to consider that age at placement is not a risk in itself, but that pre-placement experiences can increase problems later on in the adoption. An important study conducted by Hawk et al. (2012) looked at the age at adoption, and specifically aimed to analyse the

relationship between age at adoption and the time spent in the orphanage. There are robust findings in the post-institutionalised literature with regard to the age-at-adoption effect. These studies find that children adopted in the age range of six to 24 months display more behaviour problems. The findings of studies that looked at children adopted after 18 months are consistent with attachment theories, in which it is hypothesised that children need experience of an attachment relationship typically between the ages of eight and 18 months. What this study claims is that, although the age-at-adoption, the issues disposed could reflect factors other than exposure to an un-stimulating environment and a lack of caregiver-child relationships. Most of the studies reporting these results relied on parental report of age at intake and adoption, which is not always accurate. In addition to that, there might be a variety of cofounding variables with regard to age at adoption: for example, lower birth weight and poor birth circumstances. The research conducted by Hawk et al. (2012) reported and confirmed that extended experience in an orphanage seems to be the most prominent predictor of age at adoption. What Hawk et al. (2012) add to the findings of the developmental studies is that a later age at adoption was also related to a greater likelihood of spending time in a family prior to institutionalisation and to experiencing an adverse early environment.

Behaviour

In the literature on the topic of adjustment to adoption, in medical, behavioural and developmental research, children's behaviour is another topic that is analysed. One of the most frequently used instruments for measuring children's behaviour problems is Achenbach's Child Behaviour Checklist, CBCL,(in Rosnati et al., 2008). This scale has

been widely applied in international research, in both clinical and non-clinical samples and in counselling settings, to assess problem behaviour among biological children. This scale has also been used with international adoptees (Rosnati et al., 2010).

The results of this study using the CBCL indicated that, consistent with the adoption literature, Italian internationally adopted school-age children are more likely to show behavioural and emotional problems than their non-adopted peers. As several studies (Gunnar et al., 2000; Rosnati et al., 2010) have demonstrated, the school-age period is a crucial phase in the adoptees' psychological development; consequently, adoptees are more likely to show behavioural problems during these years than during adolescence. This finding is consistent with Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval's (2005) results: school age seems to be a critical phase in the process of adjustment to adoption. During this period, there is increased sensitivity to adoption and awareness of the difference between adoptive and biological families. This also confirms the *stress and coping model*, in which Brodzinsky (1993) states that when children become aware of the reciprocal implication between adoption and relinquishment, problems in adjustment may arise.

Another strand of research has concentrated on post-institutionalised adoptees, because roughly 85% of internationally adopted children have previously spent time in an institution, such as a hospital, orphanage or baby home. The literature on the outcomes for post-institutionalised children is not very consistent, which could be related to the association of suspected influential parameters (length of institutional exposure, age at assessment etc.) and specific outcome measures (Gunnar et al. 2000). Better

appreciation of these different environments could lead to a better understanding of the mixed results seen in studies examining children adopted from various countries.

A study conducted by van Ijzendoorn and Juffer (2005) compared the IQ of adopted children with that of children that stay in an institution (such as their siblings or peers that stayed there). For most adopted children, the drastic change in environment was linked to an improvement in their cognitive development. Adopted children do not completely catch up in school compared with their non-adopted peers. The discrepancy between children's development in terms of IQ and their delayed school achievement indicates a gap that was found to be larger for children who came from extremely deprived backgrounds. The general conclusion is that in terms of cognitive development, most adopted children do well, certainly much better than their peers that have stayed behind.

Attachment

In the context of adoption another aspect that has to be considered is *'attachment'*. Attachment theory describes the dynamics of long-term relationships between people, and a deep and enduring emotional bond that promotes a sense of comfort and security (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment behaviour considers the emotions that occur in particular situations where a child is stressed about, or fearful of, perceived danger and seeks the proximity of another who is seen as stronger and wiser (Aldgate and Jones, 2006). Self-esteem and attachment are related to each other: it has been suggested that self-esteem is the corollary of a secure attachment, which is basic trust in a supportive other (Ainsworth, 1989). Self-esteem is defined in relation to the following: self-evaluation, which represents the global characteristics of the individual and those that reflect the

individual's sense of adequacy across particular domains, such as cognitive competence and athletic competence (Gilligan, 1999). Adopted children show higher levels of self-esteem compared to their institutionalised peers and additionally, it has been found that there is no elevated risk for internationally adopted children regarding their self-esteem. But this result should not deny the complexity of identity formation in internationally adopted children: it cannot be denied that international adoptees' development in the domain of identity formation is more complex (Juffer and van Ijzendoorn, 2007). Referring to attachment theory, Juffern and van Ijzendoorn state that an ultimate test of adopted children's adjustment is the quality of these 'children's internal working models of others and self, and consequently how they evaluate important other people as well as their own person' (Juffer and van Ijzendoorn, 2007, p. 1079). The authors state that the results presented should be understood as evidence of adopted children's resilience in terms of recovering from severe deprivation within the context of the adoptive family and catching up with their non -adoptive peers.

Resilience

Together with the empirical research analysing the various impacts that adoption has on the child and the family, this section discusses empirical evidence from research conducted on resilience. The huge heterogeneity in the outcomes of studies on both physical and psychosocial adversity does not just reflect errors within the instruments used, it is also a reflection of the influence that the individual abilities have on those outcomes, hence the relevance to this research(Rutter, 2006). This awareness has led to the concept of 'resilience: meaning the phenomenon that some individuals have a relatively good outcome despite suffering risk experiences that would be expected to bring about serious consequences' (Rutter, 2007, p. 205). Borrowed from the scientific

world, resilience can be defined as, 'the buffer capacity or the ability of a system to absorb perturbation, or the magnitude of disturbance that can be absorbed before a system changes its structure by changing the variable' (Manyena, 2006, p. 435). This definition refers to natural adversities or disasters, but it is useful to think of the child's everyday life, environment (for example, life in the orphanage) as a system, which is being challenged through the adoption. In contrast to a natural disaster, adoption is supposed to improve a child's life. But the passage through which the adoptee will pass implies adaptation from him/her. Even though resilience relates to social competence and positive mental health, it is not necessarily a characteristic or an outcome; it is more of an 'dynamic process' (Ahern et al., 2008). In other words, it implies relative resistance to environmental risk experiences, or the overcoming of stress or adversity. It is not, and cannot be, an observed trait (Rutter, 2006).

Defined by Pearce, resilience or psychological strength is 'directly implicated in a child's capacity to cope with adversity. Resilience represents that quality of the individual that enables them to persist in the face of challenges and recover from difficulty or hardship' (2011, p. 17). Resilience varies over time and depends on biological, psychological and environmental factors. The biological influences are understood as the child's temperament, their capacity to cope with stress and tension and their ability to solve problems. The psychological factors refer to the ability of the child to believe in their competences and the expectations from the social network around them. Parenting is an important aspect to consider in the discourse on resilience, as loving caregiving promotes a balance between the acceptance of risks and protection from harm. In the development of resilience, attachment plays a fundamental role in children's perception of themselves. Attachment is also important, because the quality

of the relationship will strongly influence the child's beliefs regarding their competency and worth, the sensitivity and responsiveness of others and the safety and providence of their world. Gilligan (2004) writes about the importance of the enhancement of resilience in children and young people in public care. The author summarises the functions of public care in four steps: maintenance (which is understood as meeting children's basic needs); protection (which is understood as protection from abuse as well as protecting and promoting the rights and interests of the child); compensation (which is understood as recovery from the deficits that children have in their lives); and preparation (which refers to equipping children and young people with emotional resilience and practical techniques and knowledge to survive). This last aspect is the one that can be worked on more in relation to adoption. Achievement and performance in fields of endeavour and attainment in activities, which the young person and significant others value, are key ways of building self-esteem (Gilligan, 1999).

Additionally, the author writes about the importance of school, neighbourhood and community development, as well as the importance of a 'multiplicity of role identities and 'meaningful roles'. This last aspect is relevant for the adoption setting, as it is important to work with the adoptee but it is also important to work with the other actors in the adoption to build a supportive relationship. When giving examples of the different options to enhance children's resilience, sport and cultural activities are mentioned. When thinking about the adoption that motivated this research, the promotion of resilience could have been useful to smooth the transition from the country of origin to Italy. Language and sport, and more generally leisure activities, can help the adoptee in building confidence and 'meaningful roles' that can be transferred from the country of origin to the receiving country.

The meaning of childhood

In order to study adoption, together with the other elements considered, it is necessary to examine how the meaning of childhood and children is constructed within the specific context. How they are seen within a society influences the way in which adoption is handled. The fathers of sociology of childhood, James and Prout (1990) claim that childhood represents one of the structures within society where children have their own activities, their own time and their own space. Children's agency is acknowledged; therefore children are given the chance to speak for themselves in this research. Rather than being considered vulnerable objects of concern, in need of protection and direction, children are considered as competent social actors.

James and Prout (1990) developed an influential explanation of what the sociology of childhood entails; they define childhood as a social construction. It is a social structure in which children are not biologically determined, and they are not seen as passive recipients. Following James and Prout (1990), and Mayall (2002), childhood is seen as a culturally determined set of expectations and roles. Children are not to be considered only on the basis of their biological maturity, as this does not shape the lives of all children in the same way. Structures such as school see children as passive recipients of adults' knowledge, but children have agency and can construct their own understandings of experiences. To be fully considered within society, children need to have the political power, which at the moment, like many other minority groups, they lack (Mayall, 1996). Moreover, the sociology of childhood claims the need to conduct research with children, using methods that provide children with the opportunities to describe their worlds and cultures (Alderson, 2000). Before sociology of childhood was introduced as a sub-discipline of sociology, childhood was perceived as a biological

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state of dependency, and also as a component of the social order (Corsaro, 2004). This period of life has been seen as a period of protection and opportunity. However, this generalisation does not take into account the differing social conditions in which children are raised and the capabilities of the adults who raise them (Mayall, 2002).

Children that are adopted experience more than one childhood, which cannot be fully understood through using developmental theories only. The sociology of childhood's aim is to engage with children's competencies, responsibilities, resilience and agency, thereby offering a broader picture of the adoptees' experience (Goodyer, 2011). The sociology of childhood could bring new understandings on international adoption, by allowing adoptees' knowledge to be central in the subject. The children and young people involved in this process should be seen as co-operators, all (practitioners, adoptees and adoptive families) of whom are aiming for a successful adoption. Adoptees, as well as adoptive families, are 'users' of the services that are offered in relation to adoption.

Despite recent challenges to the foundational developmental view, national and international documentation continue to be based on foundational developmental approaches to understanding childhood (Wyness, 2006). As Goodyer states, 'by focusing on foundational concepts of 'normality', other ways of looking at childhood are overlooked, namely understanding how children's lives are shaped by current contexts, the different strengths and difficulties of particular childhoods, and how, as agents, children have capabilities to contribute to their own lives' (2011, p. 44).

Psychological and clinical studies focus on the notion of 'successful' adoption, putting forth the potential difficulties that adoption may cause. The sociology of childhood and social constructionism both function as critiques of conventional psychology. These critiques comprehend the questions that psychology poses about human beings as well as the methods applied to investigate those questions and the answers received. Critical psychology looks at the way in which the individual is placed within a social context, in relation to difference, inequality and power and this has provided a different reading of psychological phenomena such as mental illness, intelligence and personality theory (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2014). Not all critical psychologists have arrived at this position through social constructionism. Some, like Burman (2007), have arrived at it through Marxism or feminism. Burman attempts to make 'more explicit connections between individual, national and international economic development policies' (2007, p. VIII). She explicitly links 'the psychological project of describing individual development [...] with processes and practices in international economic development' (2007, p. 5). Her approach to radical constructionism, refuses the individualist identity moderated by context and insists upon constitutive constructionism: 'the starting point is that children and childhood are constructed; therefore we have to study not only the child but also the context (that is the interpersonal, cultural, historical and political situation) that produces her' (2007, p. 9).

Foundational writings on the sociology of childhood, like the seminal text by James et al. (1990), present a firm rejection of developmental psychology. Piaget's work was particularly criticised, for justifying adulthood supremacy and its fixation on universal, standardised and inevitable developmental stages. These stages, or the lack of fulfilment of these stages for adopted children, who grow up in different environments from those

described by Piaget, are then subject to the label of 'problematic' children. However, Woodhead (2009) has revisited Piaget's work and argues that his aim was to be child-focused, respecting children's own ways of thinking. Woodhead states that sociology of childhood writers have focused on the applications of those using Piaget's work (for example in education) rather than looking at Piaget's own research work. Developmental psychology, as affirmed by Woodhead, continues to be relevant to childhood studies, as childhood is by definition transitional, as well as culturally constructed. Developmental psychology remains relevant in studying changes, although attention is now being given to different socio-economic and cultural contexts. Smith suggests the potential for such developmental theories: 'they suggest that development, rather than unfolding in a predictable fashion from infancy to adulthood through the outward expression of innate biological structures, involves participation in social processes. There is no single pathway for development (such as the Piagetian progression towards rationality); rather development depends on cultural goals' (2002, p. 77).

Developmental psychology also contains alternative views, such as for example Vygotsky's socio-cultural theories. Vygotsky (1978) postulates that higher forms of cognition come from social interactions. The adult supports the child, providing a bridge between the child's current development and their potential development until the child is able to do the task on her own. Rogoff (2003), for example, has developed such ideas within Majority and Minority World settings, which can give a better understanding of internationally adopted children. The critiques and alternatives discussed in Rogoff's work question the focus on individuality and personal agency in the sociology of childhood and point to the value of considering relationships within the

context in which they take place. For example, the theoretical advances in developmental psychology suggest the need to contextualise children and young people's development. The popularity of Vygotsky, and now Rogoff in particular, highlight the importance of relationships for learning and developing. The critique of the individualist approach offers a revised possibility for studying relationships between people, spaces and materials. The adult-child dichotomy and the individualist child-centred approach, which is so central in childhood studies, has less centrality in situations where families have many siblings and extended kin, or where there are substantial numbers of children, or where young people have to take on household responsibilities. A multiplicity of relationships becomes evident, and it goes beyond the narrowness of debates about rights and responsibilities. Childhood studies have also been criticised in the past for their applicability of Minority World conceptualisations and priorities to the Majority World. The sociology of childhood, children's rights and their agencies have been accused of continuing colonial imperialism and of introducing ideas that are opposing certain traditions and cultures (Liebel, 2012).

The sociology of childhood has informed this study. However the criticisms illustrated above are also embraced. Children should have the chance to express their own views on matters like adoption, but they should also be considered in the context of the relationships that involve them. Studying adopted children alone would certainly enable the collection of rich data, but for research like the study presented here, children's accounts need to be heard and placed within their families' accounts, as well as within their community.

Adoption from the children's perspective

In the light of the ways in which childhood is understood, as described in the previous section, the next section aims to present research that has been conducted that includes the adoptees' perspectives on their experience of adoption. This informed my study on children's participation in research in this field. The researchers refer to their experiences and to the children's abilities to contribute to the field.

UK studies on domestic adoption

Research on children's views on domestic adoption is limited, but the most relevant studies conducted in UK are reported here. The research by Thomas, Beckford, Nigel and Mervyn (1999) and the work of Neil (2012) are the most relevant to my study, because of their research aims and the methodology used. They all present similar research objectives but they used different methods from those applied in my study. Presenting the studies in order of relevance to the present research, Thomas et al. (1999) conducted an innovative study that explored the opinions of children who had been the subject of domestic adoption in England. The child-friendly research design explored children's understanding of the process of adoption. It raises issues about the process of adoption, including children's and young people's perspective on it. The researchers interviewed 41 adopted children using semi-structured interviews. The mean age of their sample was seven with the youngest child being five years old.

Neil (2012) conducted a similar study, where the focus was on children's understanding of adoption. The research involved children in their middle childhood: 43 English adoptees who had had been adopted when they were aged under four were interviewed between the ages of five and 13. Neil explored how children made sense of their

adoption. In particular, the research highlighted how children experience the impact of adoption on their sense of identity within the family.

Similarly, a study on domestic adoption, commissioned by the Commission for Social Care Inspection and conducted by Morgan (2006), aimed to understand how children and young people are supported during their adoption, their history of adoption and what might be unique in the children's experience. 208 adopted children in the United Kingdom took part in this research; the mean age of the children was 11 years. The average age at which children had been adopted was four years and the average length of time in the adoptive family was seven years.

Dance and Rushton's study (2005) focused on the process of becoming part of a new family, relationships within the family and daily life in the family. It explored the views of a group of young people who had joined adoptive or foster families when they were aged between five and 11 years. This research focused on how family members offered support to the children and how these young people perceived the experience of joining the family, and aimed to deepen the understanding of the issues arising in an adoptive or long-term foster family. Its focus was on a different aspect of the adoption experience from that of my study; my focus is on communication about the child's past.

In all four studies, the researchers argued that the methods used to conduct the research were child friendly. Thomas et al. (1999) and Neil (2012) used prompt cards and feeling maps during the interviews, which were conducted at the children's homes, usually with the adoptive parents nearby. Dance and Rushton (2005) used 'CAFÉ': the Child and Adolescent Functioning and Environment schedule, which is a semi-structured

interview covering a variety of psycho-social difficulties from the child's standpoint and questions about the relationships in the family. Morgan (2006) used a questionnaire that included pictures and some open-ended questions were asked in what was considered to be a method that children would find approachable.

Much of the evidence from these studies suggests that overall children view their adoption experience positively. Morgan (2006) suggests that positive findings are related to the new family, the stability that it gives and the love and care experienced. In the studies by Thomas et al. (1999) and Morgan (2006), some children expressed concerns about particular issues: contact with their birth family and the feeling of being different. Thomas et al. (1999) found that children understood the process of adoption and readily discussed this with the interviewers. The children had often found the preparatory explanations difficult to grasp, reporting that they had been worried about what would happen and the changes that they would have to face. For example, Janine (14 years old) explained how she had learnt about the adoption (1999, p. 25):

> I think they had to tell me that I wouldn't be going home first and that I would be moving to live with someone else permanently, who would be my parents.

When the children spoke about the information given to them prior to the adoption and about their meetings with the prospective adoptive family, they said that it was useful and it helped them to get to know their new place. For instance, Jocelyn (1999, p. 50) said:

> It made it easier...'cause like I knew my way around and knew where I stood and I knew where my room was. And I knew where everything was and it was easier....

However, not all the children interviewed had wanted to be adopted:

> I didn't want to move. I wanted to stay with [my foster parents], 'cause I'd been moved around so much (p.33).

Adoption meant significant changes in every aspect of the children's lives. Some of the children described the change from the foster family to the adoptive family as a very stressful period and others, like Karen (13 years old, p.59), said:

> Meet new family, meet new friends, meet new cousins, meet new houses, meet new schools. Everything really. Meet a new world.

In Morgan's study (2006), children stated that once the decision was made, the whole process should be as quick as possible and the child should be kept closely involved but they also wanted the time to be used to let them get to know their new family better. In fact, the children's top ten ideas for improving the process were: make it quicker; involve and support the child more; keep the child in touch with what is happening – in their birth family as well as the adoption itself; give more information about adoption; do not change social workers in the middle of being adopted; do not separate brothers and sisters; go to only one foster home before being adopted; make the process more enjoyable and fun; have more trial days with the new family; and, let the children themselves make the final decision regarding their new parents (Morgan, 2006, p.10). An important outcome of Morgan's research is that children would like to have more information about their adoption:

> Just what adoption actually meant at the time I didn't really understand.

> How does the adoption work?

Morgan ranked the things the children wanted to know about the process when they were being adopted: when the child would be allowed to see their birth family; information about the adoptive parents; the reason for the adoption; what happens if the adoption goes wrong/does it have to be forever?; how long will it take to be adopted?; where the child will live; what will being adopted feel like?; will the child be 'properly' part of a family?; and, will the child be safe? (Morgan, 2006, p.16)

In Dance and Rushton's (2005) study, children's positive feelings about their permanent placements were confirmed, although some difficulties arose during the transition period and also due to the length of the process. Neil (2012) found that most of the children did not understand how adoption legally secured their adoptive family membership. They understood that they could stay forever with their adoptive family, but the process that brought that security was not clear. For children who had spent longer living in a children's home or orphanage, or with a foster family, becoming part of the adoptive family was described as a more active process. Through the use of different words like 'real mummy' and 'original mum', children made sense of the difference between their adoptive family and their birth family. But Neil argues that based upon what the children said, there should be more openness towards the adoptive family and the child about the reasons why children have been adopted.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (Minnis and Walker, 2012) published a literature review in May 2012, focusing on studies published from 2000 to 2011, with the aim of reporting on children's experiences of adoption and foster care in England. The sources used for the review were relevant research databases and the

national websites of relevant national organisations. In their introduction, the authors clarify that the accounts included in the review are first-hand experiences of children and young people, as well general points from practitioners regarding the experiences of fostering or adoption. The aims of this review were to understand: children and young people's views on decisions made about their care; their feelings about the help they received during their time in care; their feelings about keeping in contact with their birth families; and their feelings about the information they received and whether it was sufficient throughout the process (Minnis and Walker, 2012, p. iv). Throughout the review evidence was found that children and young people felt that they lacked information at important times, particularly on moving into care, when moving from one placement to another, and on leaving care. Information for children entering the care system was crucial in helping them to understand why they were in care, what their foster family was like, and what would happen next. The adopted children stressed how critical it was for them to know about their adoptive families. An important message from this literature review is that the ability of children and young people to make decisions depends on them being able to get access to the right information.

Sinclair and Wilson (2003) state that information about adoption breakdowns is rare in the research literature, as it is likely that in this instance the adoptive family, child or birth family are not willing to take part in research. They conducted research with the aim of trying to confirm the hypothesis that suggests that success in adoption depends on the placement, the children's characteristics and the type of interaction between the carers and the child. The criteria used to assess the success of a placement included measures of psychological status, educational attainment and rating how the different aims the placement were or were not met. The aim of the study by Sinclair and Wilson

(2003) was to set up a model that structures how a placement works, in consultation with social workers, children and foster parents. They also discuss placement breakdown. They established, through this definition, that a placement had broken down when 'any of the foster carers, family placement social workers or child's social workers said that this had happened.' (Sinclair and Wilson, 2003, p. 874)

International studies

Only a few studies have been conducted involving children who have been adopted internationally, and similarly to those on domestic adoption, the approaches and objectives are not consistent. Juffer and Tieman (2009) conducted one of the few studies on children's views of international adoption. The sample was drawn from three adoption agencies in the Netherlands. The overall sample comprised 1,233 children, aged between four and 16 years, adopted from China (2,225 children were contacted). The agencies were also involved with adoption from India, and they provided a sample of 412 children (out of 775 children contacted). The number of parents that took part in the research is not mentioned; it only refers to the numbers of adopted children. The aim of the study was to highlight children's feelings about adoption and the interest in their adoption. However, the research was conducted with parents who were asked about their internationally adopted children's understanding of adoption, their feelings about being adopted, their ethnicity and their interest in adoption. Eight questions were asked in the survey. Three of those questions were:

-Does your child understand the difference between being adopted and being born in a family? (No/Yes)

- How would you rate your child's feelings about being adopted? (Ratings from 1: Negative to 10: Positive)

- Did your child ever express the wish to be white (for the China survey: not to look Chinese)? (No/Yes. At what age?)

From the interviews with parents, high rates of interest were reported in the book of photos on the child's adoption, in the story on the adoption, and when possible, in the video of the journey to the country of origin. Most of the parents reported that they had talked straightaway about the adoption, or when the children reached what was considered an appropriate level of maturity (according to the parents' perception of maturity).

From the information gathered by Juffer and Tieman (2009), it appears that the majority of the children, as reported by the parents, were interested in knowing about their adoption. The survey gives a good overview of the parents' understandings of their children's experiences but the methodology used did not allow the parents the space to give examples and expand upon their answers. The way in which the questions were asked did not allow the parents to discuss problems or difficulties in the family's adjustment to the adoption. It is interesting that with access to such a large sample of international adoptees, the researchers decided to use only closed questions in their questionnaire. In order to have a better understanding of parents' experiences with their adopted children, it would have been useful to also ask open-ended questions. The child's development and consequent fluidity in adjusting and reacting to the adoption is not considered at all in the questionnaire, mainly because it is a quantitative method that captures a single moment and a specific event in that moment.

Hawkins et al. (2007) reported the results of a qualitative research study conducted in England, called the English and Romanian Adoption study (ERA), which compared the views of 180 children in two groups of adopted children, 47 children adopted from England (known as the 'domestic' group) and 133 children adopted from Romania, from a total sample of 217 children. The Romanian group was divided into two groups, according to the children's age at the time of placement: 46 children were placed when they were less than six months old and 87 were placed for adoption after they reached the age of six months. At the age of 11 years, all of the children were interviewed in their homes by an adult researcher, using a semi-structured child adoption interview. The general picture that emerged from the whole sample is that there were no differences in adjustment according to the different types of adoption. No gender differences were found in the results. Three quarters of the sample wanted contact with their birth mothers, and 60% said that they would like more information about their birth families. When the children were asked about the birth fathers, the answers were less positive and there was a greater split between those who would and those who would not like further information. The group of Romanian children adopted after the age of six months said that they felt a difference between them and their adopted families. When the researchers asked if adoption had affected their life, 80% of the children from both groups thought that it had not affected them: 80% of the UK adoptees, 83% of the Romanian children under six months, and 86% of the Romanian children older than six months. Group differences were found in the section on 'talking about adoption': half of the domestic group found little difficulty in talking about adoption, while 60% of the younger Romanian adoptees and nearly 70% of the older Romanian group found it hard. The heterogeneity in the children's accounts was attributed to adoption being a highly personal experience, 'unique to every adopted

child' (Hawkins et al., 2007, p. 13). Overall, in comparing domestic and international adoption, attitudes towards adoption did not vary in accordance with the type of adoption. This result is confirmed by Beckett et al.'s (2008) analysis of the ERA group. In addition, the results also demonstrated the need for the adoptees to have more information about adoption. The outcomes were different in the areas of 'feeling different from adoptive parents' and 'difficulty in talking about issues', where the children who were placed at a later age encountered more difficulties.

Some of the findings regarding being adopted resonate with findings from the studies on domestic adoption (Thomas et al., 1999; Neil, 2012). Children wanted to be informed about family changes in ways that they could understand. They generally wanted to retain contact with their birth mothers but they found support from their adopted parents and friends. Their concern about their 'difference' becoming known in the public arena of school illustrates the way in which their identity as adopted children has social implications in this public setting.

Summary

This chapter presented the theoretical and empirical work around adoption, giving a frame to my own research. The understanding of family can take different shapes and meanings depending on the contexts in which it is placed. Adoption challenges the primacy of the blood ties, as it is forming families through social kinship. Biological and adoptive kinship, are both seen as fictive rather than in the dichotomy real-fictive (Carsten, 2000; Logan, 2013). Families are complex nucleuses, which the definitions by Morgan (1996) and Finch (2007) capture. They pose the attention on the 'family

practices' and the 'doing' of the family. Families are subject of interest not only in the sociological term, but the concepts have to be placed in the legal debate as well. Family is taking place in the private sphere, as well as a public institution. The laws are setting boundaries, which can eclipse the everyday practices. Because the adoptive family is formed through social kinship, empirical research explored the adoptive parenting methods. The emphasis is on the acknowledgment or rejection of the differences between families formed through biological and social kinship.

Openness and communication are very relevant topics to my own study, and the review on these starts with Kirk's work, then it defines openness based on a research conducted more recently (Brodzinsky, 2005;Jones and Hackett, 2011). The pieces of research presented suggest that openness about the past's child have a positive impact on the child and the family. These studies also suggest various ways of rating communicative openness, which bring forth the factors playing an important role in the communication about adoption in the family, such as the empathy for the adopted child, the comfort with, and promotion of, dual connection, or the empathy for the birth family. In addition Brodzinsky brings forth different levels within communicative openness, which highlight various relations. Openness however was not always the seen as the appropriate way to deal with the past, in fact Bowlby's work was promoting secrecy, and the work of Goldstein *et al* (1973) developed this idea and came to conclusion that the clear-cut approach allows to form attachment to the adoptive parents.

