

Family Psychotherapy in the Context of Adoption: Parental Suppression of Adopted Children's Epistemophilic Drive in the Pursuit of Their Origins

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Abstract

Based on a psychotherapeutic clinical case study with an adoptive family, we sought to analyze the difficulties of the parental couple in the function of supporting the process of children's curiosity about their origins, as well as considering the effects on family ties when the epistemophilic drive is suppressed. Such drive refers to the desire to know about one's origins and also to one's inquiries about their own history and questions about their surroundings and oneself. This eagerness for knowledge may arouse parental anxiety when it uncovers conflicting enigmas about their own origins. For data analysis, descriptive reports of each family psychotherapy session prepared by the co-therapists were used. The vast narrative material, totaling 51 reports, contained the sequence of consultations describing the main issues discussed in the session. During the therapeutic process analyzed, we observed that one of the factors that made it difficult for the adoptive parents to establish conversations about the history of the adoption involved conflicts related to their own family history. Thus, family psychotherapy made it possible to identify that the suppression of the epistemophilic drive was a process intertwined with the family psychic transmission.

Keywords

Adoption, Family Psychotherapy, Epistemophilic Drive, Affiliation, Psychic Transmission

1. Introduction

Family composition through adoption organizes genealogical ties requiring sup-

port in the psychic and legal-cultural field (Levy-Soussan, 2014). Brazil's legal backing establishes irrevocability to this affiliation (Peiter, Paiva, & Silva, 2017), based on the equal rights and duties of parenthood by consanguinity. This type of family formation is becoming more and more frequent, allowing the reduction of disqualifying stigmas and the expansion of studies that are capable of mapping more health-promoting components for these bonds. However, in literature, we find evidence of the inexorable complexity of elements that structure parent-child bonds in adoption (Queiroz & Silva, 2017; Levinzon & Lisondo, 2018; Dias & Moreira, 2018).

The losses experienced by the adopted child impact their identity and sense of belonging in different ways, generating existential dilemmas and questions such as: "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?" and "Which family do I belong to?" (Wrobel, Helder, & Marr, 2020). We observed that psychic work regarding the maintenance of bonds is fundamental and continuous so that concerns and fantasies belonging to the family group are elaborated (Kaës, 2017).

Human dilemmas are enigmatic in nature, so they often need the mediation of someone who facilitates the process of metabolization when faced with such questions. We believe anxieties related to the enigma of existence itself provoke resonances in the family group, calling on all members to rethink and recognize themselves in a group with a common history (Foulkes, 1948). Resonance is a phenomenon of unconscious communication between people, through their encounter and coexistence, with the displacement of some fantasy or individual emotional experience to the other members of the group. Thus, a wave of emotional sharing occurs, organizing interactional behaviors in a specific way (Anzieu & Martin, 2013; Popper-Gurassa, 2016).

This exchange of psychic contents, managed by the group psychic apparatus, creates the group psychic reality that is revealed in dreams, memories, mythical constructions and family romance (Kaës, 2017). Particularly, family romance is aroused by anxieties and fantasies, referring to the story created by every child in relation to the identification with their parents, seeking to overcome deidealizations and deprivations inherent to maturation (Freud, 1909 [1908]/2006). We emphasize that this construction also refers to one's psychic work on their experiences of affiliation (what one's place is in the world) and subjectivation (how one relates in the world).

As an effect of this mental construction, one builds a narrative that is taken as a historical and ideological truth about oneself (Safra, 2006), transmitted and relived in the relationships with those who are close. Furthermore, a family romance must be considered as the result of an intersubjective creation, a product of convergent fantasies of the other members of the family. Thus, a "phantom group flow" is generated, a tributary to original issues that organize representations of all members as a single body and of the subject as part of a greater body (Kaës, 2017).

Specifically, in the adopted child's family romance, there is the double and paradoxical character of affiliation (Konicheckis, 2001; Machado, Mello, &

Féres-Carneiro, 2019), triggering symbolic productions both in the parental subsystem and in the children. If, on the one hand, adoptive affiliation is constituted by the discontinuity of the parent-child relationship bond with the original couple, on the other hand, the continuity of the family experience is made possible through adoptive parenthood. In order for the fantasies centering on dual affiliation to be symbolized, it is necessary to be able to communicate the original existential enigmas concerning the two parental sets (Kernberg, 1985).

