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Chapter

The DAVAd: A Narrative Tool to Explore the Early Stages of the Adoptive Bond

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Abstract

The DAVAd (the first bond process diary) is a new narrative tool created to accompany the adoptive couple during their trip to the land of the child/children to whom they have been matched. The tool presented is the first to explore what happens, in term of events and emotional experiences, during the first meetings between the parental couple and the child/children. This period is clinically relevant as the ideal is compared with the real. The DAVAd supports the parental couple in focusing on their experiences and their meanings and learning to deal with the complexity related to the bound construction. Moreover, the DAVAd allows the clinical psychologist in detecting and treating, if necessary, the familiar dynamics, favoring the prevention of the distress. A clinical case that utilizes the DAVAd will be presented, to enlighten the way its compilation can be used by researchers and clinicians.

Keywords: adoptive bond, international adoption, narrative diary, adoptive parent-child first meeting, post-adoption

1. Introduction

The method to investigate the phenomenon of international adaptation has progressively changed over the years. There has been a shift from a perspective that was meant to legitimize mostly the needs of the parental couple to a perspective aimed at safeguarding children's rights; later on a new perspective was developed that regards the adoptive family as a *system* to be protected and supported. In other words, there has been a shift from an extremely optimist outlook, which considered the adoption the best solution for children, biological parents, and the adoptive couple, to a more realistic approach, which regards adoption as an opportunity but at the same time acknowledges the challenges and the issues the people involved in the adoption process have to face [1].

The Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption certainly drove this change of perspective. The convention recognized that the child should grow up in a family environment, thus promoting the adoption of children with special needs and/or school-age children and making adoptive families face specific difficulties and issues. It is widely acknowledged that when children have been in the child welfare

system for long periods or have a background of abuse and neglect, those conditions may cause developmental delays, interfere in the relationship with the new caregivers, and represent a risk factor for adoption breakdown [2, 3].

If in the past, the adoptive family was considered to be on the same level of the biological family, thus neglecting its peculiarity, today we know that building an adoption bond is a complex phenomenon that may only safely be developed if the specific development challenges, involving adoptive parents, children, and the counsellors working with them, are acknowledged. Risk factors may be reduced by the relationship with the new family [4, 5], provided that its members are supported by trained counsellors and can benefit from dedicated services [6, 7].

However, Van IJzendoorn and Juffer [8] state that adoption is already a "curative intervention" and a "protective factor" (p. 1229) as it fulfills the desire of adoptive parents to have children and offer children a second chance to experience a family and emotional relationship and bond, which are essential to them.

Vadilonga [9] agrees with Van IJzendoorn and Juffer as he states that adoption represents a reparative effort and promotes the development of a multiple identity. He writes, "Children placed for adoption have specific problems and often show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder; in order to make the adoption process successful, it is essential that adoptive parents become the main point of contact in the reparative and working-through process of the child" (p. 34). This is possible if parents managed to "activate" their reparative capabilities, which mainly refer to the ability to listen, thus sharing a development process that allows the child to listen to himself/herself. Adoptive parents can therefore provide children with support, containment, and bonding and help them to reflect and process their own story [10].

In other words, the path to adoption can be therapeutic and trigger a transformation process, provided that the child is accompanied toward new relational experiences that may integrate the construction of the self and the representation the child has got of himself and the others. The answers of adoptive parents can confirm or discount the survival strategies children developed to handle with violent, untrustworthy, or absent caregivers.

From that point of view, both research and interventions should be focused less on the exclusive placement of the child with special needs and more on the care of the family system, the relationship between the child and the parents; the aim should be to support and promote a circular growth path, thus driving the development of patterns of relationship different from those learnt in the birth family background of the child [11]. A better awareness of the rights of adopted children and of the role played by adoptive parents as potential co-therapists helped to turn the attention on the training of adoptive parents but also on the need to develop preliminary and continuous interventions.

2. Research on adoption breakdowns

Research carried out with the aim of quantifying and understanding the phenomenon of adoption breakdowns can be useful to the purpose of this study to the extent that it offers information to rethink support to adoptive families.