The body of literature that looks the adoption narratives indicates that the stories help to develop a coherent identity for the adoptee and have confidence about their origins. Linked to that, a significant body of literature investigated the adoptive identity, which

explores and explains how adoptees explore and understand being adopted as part of themselves, their relationships the families and two (or potentially more) cultures.

The studies looking at the outcomes of international adoptions have contrasting and non-homogeneous results. Generally speaking their aims are to explain factors that could influence and shape the adoption experience, from both the parent and the adoptees side.

The relatively small amount of studies that included adoptees in their research project show that adoptees are capable to give their opinions on matters that are adoption related; and the ones that investigated their opinions on the adoption process demonstrate that children are willing to be more involved in it.

Research questions

The evidence presented shows that international adoption touches upon a wide range of disciplines, some of which have explored the area more than others. Research on communication and openness illustrates that a higher level of communication within the family leads to better outcomes in adoption. This area has been explored through some qualitative research focusing on domestic adoption and through some pieces of qualitative research on international adoption, mostly with a focus on English-speaking countries. The body of literature examining the meaning of family and adoptive parenthood shows the ways in which families are formed and legitimised in both domestic and international adoption. In addition, research on adoptive parenthood shows how family bonds are influenced and shaped by various factors including communication. Similarly, research on adoptive identity, its features and formations,

highlights the importance of communication for a positive adjustment and outcome in adoption. However, the largest body of research informing studies of adoption is psychological and is derived from clinical samples. Although the results presented do not necessarily offer a uniform picture of the impact of adoption on adoptees, overall they present findings that suggest that it is positive for the majority of children. The risk factors for adoptees that are specifically relevant in the Italian context are considered to be the child's placement prior to adoption and the child's age. My research is largely influenced by the sociology of childhood, as it is believed that children have the ability to understand and express their views on events influencing their daily life. A life-changing event like adoption is one such moment in which children can demonstrate their abilities and understanding. On the other hand, investigations that look at children's adjustment and the outcomes of adoption do not necessarily consider their abilities. Resilience is an area of study in which it appears that both of these disciplines find common ground, and both look at the child's ability as well as the outcomes and adjustment under conditions that put the child under strain. Studies of children's experiences and feelings about adoption (both domestic and international) show that they are interested in knowing about their past and able to express their opinions about this specific topic. When looking at the literature presented in this thesis it emerges that a child's story about her or his adoption is constructed within the adoptive family and influenced by the context in which it takes place. Moreover it can be seen that communication not only relates to the mere sharing details about the story of the adoptee but is also embedded in the specific social and cultural context, and in how childhood is understood.

This research explores communication about adoptees' stories within families formed through international adoption in Italy. The research provides explanations about the narratives of adoption and the construction of family, identity and openness. Other research on Italian families formed through international adoption is mainly limited to the psychological aspect of adoption, and only a few pieces of research have investigated families sociologically. The summary of the Italian context highlights the legal shortcomings and points out the cultural framework within which this research took place and its potential impact on the culture of adoption. It emerges that communication, parents' and children's experiences of it, are rarely considered together through a qualitative approach, and it is striking how interesting this topic could be in the light of the cultural and social background in Italy. Moreover, when considering the importance of 'success' in adoption, the potential interrelationship between resilience and communicative openness raises queries.

The questions that emerge from the literature analysis centre around Italian families' understanding of communicative openness and adoptees' experience of it. The research questions are:

1) How do parents communicate with children about their adoption?

This question tackles the ways in which parents share the adoption story with their child/ren, and how they experience dealing with the child's past (if they do so). By investigating this aspect it is possible to understand how communication about the child is embedded in their family life and is influenced by the context in which it takes place. It also allows for investigation of the various aspects of communicative openness described in the previous sections, and looks at potential similarities and differences within the Italian system.

2) What are the adoptees' experiences of communication about adoption?

With this question, the aim is to hear how children and young people experience communication about the past within their family. As this is the overall aim of this research, their account on the matter is required. The experts' perspective can be integrated with the parents' accounts in the quest for a better overview of communicative openness within the families.

3) What are the professionals' views of communicative openness in the Italian context?

The professionals' views contribute to the general understanding of communicative openness in Italy and can help in understanding the different approaches that families have to the topic of communicative openness.

4) What implications would the use of life-story work have for communication about the lives of the interviewed adoptive families?

This questions aims to understand how parents might take an open approach to the child's past through the use of life-story work. Considering the cultural and social background in which this research takes place it is evident that this method could prove difficult and challenging to apply. It is a question that potentially reinforces the parents' understanding of communicative openness, as it puts a written example of this in front of them. The aim is not to evaluate this tool but to provide an alternative approach to the topic of openness. These questions shed light on the construction of meaning and the ways in which parents ensure continuity between the past, the present and the future of the child; the adoptees' views on their communication about their past within the family; and the professionals' opinions on this topic.

Chapter 4 Methods

The design of the research

This chapter defines and discusses the methodology applied to this research. The study explores the ways in which the families have dealt with dialogue about the child's past, how the adoptees experienced this dialogue, and the experts' experience of it. The data reported in this study were generated through in-depth interviews. Below I describe the methods used, starting with the in-depth interviews conducted with the different participants: adoptive parents, adopted children and young people, and experts. Particular attention is dedicated to the interviews with the children, for which the use of engaging methods was thoroughly planned. Ethical issues arising from this research, the thematic data analysis and my role in the research are discussed.

The theoretical approach

The ways in which a research study is tackled largely depend upon where the paradigm is located. These decisions rely on assumptions about reality and how this is understood (Mason, 2002). The research questions for this study involve the exploration of adoptive families, adoptees and experts' personal and subjective experiences of communication about adoption. In terms of an ontological perspective, these aims suggest a social constructionist approach. Burman (2007, p. 4) states that 'it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge are fabricated'. As defined by Bryman, this approach allows one to acknowledge that reality is subjective and is built through the perceptions and actions of the various social actors involved (2008). Assuming that reality is seen as socially constructed, and with the focus on subjective meanings and experiences, the interpretative approach is the

most appropriate to frame my study (Gray, 2004). This type of approach enables the researcher to identify issues from the perspectives of the researched and to understand the meanings they give to their behaviours, events or objects (Hennink et al., 2011). Adopting the social constructionist ontology and the interpretative epistemology permits me, as the researcher, to undertake an in-depth exploration of the parents, adoptees and experts' meaning-making within their own contexts (Mason, 2002).

The rationale for this research: The method

The field of adoption has been investigated from different angles using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the purpose of this research, and with the aim of answering the four research questions, a qualitative approach was taken. Qualitative research aims to collect in-depth data about human behaviour with regard to a specific experience or event (Hammersley, 2012). Among the qualitative methods available, interviews are used as a tool to access people's experiences and their inner perceptions, attitudes and feelings of reality. Based on how they are organised, interviews can be defined as structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Fontana and Frey, 2005). In the literature 'unstructured interviews' is used as a synonym for other terms such as 'informal conversational interviews', 'in-depth interviews' and 'ethnographic interviews' (Delamont and Jones, 2012). For the purpose of this study, in-depth interviews were used with adoptive parents, adopted people over the age of 18, and experts. The use of this type of interview was governed by my epistemology and the aims of my study. As explained previously, I hold a constructivist point of view on social reality and I developed the design of this research within an interpretative paradigm. In order to make sense of the families' worlds I felt that I needed to approach the research from the participants' own perspectives and in their own terms (Denzin, 1989). As Seidman said

(2006, p. 7): 'I interview because I am interested in other people's stories'. The foundation of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of people and the meaning they are making of that experience, and telling stories is fundamentally a meaning-making process. This process takes place when the interviewee starts to select constitutive details of the experiences in question, reflecting on them and putting them in order, and hence developing them as stories. At the heart of the interview there is an interest in other individuals' stories on the part of the interviewer because they are of worth (Seidman, 2006; Kvale, 1996).

Kvale (1996) begins his book with a metaphor for the interviewer, whose role can be seen as either a 'miner' or a 'traveller'. For the interviewer as miner, knowledge is a precious metal that needs to be unearthed and discovered. Miners might be looking for facts that can be quantified, as well as for pieces of knowledge. The other metaphor for the role of the interviewer, the traveller, sees the interview as a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning. The idea is that the traveller explores different domains of the country, either as unknown territory or with maps. The traveller may use a specific method to investigate the area, following a 'route that leads to the goal' (Kvale, 1996, p. 4). Not only can the journey lead to new knowledge but the traveller may change as well. The traveller metaphor refers to a postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research; this is the approach that I applied to my own research.

The in-depth interview was developed in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology as a method of eliciting people's social realities. There are various definitions of the unstructured interview. Patton (2002) describes it as a natural extension of participant

observation, as it relies entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. Punch (1998) described the in-depth interview as a way of understanding people's complex behaviour without imposing predetermined categories which could limit the field of inquiry.

This type of interview cannot be started without detailed preparation and knowledge (Patton, 2002). In order to proceed with the interview it is necessary to keep in mind the study's purpose and the general scope of the issues to be discussed (Fife, 2005). The researcher's control over the conversation is intended to be minimal. However, the researcher will try to encourage the participant to discuss experiences that relate to the area being explored (Burgess, 1984). In this type of interview the interviewer follows the narration generated by the interviewee's responses and asks questions based on it. However, it is accepted that the structure of the interview can be loosely guided by a list of questions called an *aide memoire* or agenda (Minichiello et al., 1990; McCann and Clark, 2005). In contrast to the agenda of the structured and the semi-structured interview, the agenda for an in-depth interview does not have to follow an exact order; instead, the questions are subject to revision based on the response of the interviewee. However, an agenda is used to maintain a certain consistency across the different interviews and should enable a certain degree of both flexibility and consistency (Patton, 1990, 2002).

Other methods were considered for this research, for example the 'narrative inquiry'. Various authors (for example Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Webster and Mertova, 2007; Riessman, 2008) have developed this specific methodology and, using Connelly and Clandinin's words, they define the 'narrative as a way of characterising the

phenomena of human experience and its study which is appropriate to many social science fields' (2000, p. 2). In narrative inquiry, when participants are provided with the opportunity to (re)construct their story they can effectively make sense of their experiences (Bailey and Tilley, 2002). The object of investigation is the story itself, and the method can be used in many ways to understand people's experiences (Riessman, 2002a). However, this method focuses on the chronological and biographical aspects of the interviewee's account and may prevent the flow of the conversation, in contrast to one of the advantages of using in-depth interviews. Similarly, considering the sensitive nature of the topics and the different private spheres touched upon in this research, semi-structured interviews might have moderated the responses and inhibited the interviewees.

The intention of the in-depth interview is to expose the researcher to unanticipated themes and to help in developing a better understanding of the interviewee's social reality from his or her perspective (Patton, 1990). This type of interview was used in this study with adoptive parents, young adults and experts, allowing exploration of their experiences of communication about adoption in their families.

Interviews with children

The aim of the interviews with the children involved in this project were similar to those with the rest of the sample. However, as explained in this section, a solid body of research has paid particular attention to the methods used when involving children in research, especially when touching upon sensitive topics. Leitch (2008) has used visual methods with children and young people, and in particular has looked at the synergy between the visual and the verbal and how visual methods such as drawings and

pictures can act as stimuli to children and young people's 'narrativisation' (Leitch, 2008, p. 51) and vice versa: Smagorinsky (2011) indicated that just as a visual image can powerfully evoke stories, so too can the spoken or written word amplify an image. Image-making provides an opportunity to represent experience with stories inherent in or created from the images. To comply with the theoretical approach and to answer my research questions I planned to rely on a combination of methods defined as the 'mosaic approach', which was first developed by Clark (2004) and further studied by Moss (2011). The focus of the mosaic approach is on finding methods that connect with children's strengths rather than their weaknesses (Clark and Moss, 2011). In Clark's approach the aim is to find ways of harnessing young children's creativity and physical engagement with their world. The mosaic approach acknowledges what Malaguzzi (cited in Rinaldi, 2001) described as the 'hundred languages of children': the verbal and non-verbal ways in which children communicate their feelings. The approach is defined as multi-method due to the need to include a range of methods to allow children with different abilities and interests to take part. This multi-method approach contributes to the overall picture of a mosaic. It facilitates and gives the opportunity for exploring and comparing the findings across different methodologies (Clark and Moss, 2011). The mosaic approach offers a 'framework for listening to young children, which reflects the complexities of their everyday lives. This complexity does not fit well with easily measured targets and standards' (Clark, 2004, p. 153). Drawings are used to mediate the communication between children and adults with the aim of decreasing the power differential; they act as a catalyst for change rather than simply as data sources in themselves (Leitch, 2008). For the purpose of this research, drawings and creative artwork were seen as a safe place for the expression of feelings associated with the experience of adoption. Dolls and toys were used to support the children in the

conversations about adoption. The aim was to use creative methods to engage the children in conversations about adoption and this, combined with the flexibility of the in-depth interview, would allow them to share their experiences of adoption (Leitch, 2008).

Trustworthiness

'Every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing' (Silverman, 2000, p. 825)

Reese et al. (1999) suggest that the way of measuring rigour in qualitative research does not lie in validity but it aims for trustworthiness and credibility. These can be measured by observing the method itself. One reason for asking specific questions and establishing pre-existing categories in an in-depth interview is to remove human error. On the other hand, too much structure can compromise trustworthiness and credibility of research if there is a researcher bias embedded in the questions.

Reliability refers to the ability of a research method to produce similar results under consistent conditions. The concept of reliability with regard to in-depth interview is rather contentious: the aim of this method is to explore experiences, not to confirm hypotheses (Reese et al., 1999). Authors such as Hammersley (1990) and Mason (2002) suggest that this should not mean that qualitative research is not accurate in its methodology, but to overcome these issues the approaches used in each piece of research should be described in detail. As Goodman (2001) explains, the best way to support the credibility, trustworthiness and reliability of research is through the interviewer's self-monitored activities. To support the reliability of my research, this

chapter and its appendices highlight the accuracy of the methodology applied in the study.

Considering the constructivist approach to this research and its embrace of subjectivity as a way to better understand the human dimension of the world (Peshkin, 2000), my interest lies more in understanding specific cases within a particular context than in hypothesising about generalisations and causes across time and space (Patton, 2002). Generalisability is a concept borrowed from quantitative statistics and refers to the extent to which findings can be applied within a wider context. Qualitative research is not necessarily concerned with the generalisability of data as it is considered to be an instrument to interpret meanings that people give in observed contexts, rather than an instrument for measuring or predicting (Patton, 1999). An argument against the generalisability of qualitative research states that humans can attach different meanings to the same actions or situations, leading to variability, which hinders any generalisation. Although many different meanings can be found in the same situation, commonalities among the different accounts can certainly be observed (Denzin, 1983).

Ethics

This study raised some ethical issues, which are discussed here. It received approval from the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. I used the British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines and the British Educational Research Association's guidelines to ensure the appropriateness of the research (BERA, 2011; BSA, 2002).

Prior to the interviews every participant received an oral and then a written explanation of the project. The information sheet, which can be found in the appendix, contains details about the project: the aims; information about myself and the university to which I am attached; what participation would involve; their time commitment; what would happen to their information; details of how I guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity; the right of every participant to withdraw from the study; and the safe storage of the data gathered. As the research involved children and adults, informed consent was sought from both. With the adoptive families, the parents were asked for their consent first and then the consent of their children was requested. Although the parents were the gatekeepers for their children's participation in the research, I always asked each child directly if s/he was happy to take part in the study. Due to the sensitive nature of my research it was important to clarify that the participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time and I saw their consent as an ongoing process that should constantly be verbally renewed (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998).

Due to the topics and the group involved in the study, I paid particular attention to the risks related to this research (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The children as well as the young people and adults could become upset on recalling negative memories or painful experiences. While interviewing them I tried to prevent such situations, but I also guaranteed support for them (Hill, 2005). I provided the contact details of a therapist working with adoptive families, children and young people who offers free face-to-face support or, if based in a different town, support over the phone (Greig et al., 2007). If, in the course of the research, my decision to maintain confidentiality with regard to the information disclosed were to allow the continuation of a harmful situation, or if I considered a specific event described as harmful, I would have disclosed this

information to the most appropriate authorities (adoptive parents or post-adoption support). The children would be informed about the chance of disclosure and the reasons for it, as this would have changed the initial agreement on confidentiality.

The information and data gathered are accessible only to authorised individuals. Only I have access to the non-anonymised data. The data is kept on an encrypted hard-drive, which is safely stored. Anonymity was guaranteed for the children, young people, parents and experts by changing their names, the names of their exact locations and the children's countries of origin. The latter are not mentioned; however, to allow an understanding of their accounts the continent of origin is mentioned. All data that refer to someone or somewhere have been changed to avoid identification of people, places and countries (Alderson, 2008).

Sampling and participants

Gaining access to the sample for this study was not a straightforward exercise. Immediately before my probation review one of the biggest accredited bodies in Italy agreed to support me during my research, allowing me to interview families and `children that had been through the process of adoption with them. We agreed that I could interview 20 adoptive families in their offices in different locations in northern Italy. Prior to starting the fieldwork (March–June 2013) the accredited body withdrew from the project without giving any reason. There could be various explanations for this, for example a feeling of being questioned on the services it offered to the families, or they may have agreed to participate in a bigger project with a more tangibles outcome for them. I never received an explanation and I share the frustration of other postgraduate students working with big organisations (Feldman et al., 2004). In

practical terms, for me their withdrawal meant reconsideration of the sampling and gaining access to participants. Although the sample changed, the sampling strategy remained the same: purposive sampling. Purposive sampling aims at including information from rich cases for in-depth studies to answer the research questions (Patton, 1990). This strategy allows a small number of cases to be included in order to grasp the complexity of the cases and enable comparison between them. The evaluation of the cases entails recruitment based on the participants' experiences, or their contexts (Mason, 2002). Part of purposive sampling involves snowball or chain sampling. This approach involves locating information-rich key informants and asking well-situated people to recommend potential participants (Patton, 1990). By asking a number of people who one should talk to the snowball gets bigger and bigger as more names of experience-rich informants are accumulated. In light of the initial difficulties explained above, virtual snowballing proved to be an extraordinarily useful tool for gaining access to adoptive families (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). In recent years there has been increasing interest in the use of social networking sites (SNSs) to contact hidden and hard-to-reach populations. However, most of the current research has concentrated on the use of online questionnaires rather than virtual snowballing for qualitative studies. I created a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a WordPress blog, all of which include details about my research project and myself. At the same time I contacted smaller accredited bodies and support groups for adoptive parents and experts to ask whether they would be interested in taking part in my project. The response was slow but effective.

When describing the methods used and the findings, 'family' is understood as the parent(s) and the adoptee(s) either under or over the age of 18. An adoptee is a person adopted internationally by an Italian married couple. An 'adopted child' is an adoptee up to the age of 18, and a 'young person' is understood to be older than 18; my sample

went up to the age of 25. Additionally, an expert is understood as someone who works in the field of adoption, either with parents or adoptees, or as someone who has experienced adoption at first hand.

The sample is made up of:

3 couples,

3 couples with adoptees (3 children and 1 young person)

3 single parents,

2 single parents with adoptees (2 children and 1 young person)

and 3 young adults.

Snowball sampling involves looking for informants with experience and connections to potential participants, and throughout the fieldwork I had the opportunity to develop a network of experts involved in the field of adoption. I had only virtual exchanges with some of them, but seven agreed to meet me for formal interviews regarding their take on my research project and its relevance. These experts came from different backgrounds: they consisted of a clinical psychologist; two service users; an academic with a background in psychology; an academic with background in education; a governmental researcher; and a pedagogue.

I accessed the sample through:

word of mouth (5 adopters, 3 experts);

Facebook (3 young adults, 5 adopters);

Twitter (3 experts, 1 adopter);

parents' support groups (2 groups, 1 expert).

Because of the nature of the sample, the interviews followed slightly different patterns. When the interviews only involved the parents they took place in their homes. When parents and adoptees were interviewed, I started with the parents and then moved on to the adopted child(ren). One family interview was conducted with the whole family at the same time at their request. Interviews with the young adults took place in public spaces such as quiet corners in coffee shops. The experts agreed to be interviewed in their offices.

The interviews took place in the adopters' homes, the experts' offices, or in the case of young adults in public spaces such as private rooms in bars. When the interviews involved both adopters and children, the parent(s) were interviewed first and then the children. Only one family asked to be interviewed all at the same time, and although the setting was different from the other interviews, I followed the interview memoire first with the parents and then with the adoptees. However, the interviews with the adoptees and the adopters were not always clearly separated. At times either children or parents interrupted the conversation, which potentially hindered the flow, limiting the spontaneity of the answers. In the interviews with only the parent(s) present and with the children out of the house, the flow of the interviews was not interrupted. But when the children were next door or were to be interviewed after the parents it is possible, although not verifiable, that this influenced the parents. The interviews where the children were present highlighted tensions as discussed later in the findings.

As already mentioned, three of the young adults were interviewed without my meeting their families. Initially I had intended to include only adoptive parents and children, but the use of social networks attracted the attention of some young people. After

interviewing two young adults within their family settings I decided to include a few more interviews with young people who had contacted me online showing an interest in my research, as it would give a more complete picture of the adoptees' perspective.

The initial criteria for inclusion were adoption through the accredited body; the adoptee having stayed with the family for at least two years (this was a requirement imposed by the accredited body), having come from outside Italy, and having a positive relationship in their family as assessed by the professional from the accredited body. With the change in access to the sample the criteria for inclusion changed to: an adoptive family, having adopted from outside Italy, with the children having been adopted at least two years ago. While the accredited body initially imposed the latter criterion the motive behind this certainly made me include it in my own criteria. In their view, the first two years as an adopted family require caution; the balance is newly established and an interview recalling the past could be upsetting. Having a geographical criterion for my sample would have meant excluding opportunities to interview families that were interested in sharing their experiences. The families were distributed across eight regions of Italy, mostly in the northern part. In the appendix there is a brief description of each family, but here I give a summary.

The 11 families adopted their children in the period 1990–2011. They adopted from South America, Eastern Europe and Asia (Colombia, Chile, Russia, Bulgaria, Nepal, India, and Brazil). None had experienced divorce, but two had lost their partner. Most had used medium and large accredited bodies, some of which had a Catholic philosophy. The qualifications and jobs of the adoptive families reflect the average presented in Italy's statisticsabout adoption, but two of the families had a working-class

background. Two of the families had adopted after having their own biological children, and one family had adopted both nationally and internationally. Four of the families in the sample had adopted only one child; the others had adopted two or more. Although interviews were conducted with 11 families, I decided not to use one interview: number 11. The reasons for this decision lay in the fact that the process of adoption that this family went through was different from the others, as they had adopted one adult of age and her sibling. In this family the type of communication that had developed between the children and the parents about the children's origins was completely different from the others, due to the nature of their adoption process. Prior to the interview it was not clarified that the process of adoption this family had undergone had been different from the other families' experiences. Once the interview started and the differences became clear it felt inappropriate to interrupt the interview.

The interviews with the adoptive parents

The objective in using in-depth interviews for this study was to enable the parents to share their experiences of adoption. Considering the nature of the study, the sensitive topic and the potentially painful memories, this type of interview seemed the most appropriate. Some academics have discussed the difficulties of eliciting stories during interviews; for example, there may be a tendency to suppress the flow of the conversation when using structured interviews (Mishler, 1986). Patton (2002) describes the importance of encouraging participants to speak in their own way, although this can at times shift the power balance in an interview; though relations of power are never equal, the disparity can be diminished. There was an additional layer to consider when interviewing the adoptive parents, as they have experienced interviews with social

workers in which they have been assessed, and this could have influenced their way of 'making meaning' during their interviews with me.

The interview schedule used with the adoptive parents is included in the appendix. I used this interview guide throughout all of the interviews with the adoptive parents, but the order of the topics changed according to the order created during the interviews. This is due to the nature of the in-depth interview itself, as the idea is to allow flexibility in the conversation. I started each interview by asking about their adoption. Then we moved on to the way they talk about the past and the amount of information they have available, and we concluded the interview by discussing life-story work. Towards the end of each family's interview I showed an example of a life-story book, which is part of the life story work. I took the example from www.lifestoryworks.org, which serves domestic adoption within the UK, although it does have a section for adoption wherethe birth family is of a different nationality. The aim of this last question was to understand whether the families would embrace this tool for their adoption process and whether they understood its relevance. Life-story work is a social work intervention with children and adults and is designed to acknowledge their past, present and future. It is prominently used with children who are currently in foster care and will be adopted nationally. Life-story books are often incorporated into this work as a visual aid and to provide reminders of important events or feelings. The application of the concept to children in foster care and adoption has been discussed in academia since the early 1980s (Rose, 2012). Life-story work is well documented in the UK and Australia, and has been incorporated into UK's adoption legislation. The scenario is slightly different for international adoption because not all sending countries have a network that allows this type of preparation prior to adoption (Ryan and Walker, 2007). I had two aims in

using the British example of life-story work: would Italian adoptive parents use it? And how would the parents react to the open exposure to the past of the child? My last research question looked at the potential use of life-story work, but this was not aimed at analysing the usefulness of the tool itself. Life-story work is used as a prompt for the discussion of communicative openness within the families, and as a route into talking about related topics.

The 11 interviews took place at the families' houses, which allowed me to observe their private environment. I was aware of the difficulty of finding the right balance between encouraging conversation and avoiding diversion from the main topic. Every interview started, developed and concluded differently. However the first questions were aimed at eliciting the interviewees' accounts. Prior to the beginning of the interview the parents received the information sheet, which had already been discussed over the phone, and I clarified the aims of my research. I paid particular attention to this aspect and to the wording used to describe the aims, as I wanted to avoid the feeling of assessment that they may have had during their interviews with social workers during the adoption process. During the interviews I had with me the voice recorder, the consent form, the information sheet, the interview guide, a notepad, an example of life-story work, and a tablet computer in case parents wanted to show me specific websites or material online.

The interviews were conducted in Italian, apart from two that were conducted in a regional German dialect. Typically, the interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, and took place in the kitchen or living room. In these rooms there were sufficient prompts and elements to elicit more stories about adoption or to bring the conversation back to the topic of adoption.

As explained in the next section, some of the families agreed that I could interview their children. When this occurred I interviewed the parents first and then concentrated on the children, apart from one case where I had the whole family around the dinner table. I am unable to evaluate whether the parents shared their stories differently because their children were in the house (but not in the room); nor was it possible to assess whether the children answered in the way their parents expected them to. However, when the parents agreed that I could interview their children it was not possible to make a clear distinction between the interview with the parents only and those with the children. To start with, there was an issue of ethical approval: I did not have approval from the Open University Research Ethics Committee to interview children alone. This meant that the parents (or the mother) were always close enough to hear the interviews. Inevitably the parents joined in with the interviews at various stages, which changed the dynamics of the conversation.