Human beings have a tendency to pursue knowledge, which becomes even more poignant when one is experiencing adoption. The enigmas surrounding the family of origin activate the pleasure linked to the impulse for knowledge, a characteristic of the epistemophilic drive (Klein, 1998), favoring the strength of the adoptee's inquiries about their original historical context. As postulated by Klein, the human impulse to know feeds one's curiosity about one's origins. Still, according to the author, with the predominance of good relational experience, the child is able to allow oneself to be curious and able to confidently explore one's questions. If there is fear and guilt in the face of the epistemophilic drive, the activity of thinking about one's own internal reality is suppressed (Klauber, 2009).

To exemplify, in the case of an adopted child, there is a desire to understand why their parents led them to deprivation and the absence of family life, with the question: "Why did they separate from me?". In parallel, there is the enigma surrounding the choice of adoptive parents for the adoption, raising the question: "Why did they choose me?".

Kernberg (1985), for example, highlights the numerous fantasies of adopted children which function as responses to understanding the reasons for the severance with the family of origin. According to the author, some girls fantasize that they were "left" because they didn't have a penis or because there was something wrong with their body, not having managed to please their mothers of origin so that these mothers wanted to keep them. Such formulation emphasizes the child may come to consider oneself responsible for the discontinuity of the bond, thinking there is something despicable about oneself which would justify the rupture of the parent-child bond. These fantasies can trigger the belief that parent-child ties are liquefied and conditional on their attributes.

Levinzon (Levinzon, 2009; Levinzon & Lisondo, 2018) highlights one of the defensive attempts of these children in the face of such insecurity is to develop a false *self-functioning* as protection to remain attached, pleasing those who are significant to them. Others find, in oppositional and refuting behavior, a way to test relationships, constantly. Therefore, there can be many consequences of this complex of gaps and questions, among them the feeling of threat to the legitimacy of adoptive affiliation, as well as the eruption of an "infinite agony" (Safra, 2006). Such agony is composed of the vulnerability of the sense of belonging and the impossibility of validating one's own existence. When the aforementioned

emotional experiences are maximized, we are faced with a difficult scenario, especially if there is a withdrawal from the manifestations of epistemophilic drives.

The adoptive family can often play a role of resistance in the face of projections and manifestations linked to the epistemophilic impulse of the adopted child, as they fear the resonance of terrifying anguish. Thus, parents block an essential function that would help the child relieve psychic tensions and in the construction of meaning in their own history.

[Klein \(1998\)](#) emphasizes that, for the development of children's intellectual competence, it is essential adults respond frankly and take into account their ability to understand. The author states that if the impulse to inquire into unknown facts and phenomena encounters external resistance, the ability to think and to create deeper questions is also inhibited. Therefore, the experience of curiosity to know one's own psychic reality is suppressed. As another possible consequence, there is an aversion to external reality, to the expansion of knowledge in order to grow and to reflect on life experiences in depth.

[Winnicott \(2006\)](#) emphasizes the difficulty of exercising parenting with a child with basic needs, as they demand from the parental role a sensitive listening ability, sometimes similar to that of a psychotherapist. According to [Rotenberg \(2011\)](#), only the predominantly loving bond with the adopted child can stop anxieties and psychic pain this deep so hope can grow.

Faced with such profound issues of the human condition that adoption puts into evidence, we propose a reflection on the difficulties of the adoptive parental couple in the function of supporting the process of children's curiosity about their origins, as well as thinking about the effects on family ties when the epistemophilic impulse is suppressed. The above objective had as its starting point a case study on psychotherapeutic work with a family in the context of the adoptive parent-child relationship.

Many families experience situations that demand psychological treatment, either because of the intrapsychic difficulties of the adoptees, or because of the resonance of this suffering in family members. This work also proposes to analyze the suffering of the adoptive family while showing the belief that the suffering of the child is exclusively linked to traumas of the previous history of adoption, which is actually a misconception.