The main references will be made to what is stated by Vadilonga [9], in his book published in 2010, and to what is recommended by Paniagua, Jiménez-Morago, and Palacios [12] with regard to their research carried out on adoption breakdowns in Spain, over the decade 2003–2012, and presented in Milan in 2016. Further reference will be made to the Italian research carried out by the Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali (CAI), in collaboration with the Istituto Innocenti [13], and

the literature review carried out by a team at the University of Minnesota [14]. Even though the research reviewed is not recent, it is the only one available on a topic not easy to analyze.

In literature, authors agree on the fact that the phenomenon of adoption breakdown is the result of multiple risk factors coexisting and regarding three main players: the parental couple, the child, and the counsellors and adoption professionals working with the family. With regard to children, several risk factors were identified. The most important of them is the one connected to late adoption [14]. However, the research carried out by Paniagua and his colleagues shows how the risk of adoption breakdown increases proportionately with the age of the adopted child only in the age bracket between 2 and 6 years old and that it cannot be the only risk factor explaining the adoption breakdown [12]. With regard to the parental couple, the same research identifies as a risk factor the low motivation and training of the parents. It is also interesting to observe that, both in Spain and Italy, there is reluctance among parents to ask for support so that it is advisable not only to develop further local support services but to drive a real change in the culture forming the background of the adoption process [15].

The authors agree that there is a low percentage of adoption breakdown, but estimates may vary depending on the source taken into consideration (from 1 to 1.8% [13]; from 1 to 7% [16]; from 1 to 32% [12]). The differences observed among the estimates may be due to the different areas investigated, to the difficulty to collect data, but also to the definition of adoption breakdown used. From a legal perspective, it is possible to distinguish between adoption disruption and adoption dissolution. The term disruption is used to describe an adoption process that ends before the adoption is legally finalized through the adoption order, while the term dissolution is used to describe an adoption process that ends after the adoption is legally finalized.

In both cases, however, all the difficult relationship patterns experienced as insurmountable by the main actors, that is, children and adoptive parents, which however are not the cause of a final separation are not taken into account. Those critical situations may be overlooked in the monitoring, if the families do not ask for help.

According to a research carried out by CAI, the number of adoption breakdowns is mainly the same in national and international adoption processes [17, 18].

Different research articles show how adoption breakdown happens during the adolescence or preadolescence of the adopted child in most of the cases, revealing signs of distress in the adoptive parent-child relationship that has been going on for years without being identified and treated. In those situations, as Vitolo [19] observes, the "rejection and pushing-away" behavior of adoptive parents seems to be aimed at distancing themselves from the child as well as from the anguish of feeling helpless.

In the interviews carried out with some children who experienced adoption breakdown [13], a common factor emerging seems to be the impossibility to acknowledge the other and be acknowledged by him/her, and such a distress may be shown even when children were adopted at a very young age. In those cases, according to Lombardi [20] what seems to lack is a "a mental space for the other and the bonding, which turns into the impossibility to experience a verbalized space and the inability to become beings experiencing relationships subject to change: the dysfunctional family (unlike the others) is blocked in that experience, not progressing but sticking in time to that feeling of 'non-belonging' around which the subsequent relationship is built" (p. 80).

Those results are connected to the opportunity to adopt a constructive approach to respond to adoption crises through two preventive strategies: the training of the

parental couple before the adoption and first of all early detection of conflicts and problems and early intervention to support the "therapeutic" abilities of adoptive parents. The attention focused on the prevention and early support to parents makes attention also to be drawn on the first stages of the path to adoption, starting from the meeting between the child and the parental couple. Even though prospective parents were trained and their ability to manage conflicts and adjust to new and problematic situations was analyzed, it is in the face-to-face contact between the main players of the adoption that feelings of joy and acceptance but also misunderstandings and frustration can be experienced. Conflicts may become harsher, above all in the case of older children, who already have a well-defined personality and are less willing to give up the psychological strategies that have saved them from the despair of abandonment. At the same time, parents may develop defensive strategies unconsciously that make them afraid of their educational role, not self-confident, disappointed by the emotional distance of the children, and unable to deal with the developmental crisis and the necessary paths to mutual adjustment having a positive and constructive attitude. The presence of qualified counsellors as well as the early detection and management of distress may stop that potentially destructive process [21]. In other words, it is necessary to intervene before the development of deep-rooted mutual prejudices makes the parties impossible to know each other and "reach an agreement" [22].