Interviews with children

For the interviews with the children I prepared various creative and engaging tools to use with them, with the aim of covering the topics. The interview schedule is included in the appendix. The objective was to cover the following topics: their present and the influence that adoption had had; what they remembered about their life before moving to Italy; their knowledge of their country of origin; and any recommendations the adoptees have on openness. The method applied was the in-depth interview with visual methods, together with the mosaic approach. Prior to the interviews I prepared a bag with a collection of tools to use in the interviews with children. As their ages ranged from 5 to 14 I had to be prepared to interact with children at different stages of their

childhood. For the younger children I had coloured paper, crayons, scissors, glitter glue, tissue paper, foam paper, Lego characters, Barbapapà[2] characters, a toy airplane, a map of the world, a paper watch, a newspaper and a magazine, and two emotion cards.. One of the emotion cards had a smiley face and the other had a sad face, and they were made with the intention of giving the interviewed children the chance to show me their comfort or discomfort with my questions. I had asked children not involved in the research to draw them for me, as I felt that a perfectly-drawn card could inhibit children in making drawings or collages with me. In the event of a child not being interested in drawing, my bag offered a variety of approaches to the conversations: a collage of images taken from magazines or newspapers (provided by myself), little dolls and puppets to support the telling of a story, and the option of drawing a vignette rather than just one single object. The interviews with the children taking place after those with their parents gave me the chance to understand the parents' approach to adoption and the child to get accustomed to my presence. The parents were present during the interview, due to the requirements of the ethics committee, and possibly because the parents would not have allowed the interview otherwise. The interviews started with a child-friendly explanation of my visit to their house. I tried to highlight how their experience was important to me and that every shared thought was appreciated. I presented the bag with the toys and papers and I asked if they wanted to draw or do handicrafts with me. I approached the first interview with a very young child feeling

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[2]Barbapapà is a series of children's books written in the 1970s by Annette Tison and Talus Taylor. It became a famous cartoon in the 1990s and is still streaming in Italy. The main characters in the books are the Barbapapà family, who are most notable for their ability to shapeshift at will. The father of the family is pink and papaya-shaped, whereas the mother is black with a more slender shape. Their colours are an uncommon representation of genders.

confident and ready to discuss his adoption, considering the number of engaging methods that I carried with me. This child was not ready to express himself through drawing, but instead wanted to talk about adoption. With the other interviews I had similar experiences: the children used some of the toys I had with me, but mostly they preferred to talk about adoption with me. In their houses there were pictures of their country of origin, or of some important recurrences (such as birthdays, Christmas), and these elicited dialogues. There are many considerations that can be made on these reactions to creative methods, starting with the importance of the drawings. As described earlier, creative artwork can represent a safe place to explain emotions and feelings, but it may have been that the children were not ready to express those feelings. Like their adoptive parents, adopted children go through many interviews and meetings with social workers. To them I was another stranger who had come to their house to ask them about adoption, which may have made them associate me with that role. Additionally, it emerged that conversations about adoption, trigged by pictures for example, happened often. Conversation seemed to be more commonly used by parents in relation to adoption, and one may say that these conversations are rehearsed over time, putting children at ease when speaking about adoption-related issues.

Interviews with young people

The interviews with the young people followed the structure of the interviews with the adoptive parents. Two of these interviews were conducted in conjunction with the parents' interviews, therefore in their homes. The other three were arranged independently and took place in cafés in their hometown. The interviews started with an explanation of the aims of the study and clarification of the consent form. The questions included their experience of adoption and their advice for future adoptive parents. The

topics that I wanted to discuss were laid out in front of me and visible. Similar to the

dynamics with the adoptive parents, the interviews followed their agenda rather than

mine, and the order of the topics was adjusted based on their responses. All of the

interviews lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and developed in different ways but

highlighted similar perceptions. Talking to the young people with the parents present no

doubt had an impact on their willingness to share some details more than others, but this

is something that I cannot estimate. However, as emphasised in the results section, the

young people interviewed with their parents did not touch upon private topics such as

romantic relationships.

Interviews with the experts

The topics of legislation, accredited bodies, post-adoption services and preparation of

the future families were discussed with each expert. The nature of the sample generated

a diverse set of data, meaning that looking for themes across these interviews was not

straightforward. The interview guide is included in the appendix. The five main topics

covered were the interviewee's background, perspective on Italian law, approach to

openness and opinion of life-story work, and lastly any comments or suggestions they

had. In addition to these interviews a group of female adoption service users agreed to

be included in the research through a focus group. Their unfamiliarity with academic

research meant that some of my requirements were not understood or followed. Focus

groups can be hard to record, follow and lead, and a good starting point for facilitating

them is conducting them in a quiet and private space. This group offered their

participation only if we could do it in a restaurant during their lunch break. This

situation proved impossible to manage, or at least impossible to consider as a focus

group in the academic sense. I kept the field notes of the meeting but have not included

them in the results section, although some reflections on this meeting can be found in the reflexive section of this chapter. I also attended two adoptive parent support group meetings on an informal basis. My participation was not formal as the parents did not permit me to record the meeting or take notes; however, the meetings proved useful in building my knowledge around the subject. In addition I attended two conferences about the search for origins, one organised by a university and the other by a governmental body.

Recording and transcribing the interviews

Most of the interviews were recorded using an encrypted digital recorder. An exception was made for four interviews: in three cases the interviewees did not give consent for a recording to be made but allowed me to take notes as we spoke. and one interview was conducted in a German regional dialect and its transcription would not have been possible. In retrospect, a recording could have been made of the latter interview for use as an oral aid to support the notes. The notes from the recorded interviews were written down right after the interviews took place and kept as a research diary. However, as the interview guide was always on display I wrote down the key concepts that the interviewees gave to each topic we discussed. This is thought to help to formulate pertinent questions, and can help to facilitate the analysis later (Patton, 2002). In the interviews that relied only on notes these were taken as the interview took place and immediately afterwards. As Lofland stated about notes: 'if not doing them, [the observer] might as well not be in the setting' (1971, p. 102). I transcribed every interview fully myself in Italian. Borrowing from Elliot's (2005) description of the different approaches to transcription, my method was to clean up the transcription, prioritising accessibility, rhythm and content, as opposed to methods that emphasise

either the conversation's details and punctuation or use units of discourse. As scholars have pointed out, transcribing is part of the process of analysing the data (Elliot, 2005).

The transcriptions contain punctuation such as: [...] indicating a pause, a question mark indicating a question, a comma indicating a clausal sentence and an exclamation mark indicating enthusiasm or anger in the conversation. When the interviewee raised her or his voice this was noted using capital letters, and laughs were noted in brackets as they occurred. Stock phrases, swear words and various non-lexical words such as "mmm", "aha", "ehh" (possibly only used in Italian to show indignation or surprise) were kept in the text, as were repetitions and informal expressions. Expressions of emotion and tension, breaks, coffee, food, phone calls and similar events were all reported in the transcription. Maintaining these aspects of the interviews in the transcription helped to keep the text as close as possible to the oral version. For an accurate representation of this co-construction my questions and interventions were transcribed (Elliot, 2005).

Analysis of the data

This study uses thematic analysis to look at the experiences of the adoptive families, children, young people and experts. In my analysis the focus was on the content of the different experiences that the adoptive parents, children, young adults and experts shared with me. Thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6). Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe thematic analysis as an exciting method for analysing data as it permits the discovery of themes and concepts in the interviews. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), when using thematic analysis a few decisions about this method need to be made explicitly, starting with what is understood as a theme. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) define a theme as

'capturing something important about the data in relation to the research question, and representing some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set'. In my analysis the themes were not determined based on the exact frequency of the topic emerging; they were based on the ability to capture a key concept in relation to the overall research questions. In addition, in the literature there are two different ways in which themes can be identified. Patton (1990) defines the 'inductive approach' as the way in which the themes identified are strongly linked to the data and not driven by the theoretical framework or the researcher's interests. The researcher cannot free him/herself from the theoretical knowledge, and this is not intended here; data do not fit within a pre-existing coding frame. This last approach is defined as 'theoretical' as it is driven by a specific theoretical framework; it provides a lower density of data overall but more comprehensive analysis of some parts of the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

I used Neil's (2009) definition of communicative openness to analyse the interviews with the adoptive parents and adoptees. Her definition includes these key concepts: a) adoption-related communications with an adopted child; (b) compassion and support for the connection between an adopted child, adoptive parents, and birth family; (c) emotional understanding and concern for an adopted child; (d) birth family communications; and (e) compassion and understanding for the birth family. In the process of arranging the themes based on Neil's categories I felt that this theoretical way of looking at the data was inadequate as it overlooked emerging themes that are not considered in Neil's definition of communicative openness. Because of this inadequacy I went back to using the inductive approach, looking for themes independently of a specific theoretical frame.

In terms of the level of analysis, Patton (1990) describes the analytical process as going from description of the themes to connecting them to theories and literature that deal with similar topics.

Riessman (2008, 2002b, 1993) describes narrative analysis as a method that seeks to preserve the 'wealth of detail contained in long sequences' (Riessman, 2008, p. 74). Although the narrative method is not applied in this study, its approach to preserving the sense of the whole story in the analysis of the data is appreciated and is applied where possible.

In practical terms, after applying the definition of communicative openness to my set of data I went back to the transcripts and followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) for a thematic analysis: familiarising myself with the data; generating the initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes; defining and naming the themes; and, producing a report. Since I wanted to preserve the narrative aspect of the interviews, I coded the events – the incidents that the interviewee had spoken about – rather than the individual words or sentences. Because the interviews were conducted in Italian or a German dialect I carried out the whole process of the analysis in Italian. The codes emerged from the data and were guided by the research questions. These codes were then put together under a theme, which I define and describe in the results section. I wrote a list of the codes for each interview with the parents, and then with these lists I started to look across the interviews, noticing what was similar and what differed. The literature on adoption guided me in these stages, but ultimately the codes and subsequently the themes emerged from the interviews. The process was similar for the

interviews with the young adults, the children and the experts. It is important to note that although some of the interviews with the young adults took place with their parents and others did not, they were analysed together. The differences are discussed in the results section. A further analysis was made of the interviews where the parents, children or young adults discussed adoption-related topics together. Once the themes were determined in Italian they were translated into English. I translated the quotes that support the themes myself.

My role as researcher

Every researcher decides how to develop their research questions and the methodology used, and hence must make multiple decisions about what to include and what to exclude, what is considered significant and what is not. As researchers we set the grounds and we determine the boundaries Reflexivity entails the researcher being aware of his/her effect on the process and outcomes of the research based on the premise that knowledge cannot be taken as disconnected from the knower (Steedman, 1991), and that in the social sciences there is only interpretation, as every set of data needs interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). In carrying out qualitative research it is impossible to remain 'outside' our subject matter; our presence, in whatever form, will have some kind of effect. Reflexive research takes account of the researcher's involvement. The concept and practice of reflexivity have been defined in many ways. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) describe it as another layer of analysis after the data have been interpreted. For Woolgar, reflexivity is 'the ethnographer of the text' (1988, p. 14). Here we distinguish between 'introspective' reflexivity (Finlay, 2002), 'methodological' reflexivity and 'epistemological' reflexivity (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). Finlay (2002) proposes five variants of reflexivity in order to find a way out of

the ambiguity that occurs when trying to define the personal reflexive role in research.: introspection; intersubjective reflection; mutual collaboration; social critique; and discursive deconstruction. The proposed way of understanding reflexivity shows 'different routes through the swamp depending on researchers' aims and focus' (Finlay, 2002, p. 212). My reflexive role has three 'routes': reflexivity as an intersubjective reflection, which is understood as exploration of the mutual meaning-making emerging from the research relationships; reflexivity as mutual cooperation, which is understood as the researcher, who is simultaneously a participant in her own research, engaging in cycles of mutual reflection and experience; and reflexivity as social critique, where the aim is to try to manage the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant.

The roles outlined above can be justified with some notes about my fieldwork, which, in Finlay's words, was a traceable journey. Overall I travelled roughly 5,000 km around Italy in order to meet all of my participants over a period of three months. Friends and acquaintances hosted me on a few occasions, and many families invited me for lunch or dinner. Almost every family had one or two dogs, and whoever hosted me offered a generous plate of pasta. As I am not a big pasta eater and dogs terrify me, I certainly had to reflect on my role as researcher versus myself, and also my safety. Should I say that all I can think about is whether the dog is going to jump on me? In many situations I questioned the amount of information that I wanted to disclose about myself. During some interviews the parents were eager to know my opinions on adoption and politics and it was difficult to evaluate whether my disclosure would give me access to more information or influence their replies. The questions may have started with something about my relationship status and my desire to have children. It felt like a difficult position to be in: disclosing one part of the requested details would have sufficed, and

giving an answer that did not match their expectations could have influenced the flow of the interview. During one interview with a young adult I shared a lot of personal experiences, triggered by a strong sense of empathy and the sensation that there was a need to do so to gain the complete picture. We had travelled down common paths and the intensity of the conversation made me naturally overcome the sense of privacy that prevailed in other situations. The management of my 'social' role in the context of the interview played an important role in the course of the fieldwork. Adoptive parents deal with social workers, lawyers, other adoptive parents and teachers, and I was none of these. Explaining why I was interested in conducting this research proved difficult: why would a non-adopted, childless, single woman in her late 20s living abroad be interested in understanding Italian adoptive parents' experiences? At times it felt that my being a doctoral candidate studying in the UK created a power imbalance. This sensation was clear with most of the experts that I met and interviewed, and was externalised by their questions about my work ambitions once I completed the doctorate. The message was clear: in their eyes there was no space for another person trying to conduct research in this field.

My fieldwork was challenging as well as extremely enjoyable. I moved out of my comfort zone countless times. First contacting and then meeting strangers to talk about their adoption, travelling for many hours on questionable trains and staying in hostels that I would not recommend, my own journey surely transpires from the interviews. Although I might have looked scared at times, all of the participants impressed me with their generosity and readiness to welcome me.

Chapter 5 The Families

The next three chapters' aims are to present what adoptive families, children, young people and professionals shared during the fieldwork in relation to the research questions set out in the previous chapters. The first chapter presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with the families; in the second, the results from the interviews with the children and young adults are discussed; and the last part covers information about adoption in Italy presented through the findings collected with the interviews conducted with adoption professionals. These findings intend to emphasise the recurring themes for each group of participants, providing evidence of how communication about the child's past takes place within Italian adoptive families. These three chapters present findings that will be placed within the theoretical framework and will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Findings from families

In this section I address how adoptive families talk about adoption within their family, as well as how parents communicate with children about their adoption.

The chapter is based on data collected through interviews with the adoptive parents. This section draws on the adoptive families' accounts to explore the ways in which the families manage and maintain an open conversation about the past of the adoptees. The accounts of the adopters show different means of keeping conversations going, and they demonstrate great variability in understandings of openness. The quotes from the interviews always include identification of the person speaking: K indicates myself; M indicates the mother; P indicates the father; Y the young person; and C the child. For children and young people the number of the family is also shown.

The thesis that I develop in this chapter is that each family constructed a story to talk about their adoption experience, and within each story they referred to prompts or artefacts used to aid communication within their family. In some families the role of these stories and aids in facilitating conversations was made explicit. In other families their roles emerged more implicitly in the conversations, and demonstrating the importance of the story. Differences between the families in which children took part in the interviews and the ones where only the parents were present were observed in the emphasis on the role and ownership of the story.

The first part of this chapter covers the different ways in which parents make the communication happen within the family; in the second part an analysis of the functions of the narratives will be presented; the third part discusses the difficulties caused by the social context and sensitive topics; and the fourth analyses the roles of accredited bodies, the State, and countries of origin in adoptive family communication. The fifth section is dedicated to interactions within the families, when the interviews were conducted with parents, children and/or young adults present. The findings from this study lay the groundwork for an overall understanding of what communicative openness represents for these families and for discussions on how the families share these details within the family.

The telling of the adoption story

The interviews conducted with the adoptive families (both with and without children present) had a similar structure: after introducing the research project, the first question explored their adoption. The wording for the first question changed slightly from one

interview to the other, but the most used opening question was: 'Could you please tell me about your adoption?', followed by 'Could you tell me more about your adoption', and 'How do you speak about your daughter's/son's past?', as well as 'How do you speak about adoption in your family?'. The aim of these opening questions was to allow parents to freely speak about their adoption and decide which information they felt comfortable sharing, as well as to enable me to get an overview of their experience. In table 1, the ways of discussing adoption-related issues are summarised, to give an overview of the sample discussed in this section.

An overview of the diverse story telling process			
PARTICIPANT	METHOD OF SHARING	BEFORE / AFTER CHANGE OF LAW	CHILDREN PRESENT OR NOT
FAMILY 1	Story	Before	YES+Young Person (YP)
FAMILY 2	Diary/Photos	After	YES
FAMILY 3	Photos	Before	Young Person (YP)
FAMILY 4	Photos/Objects	After	NO
FAMILY 5	Diary/Story	After	YES
FAMILY 6	Availability	Before and after	NO
FAMILY 7	Diary/Photos	After	NO
FAMILY 8	Availability/Photos	After	YES
FAMILY 9	Availability/Photos	Before and after	NO
FAMILY 10	Photos	Before	NO

Table 3 - The diverse story telling process

Family 1, Family 2, Family 3, Family 5 and Family 8 had their children and/or their young adult present at the interview. As explained in the methodology chapter, in order to interview children, the parents had to be present.

The law states that parents do not have choice whether they should tell their children they are adopted (see Chapter 2). Instead, the question becomes how to construct the adoption-related talk, and how to frame the circumstances surrounding the adoption. Various authors (for example Wrobel et al., 2003; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011) have asserted that the story told to adoptees frames the future conversation on adoption. One of the tasks for adoptive parents, therefore, is to discuss adoption with their children. This task is usually undertaken by adoptive parents because of their relationship with and their daily accessibility to their children. It involves giving children information about the circumstances that led to their adoption and details of their birth family.

All the interviews present common features, the most striking of which is the construction of a story around the adoption. Through the interview parents presented the main events, making the meaning of adoption for them, and presenting it to me. The narratives reported represent the ways in which parents enable the communication about adoption within their family. All of them present a story of their adoption, illuminating how they face the conversations about it. Through the interview parents constructed, and re-constructed the meaning of their adoption for me, or for what I represented to them. One of the most remarkable characteristics of the adoptive narratives told by the participants was their complexity, which was given by the amount of actors involved, and the various emotions described.

The adoptions happened in different periods of time and despite that, there are some similarities across the periods in which the adoptions took place. The change of law in 2001 (see Chapter 2) required future adoptive parents to take a preparation course, which was not required prior the change in the law. In the sample interviewed, the

preparation or the lack of preparation of the parents was mentioned, but even families with similar preparation had different approaches to communicative openness. Regardless of similarities or differences in the nature or timing of adoption, the parents showed different approaches to the discussion of the adoptee's past in the family. The different degrees of communicative openness within this sample show a common feature: a tension between what is 'right' to say and what not. Moreover there is a tension between the tradition of the closed adoption and the more recent discussion about being open.

The tools developed to aid the telling of the story

All parents shared the narrative of their adoptions, and some parents utilised 'tools' to develop and help the telling of their story, namely: child-friendly stories; interactive communication; and dossier.

Child-friendly stories

One way some of the families used to approach the conversations on adoption was through the telling of a fairy tale, a story appropriate for younger children. In one family for example, the parents created a bedtime story to explain the reasons for the adoption, what happened and how. With the story they wanted to justify the children's move from the country of origin to Italy. This story was told to both their children, once they arrived in Italy. In the interview about it, they said:

> M: Do you remember the story? There is a girl, there are parents, and the black angel made it possible for them to meet. But then, when the angel did this job, he asked himself: but if there is so much love available in this family, shouldn't I find another child for them?

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F2Y: Oh yes, I remember, that's true.

F1C: That is how I arrived, you have love and I needed love.

M: So, yes. There was another girl that needed to be loved, so the angel went to look for her and found her eventually. (Family 1)

This allows the building up of a *family story*, and it seems something positive memory for them. In another case, the story was developed with the aim of creating an analogy to a story that would be found in a biological family. The agency of this story is to make the family fit the frame of a 'traditional' family. In fact Mother 3 mentions that in order to carry out homework for school for the daughters, she created a story:

M:[...] When they arrived, I had a pink bow on the door, because they were born for me. And on the card I wrote that I waited for them for nine months. And on the card I wrote that they arrived from the belly of the airplane. So I built the story on that, saying that they were luckier than children arriving with the stork, because it was faster and drier. I tried to make the adoption look as something positive, rather than negative.

K: So you made a story for them?

M: Yes, but it could have been real and similar to a delivery. Because you discover you are pregnant through the stick, and I discovered it through the phone. (Family 3)

The story is not necessarily completely reinvented, but it seems to have the aim of compensating for *differences*, almost making adoption 'better' than the birth in a

biological family. In another case, the story of adoption was openly written to encourage speaking about the past of the adopted child:

> K: How do you talk about the story of adoption?
>
> M: More or less we talk about it, in the sense that we do talk about it. We decided to write a story for him, but it took the psychologist telling us how to do that, and then writing the text, finding the images, and choosing the right words. To cut it short, it's only in the past six months that we talked about it so clearly. (Family 5)

During the interview with this family, their son showed some confusion about the events that happened in his country of origin, and the mother adds:

> M: You see, sometimes there can be some confusion, but through the written story we always have a ready answer to the questions that might come up. I would have rather had this in another moment, but you can see how these [things] happen.
>
> K: I'm sorry for this.
>
> M: No, don't worry. This happens. You see, but even here it's a matter of finding the right word. [...] (Family 5)

The story helps the parents as well as the child to have some security about what to say, and which *words* to use. For example these stories could enable communication when questions come up, or when there is confusion about the past. They could also help to

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face adoption talks, because they are something written to refer to and the *words* have already been established.

Interactive communication

Parents reported using interactive ways of speaking about adoption, using artefacts to initiate adoption-related conversations. Often they used pictures and videos of the various places where the children were staying in their countries of origin, or places that represented a milestone in their process of adoption. During the interviews it was also reported that objects from the children's countries of origin were used, such as flags, statues, fabrics or recipe books.

Diary of life

In this group of materials, the 'diary of life' ('*diario de mi vida*' in Spanish) can be included. This is similar to the life-story work used in the UK, and consists of a diary with details about the birth family, foster family or institution where the child stayed before being adopted. The child is involved in the making of this diary and usually receives an explanation about the adoption. In my sample the 'diary of life' was used in the South American countries, and it involved the child and the use of pictures and drawings. The 'diary of life' was described as a very valid and easy way to speak about adoption. The families that used it mentioned that the work done to achieve such a final product was useful because it facilitated communication after arriving with the child in Italy:

P: I think it was a path guided by the psychologist. [...]

M: It was important to have facilitators in the communication, as it happens for actors. So, in South America the psychologist prepares the child, and the parents

need to be available to listen and tell her story without being scared to death. (Family 7)

Family 7 described the combined work done by the psychologist and social workers to produce the 'diary of life', as something to *refer* to once in Italy:

> P: I think it was a path guided by the psychologist. It must be said, however, that in South America now the practice has been adopted of writing the diary of life. In the diary of life, they start from birth, what scares the child and what doesn't scare her, who the best friends are, and then the future family, the pictures, what you should expect and what you should not expect. So there was a whole work behind it. And at one point she had this conversation with us: do you know my story? So then it was easy to understand in, trying to see her perspectives. (Family 7)

Therefore, the first step in talking about adoption had already taken place in the country of origin, allowing the parents to build a conversation on what was already discussed. Similarly, another family used the diary produced in the institution in South America as a base for conversations on adoption-related issues. The daughter commented on the diary:

> 'The diary was key for me, especially in negative times, for something to look at.' (Family 2)

The parents acknowledged the importance of the diary and the preparation for it, saying that it was useful for them as well. The diary was useful for the parents, as it facilitated the conversation about adoption. But in light of their account, it made it easier for the children to understand adoption too, the change adoption implies and the reasons for it. Family 4 referred to a diary as well, but unlike the other families, they created it with all the information they collected in the country of origin. They made it so that the children could go back to it at anytime.

Pictures and videos

All of the families that took part in the research referred to pictures and, or videos of the moment they met the adoptee and the time spent in the country of origin. However, a few placed more importance on their meanings. Watching the video of the adoption marked a *transition* for the eldest daughter in Family 1, for whom it had not been easy to look back and see herself as a child in the country of origin:

> M: We have an entire reportage on our time there, even a video.
>
> F1Y: That I had never seen and I finally watched it.
>
> M: It's not like you've never watched it; it's that you didn't want to watch it.
>
> F1Y: I was never able to do it.
>
> K: So you decided to watch it for a special occasion?
>
> F1Y: No, simply because it was a videotape that we put in the loft; it's not that I go there everyday. So one day I said 'oh well, let's watch the video.'
>
> M: Yes, but it was when you turned 18. (Family 1)

Father and Mother 9 referred to the pictures as something needed in the moments where their children wanted to *see themselves again*. It appeared that pictures give a sense of security, they are bridging the two worlds. To help this feeling, the parents also sent their pictures to the adoptees before they met:

> K: Do you have a lot of pictures of your time there?
>
> P: Yes, they also have a lot of pictures of the trips we had later. They all had the phase where they needed to see and look at themselves in the photos. The reason why we went to these places again is to help anchor them in this nebulous past.
>
> M: Before we left to go to adopt them, we sent pictures of us, our house, so that they could get to know us.
>
> P: Yes, it was useful to give them something to get attached to, in addition to words. It's a way to get prepared, to imagine. (Family 9)

Similarly, Family 4 created an environment full of objects of the country of origin of their children, including pictures. They collected all of this information so that their children could go back to it, and have something everlasting to *refer* to. The possibility to refer to these objects seems to create a sense of continuity with the country of origin, and it gives the chance to both children and parents to go back to them when they wish.

Dossier

A dossier is a set of appropriately authenticated and translated legal documents which are used in international adoption cases to process the adoption and to permit the adoptive parents to obtain legal custody of the child in the foreign court. This set of documents includes a medical record, a behavioural report, information about the birth family if known, and details about the institution or foster family where the adoptee

stayed until then. The quality of the content varies depending on the sending country releasing it: there is no set rule in international or national laws on the minimum required. It can vary from situations where there is almost no information about the adoptee, to situations where social services have a detailed record of the growth of the child. The dossier might be used as the only source of information in the open communication within the family, or it might not be considered a fundamental source. In Family 1, for example, in response to the question on the amount of information they have on the daughters' past, the mother said it is not a great deal. Nonetheless, she shared what they have and know, some of which the daughters had never heard before:

> M: Well, we have a very short dossier about you. We have information about where they think you were born, the possible date of birth, the weight, the vaccines, the city you belong to, the presumed religion, and information about your personality.
>
> F1Y: On the personality?
>
> P: Yes, with all the information, if you are quiet, not quiet.
>
> F1Y: Yeah, my presumed religion is?
>
> M: Oh Muslim.
>
> P: Muslim.

During this interview the youngest daughter found out that she had been admitted to hospital, and, therefore, they had more information about her:

> F1C: I did not know, really?
>
> M: You're discovering a lot of things, right?

F1C: I did not know.

P: Because she is a lover of hospitals, right?

M: You see that in your subconscious you carry this phobia for hospitals.

[...]

M: We don't have an ultrasound, but we have an Asian X-Ray. (Family 1)

Similarly, another family's narrative reveals that the documents given by the country of origin are not necessarily considered a wealth of information. During the interview were only the mother is present (but at a later stage she is joined by her daughter), it turns out that the documents include the names of the birth parents:

K: As parents, what chance do you have to reconstruct their story for them?

M: None.

K: When you went there, which documents did you receive?

M: Nothing, just the original birth certificate, where the names of the birth parents are written.

K: Oh [astonished].

M: [uncomfortable] Well, the law states that until 25, so the law states that you have to tell them that they are adopted. But you can only give them the information once they turn 25. (Family 3)

This particular moment in the interview caused tension, and my reaction put the mother in a situation where she felt she had to explain herself. The mother seems to assume that she does not have enough information to reconstruct something about the daughter's past, but value of the knowledge of the names of the birth parents is clear to some extent

to the mother. She seems to realise that it is important information, but because of the law she thinks she was not supposed to share it with her daughters. In the same interview, the mother added that she has more details on the documents received in Eastern Europe, but that she thinks it would hurt the daughters to know these details.