2. Method

This is clinical-qualitative research with a single case study design ([Stake, 2010](#)), in which an intrinsic analysis of the psychotherapeutic treatment was carried out with an adoptive family, seen weekly at the Applied Psychology Service of "Y" university. Following [Stake's \(2010\)](#) postulation, we narrowed our investigation, having as our main task to understand the case, observing specific themes that emerged during the analysis, among them the experiences of adoptive parenthood and parent-child relationship, the manifestations of curiosity about one's origins and main family conflicts.

3. Participants

The family studied was named “Nascimento Family”, consisting of three members—Mônica (mother—55 years old), Sérgio (father—56 years old) and Cora (adoptive daughter—9 years old)—part of the Brazilian middle class. The psychotherapeutic process took a year and a half, being carried out in co-therapy and supervised weekly throughout the treatment period.

4. Procedures and Data Analysis

For data analysis, descriptive reports of each family psychotherapy session prepared by the co-therapists were used. The vast narrative material, totaling 51 reports, contained the sequence of consultations, describing the main issues discussed in the session, the group associations that occurred in the setting and the psychotherapists’ interventions. For the analysis, we initially read all the material, observing the themes that stood out the most in the psychotherapeutic process. Subsequently, a thematic cut was conducted to deepen the discussion.

5. Ethical Considerations

As a procedure of the institutional policies where the treatment took place, during the screening period, the Free and Informed Consent Form was presented to all family members. The content was discussed, and it was clarified that the Psychology Service is a teaching clinic with the purpose of teaching, research and scientific publication; therefore, everyone’s authorization was requested. The ethical aspects involved were guaranteed, such as the protection of identities and the confidentiality of information. It was emphasized that signing the term was voluntary and that both consent and assent could be withdrawn at any time, without prejudice to the treatment. The term was signed by those responsible, and the assent was given verbally by the daughter.

Regarding ethical care in the presentation and discussion of data, identities and certain historical contents were hidden or transformed. Rigorous care was followed so as not to compromise the anonymity of the participants, while also preserving the reliability of the clinical material analyzed. As a parameter, we followed the premises of confidentiality in the publication of a clinical case, elaborated in the document issued by the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA, 2019), aiming to guarantee the multiple ethical aspects.

6. Analysis and Discussion of the Case

The initial complaint of the “Nascimento Family” focused on the school difficulties Cora had been experiencing, who had low academic performance and sometimes took some objects from her classmates without authorization. Initially, the parents also highlighted the daughter’s resistance to following orders, both in the school and home contexts, being defined as a rigid person by the mother. After that comment, Cora automatically repeated: “I’m rigid”. When asked by co-therapists what that meant, she couldn’t explain. When stimulated to think, she

replied that she did not always obey her mother and that she felt she was getting better.

The family seemed to describe Cora's process of singularizing herself, at the same time establishing identifications with her parents. To create her own identity, respecting her alterity, the daughter needed to defy "orders". On the other hand, she identified with her adoptive parents, but for that, she resorted to the mechanism of "imitation", copying the parents' speech to please them and perhaps ensure a parent-child bond. The identification process is elementary for the construction of identity, being promoted through the mirroring function in human relationships. However, if it occurs through a fantasy of incorporation, there is no room for separation, for the development of one's own mind (Ferrazzi, 2010; Florence, 2010).

Mônica justified her daughter's challenging behaviors by attributing them to her adoptive parentage, mentioning for the first time the relationship through the affective route, but did not go into details about the history of adoption. The mother says: "I know things are different for her, sometimes more difficult because she was born from my heart, but we always try to encourage her to be strong and independent". From the father's point of view, the daughter was just "creative, even in school activities". We observed that there was an ambiguous parental discourse; while the daughter's strength and independence were encouraged, when she created something surprising, she was also considered disobedient and rigid. A dilemma seems to exist in Cora: does she surrender to the annihilation of her singularity to remain preserved as a member of this family, or does she give in to the pressure of her drive to be consistent with herself?