3. Useful guidelines to develop the intervention

The research carried out and cited in the previous paragraph provides some guidelines for the development of further research and intervention in the matter.

In general terms, it seems necessary to drive a cultural change that, on the one side, allows adoptive families to turn to support services to receive the support they need in their path to adoption and, on the other side, allows services to look at adoptive families as a resource to be trained instead of subjects to be analyzed.

Throughout this path, it appears essential to focus the attention on the meetings between parents and children, both in the pre-adoption and post-adoption stages, in order to detect any problem, thus promoting the development of a "family system" rather than mutual incomprehension getting worse.

This would be possible if adoption professionals work with parents on their ability to narrate about themselves, recognizing and validating the feelings aroused by the relationship with adopted children, first imagined and later experienced, in order to promote the necessary learning that will allow the parental couple to accept the experience of life and behaviors of children.

Narrating the family relationship means to give oneself the opportunity to think about it, weakening, as Salvatore [23] emphasizes, "the sense of truth connected to the emotional building of the experience, offering the opportunity to explore different and additional ways of interpreting reality" (p. 68).

Such a line of development is further confirmed by psychoanalytic literature [24, 25], which studied the path to biological parenthood, from the preparation to the transition to parenthood. In the course of the pregnancy and when meeting the newborn, the parental representations play a crucial role as they will drive the type of emotional investment and the care quality the parents will provide to the newborn. The emotional and symbolic dimension of pregnancy, which is common to biological pregnancy and to the path to adoption [26], plays a key role in the psychological wellbeing of the family. It prepares and helps parents to develop their role as parents, allowing them to think about and mentally contain the child, identifying his/her needs that have to be met and separating them from their own needs [27].

In the case of adoptive parents, in addition to the development of their own role as parents and the acceptance of the history of the children, it is necessary to take into account the grief for failed procreation and the awareness of meeting a child who has already lived a part of his/her own story, probably affected by adversities [28]. It is easy to think that, on the other side, the child waiting for an adoptive parent will have his/her own feelings of anxiety and expectations. To the purpose of this study, this is regarded as important as international adoptions, which are today more frequent, involve school-age children. Based on the present knowledge, children's expectations are often hard to know, for both the adoptive parents and researchers, and may be revealed only at the time of the face-to-face contact; however, it can be said that this is not applicable to the expectations of adoptive couples.

For adoptive couples the meeting groups of parents who prepare themselves to meet a child to adopt have been long since recognized as essential.

The group plays a very important role because it allows peer comparison and the open discussion of parents' fantasies about the child and the first interactions with him/her [10]. In the groups, the verbalization of doubts, fears, and prejudices is explicitly favored in order to prevent reactions including rejection, detachments, and extreme defense against resistances or simply against what is unknown and cannot be predicted [29]. Prospective parents often daydream about their first meeting with the child, so long-awaited, thinking about it as an immediately acknowledgment of their own role as parents and that of the child, as a magic ailment to the wounds experienced by the child due to abandonment and by the couple for failed procreation [20]. As experiences show, it is a fantasy that helps to remove the effort for being involved in a new and demanding relationship, and it is therefore useful to have the space and time needed to analyze it.

With regard to the stage of face-to-face contact between adoptive parents/child, there is also a gap in the literature.

Although that stage of transition is regarded as highly important, with the identifications of the issues that may arise [30], there is no research analyzing the facts [31].

Our review of specialized literature only allowed us to find one article [29]: it is a qualitative study, based on the interviews of 46 parental couples who told about their meeting with the adopted minor. The limitation of the above mentioned article, however, is the time between the adoption and the interview, which ranged from 1 to 16 years. In the interviews carried out, the three topics most frequently discussed and which show a higher level of emotional intensity were the time when the child was officially placed into the custody of the adoptive parents, the discovery of his/her own body, and the first interactions. Different themes emerged were referred to those topics: the feelings of loneliness and anxiety felt at the time of the face-to-face contact, the shocking images of the life conditions of children, the lack of training to the contact with the child, the lack of information received about the child, the fear about his/her health conditions, the fear for reactions of the child such as rejection or aggression, and the contrast between the expected interaction and the one actually experienced.

The themes identified confirm the need to focus more on the stage of the first face-to-face contact, but in the literature there are no tools designed for this.