As well as different understandings of the use of dossiers, in the narratives families faced situations where only a small amount of details were available. From the dossiers of their children, Family 4, for instance, could only gather that they had been abandoned (as opposed to being orphans), their estimated date of birth and the estimated region of origin. In Family 6 there is a difference between what is available for their two adoptees:

> M: [...] I have fairly detailed documents for my son, but for my daughter they are full of blanks, basically they are empty for her. But I know where I met her and why I met her. And I also know that if she wants, my husband and I are happy to help her retrace her past. (Family 6)

It seems that for this family the presence of information from the country of origin would have been an asset for their story, but in Family 9 it feels very different:

> K: Are the documents available for them?
> M: Yes, look they are all up there.
> P: They never asked for the documents. We gave them to them when they had to talk about their story in school.
> M: Yes, they had them in their hands at least once. (Family 9)

The documents are available in the living room, but they do not seem to play a vital role in the conversations on adoption-related issues. In this extract what is discussed is the accessibility of the documents, rather than their contents. Thus, they do not appear to be a key in facing conversations about adoption.

The roles of the story

The narratives presented here reflect the complex nature of this task. The fairy tales, the diaries of life, the pictures, the videos and the dossiers used by the parents interviewed play a role in the overall family narrative. In the previous sections some of the meanings and functions of the narratives have been highlighted: compensating for differences, acknowledging differences, helping the children feel welcome and creating a sense of belonging. Here an exhaustive analysis will be presented.

Adoption as a positive experience

In most of the cases the narratives used by the families aimed to positively construct the adoption experience. Stories, prompts and conversations reported were used to reinforce the desire to have the children as a part of the family, as well as reinforcing their value. In particular, emphasis was placed on the positive intentions of the birth mothers or parents of placing their children and the consequent value of the children.

In Family 1 the topic of abandonment and family of origin came up because I asked how frequently it gets discussed. The parents seemed open about discussing the families of origin of their two daughters, who were described as where described as having the good fortune of having 'two sets' of parents. They explain the abandonment, giving a positive meaning to it:

M: We have always been confident in talking about the biological family. We always say that they are lucky, because they have two sets of parents, the biological parents and us. We want them to have a positive experience of the abandonment, not negative. [...]

M: When she asks me, 'Why didn't my mom keep me? Why did she leave me?' I say, 'Look, there is no greater act of a mother who gives up her child because she knows she cannot give her a future.' [...]

F2Y: It's an act of responsibility.

M: Yes, but not only; it is also an act of love.

P: An act of love and responsibility. (Family 1)

The explanation of the abandonment with a positive connotation for the daughters seems to be a way of incorporating the birth parents in their daily life, avoiding or overcoming the discussion about the feeling of being abandoned. In Family 7 the daughter's friend was pregnant and her parents suggested for her to have an abortion. The adoptive parents used this example to reinforce how the birth mother showed love for her by giving birth to her:

M: I quite often stressed that her mother, yes, left her, but that it was still a gesture of love. She didn't leave her before that; she gave her a life anyway. So our daughter said to her friend, 'You know that you can keep the baby and give it up for adoption?' I think that was when she realised the difference between a mother that throws you away and her case. (Family 7)

In Family 3, as we discussed the daughter's views of the birth mother, the adoptive mother similarly explained how she always told them to be grateful, as they had the chance to survive:

> M: She always talked about her with resentment, but I always said that at three months these girls were brought to a place where they had the chance to survive. And it's not like putting them in the trash, which I just don't understand and don't justify. At least your mother did this. It could be that she died, that she has 18 other kids, that the husband left her, you never know. The fact that you were twins and that you had a milk allergy. [...] So, there was a gesture of love. One girl always understood it, but the other one didn't. (Family 3)

The differences between the mother's and the daughter's perspective highlight the potential multiple stories about the child's past.

Another aspect that emerged from the parents' accounts is that the narrative is used to highlight special qualities that the children have. For example, in Family 7 the mother said:

> M: She brought you to an institution. She was brave, and, in fact, you are brave as well. That's something you have from your mother, so it's not all negative. (Family 7)

The mother is trying to put herself in the situation of the birth mother, trying to explain and justify giving the daughter up. Describing her as brave, and finding this quality in

the daughter's personality seems to create continuity in the form of a link between the past and the present.

Additionally, the narratives are used to explain the parents' long-lasting desire to be parents, and their excess of love. For instance, Family 1 spoke about a child-friendly story invented to talk about adoption and the availability of love, which explains and justifies the adoption. The mother in Family 5 told me that their desire to adopt is explained in the story they wrote for their son, and he intervened:

> M: In our book, in our story we explain it. We were already happy, but we were missing something.
>
> F5C: I was missing!
>
> M: Exactly, and what did you bring to us?
>
> F5C: Happiness!
>
> M: Where?
>
> F5C: Heart!
>
> M: Whose heart?
>
> F5C: Mummy!
>
> M: And?
>
> F5C: No, daddy no! [Laughing]

The son brought happiness, and this reinforces the positive meaning that adoption should have in light of the parents' narrative.

Adoptive parents described a range of levels of curiosity, with some children being curious and questioning adoption and others characterised as lacking curiosity or being uninterested. It also happened that there were both, curious and uninterested, in the same family. In Family 6, the mother spoke about the different amount of information available to their children, explaining that for her daughter the lack of details is a source of unhappiness, whereas for her son there is a lot more at his disposal. These differences meant for them a different approach in terms of sharing and having adoption-related conversations:

> M: We took a big white poster, and we cut together two houses: one was the institution and the other one was our house. And we cut little squares, one for each month between the institution and home. This helped him to quantify time; it helped him to understand the meaning of time. In the squares we had the names of people that were important in his life that took care of him while he was there. This is when we told him the name of his mother.
>
> [...]
>
> M: With my daughter we celebrated the birthdays she missed.
>
> K: It's a way to get back something.
>
> M: Yes, to retrieve something. We agreed on that. [...] It was beautiful, we made cakes for her and presents appropriate for her age. (Family 6)

Within the family they decided to use two different methods they felt were appropriate to the story of each of their children. These methods responded to what they felt was missing for them and to what the parents could do about it. Family 3 talked about the inability to meet individual needs:

M: The one that is still with us, she always said she would like to know who her biological parents are. She wants to know why they left them and who they are. The other sister wasn't interested in these conversations; she avoided them. She didn't want to hear the name of the country of origin. She is losing it [the ability to reason] now, also because of that. She wants to know about her parents. [...] We don't know if it's happening because she is out of her mind, or if it's something that grew over time and because she was afraid of hurting me.

The mother of Family 8 noted the differences in dealing with the adoption story for her children: the son talked and asked about it, but the daughter did not want to hear the story. She shows respect towards the two different ways of dealing with it.

K: So, do you speak about these shared memories of Eastern Europe? And do you get asked questions about it?

M: Well, my son is asking more than my daughter. He always spoke more than her, even at school. Now though he is avoiding some conversations. With my daughter it was harder, because she didn't want to hear her story, so we had to respect her timings. We spoke about it when she decided it was the right time. But just recently, my son, I don't know why, had the feeling he needed to watch the video about his early childhood. Regularly they express the wish to see themselves again, and to listen to the stories again. About the time here and the time there. We even laugh about those things sometimes.

K: But it's not the same for your daughter?

I: She is less interested. Only recently she told her favourite teacher that she has been adopted. (Family 8)

Being available and empathic

The practice of revealing the adoptive status and maintaining the conversations on the subject takes different forms in each family, and it is an on-going process. Some adopters expressed this continuity in the discussion about adoption as being available and respecting the adoptee's timing. Availability can also be understood as both the parents' willingness to step into their children's shoes and imagine how they would feel about it, and or their willingness to discuss it within the family.

In the case of Family 6, for example, I asked the mother at what moment they shared the stories with their children and when they showed them the documents. She said that it was the adoptee's choice:

M: [...] He read the documents when he was 12 years old.

K: Because he asked for them?

M: He asked for it. I really think that the first time you have to respect their timings, respect what they are asking you. You know, there are children that don't want to talk about adoption. You can't force it. But what you can do is be available. By available I mean, well, I mean having objects around in the house that are from their countries of origins. Some books, movies and things like these. (Family 6)

We developed the conversation on the availability of the documents, and she pointed out that the documents they have do not contain sensitive information, and therefore they can be accessible to their children. Once again this shows how the parents represent the gatekeepers of information and they make crucial selections. She says:

M: The documents are kept in a drawer. They are important; they can't just lie around. But they are accessible. But I'm lucky... they are accessible because they don't have any devastating information. Because if there was something devastating in them, I don't know.

K: Sorry, what do you mean by devastating?

M: Incest, abuse, you know things like these. I wouldn't be so open-minded about that. I think there are stages in life where you can disclose such information. (Family 6)

In a different stage of the interview she referred to the need to develop *continuity* for their children, using the details they have as well as using imagination to fill some of the gaps:

M: It is about how you communicate things. With affection you can communicate positive things, so you can do that with the memories the child doesn't have.

K: You are also referring to the story?

M: Yes, and you leave the space for her to ask questions: what do you remember? How do you imagine it? It doesn't have to be a memory; it can also

be about imagining something. You can also do that speaking about the birth

family. (Family 6)

This demonstrates how their children are respected, with their emotions and thoughts about the past. In addition, it shows their willingness to build something for the daughter, even if it means using imagination.

Similarly, Family 9 described the way they talk about adoption as something that happens daily, rather than as isolated episodes. *Acknowledging the differences*, used as a coping strategy to start and maintain the conversations on adoption-related issues, is expressed here:

K: How do you talk about adoption?

P: It's not about talking about adoption; it's living it in the daily life.

K: For example?

P: Well [hesitation], in the sense that this is family for us, and that's it. It's a way of being parents, and that's it.

M: And then, it's something that always comes up because they obviously know they have been adopted. Also our nationally adopted son that has Sri Lankan origins–well, that's also because of the colour of the skin–obviously we talk about it. (Family 9)

Family 8, in the extract presented at the end of the last section, discuss their availability to discuss adoption-related issues. By respecting children's timings and wishes, they try to face conversations about adoption when the children show interests. She describes

how her two children show different approaches to the adoption talk, whereby the son was interested, but the daughter was not engaging in these talks. They demonstrate that communication about adoption is a two-way system. It can come from both sides, but there has to be interest at the receiving end. The mother in Family 8 explains the differences between her children and shows respect for it.

The challenges faced by the stories

The parents' accounts report stories, and each story refers to a multitude of factors and actors. Factors include, for example, emotions, feelings, and reasons; actors are the birth family, people in the environment in which the family lives, the adoption agency and the State. What emerges through the interviews is that the conversations about adoption are not restricted to the child-parent one-off talk, but they are rather a life-long process. This process goes through different stages, such as the disclosure of sensitive topics and discussions about moral and ethical issues, both of which could be the source of difficulties. The process of developing the adoption story is also tested by factors like the environment in which the family lives, or the choice of specific adoption-related words. In this section the different challenges that their adoption stories faced will be analysed through the parents' accounts.

The environment outside the family

Often, adoption talk was triggered unexpectedly by events outside the family and beyond its control. Several adoptive parents reported incidents in which schools had set assignments that involved speaking about the family tree, or bringing baby photographs to talk about in class. Equally relevant in the accounts is the problem adoptees faced due to racism episodes that led to discussions related to adoption at home. Both issues

proved difficult and painful. For the exercises in school, children had little or no knowledge of their time as a baby or their family tree. In cases of racism, children had fingers pointed at them for their different skin colour. Racism, and race-related misunderstandings seemed a dominant theme for both families based in an urban city centre as well as families in smaller towns. Family 9 reported a few instances where they had been challenged due to racism issues. In this excerpt the parents express the difficulties their eldest son faced:

P: Then, there's another thing to say… When he arrived in 1995, immigration had begun to spread in Italy, and if you hear the stories of adopted children in the 70s, you don't immediately hear stories of racism. But, in fact, I believe it was because at that time there was a curiosity. […]

M: As long as we were all together, it was automatic that he was adopted, but when he started going out alone, he was automatically identified as an immigrant. [...] They said things like: shit negro, and things like that.

P: He changed a lot with this. (Family 9)

One major migration wave corresponded with his arrival in Italy, and it caused misinterpretations of his background. Similarly, in school, the same son was automatically identified as immigrant and he was signed up for integration courses in school:

P: When the school had more money, teachers could take a lot of courses on migration and its difficulties. And, for example, my son's teachers took these courses, and they automatically assimilated him as a foreign child, which isn't

correct. It's not correct, because at home we speak Italian, and maybe in the foreign family it isn't so. And other things wouldn't get considered, like that this child is not living with the biological family, so the problems would be different. (Family 9)

Family 4, who live in a smaller municipality, referred to relations with the community and their daily life outside the family, and they discussed problems caused by school and people living around them. Both of their adopted children have been associated with a group of immigrants due to their skin colour and language difficulties. Another episode of racism was reported by Family 1:

M: When we went with her for a walk along the boulevard, just here in [name of city], we heard someone saying at as a sentence, which we still remember well.

F1C: What sentence?

P: 'Look mummy a child with the skin colour of poor children!'

F1C: I absolutely didn't remember that! (Family 1)

On a more dramatic note, in Family 3 the adopted daughters experienced at least two violent attacks because of their origins. The mother described one of those incidents:

M: A few years ago my daughter was beaten up by a small gang... it was five girls.

K: And why?

M: Because of the colour of her skin.

K: What was the motivation?

M: 'You ugly nigger.' My daughter reacted and told them 'ugly fat cow'. The problem is that those girls were underage, so she got beaten up by them and she couldn't react. (Family 3)

School represented another difficulty for this family. Mother 3 described the difficulties the girls had with integrating in school. They were one year older than the other children, and they were separated from the rest of the class during physical education because they were taller and older than the other pupils. The mother reported that they felt left out, and 'different' because they were attending another physical education class. Also, in Family 8 the conversation about school highlights some difficulties:

K: How were the teachers in relation to adoption?

M: Let's say they were OK, but we had to prepare them. After that they did cooperate. It's a shame that the psychologist of the accredited body suggested for us to go to school and tell his story, but the teachers didn't feel confident in doing this. (Family 8)

Following the psychologist's advice, the adoptive parents in Family 8 explained to the schoolteachers that their children's story needed to be explained to the other pupils, and that would have helped to answer the questions that they might have had and avoid potential issues. However, the schoolteachers did not feel prepared enough to face this conversation in the classroom, fearing difficult questions to answer. After the mother mentioned this, she added that it was also difficult to deal with people they met on the streets:

M: [...] Well, in school there is a lot they have to learn, but it is also people [on the street]. Because when I'm walking down the street, they tell me that we did a good deed, I just can't stand it. [...] And they even say it in front of your children.(Family 8)

On a different note, the father in Family 7 commented on the role that the media play in forming opinions about adoption and kinship:

P: There is another thing I want to add about the role of media. They talk about DNA, right? And it seems that in DNA, it seems that it is even written if you like pasta or not. If my son steals a phone, it's because he is a thief – it's in his DNA. No, no, no. Sure, there is a problem, but nothing you can't deal with. (Family 7)

Mentioning media as something that could cause difficulties with their adoption story certainly stood out from the other comments. Overall, from the interviews it appears that the above-described factors put the families in the situation in which they have to face the conversations about adoption, but similarly these events can be seen as enabling the communication about adoption.

Sensitive topics

The conversations about adoption-related issues could lead to discussions of sensitive topics, such as poverty, sexual violence or abuse, infertility, abortion. Some parents reported that there were details of the children's history and origins that were so sensitive that only a few people knew about them.

In some families, the reasons for the adoption were not discussed with their children. Sometimes this information was not clearly stated in the documents, but given to the adopters by the social workers in the countries of origin, or people working with the children. In various stages of the interviews, these families expressed concerns around these difficult stories, and saw them as potential challenges.

In line with what the other parents said, the mother in Family 6 pointed out that the documents they have for their children do not contain sensitive information, and therefore they are available as mentioned in the section on 'availability and empathy'. The type of information stated on the documents influences their availability to talk about this subject. She addresses the potential limits with regard to sharing information with her children, but it is not an issue in their case.

The words

Almost all parents spoke about debates both within the family and outside it around the terminology used to refer to the birth family or even themselves. In Family 6, when talking about the terminology used to refer to the biological parents, the mother explained she does not allow the use of 'real mum' (in Italian: *mamma vera*), but it should not always be like that:

> M: It would be unfair if I would get upset because she calls her 'real mum, I mean the Asian mum, because she is also real.
>
> K: She is the one that exists as well in the equation.

M: She has two perfectly real mums, very real. One who was so real and gave birth to her, and the other one who keeps doing it [being mother]. In this respect, I don't see why as parents we should get scared by the words used by our children. (Family 6)

In this case the mother leaves her children with the decision about which terms to use when talking about the birth family. The adoptive parents and the children seem to have negotiated meanings around the words used to identify birth and adoptive families. With Family 9, it was noticeable that throughout the interview they used different words to refer to the biological families, and they explain more in this passage:

K: So, what do you call the biological parents then?

P: Well, for example she (the youngest daughter) always spoke about the real mum, real mum, so we had to explain to her.

M: Well yes, we are all real.

P: Let's say that over time we used different expressions, Asian mum, tummy mummy, the other mum. [...]

M: To make it easier for you, we are Mum and Dad and then we have the Asian mother.

P: Yes, but with our other daughter though, she was always speaking about Asian and Asia, and after that we understood that she thought it was the place where all children were born. She once asked, 'but [name of eldest brother] was born in the Asia of Asia, or in the Asia of Milan?' (Family 9)

Also in this case there was a need to explain the meaning of 'real mum', but also the need for an explanation about the meaning of new terminology. In Family 8, the argument around the use of certain words to define the birth family is made clear:

> K: Which words do you use to refer to the biological family?
>
> M: They say 'my mother' [when] they speak about the mum from Eastern Europe. But over the years they tend to forget. With my son we tried to give her a name because there was always confusion about it. But it made the situation worse. [...] Then we have this thing of the real mum, which happens when we have arguments. When they want to stab you in the back they use 'real mum'. (Family 8)

'Real mum' as opposed to 'fake – fictive mum', represents one difficulty families have in the telling of the adoption story. This issue is not merely linked to the use of words, but it also poses questions about the 'fictive' kinship adoption is creating, challenging the discourse around the supremacy of the biological ties over the adoptive kinship. The challenges that the discourses around biological and 'fictive' kinship are reflected in the ways in which adoptive families deal with the terminology used. Some of the parents seem to have looked for a compromise that makes them comfortable, and others seems to have tried to find a way that would help them, as well as their children.

The relationships with the actors in the stories

In the stories told by these adoptive families, another characteristic that emerged is a commonality of actors: the country of origin, the birth family and the State or the adoption agency. These actors are directly related to the adoption and to its process, and

every family had to interact with them. These could potentially overlap with some of the aspects discussed in the previous sections, like the 'outside world'. In fact, in that particular section, school and racism are mentioned, which could be associated with either the country of origin or the State.

The country of origin

In all adoption stories parents mentioned the country of origin, as it is obviously part of the plot. The way they discuss it varies from family to family. In some cases a great respect towards it is shown, and in other cases the families seem to create a certain distance from it. In the case of Family 7, the father shows a great enthusiasm for South America, saying that it helped to embrace the daughter's story:

> P: Well for us, well for us it was like a dream. I have a special connection to South America. We wanted to adopt from South America, but then when we realised it was [country of origin], it was incredible. (Family 7)

He not only showed great enthusiasm for South America, but also knowledge about its history. It is not possible to say to what extent this influenced the positive experience of adoption, but it certainly helped him to better understand the daughter's background. The same family also highlighted how important it was for them to feel a connection to the country of origin:

> M: If it had been Vietnam, it would have been something different.
>
> P: Yes, you didn't want to have a child from Eastern Europe either for example.
>
> M: True, I didn't want to. (Family 7)

Family 4 had objects and pictures of the country of origin in the whole house, and they described with respect its traditions. The parents also shared two stories about the family engaging with the country of origin. At a celebration in the village where they live, they decided to wear the traditional costumes. The son asked to wear half of the Italian traditional costume and half of his traditional Asian costume. Then, on the first day of school the son asked the mother for some spiritual protection. She suggested that he prays to his god, and the son asked to carry a little Buddha statue to school to protect him. Throughout the interview the parents highlighted the importance of maintaining a double identity. This family demonstrates respect towards their children's past and origins by highlighting the maintenance of a double identity.

Besides incorporation of the country of origin into like in Italy, families also made trips back there for the purposes of maintaining a connection to the country of origin. For example Family 9 has many pictures of their trips back to the countries of origin, and they see these trips as an opportunity to give to their children a firm base and a connection to these countries. But as shown in the next excerpt the trips are perceived as important for the children as well:

> K: Are these trips adding some information for your children?
>
> M: In my opinion yes, and we hope they help us to recompose the pieces of their stories.
>
> P: I think so, and I think they help us as well. So it becomes familiar, for us as well. We don't want to go there after only 30 years, do we? *We* learned a lot about traditions, food, but it's for them as well. (Family 9)

Parents' desire to become more familiar with the different countries of origin of their children shows their interest and the acknowledgement of the country's significance in their children's lives. In contrast, Family 3 refers to the country of origin with a rather negative tone:

> K: Was it helpful to understand the context?
>
> M: Well, they were in an orphanage... it was horrible, like a stilt house, with small beds that looked like places for dogs. They were eating out of bowls and what they were eating... they said it was a bean soup. (Family 3)

Similarly, Family 5, when talking about the country of origin expressed disrespect towards it, particularly when I asked about going back there:

> K: Have you already talked about going back to South America?
>
> M: Not for now. It's early, and it's not really cheap to go there, and it's not a safe country. [lowers the voice] It's a dangerous place, and also very racist towards the colour of skin. As we were walking there, they told us: '*Que Dios lo bendiga*' (God bless you), as if to wish us good luck with a black child. (Family 5)

The ways in which the families decide to refer to the country of origin is influencing the adoption story they create, and it is linked to the way they generally communicate about adoption with their child or children.

As part of the so-called 'adoption triad', the birth family was always mentioned in the conversations that emerged from the interviews with the adoptive families. However, the way families dealt with it differed: from mentioning the birth family in the bedtime prayer to fearing they could come back for their children. Birth family and the way abandonment is portrayed are interwoven: the ways in which parents explain or justify the abandonment is linked to the way the birth family is seen, and it is included in the story created by the parents.

Family 1 gave a positive example of the ways in which they speak about the birth family and the ways in which their daughters feel they can talk about them. The eldest daughter wrote letters to her biological mother:

> M: But she always asked, and the distress of her biological mother, she always felt it. [to daughter] You wrote a lot of letters to your mother.
>
> K: It's a powerful way of communicating.
>
> M: It's a beautiful way of communicating, where she told her about her life, and where she asked why her mother made this decision. [...]
>
> M: Yes, amazing. At the same time she was hiding it from us. She didn't want to cause me any pain for having this curiosity, and she didn't feel right about having this curiosity. But she had this curiosity. She went to great lengths to hide these letters, but then she also made a big effort to let me have them. It happened without getting them directly from her. (Family 1)

As the mother was talking about this, the daughter (who at a later stage interrupted) became emotional and began to cry. The moment did not create tension in the room, but, rather, it brought the family (and possibly me as well) closer to the daughter.

With Family 5, the respect and empathy for the birth parents emerged in two different moments of the interview. In the next excerpt the mother speaks about her perceptions of the birth family's position in the whole process of adoption:

M: [...] And then I think that the biological parents are disadvantaged compared to the adoptive parents. They are staying there. It's a change for them as well. I think they should take the courses as well, to explain to them what happens afterwards, to explain certain situations. Also, as adoptive parents you ask yourself thousands of questions, if it's the right thing, if we are doing the right thing. You know it's not always easy to understand whether it's the right direction you are taking.

K: You mean about the way of being a parent?

M: Yes, you ask yourself whether you are a good parent or not.

K: But do you think the preparation you got was enough to get through these moments?

M: Yes, but compared to what a biological parent has to face... they have to face a lot more; it's harder. (Family 5)

She put herself in the position of the birth parents, showing understanding and empathy for what it might mean for them to give a child up for adoption. When her son joined the interview, they told me that in his bedtime prayer, he mentions both mothers. The

bedtime prayer is also showing empathy towards the birth mother, but also respect towards the child's past.

In Family 7, they also showed empathy for the birth mother, when they described giving the daughter in adoption as a gesture of love. However, their position is contrasting with what the daughter feels towards the birth mother:

> M: For example she says, 'My mother, that bitch.' And that's when you have to intervene and say, 'No. You are 16 years old now. Would you be able to keep a child? [...] You have been in her care for one and a half years, but why? Because the grandmother was still there and then she died. Poor her, she was probably all alone, without a job, and what could she do with you?' (Family 7)

As the conversation went on, the mother reinforced her views, and her empathy towards the birth mother's gesture. She describes her as 'brave', aiming to reinforce the positive side of taking her to the institution. Additionally, the parents showed consideration for the daughter's birth family by saying they adopted the rest of her family as well:

> P: We also adopted her family, even though we never met them. We loved them without knowing them. If she wants one day, we could meet them. But we also loved her past, even without knowing it. (Family 7)

Although these quotes have been already used, they show the contrast with the other families, and the perception of the birth family:

M: The one that is still with us, she always said she would like to know who her biological parents are. She wants to know why they left them, and who they are. [...]

M: Yes, because when I heard these things from her other sister, I cried my eyes out. I was afraid they would take them away from me. [...]

M: We should be honest about it, but I honestly don't give a sod about them. And the crazy one always talked about her mother as 'that whore, that bitch.' With hate, and she never even considered the father. (Family 3)

She reflected on her reactions when the daughter asked about the biological parents, they seem to provoke fear and concern. Interestingly, the mother talked about the birth father as well, wondering why he is not considered in the equation. As she tried to understand the reasons why the daughter called her biological mother 'bitch' she said that she always told them how grateful they should be because they had the chance to survive:

M: She always talked about her with resentment, but I always said that at three months these girls were brought to a place where they had the chance to survive. And it's not like putting them in the trash, which I just don't understand and don't justify. At least your mother did this, it could be that she died, that she has other 18 kids, that the husband left her, you never know. The fact that you were twins and that you had a milk allergy. [...] So, there was a gesture of love. One girl always understood it, but the other one didn't. (Family 3)

The description she gave of the gesture of love has both positive and negative meanings: the birth mother could have done worse than leaving them in the institution, but on the other hand they are twins with an allergy. Bringing them to the institution was a gesture of love, but that acknowledgement is still not enough for the adoptive mother overcome the fear of losing her daughters.

The State and the accredited bodies

Although the interviews were concentrated around the topic of the story of adoption, and about the discussion of the past of the adoptee, when asked about the process itself, parents mentioned the State or the adoption agency. In some cases, these last actors were influential in the adoption story. In some of the families' stories it seemed these mediators had a negative influence, while in others it appeared to be positive.

Family 4 had mixed feelings about this aspect. Both parents expressed distress about the process of adoption. They explained that they felt invaded in their personal sphere, especially by the social workers. The mother made a strong statement about the process of adoption: family should not be formed through the intervention of the State because it is an invasion of the private sphere by the public one. Nonetheless, they felt that the preparation offered by the accredited body helped them to develop a confidence when dealing with the challenges posed by adoption.

Similarly, the mother in Family 8 showed appreciation for the support she received from the accredited body, and valued the help from the psychologist:

M: We really got along well with the psychologist in this accredited body. It was love at first sight. I have to say that during the first adoption we received great support. This psychologist made the difference. But during the second adoption, the psychologist had left. It was still good, but there was a difference. (Family 8)

Family 9 referred to the role of social workers, explaining that they faced problems during their third adoption process, as the social workers suggested another adoption would cause them more harm than anything else:

P: They told us we would be responsible for destroying the balance in the family.

M: Obviously they tried to save the situation and then added that it's our job to find a new balance. But then they said again that it was our own choice to destroy the balance in the family. (Family 9)

This clearly had an impact on them, as they remember the words used by this person. But for the same family there was a positive experience with the accredited body where they particularly valued a few aspects of their team:

M: It is the chance to share and exchange experiences. It's a debate controlled and guided by the professionals. [...] It's a fundamental moment to understand and interact with the other families. [...]