Kaës (2017) postulates that, to some extent, this dilemma is related to the insertion of any subject in an intergenerational chain. Such an insertion process requires a narcissistic contract that meets both group and intrapsychic demands. The author states that, in order to fulfill the narcissistic desire to belong, it is necessary to sacrifice a part of oneself, involving the mechanism of identification with a common object. In the case of the adopted child, there is an experience of discontinuity of the primary identifications linked to the family group of origin, and the way in which this will be psychically experienced is unique. However, if the adoptive family restricts the spaces of differentiation, the suffering of the child in the group insertion can be amplified.

Cora's school symptoms supported her role as an identified patient. It is important to observe the place that this patient occupies for the balance of the system. We must question whether the symptoms identified by an individual can be comprehended as a compromise solution for the entire family group, having the function of hiding and revealing a pain shared by all.

Interspersed with the complaints directed at Cora, there were complaints related to marital conflicts in the initial sessions. Such conflicts were addressed in front of the daughter without any embarrassment, and experiences of marital infidelities and resentment were reported, with verbal aggression between the spouses. There was a pervasive feeling of belittling and marital discontent. De-

spite this, the couple was resistant to dealing with these conflicts, wanting to focus the treatment on the dilemmas of parenting, especially in the conflicts related to Cora's education.

A standstill was installed in this initial course: reflecting on marital dissatisfaction was an impeded psychic activity. On the other hand, despite Cora being placed as a carrier of parental suffering, her personal conflicts did not find a legitimate space for sharing and recognition. But what were Cora's pains? Would they be linked to the condition of adoptive affiliation? The adoptive parent-child tie was apparently verbalized without taboo by the parents; however, an interdiction was possible to be noticed, which prevented the deepening of the family history.

In one of the sessions, the mother described how she found out about Cora's behavior of taking possessions of colleagues' belongings. She came home from school with unknown objects and scattered them around the house. Upon noticing these unknown objects scattered around, the mother asked her: "Where have they come from?". Through this symptom, we believe Cora manifested the enigma of the origin, birth and belonging of things (Ghirardi, 2015).

Throughout the treatment, the search for answers being not only an individual need for Cora, but also for her parents, became apparent. Perhaps the girl tried, by scattering strange objects around the house, to raise individual and group epistemophilic drives, which were also being inhibited. This movement expressed the anxieties of seeking to awaken in the family the search for answers.

Questions of adopted children about their origins occur regardless of the age at which they are adopted, causing parents to necessarily also re-signify their choices and their history, and they are neither static nor finalized constructions (Machado, Féres-Carneiro, Magalhães, & Mello, 2019). As Queiroz and Silva (2017) point out, most parents do not know why they want a child or choose to have children, as there are significant unconscious factors in the parenting process.

Mônica and Sérgio, absorbed in their marital dilemmas, were internally unavailable for the parental role of listening to their daughter's latent demands. They had difficulties in the exercise of parenting because they were not able to establish a harmonious partnership, whose obstacle was also related to the personal history of each of them with their families of origin. The couple met when they were both living away from their families. When they decided to get married, Monica resolved to leave everything to accompany her husband, who had taken a job in another city. This choice of hers remained an unpayable debt between the spouses. Unconsciously, when "abandoning" her family of origin to live with Sérgio, Mônica expected to be "adopted" by him, expecting to occupy a place of great importance in his life.

As the treatment progressed, the marital quarrels became even more intense, leading to attacks on each other's origins. They argued that they did not understand each other because they came from "different realities". Monica's family was modest, different from Sérgio's family, who belonged to a more privileged

socioeconomic segment.

In the sessions with a lot of marital tension, Cora expressed herself with drawings. As an illustration, we highlight a session in which the girl was concentrating on drawing with great care and whim. However, when the parents began an intense argument, her drawings, which had previously been well defined and distinct, turned into blots of paint, forming a mixture of colors. The girl began to smear the entire surface of the drawing, turning it into a large stain, expressing something with little definition. However, it manifested that there was something that needed to be seen.

The bellicose relationship of the parents, as they come from different origins, expressed a relational model with difficulty in recognizing alterity. The interactions, at the level of both the internal and external worlds, were configured in an undifferentiated and persecutory relational model (Carneiro, 2007). The couple transmitted intolerance to what was “foreign/strange”. Cora embodied a relational model (Nathans & Schaefer, 2017) that did not tolerate different colors/subjectivities. “Coming from different social realities” becomes a threatening internal object, an element of great attack, compromising bonds. Therefore, the couple supported their family life by using indifference.