4. A new tool: the DAVAd

In the view of what is stated in the previous paragraphs, our research group developed a narrative diary, called DAVAd (Italian acronym for Diario di Accompagnamento del Viaggio Adottivo, translated as "first bond process diary"),

which is a useful tool offered to couples, who chose international adoption, as a "companion" during their journey to the country of birth of the child they were matched to. This tools was designed with the aim of providing clinicians with a support tool to their work, "opening a window" on the first interactions between adoptive parents and children.

The tool offered to parents suggests them to narrate an episode regarded as meaningful one for each day they spent abroad, during which they experienced the relationship with their adopted children.

The diary follows the following narrative pattern:

- Introduction: place, time, people participating
- Event: what they decided to write on the diary
- Consequences: how the event terminated, what the parents learnt, the reaction of the child/children, etc.

After that, parents are asked to write down their emotions and the relevant level of intensity (very low, low, medium, quite high, very high, incredibly high), indicating whether those emotions refer to the father/mother and/or child.

The DAVAd therefore suggests a narrative framework, but it also gives parents the opportunity to tell about the episode freely. The focus, even with regard to emotions and feelings, is on the ability of the couple to acknowledge them, write them down, and state their level of intensity. The DAVAd is used to collect the narrative choices made by the couple, the way in which the parents tell the experience they are having. The focus is not on the collection of facts, rather on the identification of the strategies developed by adoptive parents and children at the beginning of their relationship.

4.1 Why a diary?

The proposal to write a diary or to use the narrative of the events as a tool is not something new (Daily diary methodology: Bolger et al. [32]; Gunthert and Wenze [33]; Lischetzke [34]). In the post-adoption context, autobiographical narrative is often used as a cognitive and reflection tool to save memories and make a family tale be organized more easily in order to support the construction of a bonding [35], legitimizing at the same time the need of each family member to feel part of the family but also to have his/her own story to tell [36].

More in general, narrative is thought to have a transformational value as it allows the experience and memories associated to it to be turned into a narrative form (e.g., Freud [37]; Bion [38]; Matte Blanco [39]; Bucci [40]). Giving a structure to that form means to organize communication in a consistent way, with a precise time and causal order, identifying and giving a name to the emotions felt, thus driving people to provide an interpretation of the events inevitably [41, 42]. According to this approach, narrative is considered also a tool that may help to overcome traumas and improve the psychophysical conditions of the narrators [43, 44].

In the case of the DAVAd, the narrative to be built can pursue even more specific goals, besides those already mentioned.

In particular, it is useful to underline its educational role, both on the levels of content and method.

On the level of content, it has to be pointed out that parents are suggested to write a diary during the only period of time they are alone, without their own cultural and personal reference points, in a foreign land. Thinking over their own

experience of foreignness consisting of an environment made of smells, climate, cultural codes, language, habits, food, etc., different from their familiar ones, may help adoptive parents to understand what their adoptive children will experience once they will have left their country of birth and daily life. Therefore, this could help to develop the observation skills of prospective parents [45].

With reference to method, it has to be highlighted that the habit of writing a diary about the events related to the family relationship means to be able to stop and recollect what happened during the day and choose only one episode. Therefore, before starting writing, parents need to detach from the flow of events, thus building a particular material and mental setting. The act of writing the DAVAd can be considered a useful pretext to develop the ability to reflect on personal and relational daily dynamics.

Lastly, the act of writing a diary represents a meaningful act within the relation between the couple and the clinician working with them in the pre-adoption and post-adoption stages. The receipt of the DAVAd and its writing are acts proposed to make more present the background support provided by the counsellor in charge of managing the path to adoption: the diary can be regarded as a transitional object that reminds of the dialogue, temporarily interrupted, with the reference clinician. The episodes narrated will give the counsellor useful clues to understand how the narrative of the new family is being built, the criteria for interpreting and explaining events within the relationship, the type of reflexive ability used by the couple, and therefore what type of support should be offered to them later on.

4.2 The DAVAd and the reflexive function

Despite the observations made in the previous paragraph, the act of writing a diary can also be considered a very demanding effort for the couple. Even though such an issue needs to be taken into account, it also needs to be addressed when considering the specific role adoptive parents start to play during their journey. The act of writing requires an effort similar to the one the adoptive parent is going to make based on his/her new role as a parent.