P: These psychologists have the extra oomph. For example, those who have studied psychology but don't have a specialisation or don't understand adoption-related issues, they just can't see things. (Family 9)

The dynamics during the interviews

Although the aim of the research was not to focus on the family dynamics during the interviews, it is worth discussing the interplay between family members during interviews that included at least one parent and the adoptee/s. This applies to Family 1, Family 2, Family 3, Family 5 and Family 8. All of these families share a tension between the parents and the adoptees in the process of telling the story. Ultimately whose story is it? Are there multiple stories told, but one is 'official'? For example, at the beginning of the interview with Family 1, the daughter started talking about the place where she stayed before the adoption and the mother interrupted:

K: When you were in Asia, where did you stay? With your family, or in an institution?

F1Y: No, I was [interruption]

M: No, she was in an institution. As far as we know she was abandoned at the institution directly by her mother [...] (Family 1)

From this start of the interview it seems that the mother wanted to take the lead in the conversations although the eldest daughter is willing to share adoption-related information. In Family 2, when I asked the daughter if she remembered anything about her past, the mother interrupted and said no, that she does not remember. Interestingly, the daughter disputed that assertion:

F2C: No, I remember things. I remember where we played, the inner courtyard, the street, my home. Some things I remember. (Family 2)

With Family 5, something similar happened: as I talked with the mother about the information they have about the adoption, the son interrupted her. However, she did not allow him to talk:

> M: When they say that older kids are not so difficult, in fact it's not true. In the end it is true that when they are so young, like him, we don't know his past, and we cannot fill this gap. And I'm sorry for it, really. [...] But compared to those who have memories, working through memories will be more difficult.
>
> F5C: But I 've got the memories.
>
> K: What do you remember?
>
> M: Let me do the talking. (Family 5)

The reasons for the interruption are not made clear, but it is still an interruption of a flow in the conversation about his past and memories. In Family 8, while we were talking about their 'second birth' in their adoptive family, I asked the children if they remembered something about their birth mothers:

> K: And what do you remember of your birth mothers?
>
> I: They don't remember one thing.
>
> F8C1: It's not true.
>
> I: Oh really?
>
> F8C1: She was bad.
>
> I: Oh OK.

Although the question is aimed at their children, the mother replies, possibly trying to stop a conversation about the birth family. These passages are reported here to give an account of the tension that I perceived as an interviewer at certain stages of the interview. It is not possible to question whose story it is, only basing the answer on excerpts such as the ones above, but it is certainly important to highlight the fact that parents took the lead in the interviews. Although this is not necessarily confirmed through the interviews, and it is not directly investigated, it seems that there are multiple narratives, and that the one I listened to is what is thought to be the 'official' one.

Life story work

In this section, the fourth research question is addressed; namely the one examining the implications of using life-story work on the adoptive families interviewed. Considering the overall aims of the research, asking parents about the use of life-story work was useful to understand the implications for the use of this tool in the Italian context and how they may react when put in a situation where the past of the adoptee is not only discussed, but is written with the child. The variety of the sample is also reflected in this section, because every family had a different approach dependent upon their formation and background. Striking differences were found between the families that had something similar made for them in the country of origin and those who did not.

Families with the life-story work done in the country of originThree of the families interviewed had something similar to life-story work completed in the country of origin. The name used for this tool or preparation varies between countries. In my sample, the Southern American countries described it as the *diario de mi vida* (translated from Spanish: diary of my life). Both parents and children from these three families spoke

very positively about this tool. In particular, they underlined the importance of going back to it in moments of need.

In family 7, the parents describe the daughter's attitude towards the discourse of adoption as very open. They suggest that the work done in South America by the psychologist helped to facilitate the communication. Combined with this work, social workers made a 'diary of life', where they collected information and pictures of her life there in order to have something to refer to once in Italy:

> P: I think it was a path guided by the psychologist. It must be said however, that in South America now, the practice of writing the diary of life has been adopted. In the diary of life, they start from birth, what scares the child and what doesn't scare her, who her best friends are etc. And then the future family, the pictures, what you expect and what you do not expect. So there was a whole work behind it. And at one point, she had this conversation with us: do you know my story? So then it was easy to fit in, trying to understand. (Family 7)

This diary is described as important, because it helps her to look back on the past and feel somehow grounded:

> P: I think the diary is fundamental, a discourse around the story because during adolescence, during the rebellion [...] the chance to have a story where you can recognise yourself, even during lonely times, it's vital. It's like having benchmarks. (Family 7)

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As the parents talk about school, they state the importance of the diary as a tool to tell her story:

> M: We have the diary, yes. And I have to say that it was very useful in those situations that are unavoidable, well, by that I mean those situations where the teacher is asking to tell her story and so she is talking about her first institute, of the rest, without problems.
>
> P: It was natural for her to talk about it, even with the teacher. (Family 7)

In family 2, the parents speak about their use of this diary and its use as a basis for their conversations about their daughter's past. However, in this family, the parents showed willingness to discuss her past to the extent that the information was already written and discussed with her; they were not ready to face other conversations or deeper topics related to the past. The diary was used to set the amount of information they should disclose to their daughter about her past. When I asked the daughter directly about the diary she wrote when she was in South America, she did not remember who made it with her, but she said:

> 'The diary was key for me, especially in negative times, for something to look at.' (Family 2)

The account from this family demonstrates the importance of the diary and the influence it had on the parents' decisions to share or suppress certain information.

With family 5, the 'diary of life' made in the country of origin was used as a base for the story they wrote for their son once they arrived in Italy. The facts and the pictures put in the diary were used in the story. Their aim was to simplify the diary and to have a narration for him. In this manner, they embraced the tool and adapted it to the age of their son.

Families who had a positive response to the life-story work

Family 1, which went through the process of adoption before preparation courses were compulsory, looked at an example and commented positively. They felt it was something they missed in their process of adoption and that would have been helpful. The daughters also confirmed that this would have been something useful for them.

Family 4 felt that they had made something similar to the 'life story book'. They collected all the information they had, even details about the birth parents where possible. All this information and pictures were kept together in a diary, so that children could go back to it at any stage. The diary contained details about the time between the match with the parents and the adoption itself, because the institutes kept the family informed about the development of their children through emails and pictures.

Family 3, for example, looked with interest at the example of the 'life story book' presented to them:

> K: […] In the UK, they prepare this book, called the 'life story book', where they put together all the information available on the child, from day one until the adoption takes place. Here is an example [showing it]

M: We don't do this, absolutely not.

D1: I would say that something like this needs to be done, it would be really helpful. I really think it's just right. It helps so that you have something that helps you remember. (Family 3)

In family 9, where they have adopted three children in various stages through different processes, they showed interest in the life-story work. When I showed them the example, they say:

K: This is my last question, this is an example of something they use in the UK, it's called life-story work. They use it for the domestic adoption and it collects as much as is known about the child. What do you think about it?

P: Somehow we have something like this, in our documents we have something similar. If they want to, they have access to this information.

M: [at the same time as P] it looks very interesting, it would be great to have such a booklet.

P: They have a booklet with our pictures that we sent before we met them. Everything is available to them. But then of course, the American or British style of diary, no, we don't have that.

M: Actually true, we don't have that.

P: Obviously it would be useful, because it is something that they could carry with them and show to their children. But we saved the pictures we received from the orphanages, and we have them together with the first pictures we have from here.

M: Yes, but we don't have something like a diary. (Family 9)

Families with mixed reactions

In the interview with family 6, the mother explains that she feels that the life-story work is already in use in the Italian context, but is not described as such. Her feeling is that parents should choose what they feel more comfortable with and that, if anything, the issue is talking about the past. On the same subject, but at a different stage of the interview, she describes the importance of 'empowering' the adoptee through the information on their story:

> M: They should get the feeling that they really have information on adoption in their hands (under control). If, for example, a son wants to visit the country of origin, they should be able to do that. But, if a son decides not do that, he is not wrong because of that.
>
> K: No, it's a choice.
>
> M: Listening is key. In the projects on auto-narration [...] there is a paradigm: we let all adopted children do that. But if the child doesn't want to? The method works only when everybody involved feels it. (Family 6)

In this part of the interview, she is criticising methods that encourage adoptees and parents to discuss the past of the child. However, she is stating that the child should be listened to and his/her wishes followed. The method used should be flexible and should work around the child's requests. As I then introduce the subject of life-story work, she tells me how they developed their own way of discussing the children's past with them:

M: We took a big white poster and we cut two houses together: one was the institute and the other one was our house. And we cut little squares, one for each month between the institute and home. This helped him to quantify time, it helped him to gather the meaning of time. In the squares, we had the names of people that were important in his life that took care of him whilst he was there. It was at this time that we told him the name of his mother.

[...]

M: With my daughter we celebrated the birthdays she missed.

K: It's a way to get back something

M: Yes, to retrieve something. We agreed on that. [...] It was beautiful, we made cakes for her and presents adequate to her age. (Family 6)

Within the family, they decided to use two different methods they felt were appropriate to the story of each of their children. The methods used by this family relate to what the children felt was missing for them but, ultimately what the parents could do about it. It shows the flexibility and willingness of both parents to question their ways of talking about adoption.

In family 8, the mother feels they have something like the life-story work, but she would not include details of her children's past:

K: But, going back to the story of adoption and speaking about the past, I was wondering what you think of the idea of the life-story work, a sort of book in which you collect information from children from day zero - of course, if they are available.

M: Well, we have all this information but only from the day we have known them. We could also do it, but, even though I have some details of what happened before us, I wouldn't put them in. I think I would leave them out, because I would like to have it from when we met. I could make it for them.

K: Don't you think it would be nice to do with them?

M: Yes, it also might be an idea for something to do altogether.

K: Do you think it could be a way to talk about their past?

M: It could be one way to talk about the past , but I think every parent needs to find the right amount of information to give away and choose the what to say it.

K: Of course. (Family 8)

This is the family who celebrate the 'second birth' of their children as a clear cut with the past.

My objective was to understand how families were reacting to this tool, which I only introduced towards the end of our interviews in order not to influence the rest of the conversation. Overall, the reactions were mixed: one family already had it and fully supported it, while another said it would be useful, but mostly thought it would help the children rather than themselves, yet others again did not agree and were resistant to methods to speak about the past.

Summary

From the interviews conducted with the adoptive parents it emerged that all of them developed an adoption story to support them in talking about it. These stories present different features, some shared by most of the families and some shared only by a few.

All families referred to the use of tools to *enable, support* and *enhance* their narrative: child-friendly stories, dossiers, pictures, videos, objects from the country of origin, and or drawings. However, not all families used these materials for the same purposes or valued them in the same way. For example, for some the child's dossier did not contain valuable information, and for others every detail collected was glorified. Parents made selections about which information needed to be shared, and which one could be avoided. Generally, the stories were constructed thinking of the child they were aimed to, and in some cases they demonstrated availability and empathy towards the child, as well as the birth family.

The stories were used to **enable talking** about the adoption, in particular the past of the child. Some of the stories incorporated positive talks about adoption, and other stories were built around the expressed interests and (perceived) needs of the adoptive child. All families either implicitly or explicitly mentioned difficulties that created challenges for the construction of the story. The biggest **challenge faced** by families appeared to be the environment outside the family. Schools, relatives, neighbours, and the community they live in seemed to have destabilised their stories at times, by intentionally or unintentionally asking about specific pieces. Parents also mentioned sensitive topics related to the past of the child as a strain, which influenced their adoption talks. Issues like abortion, poverty, and sexual violence, which played a role in the decision to give some of the children away, were often topics avoided in the family. Only one family discussed openly the reasons why the daughter may have been given for adoption. In other families the reasons were not discussed openly if the information would presumably cause problems for the child's self-esteem. Linked to this, parents showed difficulties with the words used to refer to the birth family in the adoption talk: many

for example referred to the *'mamma vera',* the 'real mum', as a point of discussion or confusion. These words challenge the discourses of kinship and perceptions of the validity of the family relationships formed through adoption.

Within the adoption stories, parents mentioned, apart from themselves and their children, the birth families, the countries of origin and the State together with accredited bodies. The birth families were at times included positively in the story; in some accounts the adoptive parents showed empathy towards them; and for some families the idea of including them caused tensions. The countries of origin and the State also play a remarkable role in their stories and elicit both positive and negative accounts. On the one hand, the State and the accredited agencies are seen as actors that intrude and disrupt the formation of the adoption story. On the other hand, individuals are seen as supportive of the families' journeys. Similarly, there were two different perspectives of the role of countries of origin. On the one hand, their importance is acknowledged, and they play an important role in the story. On the other hand, countries of origin are part of the background information rather than actively considered in the narrative, and they sometimes appear to be blamed for issues that have emerged during the adoption. The different experiences that the adoptive parents reported in terms of experiences with the accredited bodies and the support given by the psychologists, confirms the information gathered from professionals regarding the variety in services provided to adoptive parents, and the formation given prior adoption.

Although it was not intended to be part of the research, when interviewing parents and children together, it was noticeable that in some cases the parents took the lead in the conversations, denial or dismissing information coming from their children. When

children started to disclose some personal memories, it appeared to cause distress in the parents. Because not all interviews were conducted with the children or young people present, it is not possible to observe a pattern for this specific feature of the interviews.

As highlighted previously, the concepts of 'displaying families' and 'family practices' are examining tools that are used to construct their families. As already presented in Finch's work, 'displaying families' encourages to use of stories, objects, pictures and other tools to communicate family ties and values. My question that aimed to understand the parents' perspective on the use of life-story work revealed mixed feelings about discussing the past of the adoptee. The families that had been exposed to this method (used in the country of origin) appreciated its usefulness and importance for themselves as well as for the adoptee. The parents that understood the importance of communication about the past, but did not use something similar, demonstrated interest in this way of working. However, the parents who did not support discussions of the past did not necessarily understand the usefulness of writing the child's story in a booklet, or the importance of confronting one's past.

Chapter 6 Young People

Children's knowledge of adoption changes alongside their development and, as their conception of adoption broadens, they begin to appreciate the uniqueness of their family status, including the many difficulties it entails (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2014). The sample of young people is formed of five young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. Three of the five, Y3, Y4 and Y5, were interviewed without their parents present, whereas the other two, Y1 and Y2 were interviewed in the family setting. The parents' presence for two of the young adults influenced the conversations, but the extent of this influence is not directly measurable. The three young adults who took part in this research detached from the family setting contacted me directly and offered their availability.

The interviews where the family was present aimed to understand the young adults' knowledge of their adoption, their openness and opinions about it. Similarly, in the interviews where the parents were not present, the questions examined their adoption, their experiences of openness and their feelings about being adopted. These questions aimed to tackle the young adults' perceptions of the adoption process and their parents' openness about it. The opening questions were: 'When were adopted?'; 'Where are you from?'; 'Do you talk about adoption in your family?'. Since these questions were linked to their daily lives, many other related topics emerged.

Throughout these five interviews, common themes emerged. These included normality-integration, racism; honesty; the making of the family; relationships and search for origins and the institutions. The first two themes emerged across all five young adults,

with and without their parents present. However, the other three themes emerged in the interviews with where I interviewed the young adults alone. All the five themes could be clustered together into two broader categories: the family environment and the social environment. This resonates with what the parents reported in their interviews.

Normality-integration

The adoptive status of the interviewees is often visible and obvious due to their traits, which means that the disclosure of this information is not always needed. On the other hand, this obviousness means that there was no hiding behind the adoptive status. These young adults highlighted the difficulty they encounter in feeling 'normal' in their daily life. The concept of normality is certainly broad; in the examples shown it refers to feeling integrated in the community, and the feeling of having the same abilities as other Italian young adults. During one interview I break the ice by asking the young adult if she took part in other interviews in the past, and she explains she used the fairy tale of Pinocchio to explain the feeling of integration:

> K: Did you talk about adoption with other people?
>
> YP5: Yes, actually a few times. Last time I went to a show and with a friend we dressed up as Pinocchios.
>
> K: Why as Pinocchios?
>
> YP5: We wanted to use this character because Mr Geppetto takes a piece of wood and he shapes it based on the child he wants and he adopts him. He does it although he is not a real child. And the path that Pinocchio has to take to become a real child is similar to what we adoptees have to do. And then Pinocchio doesn't see himself in the other children, because he is made of wood. We meet

each other, so it's two Pinocchios, and we realise we are different and we question this difference. By the end of the interview we become normal.

Immediately after this explanation the situation becomes more relaxed and I ask to explain why she uses the word 'normal', and if she ever felt inadequate as an adopted daughter:

K: Have you ever felt wrong or inappropriate as adopted daughter?

YP5: I don't want to say that I felt wrong, but out of place yes. You always feel you are not adequate.

K: Why do you think is that?

YP5: Well, let me give you an example: you have the thing where they say 'You are adopted so you are lucky'. In the sense that people say: 'Oh, wow you were adopted, that's great!' Of course, it's lucky, but it isn't great or beautiful. And then you have people feeling sorry for you. It's not like we have cancer. Oh, I was forgetting, there are people that compliment you and say it's wonderful to help countries in need. I just miss being normal, like everybody else.

This excerpt is powerful, because it contains people's, 'outsiders'' words on how adoption can be perceived. She is looking for normality: feeling as others do and having a story that does not invoke comments or feelings of pity. The contrasting reactions she is reporting, being lucky and people feeling sorry for her, make her standout: she acknowledges the opportunity she had, whilst not belittling the challenge of being an adoptee. In the same interview, we keep talking about the influence adoption has in her daily life, and we changed to the topic of school:

K: How was school for you?

YP5: Oh my god, a nightmare. Not during primary school, but afterwards yes. I had children asking me if I was adopted because my mom died, and things like this. And because I'm white, and my parents are white, they don't think about adoption. It is a topic that can be avoided. But then you have moments where you have to tell your story and it's not pleasant. But why do children with divorced parents have an easier life?

From this passage it seems that skin colour is complex, those who have a Caucasian background can suffer because the adoption is not always obvious. While those who have a different skin colour to their parents can suffer because they are marked out and it can cause racism Similarly, in the fourth interview the young adoptee refers to the absence of normality:

YP4: You know what? For example, I miss normality. [silence]. I miss knowing what it means to behave normally, how to be with people, how to interact with people. [...moves on to relationships]

Although the meaning of normality is not clarified here, it suggests the self-perception of being different, and possibly the desire to fit in. During the interview with Family 4, the young adult speaks about advice to give to the future adoptive parents, and the mother intervenes:

K: What would your advice be?

F4Y: I don't know.

M: Would you like to be adopted again?

F4Y: Well, I don't know, maybe not. But because of this issue of not being accepted. Just because I'm not accepted by the others.

Although the aim of the interviews was not to examine journeys to the countries of origins, these words from the third interview highlight feelings of familiarity, normality and integration. Here we are speaking about her first moments in her country of origin:

K: What was the first thing you saw?

YP3: I spent the first night on the balcony, to smell the odours, because it was the first thing I sensed. The first impression was given by the odours.

K: Was it familiar?

YP3: Holy s…, yes! As soon as I left the car I thought, oh wow. The odours, I don't know. It was hard to leave it behind me when I left.

The thrill that she experiences when she is her birth country comes through during the interview. In the next excerpt she again describes the feeling of familiarity, but this time in relation to the people and places in her hometown:

YP3: We went to meet my brother, and he lives in the house where I was born.

K: Did you know about that, or did they tell you when you were there?

YP3: They told me there. And they showed me where I was staying when I was there.

K: Did you remember that place?

YP3: When I walked in the house, well let's call it house, I felt at home.

At another point, she describes the meeting with one of her birth sisters:

K: Your sister, okay. Does she live nearby?

YP3: Yes, roughly. The first thing was the resemblance. When she saw me she was enchanted. When I saw her, I was bewitched. We mirrored each other, we were identical. Basically like twins.

K: Was it good for you to see another you?

YP3: It helped a lot.

She does not explain explicitly that seeing somebody from her birth family helped to feel normal, but this can be gathered from the whole conversation.

Racism

As it emerged during the parents' interviews, adoptees reported experiencing racism. In this sample, episodes of racism are triggered by the racial appearance, or from what they said it appeared to be the initiator of problems. This form of discrimination proved to be a challenge for the adoptees. In the interview with Family 3, the daughter explains one episode of racism she faced at school:

K: How was school for you?

F3Y: Well, yes. Okay. But sometimes I think they should have put us in a separate group to learn better Italian.

M: Really? You would have liked to be put in a group of foreigners?

F3Y: Yes

M: Why?

F3Y: Because I feel foreign, anyway I felt foreign.

M: the thing is, they always said they were adopted.

F3Y: The others didn't accept it. [...] But it was because of our skin, in primary school and in secondary school they called us gipsy, negro, and they were telling us we have been left in the rubbish and that our parents didn't want us.

With the fourth interviewee, the sense of inadequacy is expressed rather clearly. In this extract, he speaks about the differences with his adopted sister:

YP4: [...] My parents tried to let her talk to a psychologist, but it was too late already. She never thought she was wrong, she never questioned herself.

K: Do you consider yourself not adequate, or wrong because you are adopted?

YP4: I thought I was wrong until a year ago. My biggest problem was the integration, I always felt like an illegal immigrant, the immigrant that came here to Italy.

K: Is this feeling linked to adoption or to the Italian context?

PY4: Italy.

In this excerpt he verbalises the issues he had to face due his origins and skin colour. Integration and feeling 'wrong' are two practical issues in the daily life of an adoptee.

Honesty

Another aspect that the adoptees mentioned in their interviews is honesty from their parents about their adoption. Since there is no direct translation for the word 'openness'

in Italian, it seems more appropriate to use 'honesty' instead to accurately reflect the young adults' voices. From very different angles, adoptees spoke about the relevance of having information about their past. What came across is the desire to build a consistent understanding of their past, which should be developed over time, rather than when it is imposed by contingencies. It appears that parents are the most important figures with whom to talk about the adoption; they are the gatekeepers of information.

The young adults interviewed present a wide range of experiences around openness: some reported the complete lack of honesty, some received information appropriate to their age, some would have liked to have more adoption-related talks and gain confidence in such conversations. In the case of Family 1, they discuss the importance of sharing adoption-related information:

> K: And you girls, what would you suggest to future adoptive parents?
>
> F1Y: You mean afterwards?
>
> K: Yes, once adopted.
>
> F1Y: Well, what I would say more than anything is talking about it. I remember in school there was another adopted child, maybe in school you don't talk about it, you can't force him, but they should tell him. It's something important, you have to speak about it.
>
> F1C: I agree, you need to talk about it, even though I don't like it, you have to.
>
> K: I know that for you it might be obvious to talk about it, but it's not for everybody.
>
> M: Yes, we know somebody that adopted and never told the child.
>
> F1Y: You can't do that, after a while you need to know.

While they seem to comprehend the importance of sharing details, during the interview they disclosed some new information to their daughter (see Chapter 5). Likewise, Young Person 4 mentions the importance of sharing information about the adoption with the child, regardless of age:

> K: How were you told about it (your adoption) from your adoptive parents?
>
> YP4: I think you should say everything to a child. To my niece I say everything, in a childish way, but even though she is 5 she knows everything. You know, if a child asks you something, you should be able to answer the questions, but you shouldn't bombard the child with information. But then again, you shouldn't hide information.

His standpoint on the sharing of information is quite clear: there has to be an exchange of knowledge about adoption and adoption-related issues, but it should not be forced on the child. However, this answer is rather detached, and in fact he adds something more personal to it:

> YP4: Well, for example, the memories I have of South America, I wrote them down. I only have positive memories and whenever I need it I read them again. It helped in talking about it.

Considering the complex story of Young Person 3, I ask for more details:

K: When somebody was asking about your country of origin you weren't interested?

YP3: No, not really. If somebody asked me about it, or if I wanted to go back there, I always said no. And then one day I thought, adoption might be a reason why I feel bad, and so I tried to investigate that. And in that moment the war with my parents started.

K: So how was the relationship to your parents until then? How where they talking about adoption?

YP3: Well, when I started to know a little bit more, I discovered that everything they told me was false.

K: So you had one version of the facts?

YP3: Oh yes. I knew that they died during a war. In my head, I had one scene, a war scene where basically they shot my father in his head and my mother directly through her chest and I was sitting in the potty-chair. So at the beginning, I was trying to re-elaborate this experience, thinking that it was real.

This stage is crucial, it explains and possibly justifies her feelings and perceptions towards adoption. As will become clearer further in the interview, this moment, where the facts stated do not represent the reality, proves to be a breach in the relationship with her adoptive parents. She then goes on explaining how she discovered the truth:

YP3: I ran away from home when I discovered that it wasn't the truth, and my nightmare started then.

K: But did they tell you the truth after that?

YP3: Eh, well, they gave me the documents.

K: Because they gave them to you, or did you ask for them?

YP3: No, no. I had to ask for them. I was looking for them, and I couldn't find them. On the documents I saw that nothing was real.

K: How did they react when you discovered it?

YP3: Well, they were sorry. They cried, they were trying to justify why they did it.

K: Sure they felt sorry.

YP3: Yes, but then again, they did nothing to repair the situation.

This key moment, where she questions her parents and they fail, because they lied about her past, is leaving her insecure and angry. I investigate what consequences this moment had on her life: it developed in two linked ways. Firstly, it pushed her to find more information about her past and it led to psychological issues manifested through food disorders and what she called Oedipus complex:

YP3: Since I woke up that morning when I didn't recognise myself and then all the rest happened, I wasn't hungry at all. I don't know where my head was, but I wasn't hungry at all and I could only run and walk. When I realised I lost 15kgs, I asked for help. My parents didn't suggest it, I had to ask for it. [....] Then something else happened, it's a story on its own though. I developed an Oedipus complex.

K: Do you think there is a link between anorexia and this?

YP3: For sure. Anorexia is an expression of the relationship with my adoptive mother and we never really loved each other.

On a more positive note, with Young Adult 5, I try to discover how the parents talked about it with her, and how they explained adoption:

> K: So, do you remember as a child how they spoke about it?
>
> YP5: Yes, at the beginning, we had little stories with animals, something that worked with a little girl. They were describing it in an easy way, but it worked. And I remember that I always wanted to tell this story.
>
> K: Did they give you all the information?
>
> YP5: Well, there are things that are better not to say immediately. I have a friend that always complained about the invasive parents that tried to discover everything for him. I don't mean that you have to hide stuff, but just maybe ask for help for a social worker who can give you advice on how to deliver the information. You know, maybe that's suitable with older children.
>
> K: And what about your situation? I know that you don't like the use of the word abandonment.
>
> YP5: Words are important, you can't say to a child that he been abandoned. Always talk about it, even though the child is young, he remembers things. You should maybe say that you are separated at birth, but say it. As you grow up these things add up and make the difference for your identity.

Making of the family

In most of the interviews, the adoptees wanted to give their own contribution on how to build the sense of family and identification in the adoptive family. The 'making of the family' should be understood as the actions the parents take to create family relationships, and especially to make them work as an adoptive family. As will be

shown in the next section, honesty and openness represent an important aspect of their experiences of adoption, and this awareness links with the complexity of the adoptive family relationships. There is a tension with the previous section: young adults are seeking normality, yet they expect the family, and especially the parents, to 'make the adoptive family' openly, using their diversity as their starting point. During the fourth interview, as a final question, I ask the adoptee what family represents for him:

K: What is family for you?

YP4: In one word?

K: You decide, a sentence, a word, whatever.

YP4: Family is a big responsibility, you are born as father or mother but you become a parent. And to become a parent, you need to be prepared, and if you are not prepared, you can't face the family. Responsibility and dedication.

After this moment, we talk about his other experiences as interviewee, and he tells me about his intervention in a session for future adoptive parents:

K: How was this experience? How were these parents?

YP4: I realised that many that adopt don't realise what comes afterwards. They don't take it seriously, they don't think of afterwards. The problem is that a child has, more or less a past. And this past is coming with him, and if it is traumatic and you don't tackle it, game over. He is growing up with traumas and becomes mad.