In adoptive affiliation, the condition of being a “foreigner” must be welcomed in the family’s mind, with the ability to integrate the different origins into a single generational chain, psychically consolidating the affective parent-child relationship. Should Cora lose her original contours? Could a loving alliance of affiliation be formed in this family intolerant to differences? She expressed her agony when faced with the internalization of this relational model.

Over time, the family clearly became engaged in the treatment, confidently bonding with the co-therapists. Foulkes (1948) understands that pathology is constructed in a complex network of interactions, with family group psychotherapy being an effective tool for revealing different sides of psychic disturbances. Family treatment allowed the expression and understanding of dynamic intersubjective movements. As Rousillon (2019) points out, human beings need to communicate, to speak, in order to recognize and know some of the mysteries that inhabit them.

The clinic family device allowed Cora to voice questions about her curiosity around her origins, meeting not only intrapsychic needs but also intersubjective ones. As an example, in one of the sessions, Cora was dressed as an “animal-girl” as she was wearing an animal hood, thus, incorporating the character from the book she carried in her hands by wearing it. The book focused on the life of a girl born and raised in the forest by animals; after growing up she was taken to live in a family composed of humans. As she did not see herself being happy in this coexistence, she ended up returning to her old home among the animals. After the narration of the story in the session, the father commented: “These humans are weird”. A family reflection began that family does not always promote well-being.

Cora's spontaneous gestures when playing, drawing and bringing books enabled manifestations of her internal world. She was still able to connect with her true self and sought help not to succumb to its encapsulation (Levinzon & Lisondo, 2018; Winnicott, 2005). According to Safra (2006), for an individual to experience their memories, it is necessary for them to be rooted in a group because it is in the encounter with others that the act of narrating their own biography becomes possible, favoring the experience of the true self.

At the beginning of the treatment, the parents' own family history was only mentioned in a chaotic way. They could not find precision in the reporting of the dates of events; they confused the facts they had experienced or emphasized that they had forgotten them. In the course of treatment, Cora's parents came to recognize and value her curiosity, mentioning that they observed her discontent when she didn't know things. Therefore, the family history could be rescued. Everyone in the family began to do mental work, thinking about the oddities, strangeness, loyalties, fantasies of belonging and discomforts. The psychotherapeutic process seemed to allow mental disorganizations to be verbalized and understood in a group, creating symbolizations and new ways of relating.

The couple began to reveal the stories about the origins of adoptive parenting and about their own origins. For a long time, they didn't want to have children, Sérgio being the most resistant, not supporting Monica in her desire for motherhood. The co-therapists tried to explore what the decision to have a child was like. In one session, while playing with slime by shrinking, stretching, dropping it on the floor and then retrieving the object, Cora asked what "it meant to be inserted" (a word mentioned at some point by her father). Sérgio replied that the meaning was "feeling part of something". The co-therapists asked him what he thought of his daughter's question, and he turned to her: "Do you feel part of our family?". Cora replied "more or less", showing discomfort and generating an immense silence. The feeling of being inserted or not is an appropriation of the subject, which is achieved when identifications become integrated and symbolized (Carneiro, 2007). Not feeling part of the family was also a strong feeling, present in Monica's life. She was the first female child, after three male children, and was treated like a boy and as the caretaker of her brothers.

The psychotherapeutic space allowed voicing what was feared, attending to epistemophilic impulses and, consequently, mitigating persecutory fantasies. The couple painfully revealed that there had been a pregnancy prior to adoption. Monica managed to get pregnant but lost the girl in childbirth, in addition to her being in grave conditions, with a risk of death. The mourning was still poignant and touched Monica and Sérgio a lot. We understand that this fact created another enigma in the constitution of Cora's affiliation. Did she occupy a unique place in the generational chain that she could consider hers exclusively? Or did she live in the shadow of the girl who had preceded her, with death being the motivator for her birth in this family? According to Souza (2018), learning also implies knowing about things that are difficult to accept, such as failures and

death.