This can be better explained as follows.

A child going through the path to adoption is a child who suffered from being separated from his/her birth family but who may have experienced other events that may be defined as traumatic ones. Those events affect the child's reflexive function [46], that is, the ability to interpret behaviors, personal and those of others, in terms of hypothetical mental states, be they thoughts, feelings, wishes, and intentions, thus promoting the building of (self and others') representations that are incompatible among themselves and are therefore left separated from each other [47].

For example, the feeling of having been inflicted an unfair punishment may lead to a representation of parents incompatible with that of a loving and caring parent. On the contrary, if the child is able to consider the unfair punishment not a result of his/her condition as a child not deserving love or of the cruelty of adoptive parents, experienced as absolute dimensions, but only as the result of a temporary condition, then it is possible to be able to reconnect the two different representations.

For the child the opportunity to regain a unitary model of the self and of the other is connected to the reflexive function of his/her new parents who can gradually make understandable and foreseeable the behavior of the self and of the others; this will reduce the needs to separate the representations and will promote the absorption of new relational experiences. As Bastianoni [48] observes "the entry of the child in the world of minds is almost a process of apprenticeship whereby caregivers encourage the child to adopt mentalizing concepts. The acquisition of a

reflexive ability thus becomes part of an intersubjective process between the child and the caregivers" (p. 34).

If we look at this from the point of view of the couple, for example, the child is likely to have learnt dysfunctional patterns of relationships that are symptoms of the need to defend himself/herself and the inability to trust caregivers. This means that adoptive parents need to learn that a rejection behavior against them may be the expression of the child's fear to trust them but also the desire to meet them.

On the other side, the possibility to accept the life experiences of the minor, the "internal events" driving his/her behavior, is based on the parental ability to identify their own emotional states, recalled by the relationship, reflecting on them [49].

The DAVAd can therefore be a useful tool whose writing should be recommended to parents.

5. A case study

By way of example of what is stated above, the analysis of a DAVAd is hereby presented, which was written by a couple who left for a journey for the international adoption of two sisters, aged 8 and 9 in 2017. As researchers, we analyzed the written report using the same reading categories used during the observation of an interview, taking into account When, How, and What was "said" (see **Table 1**).

5.1 When

The first remark is about the days of diary writing. Even though the couple was given instructions to write the dairy every day, the act of writing is clearly and strongly irregular. Over a period of 30 days spent abroad, only eight episodes were reported. In addition to those episodes, five more were added when the family came back home and narrated over a period of 5 months. What is therefore analyzed is not a diary but a collection of episodes, which clearly points out the need to understand when the diary writing was regarded as appropriate.

5.2 How

In the 13 episodes narrated, no attention is paid to the field "Introduction," which is filled in with a more general reference to the place where the event occurred. The perception is that the episode narrated is regarded as a moment of discontinuity compared to their expectations or the normal flow of events. In other words, unexpected events seem to be narrated, which are hard to refer to the previous situation, in line with what is stated by Chafe [50], according to whom the need to narrate, to give consistency and continuity to one's own experience, is revealed only by what actually does not match with the expectations, that is, the incomprehensible and unexpected event. On the level of content, the hypothesis made is further confirmed by the repetition of the term "suddenly."

5.3 What: emotions

Figure 1 shows the emotions both parents list to have felt with reference to the episodes narrated.

It can be observed that helplessness and grief are the emotions most cited, together with fear, often described as the fear "of not understanding" and

When	How			What	
	Introduction	**Event**	**Consequences**	**Emotion**	**Event**
1st day of trip 13/06	X just the place	X		Mother: sorrow (5) Father: dejection (4), fear (2) Child 1: Child 2:	Leaving the institute
2nd day of trip 14/06	X just the place	X		Mother: tenderness (3) Father: tenderness (3) Child1: Child2:	Collaboration and jealousy of the girls
5th day of trip 17/06	X just the place	X	X	Mother: impotence (3), sorrow (3) Father: impotence (3), fear (3) Child 1: Child 2:	Whim of the oldest girl
9th day of trip 21/06	X just the place	X	X	Mother: impotence 5, confusion (4), sorrow (4) Father: impotence (4), confusion (4), sorrow (4) Child 1: Child 2:	Intolerance to frustration of older sister
18th day of trip 30/06	X just the place	X	X	Mother: fear (3) Father: fear (4) Child 1: Child2:	Whim of the oldest girl
20th day of trip 02/07		X		Mother: Father: Child 1: Child 2:	Nocturnal enuresis of the older sister
23th day of trip 05/07	X just the place	X		Mother : sorrow (5) Father: Child 1: Child 2:	Melancholy due to the lack of children who were in the institution
27th day of trip 09/07		X	X	Mother: sadness, sorrow Father: fear Child 1: despair Child 2: despair	Desperation for the removal of the mother
15/09 at home		X	X	Mother : confusion Father: Child 1: Child 2: rage	Provocation of the youngest child