As he goes directly into the discussion about the importance of the past of a child and on to the difficulties a parent might face, I ask about his experience:

> K: And how was it with your family?
>
> YP4: I know many adopted people, and many have serious issues. In fact, one thing that I said to my parents is that, from the beginning, they didn't face my memories. And you should talk about it from the beginning, with a psychologist. So a child arrives, he talks about his memories with a psychologist and then he remembers. For example, I don't remember of my birth parents, but my sister does.

This adoptee is explaining very clearly his expectations of his parents. He is also referring to memories and their value, which resonates with what children said in the interviews. The third interview ends with a very strong, yet personal and emotional statement:

> YP3: When a parent is adopting, subconsciously they are adopting to fill a void, and the child is filling it. But he is not wondering, how it would be possible to fill the adopted child's void? He takes it for granted. You expect things from your child that he can't give you, because there is this unfilled void that you will never be able to fill. If the child was alone up to the age of 5, he was alone – and that's it. You can help him to grow up from the age of 5, what happened in the past can only stay there. You can't expect to bridge the gap of 5 years, like if you had been there during those 5 years. You can only help him to grow up with this feeling of emptiness.

Also in the fifth interview we conclude with a question on family:

> K: What is family for you?
>
> YP5: Security. And, well, let me think. Responsibility. Yes, you know you can't start a path to talk about adoption throughout adolescence. When you speak to parents that what to adopt, they don't seem to understand that it is important to talk about it form the beginning. It seems they listen and say yes and then don't do it.

Relationships

Although there were no direct questions about romantic relationships during the interviews, most of the interviewees mentioned this aspect of their lives. When discussing the impact that adoption had, and has, on them, difficulties with romantic relationships were almost the most important compared to other subjects. Theorists like Hazan and Shaver (1994) have suggested that the social interactions individuals have throughout their life are shaped by the emotional attachment they form with their primary caregiver during infancy (Feeney et al., 2007). Some of the adoptees referred to the link between abandonment and the struggles in ending a romantic relationship, some mentioned the strain in judging good friends from bad ones and others mentioned general confusion. For example, with this adoptee the fear of losing somebody seems to be linked to her early abandonment:

> K: How much is it influencing you?

YP5: It is hard to build a relationship; I tend to nullify my personality when I'm with somebody, because I fear losing this person.

K: Is the fear of losing somebody a recurrent theme?

YP5: Yes.

She discusses her past relationship, explaining that although herself and her ex-boyfriend are not supposed to see each other, she cannot stop being in contact with him. I then try to ask to which extent adoptive parents influence this fear:

K: Do you think your parents have something to do with this?

YP5: I can't hold one thing against my parents, I had the support I needed. I felt valued and understood, and I could always talk. My parents were there; for us, it was something we could discuss. But sometimes you lose control anyway, and you do things that are not that bad, still silly, but you do it anyway. The hard part for me was to deal with this thing that I was abandoned. You know I was only 40 days old. I think this changed my attitude towards the relationships.

In another interview, a young man describes the difficulties of understanding the boundaries in the relationships:

YP4: You know what? For example, I miss normality. [silence]. [...] My biggest problem was to understand relationships. I couldn't understand where a friendships ends, the feeling of love and where romantic relationships end.

In line with what the other adoptees said, he refers to the trauma of abandonment:

YP4: [...] When she left me, I felt the trauma of abandonment. Suddenly she deleted me from her life. I didn't have the trauma of the abandonment from my parents, but from the person that took care of me in South America. But I actually still write to her. But with this girlfriend, she left me and I felt lost. I lost my stability.

Researching origins: the role of institutions

The search for origins strongly links with the topic of openness in adoption, but it is covered in other pieces of research, as discussed in Chapter 2 and 3. However the interviewees mentioned the search for origins, in particular it emerged that they had clear feelings about the role of the institutions during this stage of their adoptive life. As previously explained, the law does not permit the adoptee to have access to details about the birth family until they turn 25 years of age. As children grow older, integrating an adoptive identity may require more information than is available, and a desire to seek for more details may then arise. The adoptees in this sample claim the need for regulated support in the search of more information, as if they do it informally, it may expose them to illegal paths. One of the interviewed adoptees searched for details about her birth family, and, in the next extracts, she explains how she managed it:

YP3: After work, I was always going at her (the close friend) place and I decided to go back to my research about my family. And, all of a sudden, I thought of using Facebook to conduct this research. Out of the blue!

K: But it was useful, wasn't it?

YP3: Yes, I ended up with three different profiles. My own, and two in [language of her country of origin].

K: Why two?

YP3: They were blocking one and so I could use the other one. They were all in [language of the country of origin], and I had my story on it.

K: How did you manage that?

YP3: Google translate.

K: Did you ask for help through the official channels?

YP3: Yes, and the same old story about the 25 years stupid law.

The research for her origins took place online, and through Facebook alone. The official channels could not help her, and left her alone in this process that could have potentially caused her harm or distress. She then talks me through the different stages of her journey to her country of origin:

K: How many responses did you get through Facebook?

YP3: 99% of people didn't reply, but then I had the one that did. Within a week, I knew everything through her.

K: Really? Who is she?

YP3: She has the same surname as my birth mother, and she is the only one that replied asking for more details. She had a friend working as a social worker and one journalist friend. [...] We sent messages through the chat on Facebook, and after one week she said: come online, I have some good news and some bad news. I said that I want the bad one first, and it was that my birth mother died in 2005. The good news is that they discovered where my father lives.

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K: Did you expect this? Or what did you expect?

YP3: Maybe I was expecting it to be the other way around, but it doesn't matter.

The pride that she had in telling me about how she managed to get information about the birth family was obvious. During the interview with the fourth adoptee, she talks about her friend who felt the parents crossed boundaries because they were doing the search for him, and she talks about the use of Facebook for this reason. She condemns it, because from her point of view, it is dangerous because it is not controlled, and it is illegal because Italian law only allows people older than 25 to have information about the past.

K: And what do you think of the people who make these appeals on Facebook to find out about the biological family?

II: Look, I know it. Today, anyone can take advantage of people making these appeals. I think they're doing a very wrong thing. Do you know that we have our own group, right? We have always said no to appeals, but there's no way to make them understand that. Now in order to protect the group, we had to control who was joining it. It's a little too easy to do so. It is too easy. It seems that you are afraid to face the subject, and do it on the Internet. Then for minors, the law forbids it, it is not legal. Then maybe someone responds to it, and they may take advantage and ask for money. There should be a group on Facebook, followed or controlled by an institution, which regulates and controls these things. It should be the institution that connects people. But not the private individual who is looking for some way to seek for a solution. There are limits, from the legal

point of view, and we should respect them. We have been doing the battle against the so called 'hundred years law'.

K: The law is much debated at the moment.

Children

The five children interviewed range from the age of five to 14 years. They were all interviewed with either the mother, or both parents, present in the room. Two of these children had the 'diary of life' made in their country of origin, and two of them are siblings. Although the approach used for the interviews with the children was meant to be creative, all conversations took the shape of an in-depth interview. After offering and trying the different engaging methods, the initial questions were: 'Tell me about your adoption'; 'What do you know about your adoption?'; 'What do you remember?'; and questions developed based on the responses. As discussed in the previous section, the parents' presence influenced the course of the interviews: it frequently happened that children were interrupted during our conversations. Another common theme in the interviews with children, is the two-fold sources that children rely on to build their knowledge around adoption; the details given by the parents (also with tools like the diary) and their memories. Memories appeared to play a significant role in children's (as well as young adults') formation of identity.

Knowledge

During the interviews, children showed some knowledge of their adoption and they were able to reason about their past. Some of the details children reported came from either the diaries they wrote in the country of origin, or from information supplied to them by their parents. In family 5, the parents had the diary of life made in the country

of origin, they rewrote it in the form of a 'fairy tale-diary of life', trying to create a story that was adequate to the young age of their son. The conversations about the past seemed to happen often in this family, many of which appeared rehearsed. As we were talking about the 'tummy mummy' and about the fact that he does not come from his adoptive mother's tummy, we speak about his past:

K: Did he ever pretend that he came out of your belly?

M: No, he didn't. But I think he would have liked to do it.

F5C: Yes, can I have the '*tetero*' (dummy)?

M: Now? No, you used it as a baby!

K: Who was there when you were a baby?

F5C: Ana

M: Who is Ana?

F5C: My tummy mummy

M: And who is your tummy daddy?

F5C: He is no longer there, Josè. He went to heaven. There was an accident, on the river with the boat. With the boat in the sea.

M: You just invented this, we never told you this. He drowned in the river.

F5C: On the boat, on the boat [yelling]!

M: No

F5C: On the boat!

M: But there are no boats in [city].

F5C: But I saw boats in [another city].

M: We never went there.

F5C: Where did you come to pick me up then?

M: [city]

The mother tells me about her desire to adopt is explained in the story they wrote for him, and they explain it to me together almost as if they knew this question would be asked:

M: In our book, in our story we explain it. We were already happy, but we were missing something.

F5C: I was missing!

M: Exactly, and what did you bring to us?

F5C: Happiness!

M: Where?

F5C: Heart!

M: Whose heart?

F5C: Mummy!

M: And?

F5C: No, daddy no! [laughing]

After the explanation about their desire to adopt, I ask if I can see the book with his story, and the son is very excited about it and tells me:

F5C: Can you read it for me?

K: Yes.

F5C: Instead of reading it, I'll tell you about it! Sit here!

We sat next to each other and we went through the book and he explained all the pictures, giving me details of each image. For example, at the beginning of the book there is the map of his country of origin and some pictures of him alone:

> F5C: Look, this is [country of origin]. And look, this is me, little little. Here is another time me little, after Ana left.

In a picture of him looking at the mother and father he is saying:

> F5C: Here is mum and dad the first time.

And then he tells me that before sleeping, he says a little prayer for his adoptive mother and his 'tummy mummy'. The book they created helped the son's knowledge about his adoption, but also influenced it. With the siblings in Family 8, we go through the pictures taken in the country of origin and we have these conversations:

> F8C1: Mum, look, do we still have this dress thing?
>
> M: No, I threw it away.
>
> K: Apart from that, do you have some other memories for the children?
>
> M: No, not much.

The mother might have felt uncomfortable after this question, so she intervenes and says:

> M: Did you tell Katia what we do every year?

F8C2: Christmas!

[laughter]

I: No, not that. I mean about adoption.

F8C1: Oh yes, we celebrate our second birth.

K: OK, can you tell me what that is?

F8C1: It is when we celebrate that we were born again; when mum and dad brought us here. We do it for me and her together, it's like a birthday, with cake and everything!

M: Yes, you were born again with us, and we celebrate that.

Mentioning this clear-cut event, the second birth celebration, sets the tone for the rest of the conversations. It appears that the mother would like to highlight the importance of their family over the birth family.

In Family 1, it was interesting to see that the daughters did not know about all the information parents had available for them. During the interview the youngest daughter found out that she had been admitted to hospital, and that therefore they had some details about her health, and documents produced in the country of origin.

In family 2, the details about the child's past are stated in the diary of life: from the conversations with the parents, it appeared that they were open to the extent the information was already written and discussed with her. They did not seem ready to face other conversations, or deeper topics, related to the past. I ask the daughter directly about the diary she wrote when she was in South America:

'The diary was key for me, especially in negative times, for something to look at.' (Child Family 2)

Adoption awareness

Together with the knowledge about adoption, in some of the interviews it appeared that children had expressed awareness of their adoption. In these contexts, awareness was used to indicate the children's understanding of what their adoptive status entails. Obviously separating knowledge from awareness is not an easy task, if even possible, but the example reported here will highlight the differences.

For example with the son of Family 5, whilst we are trying to cut out small paper - houses, he sees the 'Barbapapa':

K : Oh, did you just take them? There is the whole family of 'Barbapapa'!

F5C: Yes, they are beautiful. This is the mother (he points to the one coloured in black) and this is the father (he points to the one coloured in pink), they also have different colours, just like us.

He decides to intervene when we are speaking about the problems they faced in South America, where, due to a different skin colour, it was automatically assumed that he was an adopted child:

M: You know, they saw two white people and one black child and they just did the maths.

F5C: Who is black?

M: Who is black? You are brown? Or you're chocolate?

F5C: Black, I'm like chocolate!

M: Or like coffee?

F5C: Like chocolate!

In Family 1, the daughters seem to have a clear idea about what the abandonment means, and what it meant for them:

F1Y: It's an act of responsibility

M: Yes, but not only, it is also an act of love

P: And 'an act of love and responsibility'.

Memories

Often children recalled memories from their time in the country of origin, in their original homes, or simply sensations linked with their past. Although developmental psychology (Bluck et al., 2005) refers to middle childhood into early adolescence as the time when children become increasingly able to think about multiple facets of an event simultaneously to maintain cognitive and emotional ambiguity, from the children's stories, it appears that this ability might be developed earlier. It was noticeable that children wanted or simply already had ownership over some details of their past that did not always fit with their parents' expectations.

With the siblings of Family 8, I offered a piece of paper and colours, but they never started a picture. As we were talking, I asked them to draw something that relates to their adoption:

K: Shall we try to make a drawing about adoption?

F8C2: And how do you that? Something like Eastern Europe?

K. For example, what was the house where you stayed in Eastern Europe like?

F8C1: Ahh, like that?

F8C2: The house was big, very big, and then there was the park, and then the well, and it was great.

K: Shall we try making a drawing?

F8C1: Then there was the great big kitchen, with a net covering fire.

F8C2: And do you remember that corner?

F8C1: Yeah, that was great. That corner. That is where mum was cooking.

K: Where was this corner?

F8C1: Where we were staying, and we hid there when we did not want to do things.

K: But you remember so much?

F8C2: Oh, yeah. But mum [adoptive mother] told us something and there are a few photos.

Considering what they were saying about the second birth, I ask them whether they remember something about their birth mother:

K: And what do you remember of your birth mother?

M: They don't remember one thing.

F8C1: It's not true.

M: Oh, really?

F8C1: She was bad

M: Oh, Okay.

The mother clearly interrupted the conversation: it is not clear whether the problems are with the memories, or the talk about the birth mother. Certainly, the conversation needed to stop there. Similarly with Family 5, as we talk with the mother about the information they have, the son interrupts her, but she does not allow him to talk:

M: When they say that older kids are not so difficult, in fact it's not true. At the end, it is true that when they are so young, like him, we don't know his past, and we cannot fill this gap. And I 'm sorry for it, really. [...] But compared to those who have memories, a life, reworking/re-elaborating will be more difficult.

F5C: But I 've got the memories.

K: What do you remember?

M: Let me do the talking.

Likewise in Family 2, the daughter refers to a few memories of her past and, as we were going through the pictures together, she added:

'My mother kept the little backpack I had in South America, it's nice to know I have something that is mine'

When I asked if she remembers anything else about her past, her mother interrupted and said that she didn't remember anything. The daughter stopped her and said:

F2C: No, I remember things. I remember where we played, the inner courtyard, the street, my home. Some things, I remember.

She also said she remembered how the judge asked if she was happy to travel to Italy with them.

Summary

Overall, the interviews with children and young people showed a general desire to disclose details about their adoption story and past. Only one of the young children interviewed had some issues in talking about adoption, but it could have been related to shyness rather than the topic, since she made a drawing on her family tree for me. The five interviews with the young people show conformity in the outcomes, they all stated that talking about adoption is key. They did not appear to have different perspectives, or opinions, about openness in communicating about adoption. The themes that emerged with all five interviews are racism and honesty: all young adults refer to these topics. Dealing with difference and 'non-normality' proved to be a challenge for them, which, at times, was triggered by the context they lived in, as well as their own family environment. However, the desire for 'normality' is contrasted with the desire of 'making the adoptive family' their own: on one hand, they state they would like to feel 'as the others', but they acknowledge that adoptive families need 'to be made'. Honesty was often used to describe their wish to know about their past; all of them mentioned the importance of honesty in adoption-related discussions within the family. One young adult had a very negative experience in this regard and expressed strong opinions about her parents' dishonesty. Sadly, racism appeared to be an issue that many adoptees encountered, impacting upon their self-esteem and leading to negative feelings about

adoption. For the young adults interviewed without their parents, relationships and the search of origins emerged as topics. Although no questions were asked about romantic relationships, it appeared to be problematic for adoptees. They mentioned trust issues and difficulties in building healthy relationships. This certainly could be investigated further with specific research. The search of origins is another topic that I did not intend to discuss, but was raised by the adoptees. There was agreement that the State, or accredited bodies, should regulate the sources used by adoptees to initiate the search for information about the past.

The interviews with children were generally brief, but all children demonstrated their ability to discuss topics related to their life experiences. The three themes that emerged are knowledge of adoption, adoption awareness and memories. Their knowledge and the accessibility to information was not the same for all five interviewees. In one family, the child was told about his story through the diary made in his country of origin, and in another, the family referred to a second birth alongside the adoption. Similarly with the topic of memories (as highlighted in the section about the dynamics within the story), some children were allowed to describe their memories, while others were stopped. Adoption awareness refers to the child's knowledge of their adoptive status and it was explicitly verbalised or expressed through awareness of their 'differences'. Overall, children demonstrated awareness of their adoptive status; what was shared with the adoptive parents stayed with the children, and that tools like the 'diary of life' proved to be useful.

Chapter 7 Practice findings

The culture of adoption and the debates

As part of the process of gaining access to families and adoptees during fieldwork, I arranged prior meetings, formal and informal interviews with a variety of experts. Overall, there were seven formal interviews with professionals from different backgrounds: clinical psychology; service users; academics with backgrounds in education and psychology; governmental researcher and a pedagogue. In addition, two support groups for adoptive parents agreed that I could attend their meetings, but permission to record discussions was denied. I also attended two conferences on the search for origins and the adoptee's right to access information.

The debates around adoption and the professionals' contributions

As described in the section on the search for origins, the debate around the recognition of the adoptee's right to access to information about his/her origin and biological parents (where they exist) has been in place for some time. It is only in very recent times that Italian law has begun to address this. The difficulties in accessing information about the origins is further evidence of the doubts that still weigh on the fullness and recognition of the adoptive relationship in respect to both family and biological ties. The discourse around the search of origins, has been cleverly set aside in the supposed best interests of the child. The question of origins is disputed more than ever given the overlap between the strong discourse of the global village, and the rising discourse of biological prevail presented in the media discourse. Therefore, the clean break with the past is seen as unnatural within the family and the social context in which the adoption takes place.

This evidence is part of the manifesto of many of the adoptee movements that are loudly requiring reforms to the law. In fact, in recent times, the debate around adoption has become more and more clamorous with adoptees claiming the right to know who they really are through access to information about the origins. To this movement, another rich and combative movement can be added: biological parents in search of their children. This group is formed of people who abandoned, or were forced to abandon, their children. This last one is particularly evident on social networks.

During an interview with a leader of the service users' campaign, it was possible to gain an insight into their perspectives on this matter. The group was formed of domestic and international adult adoptees that share the wish to change the law on the search of origins. In particular, their argument is against the law that prevents adoptees that are not recognised at birth obtaining information about their biological family for a period of 100 years. On that:

> P1: Well we can say that the reasons behind this ban, even if it is perceived as a punishment by the adoptees, is to guarantee the anonymity to the mother who delivered the child. [...] We were the sons of the guilt, we were the result of something dishonourable. We were the unladen weight.

She then explains that what they are trying to enforce is a change in the law that protects the biological mother, while maintaining the rights of the adoptee:

> P1: All the options that we are giving them are similar in reality. The bottom line is that, at the age of 25 years, you can access information, but through

mediation. And at the age of 40, you should be able to access information without mediation. This is due to the fact that, after 25 years, the biological mother might still be in the situation where she doesn't want to be known, but after 40 years, the expectation is that this situation is blunt. We are playing around two different rights here, the anonymity of the biological mother and the right of the adoptee to know their identity.

In a similar tone, she accentuates the disparity between the rights of the mothers and the rights of the adopted child:

P1: I'm convinced that motherhood is an act of responsibility. So, the State that is basically saying to the birth mother, 'now you had the child, let's do everything as if nothing happened, because I guarantee you anonymity. Because you didn't opt for an abortion, you didn't throw the child in the rubbish, I'll give you a discount'. No, I don't think that is right. Okay with the discount, it would be better to help this mother to raise this child. [...] This right that birth mothers have is eternal and unconditional, but it shouldn't be. It should be a protection for the birth mother, so that she doesn't have to materially, practically raise this child. [...] Other countries don't even have this issue.

During the interview, she shares her experience about her own struggles in finding information about her birth family and the obstacles her adoptive family put in front of her. The part of the interview on her experience starts with a question about her knowledge of her adoptive status.

P1: You know, everybody knew, your relatives, the waiters, your neighbours. Everybody knew. The only person that didn't know about it was me, like the cuckold husband that is always the last one to find out. But you get some messages, you get them in different ways but you get them.

She describes the difficulty in dealing with this information, and not being able to discuss it with the parents. She comments on that:

P1: Why are they hiding it? If you are hiding it, what message do I get? You are hiding it because it's a negative thing. So what is the next step in this reasoning? If it's a negative thing, and I'm born from a negative thing, it means that I'm negative.

Towards the end of the interview she mentions her brother and her newly found birth relatives. Therefore, I asked her about how she contacted them, considered that the law prohibits the search for the origins for people not recognised at birth.

K: How did you do search for them?

P1: I found my family, I found them yes.

K: How did you do that?

P1: If you switch the recorder off, I can tell you.

K: Why was it so important to you?

P1: My historical identity and familiarity. It wasn't about blood ties, it was familiarity.

Her role in the adoption debate is not primarily professional, it is, in fact, influenced by her experience, and highlights the everyday difficulties adoptees in similar situations face. Her work is legal in manner and about the right to search for origins.

The debate around adoption, rights and obligations of all parties involved is spread over a broad spectrum. Although it is the same law and country, the understanding of adoption varies quite drastically among professionals. Among the interviews and meetings I conducted during fieldwork, three stood out, particularly for their differences. Professional 2 is a clinical psychologist and works with adoptees and the families who need her assistance when adoption is completed. When we discuss what she spends most of her time working upon, she states it would be the child's past and attachment issues. In her experience, it is not possible to force somebody to confront the topic of life before adoption, so I ask her:

> K: In your opinion, what role do parents play in discussing this topic?
>
> P2: Commitment is a personal choice, it's not the parents. It depends from the environment, I obviously meet only a selection of adoptees.

Professional 4 is a pedagogue and works with families and children through the process of adoption. She describes the preparation of adoptees as a step that would help children to create links with the Italian context and adds that it would be useful to produce a 'diary' (as part of a 'narration project'):

> P4: For example, it would help if children would make something like a diary where they describe culture, food, and traditions and where the differences and

similarities with the new culture can be included. This could help to develop the feeling of belonging and get the parents closer to the child's life.

Since she is working with parents and children, I ask if she could briefly explain her approach:

K: So how do you work then?

P4: The process of narration is the basis of my work. We do it from the moment the child arrives onwards. For example, the child arrives at the age of 6, the parents should prepare a book with pictures of themselves at the age of 6. Children feed their curiosity, brains with information like that. Comparisons, recognising helps them: I don't know, mum likes the red bike, I like red.

Similarly, later during the interview she goes back on to the importance of the past of the child and the role parents have:

P4: There is a lack of responsibility. Who is responsible for the child's story? It should be parents, they should be the depository for the story. They should be ready for it, they can be helped to understand that there is a rhythm in the evolution. At the start, you should give some hints, the kids take the hints and start to intertwine the details available. Then the child puts together these pieces of information and they ask for more information. After that, the phase of belonging starts and they ask direct questions.

Although from a different background, professional 3, an academic working in education, gives responses that are similar to P4. She explains the results of her research

in which she interviewed young adoptees about their experience of adoption, and in one excerpt, describes why continuity is such a strong theme:

> P3: The main theme is continuity, continuity in the path of life that is usually featured with discontinuity. And this means that the story needs to be welcomed, the parent needs to give the opportunities to create this continuity, and to materialise the principle that the child needs to be welcomed for what he is. In the act of welcoming what is extraneous to us, like the past of the adoptee, we overcome the extraneousness.

For P2, the core of the difficulties encountered by an adopted person relate to attachment:

> P2: The attachment disorder is the core of the issues. I understand attachment as something that happens at the beginning when you don't have a present adult, or a negative presence.
>
> K: At what stage of life?
>
> P2: At the beginning I mean.
>
> K: So you work a lot on this aspect then?
>
> P2: Yes, you see, the origins are important, but there is a lot more to that. It is really down to how you develop your attachment, and when you are adopted, it is really like a second birth.

At a later stage, she describes her work with an accredited body, explaining that they will work on adolescence, origins and school. She explains that it is not easy to develop these courses, as they are theoretical and it depends on each child:

P2: It isn't easy at all, because adopted children usually have troubled attachments (?), or something that went wrong also, because otherwise they wouldn't be abandoned, would they?

We move on to discuss the abilities that the child might have to confront an event like adoption:

K: What role does resilience play in your opinion?

P2: Resilience is important, a child that reacts is always a step ahead.

K: Do you think you could work on that?

P2: No, I think resilience is a choice.

K: Oh, what do you mean?

P2: I think it is a personal choice to be committed to something, to make an effort and deal with things.

This perspective is almost opposite to what P4 says about resilience and the perception of adopted children:

P4: In the preparation of courses, in some areas there is a restoring approach, where these children are necessarily starting from very disadvantaged situations. I often stress the resilience children have: they are hit by something so big, and the way they react to that depends on an inner feature they already have.

On the other hand, the group of professionals seemed to agree on a few aspects, such as being critical of the current Italian adoption system and the openness of parents.

Professional 3, for example, discusses how parents have changed their attitudes in the past ten years:

P3: In the most recent interviews, more openness towards adoption emerges. This is confirmed by a high number of adoptees that have travelled back to their country of origin. However I find some difficulties, but generally this are discussed informally with parents.

The conversation then shifts to communication within the family:

K: What do you think about communication within the family?

P3: Interesting that you ask this, I find that often there are situations where parents say: 'yes, we always speak about it'. But this seems to correspond more to a 'yes, we said it', we gave the information. However, the profundity of the communication with empathy, that is, accompanying the path to the understanding information that is non-existent. But it isn't only that, it's also the lack of practical actions to get more information, like calling the institute to ask for something.

Although the topic was not addressed directly, a discourse around blood ties emerged:

P4: In my opinion, there still is a cultural problem: blood ties still have a primary function. You need to understand which operator/social worker is dealing with this. I always say that who is dealing with adoption shouldn't deal

with the previous stage, the removal from the family. They may not disclose information to protect somebody, but there is a bias.

As with P3 and P4, other professionals mentioned the preparation of the child prior to the adoption as something that would help the transition from one environment to another. Even within this small group of professionals, differences in the approaches to adoption were observed. In both the interviews and other informal conversations, criticisms of the high number of accredited bodies emerged.

Summary

The laws should change to reflect changing practices of adoption. However, the debates presented in this chapter suggest that practices are moving faster than laws. This creates a gap between the two, and possibly influences the various approaches to adoption. The sample of professionals interviewed is small and does not cover the different roles in the adoption process, but their accounts resonate with what has been observed in the interviews with parents and adoptees. They presented contrasting views about concepts like attachment, resilience and how to manage the adoption talks with the child: for some, in adoption talk, narration played an important role in the adoption process, however, for others, it was not taken for granted that it was necessary to impose this on the family and the adoptee. The debates boil down to the 'clear cut' approach versus an approach that acknowledges the existence of the past of a child while recognising the relevance of creating continuity. The text of the law is one, but, from these interviews, it is clear that it is open to a wide range of differing interpretations. The representative from service users' campaign expressed her disagreement with the law and the consequences it has for children of mothers that gave birth in anonymity. Through

formal and informal interviews with professionals, it emerged that the law is not setting

all the requirements and that this freedom allows some professionals to apply their open

understanding, while others utilise a more 'clear cut' approach. What emerged through

all the interviews and conversations with professionals is a criticism of the number of

accredited bodies operating in Italy. In their opinion, these bodies create an even greater

disparity in the approach to the adoption process and that each of these bodies are part

of this disparity. The professionals' accounts has been included, as it helps to reflect and

understand the differences in the parents' interviews, although they are not necessarily

linked to each other.