Cora brought another book called *The Birth*, pointing out that it consisted of many pages. Somehow, the girl tried to think about her origins in the “Nascimento Family”. Through her curiosity, she brought the force of a desire for transformations alive (Safra, 2006). This clinical encounter allowed family members to listen, producing reciprocity effects (Roussillon, 2019).

In one session, the co-therapists decided to build the genogram with the family. Through this instrument, the couple was able to report other deaths in their families, experienced in three generations. Sérgio described in detail the experiences related to the death of his first daughter, getting emotional and triggering unprecedented complicity in his wife, being listened to and carefully observed by Cora. He reported that his father’s first wife had died in childbirth with his twin daughters, with only one of them surviving. With that, Sérgio’s mother (his father’s second wife) took the place of an “adoptive mother” for his surviving sister. This painful experience was so present and intense with each pregnancy in the family that his sister cried and feared the possibility of the pregnant woman’s death. The legacies of suffering due to deaths at birth and the questioning about affiliation permeated the bonds of the “Nascimento Family” in a transgenerational way.

Gradually, the painful experiences generated new historical representations. A situation that demonstrates the transformation of this family occurred when Cora verbalized in a session, playing with dolls: “This is daddy, this is mommy, where am I? Don’t I exist yet?”. Subsequently, she picked up another doll and claimed to be her. She searched the toy box for two more dolls identifying them as the psychotherapists. She said all the dolls had gone to psychotherapy. At the end of this session, the girl explained that if she had a box like that in her house, she would feel much better.

Family psychotherapy allowed the elaboration of the family romance, unraveling shared fantasies, which generate disturbances in family ties (Kaës, 2017). Family members had difficulty to question and think about the inquiries regarding their experiences, suppressing the parental function of supporting the fundamental epistemophilic impulses in the adoptive affiliation. Psychotherapeutic work occupied this space of mutual recognition, being important in many ways, especially when it came to strengthening the parental ability to go through the various anxieties and the demand to pursue the truth of their own life stories. We understand that there was also a mental process of decondensation (Roussillon, 2019) when the subjective experiences of each family member were dissected, enabling the process of differentiation and, thus, relating to fewer “blurs”.

7. Final Considerations

In the treatment of the “Nascimento Family”, we were able to observe the need to dissect time, spaces and subjective experiences, working on the family relationship and the meaning of unconscious fantasies about affiliation across gen-

erations. It was more than talking and being heard; it represented getting in touch with emotional experiences which were previously impossible to be dealt with. The mutative capacity created through family psychotherapy was supported by the family transformation of enduring some degree of separation, and not feeling this experience as abandonment, loss, or attack. There was a strengthening of tolerance in the face of the expression of the epistemophilic drive, which allowed members to open up to the desire to know and recognize their own history.

As mentioned, the epistemophilic drive is represented by the child's desire to decipher unknowns imposed on the child and that are linked to the questions around the origins of things and the whys. Such questions constitute the core of the pleasure of learning, which later is the access route to the knowledge proposed by formal learning at school. Knowing oneself inscribes the broader desire to know the world. However, when layered in secrets and inhibitions, this search for knowledge is transformed into a mechanism of unconscious attack on the knowledge processes themselves. Thus, the fantasy is created that "if I can't know myself, I can't know/understand' anything". We observed that the suppression of the epistemophilic drive could be triggered by the generational transmission of blocking the psychic activity of questioning.

The elaboration of the main fantasies and anxieties had to be worked on very gradually in psychotherapy, respecting the time of the psychic maturation processes, being fundamental not to accelerate any breakthrough that could not yet be dealt with. As *Eiguer (2007)* points out, clinical work involves doing something new with the resources that we already have whenever life requires it. Thus, "no matter how difficult a person's life was, no matter how objective his frustrations and disappointments were" (*Green, 1990*), it is necessary to transform internal and external data into properties so we are able to create a mental life of our own.

Conflicts of Interest

We ensure that there is no conflict of interest between the researcher and the research subjects or between the funding agencies of the project: CAPES, CNPq and FAPERJ.

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