When	How			What	
	Introduction	Event	Consequences	Emotion	Event
11/10 at home		X	X	Mother: confusion Father: Child 1: Child 2: rage	Provocation of the youngest child
5/12 at home		X	X	Mother: rage Father: Child 1: Child 2: rage	Provocation of the youngest child
10/01 at home		X		Mother: Father: Child 1: Child 2:	Nocturnal enuresis of the older sister
21/01 at home		X		Mother: sadness, impotence Father: sadness, impotence Child 1: sadness Child 2: sadness	Melancholy for the sister who remained in the institute

Table summarizes the writing of the diary by parents with respect to all the fields proposed by the format and to the indication provided. The "When" field reports the days when the parents filled out the diary. The "How" field considers the introduction of narrated episode, the description of the event occurred, and its consequences. The table also highlights the fields completed by parents. The "What" field present the "emotions" (experienced by each family member according to the writer's point of view; each emotion has a degree of intensity on a scale from 1 to 6) and the "events" (a brief summary of each event occurred).

Table 1.
Summary of the coding procedure of the case study.

confusion. Parents seem to show the discomfort created by the clash between expectations and reality, indicating their own ability to identify and express their emotions that the problems faced make them experience.

With regard to the girls (see **Figure 2**), only in some cases the emotions felt by them are listed. In more details, only one episode among those narrated during the journey (desperation referred to both girls) and four episodes (crossed, listed three times and referring only to one of the girls, sad referred to both of them) out of five narrated when being back to Italy were listed. The above mentioned data show an increasing attention to the moods expressed by the girls, above all in period after their arrival in Italy. It may be supposed that the need to organize a family routine leads parents to pay more attention to what is felt and experienced by the minors and above all to the most difficult events to manage.

Although only negative emotions were listed as felt by the girls, it seems advisable to analyze that information taking into consideration the number of episodes narrated compared to the time. Even in this case, it has to be underlined that the couple chose to narrate some specific episodes, thus not complying with the instructions given.

With reference to the intensity of the emotions, it is possible to observe that in the first episodes, a medium/high value is always listed, but from the sixth episode, no intensity is described. One of the hypotheses that can be made is that, over time, the level of intensity of the emotion expressed was regarded less essential than the identification of the same emotion.