Chapter 8 Discussion

Introduction

To date few academic studies have explored adoption from a sociological perspective. Wegar (1997) argued that the lack of sociological studies in this field has allowed scholars of other disciplines, especially psychiatry, psychology and social work, to dominate the study of this topic. The scholars in this field approach the study of adoption in 'predominantly individualistic terms, without taking into account the social factors and processes that affect adoption experiences and policies' (Wegar, 1997, p. 5). As presented in the literature review, these studies mostly use clinical populations and are more likely to focus on the occasional pathological aspects of adoption than on its successes. Fisher (2003) suggests four reasons why sociologists should study adoption: first, to study the great diversity of forms that families have taken, such as the adoptive family (Wegar, 1998). Second, the need for greater emphasis on the social construction of the families and the matter of a deliberate choice; families should be studied from the constructivist perspective, investigating what makes family apart from blood ties. Thirdly, adoption questions the influence of race and ethnicity, social class and gender, and how families are formed and how they function; and fourthly adoption affects many more people than just those who are adopted and those who adopt (Fisher, 2003). Through my research it was possible to observe all of these factors, and hence to observe adoption from a sociological perspective and link it to the unexplored concept of openness in international adoption in Italy.

As highlighted in the literature review, the concept of openness in adoption was introduced through the groundbreaking work published by Kirk in 1964, resulting from a growing awareness that secrecy in adoption could have negative implications for both

the child and the family. Generally, secrecy was legitimised by Bowlby's work (1951) and Goldstein et al.'s studies (1973, 1986), and was applied to adoption to avoid the stigma of a child born out of wedlock and the stigma of infertility on the part of the adoptive couple. The conceptualisation of openness has continued ever since Kirk published his work, with different approaches, as described in the literature review. Brodzinsky's work introduced a distinction between structural openness and communicative openness, whereby the first relates to the contact after adoption and the second, the process of exploring the meaning of adoption. I use his definition of communicative openness in my research as a starting point for the analysis of the communication within the Italian families. In his words, communicative openness represents:

> ...general attitudes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and behavioural inclinations that people have in relation to adoption. It includes amongst other things, a willingness of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share the meaning with others, to explore adoption-related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families, and perhaps to facilitate contact between these two family systems in one form or another.
> (Brodzinsky, 2005, p.149)

As shown in the literature review, the revisions to this definition proposed by Jones and Hackett (2008), whereby the importance of the interactions between the family members and the wider community are considered, are embraced. A mere focus on international adoption and communicative openness from a sociological perspective in the Italian context has not yet been developed on a theoretical level, as it is mainly

looked at from a psychological perspective (i.e. Lanz et al., 1999; Rosnati et al., 2008; Barni et al., 2008).

Through the interviews conducted with the adoptive families, adoptees and experts it is possible to outline what communicative openness entails for those involved in this research. The adoptive family presents distinctive features such as belonging to various systems. International adoption is a complex process in which different realities, such as the child's past and the adoptive family's present, coexist. All of the adoptive families had created a story, which formed and shaped the adoption-related talks and connected these systems. The stories involve actors such as the adoptive family and the Italian and the sending country's adoption systems. The interactions between these influence the stories and attitudes towards openness. Not only that: these interactions cause some tension in communication about the child's past. From the interviews it became clearer how all these factors played a role in the formation of the adoption story, and how these interactions produce different attitudes towards openness.

In Italy communicative openness in international adoption is not yet as developed as is suggested by the definitions mentioned above. Families have to engage with it when they are faced with certain challenges posed by their children, the law and the wider social context. However, this communication is not a straightforward process, as in the Italian context there are constraints, tensions and differences in what influences the ways in which communication is understood.

The outcomes can be clustered into three main points. Firstly, the families and adoptees showed commonalities in their ways of dealing with the past and managing the

available information. The making of an 'adoption story', the practices that develop around it and the various means of delivering the story shaped attitudes towards openness. The openness practices, presented through their accounts, and their stories can be represented on a 'openness continuum' on which families can be grouped together, allowing easier reading of the findings.

Secondly, it emerged through my interviews that it is not only the adoption triad that influences the discourses on adoption within the family: these are also influenced by the wider social context. This resonates with Jones and Hackett's (2008) findings in their work looking at domestic adoption. It also partially resonates with Magini et al's (2012) study in which adoptive identity is thought to be influenced by the interactions between the Italian adoption system, the foreign adoption system and the adoptive family. It also echoes a number of studies looking at identity and ethnicity (Rhee and Waldman, 2002; Song and Lee, 2009; Lee, Kim, et al., 2010; Manzi et al., 2014)(Manzi et al., 2014; Rhee and Waldman, 2002; Lee, Kim, et al., 2010; Song and Lee, 2009). However, from the interviews in my study it emerges that not only the factors that Magini et al. (2012) and Jones and Hackett (2008) believe to be influential on the communicative openness, but also two more aspects – the 'cultures of adoption' and the adoptee as an individual – must be included. The latter refers to the adoptee and his/her personality, abilities, interests, curiosity, resilience, etc, which shape adoption-related talk. 'Cultures of adoption' is understood as the way in which these factors, namely the wider social context – the Italian adoption system, the foreign adoption system, the adoptive family and the adoptee – combine with each other and influence communicative openness. To explain further, if for example the adoption system has a strong impact on an Italian family's perspective on openness this, combined with the wider social context in which

adoption has negative connotations, will have a certain effect on the family's degree of

openness. On the other hand, in a family on which the Italian adoption system has a

similar impact but for which the social context is more open towards adoption, these

factors may have a different impact on openness, therefore lead to a different degree of

openness.

Thirdly, some tension emerged from the conversations about communication. Tension

in this setting is defined as a strain between different stances on issues like the meaning

of family and kinship; the role of the law as opposed to its practical application; the

different uses of available information; and the right to an identity. These tensions are

linked to the previous point, as communication is part of the interaction between the

actors involved in the adoption process.

Stories on the communicative openness continuum

Starting with the first findings, the adoptive families generally showed similarities in

their approaches to conversations related to the adoption and had all developed their

own stories around it. As shown in Chapter 3, various authors (Galvin, 2003; Wrobel et

al., 2003; Jones and Hackett, 2008) have stated that parents use shared family stories to

explain how their families are constituted. From the families' accounts it emerged that

their stories are created using tools such as objects, pictures and videos, and aim to

develop a positive experience of adoption; this resonates with Harrigan et al's (2010;

2011) findings. In addition, the stories aim to respond to the children's curiosity, answer

their questions about adoption and discuss sensitive topics, and in most cases they are

developed in a child-friendly way, as described by Jones and Hackett (2008). In

addition, the families' accounts show that the stories describe the relationships with the

actors involved in the adoption process: the country of origin, the birth family, the state and the accredited bodies. Moreover, in some of the stories it emerges that there are tensions around the words used to refer to the birth family or the country of origin. These tensions resonate with the findings presented by Greco (2014), in which she analysed how birth families and adoptive families are referred to in books on international adoption in Italian for children and for families .

The groups that are described below are used to explain and cluster the openness practices that the interviewees shared. The stories of the families, children and young people interviewed show diverse practices in relation to communicative openness, and for a practical reading they are arranged in clusters. However, these only represent their practices at that specific moment in time. As often stated in the literature, if communicative openness could be represented graphically it would be on a continuum. The notion of the continuum, widely used in the literature on communicative openness, is used to illustrate the wide range of understanding of what communicative openness involves. Approaches to adoptive parenting have been described in similar ways, starting from Kirk's (1964) work, in which he described 'acknowledging the differences' and the 'rejection of differences', as ways of dealing with adoptive parenting and the discussion of adoption-related topics. More recently Rosnati (2005) developed a scheme in which she described four patterns in the ways in which families establish the 'adoptive pact'. Similar to the categories developed by Rosnati (2005) and in the light of the findings presented in this study, one end of the continuum represents an open approach which could correspond to Rosnati's 'pact of recognition and appreciation of differences', and the other end represents a closed approach to adoption, which could correspond to either 'negating the differences' or the 'impossible pact' described in her study. In the middle, there are practices that present aspects of

closedness and others with more open aspects which Rosnati calls the 'assimilation pact'. The practices that I was able to see and unravel were specific to that moment in time, and both the interviewees and I constructed the meanings of openness.

Communicative openness is not a fixed notion. On the contrary, the findings show that it is a fluid concept influenced by various factors such as the social and cultural context in which each family is placed. Thus the definition suggested by Jones and Hackett (2008), in which communicative openness is understood as part of the family practice, is embraced in this thesis. The representation of different practices is used to give a picture of the sample interviewed, since there is a lack of research on and development of this concept in the Italian context. In addition the parallels with available literature developed in the same country and looking at a similar topics, such as Rosnati's work, connect these findings to already-established research, although it is not necessarily fully embraced in this thesis as it might impose limits on the fluidity of the adoptive family concept.

Communicative openness is greatly influenced by the social context in which an adoption takes place, the understanding of the adoptee's country of origin; the preparation for adoption in terms of the family's understanding certain issues; the availability of information about the adoptee's past; and the parents' ability to make use of what information is available. Families adapt and change their practices depending on the situation to which they are exposed; they may be less or more open when people outside their world challenge them. All of the families referred to challenges or issues raised by the environment outside their family, but it appears that at times openness served as tool to help them overcome these issues. Nonetheless, openness, or seeking openness, also represented a challenge that they had to face. From the data collected it

was possible to identify four different degrees of openness among my sample of parents and adoptees:

1) Open

2) Partially open

3) Partially closed

4) Closed

To describe each one, the key themes that emerged from the interviews (chapter 5) with the parents and the adoptees are used, namely the adoption story; the use of the story; the management of the challenges; and the relationship between the actors involved in the adoption story. For the adoptees, the main themes emerged in the interviews (chapters 6 and 7) were their integration into normality; the management of racism; honesty; the making of the family; difficulties in romantic relationships; their memories; the adoption knowledge; and adoption awareness.

1) *Open*: Open practices were found in families 4, 5, 7 and 9. The parents showed that they had used all of the information available to them, such as photographs and dossiers, to create an adoption story. These families used their stories to give a positive meaning to the experience of adoption and to meet their children's needs and curiosity. When faced with adoption-related issues, posed by schools for example, they openly discussed them to support their adoptees' understanding. In terms of interactions with the state, for example, these families showed a positive relationship with their accredited body and a positive view of their help. In terms of empathy towards the birth family, they showed the ability to support the birth parents' decision to give their child up for adoption. Similarly, these families showed respect for the child's country of origin through an interest in its history, by making several trips there, or by having many objects from the country of origin in their homes. Among this group only one

child showed knowledge and awareness of his adoption, although when sharing his memories some tensions emerged, raising questions about whose story it was. Out of the group of young people interviewed independently of their family, one adoptee (Young Person 5) reported her positive experience of adoption within her family. She described the availability of her parents to discuss adoption-related topics and their empathy towards her birth family and country of origin. Throughout the interview she referred to their availability, describing it as significant for her. Nonetheless, she also mentioned having difficulty balancing the feeling of 'normality' with the desire to 'make an adoptive family'.

2) *Partially open:* In families 1 and 6 it was generally possible to observe openness towards adoption-related topics but also some discretion about sharing specific information, discussing the influence of adoption on their family and children's lives, or in understanding the importance of the available information. In fact these families had shared most of the features described above, but the remarkable difference from the previous group was the withholding of some details about the child's past, either because they were considered potentially damaging to the adoptees' self-esteem or because they were not considered relevant to the child. In this group there was also one child and one young adult, both of whom were adopted, who were part of the same family. In their contribution they highlighted the importance of an honest account of their adoption from their adoptive parents and the significance of talking about and discussing adoption-related topics.

3) *Partially closed:* These families presented similar practices to those described in the open approach but also had a determining aspect that could make their approach more closed than the other two approaches. Families 2 and 11 had in common the fact that they had decided not to disclose specific sensitive pieces of information about their

children's past. As for the other themes, they were similar to the open practices, but withholding this information shows a different commitment to openness to that presented by the other families above.

4) Closed: Families 3 and 8 presented practices that could be seen as closed. In both families the adoptees were interviewed as well as the parents, and their perspectives confirmed what the mothers had shared. In one family the children's story started with their adoption, which they called their 'second birth'. They acknowledged thedifferent origins from their parents because they remembered them. However, in their adoption story the past did not play a significant role. As discussed in the interviews, this clear-cut approach influenced the way in which adoption-related talk could happen within the family. In the other family the past was discussed but was charged with negative meanings, which could also be found in their descriptions of the child's country of origin. The most striking feature looking across all the different families was the lack of sharing available information. One family in particular had details that could have helped their daughters but had decided not to share them, influenced by the law on adoption. The other family did not consider details about the past relevant, as their child had been 'born again' with them anyway. Among the young people interviewed separately from their families, one (Young Person 3) shared her experience of 'closed' practices. Her parents had changed the information about her past, letting her believe that her birth parents had died when in reality they were alive. This experience had caused her distress and anxiety, and throughout the interview she stressed the importance of adoptive parents being honest with their children. She referred to openness, which in her words was 'missing' in her adoptive family, as a fundamental way of making a family. This description of closed practices resembles the

'confidential' adoption mode whereby the adoptive family puts practices in place to operate as if they are the biological family, shaping the discourse on the child's past.

As discussed in the introduction to this section, using the idea of a continuum is not to imply communicative openness as a fixed notion; on the contrary, it helps to organise the data collected and to identify the multiplicity of practices that the families presented. As I describe in the next sections, the social and cultural contexts in which all the adoptions took place have an impact on the fluidity of their practices around communicative openness. These strong Italian features that influence the use (or not) of open practices show that the making of the adoptive family is heavily embedded in the culture in which it takes place.

During the interviews the adoptive parents were asked for their opinions on life-story work, because this is a practical application of how parents understand communication about the child's past. The four groupings used to describe openness practices do not necessarily resonate with the families' reactions to the use of life-story work discussed in Chapter 5, but there are some striking features: out of the four families described as having *open* practices, three had done something similar to life-story work in the country of origin; the families with mixed reactions about it were found to be on the other end of the continuum; and the remaining families with a positive outlook on it were either at the *partially open* or *partially closed* point on the continuum.

The influence of the adoption triad and the wider social context

The description of the openness continuum shows differences in the practice of communicative openness, which are influenced by various factors. However, as shown

through the interviews, the influence of the wider social context and the actors involved in the adoption play a major role in shaping communicative openness. Wegar (1997, p. 60) argued that social scientists studying adoption have 'neglected the impact of the social stigmatisation of adoption' on the members of the triad. By not examining the ways in which negative community attitudes towards infertility and adoption affect the experience of adoption, researchers have 'decontextualised' adoption.

Stigma is a theme that did not emerge directly from the interviews with this sample of adoptive families; however Wegar (1997) and Miall (1994) claimed that adoption still carries a stigma. As suggested by Fisher, if stigma is understood as 'social identity that is devalued in a particular context' (Fisher, 2003, p. 352), and if what is observed is not just general attitudes but actual behaviour towards adoption, it can be still considered a source of stigma. Based on the statements emerging from a National Survey conducted in the US in 1997 (Donaldson Adoption Institute, as cited in Fisher, 2003), half of the respondents agreed to the statement that adoption is 'not quite as good as having your own child', which could be argued to be a devaluation of adoption.

Some of the interviews make the impact of the wider social context explicit, but in others there is only indirect mention of these factors. The idea of the 'cultures of adoption' as a factor that plays a role in shaping families' attitudes aims to encapsulate the complexity of the process of sharing adoption-related information and the complexity of the adoption itself. As described in the introduction to this chapter, the interactions between the various systems influence communication and the tensions that they cause are labelled 'cultures of adoption'. All of these factors go hand in hand: the

understanding of the 'making of the family'; the 'clear-cut' approach to the past (or

embracing the past); and generally speaking the 'culture of adoption' are all linked.

The wider social context

That international adoption is broad, multi-faceted, ever-changing, and difficult to deal

with in a comprehensive manner has been shown in the previous chapters. The changes

from the 1980s to current law responded to the quick rise of international adoption,

making previous laws inadequate and causing situations where adoptions were

organised fraudulently and for profit and outside the law. Adoption was also carried out

without adequate preparation of the couple or competent professional guidance, thereby

increasing the chances of problems (Lorenzini, 2006).

The main reasons for the increasing number of adoptions in Italy in recent decades

could be related to the increasing acceptance of adoption throughout the country, the

economic advancement of society and the increase in infertility in couples (ISTAT,

2011). Another important factor to consider is the increased complexity and length of

the legal procedures necessary to adopt an Italian minor (C.A.I., 2013a). The number of

Italian children declared adoptable has also gradually decreased in line with the

reduction in early-childhood abandonment. In the past abandoned children were most

often the result of unwanted pregnancy. Usually they were children born into extremely

poor families, children born of unmarried women who were unable to bear the weight of

the 'shame', or the mothers were victims of domestic violence. Currently the majority

of adoptable Italian children were reared for a time in their biological family and only

later declared adoptable, and therefore are usually older children and are often

considered difficult, (i.e. families in situations of mental illness, alcoholism, drug

addiction, delinquency, maltreatment and abuse). Social services tend to work with the family to try to keep the unit together so that the child can be raised with the biological parents (Chistolini, 2008). This leads to the small number of domestic adoptable children, and in turn explains why so many families resort to international adoption in the belief and hope that it will be quicker and they will be able to adopt younger children (Tonizzo and Micucci 2003).

Explaining the wider social context and its influence on adoption is a difficult task because it is not necessarily made explicit in the everyday practices. It was not even possible to pin it down with specific quotes. However, as described in Chapters 5 and 6, it emerged that racism was an issue for some of the adoptive families formed through international adoption. Many families spoke about episodes of racism experienced by their adopted children. As described in Chapter 2, migration is a fairly recent phenomenon and the process of integration of foreign cultures into Italian culture is slowly taking place. However, this has an impact on international adoptees, who at times are labelled 'migrants'. Unfortunately this still has negative connotations, as portrayed during the interviews, and puts their families under strain. When these episodes take place families are faced with the need (or the possibility) to speak about the child's origins, and their attitude towards openness can impact on the ways in which they deal with this issue.

The country of origin

The country of origin has an impact on the families and accredited bodies' understanding of communication in Italy. Although this aspect was not directly investigated, it could be said that the process of preparation for adoption and the

adoption itself may determine how much and what the adoptive parents are ready to talk about. As described in the introduction to this chapter, this resonates with Magini et al.'s (2012) work in which the system of adoption in the country of origin is believed to be influential. Secrecy or openness in the country of origin may have been assimilated (learned) by the adoptive child as well, and this has the potential to challenge the notion of openness. Chapter 5 highlights the role of the country of origin, showing that some families are interested in the story and traditions of the countries but other families reported some negative comments. Looking back at the openness continuum, the families that had negative experiences of the country of origin are at the *closed* end of the line. In terms of the other families and their attitudes towards the country of origin, those at the *open* end, if and when they mentioned the country of origin, showed positivity. The remaining families had generally positive attitudes or made no particular comments about this.

Chapter 5 discussed the preparation of tools such as life-story work. It is apparent that children who had developed something similar to the life story work had a positive response to it. The support that children receive in their country of origin can have a positive impact on them as adoptees. On the contrary, countries whose institutions, for example, are isolated from the city centre, or where preparation for adoption is not considered important and their transition from the country of origin to Italy is fast, and furthermore the willingness of the parents to talk about the adoption, may influence the child.

This research seeks to understand adopted children and young people's perspectives on the communication within their families. As described in Chapter 3, there is a paucity of research in this area, in particular in the Italian context. Generally speaking, adoption research has mostly looked at adoption in terms of psychological adjustment. This focuses on the characteristics of the children such as their behaviour, academic outcomes and life conditions prior to adoption; it also explores the adoptive and birth parents and their potential influence on the child, and the adoption outcomes (Fensbo, 2004; Juffer and van Ijzendorn, 2005; Juffer et al., 2011). However, less attention has been paid to the influence of communicative openness on adoption and whether it is considered important for adoptees. As explored in Chapter 2, the role of family in the Italian context is different in some respect to that in other European countries. The spread of adoption in Italy has led to research mainly on its psychological outcomes, which resonates with international research on the topic. Openness is considered in some research, but it largely draws on the parents' perspectives rather than those of the adoptees. Including adoptive families in this research has highlighted how they find themselves embracing communicative openness if, for example, their children challenge them in relation to their needs, their curiosity or their memories, or to talk about their birth families. However, what prevents them from talking openly about adoption? As described previously, it emerges that the main issues families face that make them lean towards a closed adoption are fear that their child's self esteem will be negatively impacted by honest accounts, fear of facing sensitive issues, and the role of the birth family in the child's life. Although the aim of this research was not to look at multiple stories presented by adoptees and parents, in the interviews at which parents (or only the mother) and the children were present together there were some tensions. This draws attention to ownership of the story. Whose story is it? Considering the nature of this

research, it is not possible to answer this question. However the adoptees showed *agency* when discussing adoption-related topics. They reported that when it came to communicative openness they expected honesty and looked for normality, and, as explained in the section on the challenges that the families face, racism plays an important role. The desire for normality, though, contrasts with the desire to make the family in 'adoption-specific' ways. Through the adoptees' accounts another interesting aspect emerged: the relevance of memories of their past. These feed into the need to talk openly about their adoption, but were not always respected and understood as such. The children and young adults described their memories, and in particular in the accounts of the young adults these appear to be a positive advantage to work with rather than working against it. This finding supports and is supported by Gilligan's (1999) work, in which the importance of working with adoptees but also with the other actors in the adoption helps to build a supportive relationship. During the interviews some of the parents showed disinterest in the child's account when they talked about memories of their country of origin, their birth family or the institution that had hosted them prior to the adoption. In the research done on psychological outcomes for adoptees, little attention has been paid to adoptees' resilience. Memories could be used as a tool to work on adoptees' resilience, especially considering the average age (5.5 years old) at adoption into Italian families. Together with this, although not many of the families mentioned it, their mother tongue could be a positive advantage for adoptees that could be worked on. Some of the families thought that it would be good for the child to maintain his or her knowledge of the mother tongue, but others considered this unnecessary. The childrens and young people's accounts showed their desire and ability to deal with their own story; however, they also found themselves negotiating between 'biological' and 'fictive' kinship.

The tensions in communicative openness in Italian international adoption

The previous section described the meaning of communicative openness in Italian international adoption and here, in light of that, some tensions within the concept are described, highlighting the difficulties of applying it in practice. These tensions, the ways in which they are dealt with and the influences described in the previous section are part of what I understand as 'cultures of adoption'.

The understanding of 'family'

For the purpose of this research, the terms 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) and 'displaying families' (Finch, 2007) are used to conceptualise the meaning of families. Openness in adoption challenges the idea of 'family'; it poses questions about the primacy of biological connectedness, the understanding of kinship as fictive or real and the decision to belong to one family or the other, rather than to both. Like the section on the influences of the wider social context, explaining in the participants' words how kinship is understood and how it is 'made' is a complex task, partly because this was not the aim of this research. Nonetheless, in Chapter 5 questions around the supremacy of biological connections, for example, are expressed through decisions about the wording used within the adoptive and the biological family and through the relevance given to the birth family in the adoption story. In the section on the fragility of the story the *words* used to refer to the adoptive family or the birth family could be examples of the tensions between adoptive and biological kinship. Also in Chapter 6, young people discuss their desire to feel 'normal'; yet they express their wish to be acknowledged as part of an adoptive family.

This research demonstrates that the day-to-day activities that reflect family practices and the 'displaying family' approach to making a family both influence the discourse on openness and are influenced by the way in which blood ties and adoptive kinship are seen. This resonates with what Jones and Hackett (2011) observed in their research: openness should be considered as an integral aspect of the 'making of the family'; it should be one of the practices taking place in the adoptive family. In the light of this, and considering the openness continuum described previously, it could be speculated that families that 'acknowledge the differences' and those that 'reject the differences' (Kirk, 1964) perceive the contrast between biological and adoptive kinship.

Law versus practice

The law sets the boundaries within which adoption and the formation of a new family take place. As described in the background chapter, the legal definition of 'family' sets the grounds for the legal understanding of the Italian family. These definitions form the basis of adoption, but are not necessarily reflected in its evolving culture of adoption. The legal definition has not adapted to the changes occurring in Italian society. The process via which an adoptive family originates happens in legal stages, but this is only one side of the making of the family. From the ten interviews with adoptive parents it emerged that although they had all formed their families according to the same legal requirements, they all embraced different meanings of the concept of 'family'. They demonstrated not only that family is made through daily practices but also that the process of 'displaying family' has a great impact on their daily lives. In fact 'displaying families' relates to the influence that the social context has on the family. A school requiring pupils to show their baby pictures or draw their family tree is an example of how the family is required to constantly negotiate adoptive family status.

Adoption is a one-off event, but the construction of the adoptive family and the adoptive bond happen over time. Adoption marks a transition in the family with the aim of legitimate parenthood and adoptive filiation; the external acknowledgement takes place through the court and its decree, but together with that there is a path that the family embarks upon in order to legitimate their new status. The state has access to the privacy of the family through regulations and through its establishment of the possibility of making a family. This private sphere is therefore losing its privacy and partially becoming the territory of the law. Italian adoptive families have to find their own space between the legal framing of 'family' and their own way of understanding family (if this is different from the legal definition), and this was the case for the families interviewed. This presents some similarities with Edwards' (1999) analysis of this issue in which she describes the dominance of legal discourses over the family, since the former are supported by the power of law and are linked to a prominent branch of child-welfare science. The Italian adoptive family manages the tension between these two spheres and tries to find a way to affirm itself as an adoptive family. The way in which the State supports the making of the family is rigid and does not reflect the ways in which adoptive families are continuously required to negotiate and renegotiate their adoptive family status.

In this scenario, professionals working with adoptive families are the link between the public, the state and the law; and the family's private sphere. Adoption sits between these two domains and is managed by the professionals in the field. This research did not aim to understand the role of the professionals and their experiences of communication about the child's past; however, considering their crucial role I had a

chance to meet and interview a number of them. What emerged from these interviews was a very varied picture of what communication means to them. The differences in the opinions of the experts interviewed reflect the differences presented in the sample of adoptive families, and this lack of uniformity was also found in relation to the matter of life-story work.

Talking versus telling: Understanding communication

As suggested by several authors (Feast and Howe, 2003; Lorenzini, 2013), in this study it also emerged that there are two ways of embracing and understanding communication which can be summarised as *talking* and *telling*. In Italian this would be expressed through the words *dire* and *parlare*. To tell means 'to notify, inform, to make known and reveal' (Hawkins et al., 1995, p. 671). To talk means 'to give expression to in words; to express one's thoughts or emotions by means of spoken language' (Ibid, p. 665). Both refer to the communication of information, but the first implies only the sharing whereas the second assumes an elaboration of the shared information. These different ways of communicating express the different approaches discussed by the interviewees, with different nuances but on a continuum, delimited at one end by 'talking', corresponding to openness, and on the other by 'telling', corresponding to a minimal form of openness. The continuum developed from this study is presented in the previous section, but it is looked at here through the juxtaposition of the two verbs 'talking' and 'telling'. Telling refers to the statement that adoption is the means through which the family has been formed, and the details are withheld. Talking, on the other hand, implies the use of any available information to build up a dialogue about the child's past. In this study it appears that what happens around the family – its social environment – has an impact on decisions regarding how they decide to communicate.

Families that had been exposed to difficulties, due to racism for example, acknowledged the differences and faced conversations related to the adoption and potentially to the country of origin.

The right to an identity and openness

This research started with a desire to understand whether the rights of children are respected in the process of adoption. Looking at the specific case of Italian international adoption it seemed important to consider the right to an identity, as the law on this differs among most European countries that adopt internationally. The right of the adoptee to know his or her identity is only partially protected by Italian law, and in the case of domestic adoption it is subordinated to the rights of the birth mother. Although this was not the main focus of this study, it transpired that the children and young people stated their wish to know and talk about adoption-related topics, which resonates with Thomas et al.'s (1999) work with adoptees. However it emerged that children are not the gatekeepers of this right: adoptive parents as well birth parents, the Italian State and the country of origin seem to have control over this specific right. The right to an identity is developed at different levels. It is not merely the right to know about the past. It is a continuous negotiation and expression of various factors: the right to speak the language of the country of origin, the right to maintain biculturalism, and even the right not to be informed about the past (Pregliasco, 2013). What emerges is that the nucleus of some families takes priority over the child itself and maintaining the balance between the different parties is privileged. For other families, though, there was empathy towards this need and right of their child and acknowledgement of the importance of talking openly about the past, as confirmed by research on this subject (Wrobel and Ayers-Lopez, 1996; Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011).

In the Italian context, the legal adoption framework defines 'closed' or 'confidential' adoption, in which no or little information about the birth families is exchanged. International adoptions limit full disclosure about the adoption because the countries of origin do not always keep details about the birth family, or do not have the opportunity to do so (i.e. in cases of child abandonment). In addition, not all countries have the same system for keeping records of childbirth, or they do not have infrastructure that connects remote areas of the country with the main urbanised areas (Pregliasco, 2013). However, this approach to adoption is challenged by adoptees, the social context in which the adoption happens, and the concept of openness. Through the interviews the adoptees confirmed the artificiality of 'confidential adoption' in many different ways: their desire to know about their origins, their memories, their resemblance to the other family members (or non-resemblance), and their desire to feel part of their adoptive family, but the acknowledging at the same time that they have a 'past'. This finding resonates with Von Korff et al.'s (2011) and McAdams' (2001) work on adoptive identity, which acknowledged that narratives developed with the parents influence and shape the ways in which adoptees see themselves. However, for some of the adoptive parents the confidentiality of the adoption justified their withholding some of the details. As described in the previous section, being open in terms of communication within the family implicitly means reflecting upon the importance of biological connections versus adoptive kinship.

Reflection on the methodology

The method employed for the research was in-depth interviewing. This method was considered the most suitable for this research because it allowed those interviewed to develop their accounts of the adoption experience. It was chosen for its flexibility and in

order to stimulate conversation. Researchers use this method to enable people to give an authentic interpretation of their own lives in the belief that the flexibility may empower the teller (Kvale, 1996; Goodman, 2001; Patton, 2002).

The initial method of recruitment to the sample was through contact with one of the major accredited adoption bodies in Italy, which guaranteed access to a sample of its adoptive families. However, as described in Chapter 4, the contact fell through just before the fieldwork was expected to start. This led to the necessity of finding families by different means. The snowballing method used meant that the families came from different backgrounds and regions and had different experiences. What associates them is that they have all adopted one or more children internationally, and they were available to talk about their experiences of openness in adoption. Considering the sensitive nature of the research I expected that only families that had had positive experiences would agree to be interviewed (Patton, 2002; Sinclair and Wilson, 2003), but in my sample some negative experiences were shared as well. The small sample and the different backgrounds did not allow for looking for similarities or differences amongst the mothers and fathers, or amongst families living in cities or in rural areas. In addition, because of the way in which the interviews developed it was not possible to look for differences between the parents' and the adoptees' accounts. It would be interesting and certainly relevant to investigate this last point further, with the aim of exploring whose story it is and understanding its ownership.

This research also makes a contribution through the methodology used to collect the data with the children. The interviews with them were thought through in advance so that the children could be engaged in conversation in a creative way, with the aim of overcoming initial barriers to discussing sensitive topics with an adult whom they did

not know. This study demonstrates that creative methods are not always necessary to engage children in research. In my sample the children acknowledged the tools presented but showed an interested in simply talking about adoption. This raises questions about children's ability take part in research without using creative tools, and the influence of repeated exposure to 'adult strangers' on this ability. Throughout their childhood the adopted children may have had to talk to social workers, doctors and possibly psychologists who were interested in discussing adoption-related issues. This finding resonates with research involving children (Butler et al., 2003; Smart, 2006) on the topic of divorce. In particular, Smart (2006) suggests that the narratives should be seen as more than merely factual accounts, arguing that the ways in which experiences are conceptualised can shape the kind of person an individual believes she or he is. These findings question the ways in which children's participation in research is seen, and could potentially take their participation in research to a new level.

As pointed out in the methodology chapter, defining my role and my position in the context of the 'adoption experts' proved to be difficult, as it might have influenced the children's perspectives. Another factor that should be mentioned is the presence of the parents: without them in the room while conducting the interviews it would not have been possible to gather data from the children as well. However, this led to interviews in which the parents intervened, or chose to have the interview all together. Measuring the parents' influence on the interviews is not possible; however, it requires acknowledgement.

My role played a significant part in the research. As described in the methodology, my reflexive role falls into three different categories; however it is important to

acknowledge what I brought to the thesis and to the interviews. I spent most of my life in Italy, and the social and cultural context in which I developed my own understandings of family, kinship and adoption is shaped by that. Prior to starting this research my views were in line with what I described in the background chapter about family, religion and migration. This inevitably meant that I initially approached the topic of my thesis with 'Italian eyes'. Thanks to the interviews with the participants and bibliographical research my perspectives developed, changing my understanding of the concept of the family. When I started the PhD I saw family from the Italian perspective, where the core of the family lies in the people, their links and their relationships, making it a rather fixed concept. Having completed the research, I now understand family as a set of practices influenced by the desire or the need to display these practices. Because of my awareness of my initial standpoint, while I was transcribing the interviews I decided to include the questions I had asked as well as my reactions to the responses I received. Once again, this is in line with what I described in the methods chapter, where I recognise that the interviews were co-constructed. Unstructured interviews allow more flexibility for the interviewee; despite that, it felt necessary to show the exchange between the participants and me.

Implications for practice and future research

The findings suggest theoretical changes in Italian the approach to communicative openness, but they also highlight aspects of the process of adoption that could be revisited. As pointed out, disparities emerged in the expert group's approach to communicative openness. These differences are reflected in the preparation that future adoptive parents receive and contributed to the variety of responses received from the

adoptive parents. Thus a number of issues should be considered by policymakers and operators dealing with international adoptive families:

1) Uniformity of preparation for future adoptive parents.

2) The difference between *talking* and *telling* should be addressed prior to adoption with the adoptive parents and where possible with the adoptees.

3) Life-story work is one way of working that is used in several countries and could be used as a starting point and model within the Italian context.

4) Self-narration projects in discussion with some of the professionals offer an approach that is comparable to life-story work in that it involves discussing the past and communication within the family, but this is not distributed in a uniform way across Italy or across the different accredited bodies. The differences are evident in the extent to which two families living in the same town which have chosen different accredited bodies could be prepared for adoption using completely different approaches depending upon the courses and preparation.

Further research should look at:

1) longitudinal studies including of children from childhood to adolescence and how they change their attitude towards communicative openness;

2) using a tool similar to life-story work with adoptive families;

3) research with families that have used the *'diario de mi vida'* from South America, and comparing the outcomes to children that have not used it;

4) Research on internationally-adopted children's resilience: memories and mother tongue;

5) The ownership of stories in adoptive families.

Chapter 9 Conclusions

The title of this thesis is *'You were born again with us': Narratives of Italian families formed through international adoption*. The aim of this research is to explain how families formed through international adoption in Italy deal with communication within their nucleus and how the adoptees manage it. To answer the research questions, qualitative in-depth interviews were used to explore the experiences of the participants. My research has added to the existing literature on international adoption in Italy, as the findings show what communicative openness means for the sample interviewed. All families develop an adoption story, but they all give their stories different meanings and roles. Families also deal differently with the difficulties that might emerge in relation to the child's past, and show different levels of empathy. Being able to consider the perspectives of parents, children and young adults at the same time gives great insight into the meaning of communication in adoption and adoptive-family life. The opportunity to interview adoptees ranging in age from 5 to 25 meant that it was possible to see how they manage adoption talk independently of age, as well as depending on their age. They all showed an interest in their past and they all mentioned memories of their life prior to adoption. The young adults referred to their need to feel 'normal', yet acknowledged that adoption influences their being. The children did not express these feelings in such an explicit way; however they showed an awareness and knowledge of their adoption and their adoption story. The adoptive parents showed their means of dealing with the adoption story and of incorporating it into their family story, and highlighted the difficulties faced at times. As shown throughout the thesis, without doubt the specificity of the Italian culture shapes the outcomes presented. These

accounts generate new understandings of communicative openness and highlight the importance of the social construction of this concept. Adoptees are situated in the complexity of being without family in their home country, and then have to embrace the culture of the receiving country. The vast body of literature that explores psychological outcomes for adoptees has overlooked the powerful notion of resilience and children's ability to make sense of their own experiences. In the transition it appears that some aspects that contribute to forming adoptees' identities are lost, and are therefore not used as the basis for developing their resilience. Children who are adopted experience different childhoods and adoption is a process of transition between one childhood, as a child without family, to being part of an adoptive kinship. Communication within the adoptive family is not simply 'telling' about one's origins; it is 'talking', discussing and elaborating on the (un)available information. Communication about the child's past in the Italian context is developed in a non-homogenous way. To start with, factors like the 'cultures of adoption', the country of origin and the adoptees influence the ways in which this is shaped. In addition, it emerged that the ways in which kinship is understood play a vital role in shaping communicative openness, as well as understanding of the law; use of available information; and the understanding of the right of the adoptee to know. The different degrees of tension and influence were placed on an openness continuum, which helped to summarise the approaches of this sample.

Research (Lanz et al., 1999; Brodzinsky, 2005; Berge et al., 2006; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011) shows that communicative openness helps the adoptee; my research and the adoptees' accounts show that it is desirable. However, communication not only takes place at the micro level of the family: it is also embedded in the wider social context.

The families, adoptees and experts did not make explicit that these stories contribute to 'making the adoptive family'; however, openness is part of 'doing the adoptive family'.

As the quote in the title suggests, the meaning of the adoption event in one's life is open to different interpretations. This research has aimed to provide an insight into the adoptive families and adoptees' complex task of talking about this event and its meaning in their lives.

Appendix

The sample

The interviews were conducted between March and June 2013, with 11 families, five children and five young adults. As it will be described, children are always interviewed in presence of their parents and in two cases also young adults were interviewed in presence of their family.

Families:

Family 1 is formed by: mother, father, one child and one young adult. All four took part to the research, through one single interview (with all of them). The family lives in the North-West of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it took one hour and it was recorded and afterwards transcribed. The two daughters were adopted from Asia, with two separate adoption processes, but through the same Italian accredited body, which is medium sized, catholic and based in their region. The first one was adopted in 1997 and the second one in 2001. At the time of the interview, one daughter was 18 years old and the second one was 14. The oldest one arrived in Italy when she was 2 and half years old, and the second one with 2 years of age. They are both going to high school and the parents are both professionals.

Family 2 is formed by: mother, father, one adopted child and one biological child. All four took part to the research, through one single interview with all of them. The family lives in the North-East of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it lasted one hour and I took notes of it. There is no recording of this interview because the family preferred it this way. The daughter was adopted from South America, she is 13 years old, was adopted in 2005, at the age of 5. The son is 14 years old. The adoption was

done with a medium sized accredited laic body, based in their region. Both parents are professionals and are involved with a support group for adoptive parents.

Family 3 is formed by: mother, father and adopted twins. The mother and one of the daughters took part to the interview. The family lives in the North-East of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it took nearly three hours, it was recorded and transcribed. During the first two hours it was only me and the mother, and the daughter joined after that for another hour. The daughters were adopted from Eastern Europe in 1996, at the age of 6 and a half, and at the time of the interview they were 22 years old. The adoption was done through a small voluntary association, based in central Italy. The second daughter did not take part to the interview because she is in a rehabilitation center, for people with mental health problems. The father was not interested in taking part to the interview. The daughter is looking for a job and the parents cover manual labour positions.

Family 4 is formed by: mother, father, one adopted boy and one adopted girl. The parents took part to the interview. The family lives in the North-East of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it took one and a half hours, it was not recorded, because the children did not want to be recorded. But I took notes throughout the interview. During the interview the children stayed in the room with us, but they did not want to talk. The children were adopted from Asia, through two different adoption processes. The accredited body is medium sized, laic and based in their region. The son is 7 years old and arrived in 2008, and the daughter is 3 years old and arrived in 2011. Both parents are professionals.

Family 5 is formed by: mother, father and one adopted boy. All of them took part to the interview. The family lives in the North-West of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it took about two hours and it was recorded and transcribed. The son was adopted from South America, in 2011, at the age of two and half years. At the time of the interview he was 4 and half years old. The adoption was done through a medium sized body based in their region. They are in process of adopting another child, but through another accredited body. Both parents are professionals.

Family 6 is formed by: mother, father, two adopted children. The mother took part to the interview. The family lives in the central Italy. The interview took place in her office, it nearly lasted two hours, and it was recorded and transcribed. She is involved in the practice of adoption in Italy, as second job she is covering a managerial role for an association dealing with adoption. She decided to be interviewed as adoptive mother. The children were adopted from Eastern Europe and Asia, through two different adoption processes. The accredited body is large sized, Catholic and based in another region. The son is 17 years old and arrived in 2001 from Eastern Europe and the daughter is 10 years old and arrived in 2006 from Asia. Both parents are professionals.

Family 7 is formed by: mother, father and one adopted young adult. The parents took part to the interview. The family lives in the North-East of Italy. The mother is well aware of research on adoption and is working on becoming an expert on the subject. The interview took place at their house, it took about one hour and it was recorded and transcribed. The daughter was adopted from South America, in 2005 when she was 10 years old. The adoption was done through a small sized body based in their region. Both parents are professionals.

Family 8 is formed by: mother, father and two adopted children. The mother and the children took part to the interview. The family lives in the North-West of Italy. The interview took place at their house, it took about two hours and it was recorded and transcribed. The children spoke to me in their dialect, but the mother spoke to me in Italian. The children were adopted from Eastern Europe, through two different adoption processes. The daughter is 9 years old and was adopted in 2008, and the son is 6 and a half years old and was adopted in 2010. The adoption was done through a large sized body, Catholic and based in their region. The mother is a housewife and the father covers a manual labour position.

Family 9 is formed by: mother, father and three adopted children. The parents took part to the interview, with the youngest daughter sitting in the next room. The family lives in the North-West of Italy. The interview took place at their house, for about one hour and it was recorded and transcribed. The children were adopted from Europe and Asia. The eldest son is now 17 years old and was adopted in 1995, the daughter is now 15 and was adopted in 2001, and the youngest daughter is now 10 years old and was adopted in 2005. The international adoption were conducted through a large sized body, laic and based in their region. The parents are both professionals.

Family 10 is formed by: father and adopted adult. They both took part to the interview, but the disability and speech impairment of the son allowed only 'yes and no' answers from him. The mother died two years after the son arrived in Italy. The father got married again, but divorced 10 years later. They live in the North-East of Italy. The interview took place at their house, for about two hours and it was recorded and

transcribed. The son was adopted from South America in 1985, at the age of 1 and half. The adoption was conducted through a medium sized body, laic, based in their region. The father is a retired professional.

Family 11 is formed by: mother and two adopted daughters. The mother took part tot the interview. The father died one year ago. They live in the North-East of Italy. The interview took pace at their house, for about one hour, it was recorded and transcribed. The daughters were adopted from Eastern Europe, one in 2003 when she was 18 years old, and the other one in 2007 when she was 14 years old. This is a particular type of adoption process, because the daughters spent summertime in Italy hosted by them. They first adopted the adult of age daughter, and then the sister. The adoption was conducted privately, through the family lawyer and the lawyer of the institution. Both parents were professionals. Due to the nature of their adoption this interview was not included in the sample.

The Laws

The adoption procedure:

1) The first step for couples that want to adopt a foreign child is sending the declaration of willingness to adopt a child to the Juvenile Court of its home region. The Court verifies the requirements of prospective adoptive parents, which must correspond to those required by the aforementioned Article 6 of Law 149/2001.

2) The social services acquire the necessary information regarding personal history, family and social life of the couple and to convey to the Juvenile Court within four months, a report that would allow the court to assess the resources and potential of the parental couple.

3) If the couple does not fulfill such requirements, the Court immediately

pronounces a decree of unsuitability.

4) Once released by the Court, the decree is sent to the Commission for International adoption, and where already indicated by the couple, also the accredited body.

5) Within one year after issuance of the decree of eligibility for international adoption, the couple should contact an accredited body authorised by the Commission for International adoption, freely chosen, to begin the process of international adoption.

6) Most of the accredited bodies organise meetings to inform couples about the reality of international adoption and procedures of the countries where they operate. The goal of these meetings is to prepare them for their future role as adoptive parents, with the collaboration of psychologists and other experts. The accredited body follows and accompanies the couple, accompanied also by the local social services, throughout the various stages of approaching and meeting with the foster child in his country and even after his arrival in Italy, and carries out the necessary paperwork during the entire procedure.

7) If the foreign authority does not accept the couple, or considers the couple not adequate for the adoption, the couple has the right to appeal to the Commission for International adoption, which may confirm the refusal of the authority, or entrust another body to carry out the procedure.

8) After the entry of the child in Italy and the end of any period of custody (for purposes of adoption), the Juvenile Court in the region of residence of the couple, makes a further check on the regularity of the proceedings, and orders the record of adoption in Civil Status register.

9) Following such registration, the foreign child acquires Italian citizenship, with retroactive effect from the date of issue of the sentence and in respect of the adoptive parents, the status of a with retroactive effect from the date of issue of the sentence and in respect of the adoptive parents, the status of a legitimate child.

The law 476/1998 also regulates the international adoption of children from those States not party and that did not ratify the Hague Convention. These pre-adoptive or foster adoptions may be declared effective in our country under the following conditions: they must have established the state of abandonment of the child and the parental consent to legitimise the adoption, adoptive parents must have obtained the order of suitability and complied with the instructions contained therein, and the adoption procedures should have been made by the Commission for International adoption, and authorised institutions, the Commission must have authorised the entry and permanent residence of foreign child in Italy for the purpose of adoption.

Interview schedules

Research project: "Openness in international adoption in Italy"

Katia Narzisi

Prof Brid Featherstone & Prof Monica Dowling

Interview schedules

(These are to be intended as topic guides and indication of guide questions)

For professionals:

> What their profession is, and how it is related to international adoption
> 1. What is your occupation?
> 2. Who do you work with?

> What they think of the actual situation and law in Italy
> 1. What do you think of the Italian law?
> 2. What would need to be updated or changed (if that is suggested)?
> 3. What do you think of the new law on international adoption that has been proposed to the parliament?

> What they know about the concept of openness in adoption
> 1. If I speak about openness, do you understand the concept?
> 2. What do you think about it? Is it a concept you refer to in your profession?

> How do they apply openness in their profession, if they do so
> 1. Is openness something you think it is important in adoption?
> 2. How do you apply this concept in your work within adoption? Do you speak about it with parents? Or in the preparation courses?

> The use of life story book
> 1. Do you know how the "life story book" works?
> 2. Do you use it in the preparation for parents? Do you use it when working with adoptive children? (depending on the job these professionals practice)

➢ What they suggest on the subject
  1. Is there anything you would add to this topic?

For parents:

➢ Story of their adoption process
  1. Tell me about your adoption
  2. When did your adoption process start?
  3. Since when is your child with you? How old was s/he?

➢ How they speak about adoption with their children
  1. How do you speak about the adoption with your child?
  2. Is your child asking about his/her past?
  3. Which information do you have about his/her past?
  4. Which information do you share with him/her?

➢ What they know about openness in adoption
  1. Do you think it is important to speak about the past with your child?
  2. In the preparation to adoption, did you speak about the openness in adoption?

➢ How they feel about the life story work/what could be done with children to speak about adoption
  1. (with an example of the life story work with me, taken from a text book) This is an example of a life story work: do you think it would be something useful to do with your child?
  2. Do you think that sharing the information about the child's past is positive for your child?

➢ What they suggest on this matter
  1. What would you suggest about openness?
  2. Do you think the life story work should be introduced in the preparation courses for parents?

For children:

➢ Topics related to the present like school, friends or afterschool activities (visual aid: drawings on daily life)
  1. Do you like going to school?
  2. What do you do after school?
  3. Would you like to draw with me about your favourite activity?
  4. Do you have good friends at school/after school activity?
  5. Do they know that you are adopted?

➢ Question about the influence of adoption in the daily life (visual aids: vignettes or puppets – depending on age)
  1. Are you friends curious about it?
  2. What do you tell them about it? (vignettes or puppets can be used for the answers)

➢ Past – what happened before Italy? What did they know about adoption? (visual aid: timeline)
➢ What do they know about their country of origins? (visual aid: globe)
  1. Can you show me where you lived before meeting mum and daddy?(globe)
  2. Do you remember the first time you met them? (timeline)
  3. Can we draw on the timeline the house where you lived in before and your house now?
  4. (using the timeline) When you where here (origin country), what did you know about here (Italy)?
  5. Did someone explain to you what was going to happen once you were in Italy?
  6. Now that you are here (in Italy), what do you know about there (country of origins)?
  7. Did you want to know more when you where there (country of origins) about here (Italy)?

➢ Future – any recommendations?
  1. What do you think they should tell children when they are adopted?

For young adults:

➢ Story of their adoption process
  4. Tell me about your adoption
  5. How is adoption influencing your daily life?

➢ What do you know about your past?
➢ How much about your past do you ask your parents?
➢ What do you think of the life-story work
➢ Is there anything you want to add or suggest about this topic?

Openness in international adoption in Italy

Researcher: Katia Narzisi, PhD Student

Research supervisors: Prof Brid Featherstone & Prof Monica Dowling

Project summary for professionals & Consent sheet

Introduction – Why this research?

My PhD research is focused on understanding how openness in international adoption in Italy is discussed in the adoptive families and from the professionals. I would like to talk to professionals like you to understand how you deal with openness and communication in the preparation of adoptive families to be. I will talk to adoptive parents to understand how they deal with the subject within their family. Lastly I would like to talk, play and involve children inviting them to share with us their knowledge and understandings of adoption, tackling aspects of adoption that adults might not consider relevant.

Your participation

As a professional you can decide to participate to this research through giving the consent. If you permit it, I will record the interviews with a digital audio recorder. You can decide to withdraw your participation up to the moment data are anonymised. The information collected until then will be destroyed. The change of the real names with pseudonyms will happen once the interviews are transcribed.

Risks and Discomforts

I am asking you to share with me some personal and confidential information, and you might feel uncomfortable telling me about your opinions in relation to international adoption is Italy and in your practice. You must know that you do not have to answer any questions or take part to any discussions if you do not wish so, and that is obviously fine. You do not have to give us any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview.

Sharing of Research Findings

At the end of the study, we will be sharing what we have learnt with you, with the other participants and with the community through "Il Giardino dei Ciliegi" "Il centro al supporto per l'adozione". In the course of the research I will be able to indicate how to access this information.

Confidentiality:

As requested by the Open University's research ethics committee, which approved my research, the maintenance of information security and confidentiality will be kept throughout the research. Data will be encrypted for transit and then stored on the Open University's secure servers. Confidentiality in conversations and activities will be always assumed, and it will not be possible to identify either the organisations or any individual in any of my subsequent research outputs.

Consent:

By signing the attached sheet, you express your agreement to participate in this research project and to allow me to use the resulting anonymised materials as part of my academic work.

If you have any further questions, please contact me at any time via email ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ or via mobile: ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

If you have any doubts on the research please contact: Anna Genni Miliotti:

▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

Or you can contact Prof Monica Dowling:▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓

▓▓▓

Openness in international adoption in Italy

Researcher: Katia Narzisi, PhD Student

Research supervisors: Prof Brid Featherstone & Prof Monica Dowling

Project summary for adoptive families & Consent sheet

Introduction – Why this research?

My PhD research is focused on understanding how openness in international adoption in Italy is discussed in the adoptive families and from the professionals. When I refer to openness I mean the readiness to talk about the past of your adoptive child, his/her origins and about the process of adoption. I would like to talk to professionals to understand how they deal with openness and communication in the preparation of adoptive families to be. I will talk to adoptive parents to understand how they deal with the subject within their family. Lastly, I would like to talk, play and involve children inviting them to share with us their knowledge and understandings of adoption, tackling

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aspects of adoption that adults might not consider relevant. Attached to this information sheet you will find a

Your participation

As adoptive parents, you can decide to participate to this research, but you may choose not to have your child participating in this study and your child does not to have to take part in this research if s/he does not wish to do so. If you are happy with your child taking part to the research, please use the information on this leaflet to inform him/her on how it will work and what it implies. Choosing to participate or not will not affect either your own or your child's future treatment at the Centre in any way. If you permit it, I will record the interviews with a digital audio recorder. You can decide to withdraw your participation up to the moment data are anonymised. The information collected until then will be destroyed. The change of the real names with pseudonyms will happen once the interviews are transcribed.

Risks and Discomforts

I am asking you and/or your son/daughter to share with me some very personal and confidential information, and you or your son/daughter may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You must know that you or s/he does not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion/interview if you or s/he does not wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give me any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview.

If you or your child get upset for something that came up during the interview, the "Centro per il supporto all'adozione" (Centre for the support to the adoption) will offer their post-adoption support service, to discuss issues of doubts.

Sharing of Research Findings

At the end of the study, we will be sharing what we have learnt with you, with the other participants and with the community through "Il Giardino dei Ciliegi" "Il centro al support per l'adozione".

Confidentiality:

As requested by the Open University's research ethics committee, which approved my research, the maintenance of information security and confidentiality will be kept throughout the research. Data will be encrypted for transit and then stored on the Open University's secure servers. Confidentiality in conversations and activities will be always assumed, and it will not be possible to identify either the organisations or any individual in any of my subsequent research outputs.

Consent:

By signing the attached sheet, you express your agreement to participate in this research project and to allow me to use the resulting materials as part of my academic work. If you allow your child to participate, your signature indicates your agreement for him/her to participate in this research project, but for this to be effective needs the signature of

your son/daughter as well. Attached to this information sheet and the consent form, you will find a list of topics and questions that I will be asking you and/or your child.

If you have any further questions, please contact me at any time via email ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮r via mobile: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

If you have any doubts on the research please contact: Anna Genni Miliotti: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮@▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or you can contact

Prof Monica Dowling: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮@▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

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Consent Form for children:

As a parent you are making a decision whether or not your child participate in this study about *"Openness in inte*ild to participate. You will receive a copy of this document.
have read (or been read)
decided to allow your ch^s pleas⬛⬛⬛⬛ the contact d⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛

If you have any questions pleas⬛⬛⬛⬛ the contact d⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛

Signature Of Parent   Date

⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛

⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛
Signature of researcher   Date

Signature of Witness   Date

Assent of Child

_____(name of child/minor) has agreed

to participate in research titled *"Openness in International adoption to Italy"*

Signature Of Child   Date

OR

Waiver of Assent

The assent of _____ (name of child/minor) was waived
because of:

        Age _____

        Maturity _____

     Signature of Parent or   Date

     Legally Authorised Representative

Consent form for professionals and adoptive parents:

Research project: Openness in international adoption to Italy

Name of participant:

Name of principal investigator(s): Katia Narzisi

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written statement in plain language to keep.

2. I understand that my participation will involve *interviews* and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

3. I acknowledge that:

the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction;

I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided;

the project is for the purpose of research;

I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;

I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored on a encrypted USB stick and will be destroyed after five years;

if necessary any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research;

I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be made available to me;

I consent to the interviews being audio-recorded   □ **yes**   □ **no**

Participant signature: Date:

If you have any questions please contact me via the contact details above

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