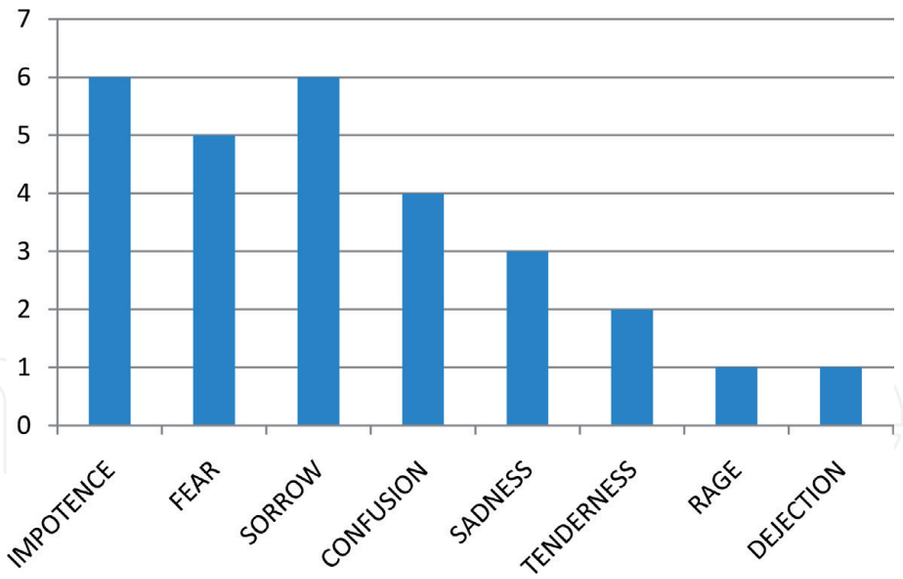


Figure 1.
The emotions described by the parents as felt by them. The results, represented in the graph, refer to the total number of times that parents have reported the emotion. Each emotion reported by the father or mother was considered.

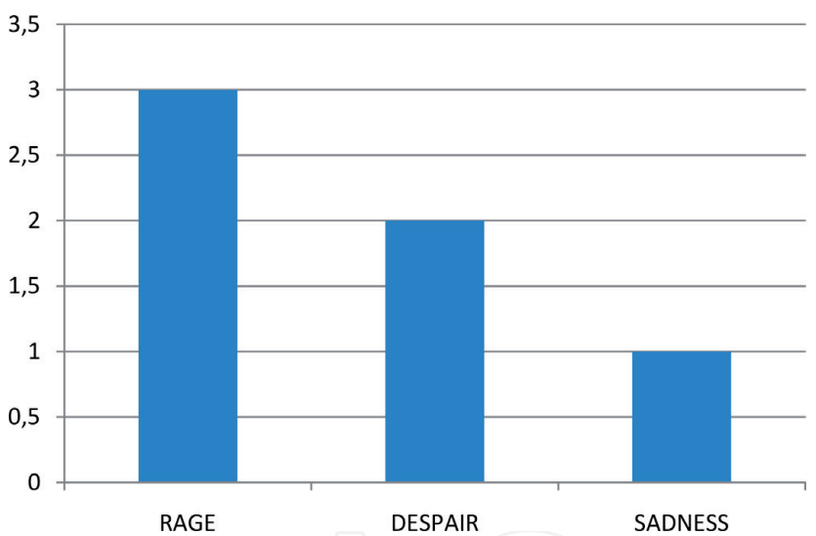


Figure 2.
The emotions listed by the parents as felt by girls. The results, represented in the graph, refer to the total number of reports about the emotions attributed by parents to the girls.

5.4 What: the events

The events narrated show some cohabitation issues and the solutions found by the couple.

The first is about the leaving of the orphanage, the most intense event on the emotional level, in which it is difficult to understand whether the tears of the girls are for what they are leaving, their poverty (they know they are leaving only bringing with them a small backpack containing just a few things), or for what they are going to face, and the adoptive parents obviously wonder if they themselves may be the cause of the girls' sadness.

Going on reading the episodes, regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, bedwetting, and incontinence during the day) referred to the oldest girl and the relevant worries of parents are described. The inconsistency between the behaviors adopted and the age of the girl causes reactions sometimes based on compassion, sometimes

on reprehension. It could be useful to analyze those topics with the psychologist in charge of the case to look at the regression as an expected event and, at least in the beginning, beneficial as it is a sign of the need of the child to recover her own dimension of "being a little child in need of care."

Several references are made to the defiant behavior of the youngest sister over the first months of their life on Italy. It is interesting to observe the ability of the parents to recognize the emotion aroused by that behavior but also the opportunity described by them not to act out. Parents seem to express the need to keep up with the image of a loving, caring, patient, and sympathetic parent and had problems in managing negative and unexpected emotions.

The uneasiness of the girls to accept rules and frustrations is also described, but most evident is the feeling of helplessness parents experience when the girls show signs of homesickness and regret for what they left.

Therefore, parents describe moments of discouragement for which they try to give comfort or oppositional behaviors they try to contain: those actions shown ever appear to be poorly effective as they should be based on the certainty of a bond still being built. What is evident is the struggle of parents when trying to balance loving care with frustration as well as the ambivalence of the girls, who ask for attention but are scared by the new experience. The parents seem to manage a fragile balance between the desire to meet the requests of the children, which are ambivalent and cannot be met in a linear way, and the desire to reduce the riskiness of their bond, thus making the family life normal and reassuring the minors while reassuring themselves as parents.

The return to Italy and the placement in a new, larger family become the source of embarrassment due to some behaviors of the girls: grandparents are described as silent witnesses, observing what they think is due to the lack of educational skills of their own children.

5.5 The DAVAd in the relation between the clinician and parents

The above mentioned considerations, which are the result of the reading of the DAVAd, allow the psychologist who works with the couple to understand the dimensions of fragility that were emphasized by the meeting between the parents and the girls. Some of those considerations were introduced in the dialogue the psychologist had with the couple, during the first assessment session.

As provided for by the procedure detailed in the agreements between the country of birth of the children and the agency for international adoption, after the first months of cohabitation, a first assessment session of the adoptive family is held, following an interview structure suggested by the country of birth of the minors. In one section of the interview that has to be filled up, it is asked to analyze the level of adjustment of the girls and integration within the new family. Talking about those topics allowed the psychologist to recollect what parents had reported during the journey, reflecting on the meaning given to the events described and the impact they had on the parental couple. The couple seemed to be very aware of what they felt and experienced and was ready to regard it as elements of the dialogue. In this way, it was possible to talk about their need to be "a good parent," acknowledging the possibility that they may feel upset due to defiant behaviors. Furthermore, it was possible to reflect on the respect of the time of adjustment of their daughters, on the acceptance of "upsetting behaviors" by the girls on different occasions, and on their sorrow for the unease of the daughters that they cannot explain. Sharing with the parents the events occurred allowed the psychologist to help them to relieve their tensions, their feeling of being helpless, and their feeling of losing control over the experience made.

Furthermore, reading again the narratives of the DAVAd and noticing that mainly "negative and critical" events were narrated drove the "newborn parents" to also tell about the occurrence of many pleasant events and their joy to recognize themselves as a family. A more flexible narrative was therefore created, with the opportunity to acknowledge themselves as resilient and caring people.

In this research, it was useful to recognize and accept the experience of distrust and fear of the couple and at the same time the feelings of anxiety and fear expressed by the girls. The relation with the counsellor, who recognizes and legitimates what is felt and experienced by the parents without judging them, seems to have activated the resources of the couple useful to accept and legitimate the problems experienced by the minors.

6. Conclusions

A new tool was presented in this work, a narrative diary, which is the result of the considerations implicitly made reviewing the literature about adoption breakdowns. According to the literature reviewed, there seem to be two elements that may be useful to develop: the relationship between families and counsellors, as to launch early and long-lasting support services, and the attention to the "birth stage" of the family relations.

Therefore, a tool was designed that could be useful to guide adoptive couples and the counsellors working with them when monitoring of what happens during the stage of face-to-face contact with the children. A meeting in case of international adoptions takes place in the country of birth of the children and is difficult to be directly observed.

The act of writing a diary by the adoptive parents can thus make it easier to monitor a stage that is very important as it lays down the foundations on which the family relationship will be based. In addition to the monitoring of the first stages of the relations, such a tool is also not very intrusive and is meant not to harm the intimacy of the family being built.

The reading of the diary, on the other side, can provide counsellors with useful information to implement early actions of prevention aimed at safeguarding the wellbeing and development of the adoptive family, taking into consideration the way in which parents talk about their relationship with the children.

In more general terms, it can be stated that the act of writing is a preventive action, as it allows the actors to narrate about themselves and think back to the events that occurred.

According to Paradiso [51], narrative is the space for resilience, because narrating oneself and sharing one's own life experience with a "fairly good" interlocutor allow oneself to rethink the representation of the self and of one's own future. This is important for the adoptive couple in their relation with the counsellor, within a narrative path already started in the pre-adoption stage. And it is even more important for adopted children in their relation with the new parents, because they bring with themselves traumatic memories and are working hard at reconstructing their own story.

Even though the design of a tool is a small thing, compared to the desirable change in the culture driving the behavior of those who are involved in adoption processes, based on the evidence of our research, the diary proposed may be considered one of the elements that may drive such a change. It is a good pretext to help the ability of the spouses to think [52] of the family relationship and what happens within it every day, progressively walking away from a predictable interpretation of the events, based on habits according to which events are interpreted. Thinking

about one's own emotiveness, aroused by complex relations, can be useful to any family, but it becomes highly significant for those families who since the beginning show relationship issues with their own children.

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