

A shift in narratives: from “attachment” to “belonging” in therapeutic work with adoptive families. A single case study

Abstract

This study analyses a one-year family therapy with an adopted adolescent, with regards to its outcome and process.

This study will use Stratton’s (2003a; 2003b) scheme to explore family attribution processes regarding attachment, bonding and mutual belonging. Unitizing coding system for causal attributions (Ugazio, Fellin, Colciago, Pennacchio & Negri, 2008) will also be used to highlight inference schemes recurring in family discourse and their change throughout the course of therapy.

The study will provide a systematic view on how the introduction, by the therapist team, of triadic, relational hypotheses based on present narratives and interactions can promote a semantic shift from the concept of “attachment” to the alternative concept of “belonging”.

Aim of the study is to highlight advantages of adopting a socio-constructionist approach when dealing with the problem represented by mutual belonging in adoptive families.

From a socio-constructionist perspective, creation of emotional and affective bonding within a family is a conversational process, subject to continuous changes and revolutions throughout the individual and family history (Ugazio, 2013).

Focusing on resources and ongoing relationships, rather than damage and early trauma, a socio-constructionist approach may represent a powerful resource in strengthening emotional ties within the current family

Introduction.

Adoption has always been a challenging subject for family therapists. Its inner nature, suspended between past and present, between the need to acknowledge loss and the aim to build new opportunities, is always at risk of putting families and therapists in a maze where the way out is not easily found. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1969) offers a powerful explanatory structure and a reliable “map” to orient both therapists and families in front of this maze.

For this reason, several authors (Moran, Diamond & Diamond, 2005; Kenrick, Lindsey & Tollemache, 2006; Vetere & Dallos, 2008; Dallos & Vetere, 2009; Diamond, 2014) have suggested to embed core elements from attachment theory within the epistemological framework of systemic thinking, despite some theoretical inconsistencies (for instance, attachment theory’s focus on the past, as opposed to systemic therapy prioritizing the *here and now*). As Dallos & Vetere (2009) point out, therapeutic approaches should not be evaluated only on their theoretical soundness, but

mainly on their usefulness in addressing the complexity of family situations. What defines “usefulness” in this context?

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1992), “the therapeutic system is a problem-organizing, problem-dis-solving system” (p.27). The goal of therapy is therefore the dissolution of the problem, and the consequent dissolution of the therapy itself. Is attachment-based family therapy a self-dissolving system?

The “phantom pain” effect in therapy with adoption.

As previously stated, attachment theory can be quite a useful map in understanding adoption, but what can happen if the map becomes the territory, and we start confusing the real object with the categories we designed to describe it? We might start thinking of “attachment” as a real organ, which can be broken and may therefore need repairing at some stage. In our experience with adoptive families, we found the goal of “rebuilding” or “repairing” attachment, frequently considered as paramount in family therapy with adoption, somehow constraining.

Whilst attachment theory was designed as a therapy of hope, offering a non-pathologizing view of the individual as opposed to Freudian’s pessimistic perspective, its translation in the field of family therapy has sometimes taken a different path. Therapeutic processes based on attachment often convey the idea that adoption is *“a lifetime event, that adoption issues may emerge and reemerge at different points across the lifespan and that all adoptive families may need advice, information and support at some stage”* (Beek, 1999, p.21). Authors like Vadilonga (2010) and Schofield & Beek (2005) suggest that therapy with adoption is a reparative effort that cannot be dismissed at any time, and families should constantly engage with therapeutic agencies.

This rather non-self-dissolving attitude is not much inherent to attachment theory itself. Sroufe, Carlson, Levy & Egeland (1999) clarify that early attachment is not linearly linked to development of psychopathology. Similarly, recent studies have moved towards a more flexible, less narrow view of attachment process. For instance, Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates (2001) highlight how children in foster care are able to readjust their attachment style in order to tune up with new caregivers.

Crittenden & Claussen (2003) follow a similar route, describing how contextual and cultural variables may add variability to attachment pathways, making the “attachment” construct wider and more flexible.

Nonetheless, many attachment-based therapeutic approaches seem to translate into practice a very rigid perspective on attachment, strongly linked to the idea that

“once a sequence of behavior has become organized, it tends to persist and does so even if it has developed on non-functional lines and even in the absence of the external stimuli and/or the internal conditions on which it first depended. The precise form that any particular form of behavior takes and the sequence within which it is first organized are thus of the greatest consequence for its future” (Bowlby, 1969, p. 169).

Therefore, controversial treatments arise, with little supporting evidence and the only common denominator of dealing with the attachment wound (Hanson & Spratt, 2000; Chaffin et. al., 2006). Considering the building of mutual belonging between parents and children as a mostly innate process, many attachment-based therapies are at risk of trading a negative and pessimistic view on adopted children’s fate (Barth, John, Crea, Thoburn & Quinton, 2005).

The controversial construct of “reactive attachment disorder” and its clinical applications (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) are a perfect example of how confusing the map with the territory can turn a deeply relational, non-pathologizing theory into a labelling and rather deterministic therapeutic perspective.

The risks of over-diagnosing attachment disorders, with a negative impact on children and families’ wellbeing, is also stressed by several studies (Woolgar & Scott, 2014; Woolgar & Baldock, 2015). From our perspective, clinical conversation with adoptive families often confronts the therapist with a sort of “phantom pain” effect. Phantom pain can be described as the suffering caused by a part of ourselves that is irreversibly lost, and yet is perceived as still attached. Although the pain can be perceived as real and perfectly localized, it cannot be soothed as the suffering part cannot be reached. As therapeutic conversation focusses on failed attachment in the child, along with parental infertility, “phantom pain effect” may crystallize as a family narrative, potentially disrupting the creation of new relational ties within the adoptive family.

Another potentially detrimental effect of attachment-based therapies with adoption resides in its focus on birth family relationships. Both parents and children are engaged to work on their own internal working models, structured during early childhood. As a result, “this kind of therapeutic setting brings everyone back to his own family, or to the ghost of it” (Salamino, 2016, p.1).

Making attachment the ultimate center of gravity of a therapeutic intervention may generate a conversational “black hole” (Salamino &

Gusmini, 2016; Fellin & Salamino, 2016) that is able to shut down professional curiosity and close any other possible therapeutic pathway.

Are there therapeutic alternatives to attachment, when dealing with the complexity of mutual belonging in adoptive families?

This case study aims at proposing a different approach to family therapy with adoption. Whilst considering attachment a relevant emotional and cognitive dimension involved in mutual bonding between adoptive parents and their children, we decided not to include attachment-based narratives in hypotheses and explanations we shared with the family, focusing therapeutic conversation on current family relationships. We also tried to offer triadic explanations, as opposed to attachment theory's dyadic attributions.

Our aim is to explore how a therapeutic approach focused on current interactions and triadic pathways of communication may contribute to change in the family's attribution scheme and mutual perceptions.

Looking for “the pattern that connects”. A reasonable quest for family therapists?

Bateson (1979) invites us to find “the pattern which connects all the living creatures” (p.8), and this task still seems crucial when we work with families, especially families in which “blood ties” are not available. When biology fails and the innate connecting pattern cannot be claimed, we need to promote other forms of mutual belonging, by following different conversational patterns. As Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart & Sabat, (2009) highlight, “any encounter might develop along more than one story-line, and support more than one story-line evolving simultaneously” (p.8). Attachment-related storylines are therefore not the only ones available for re-framing and giving meaning to interactive and relational behaviors among members of an adoptive family.

Our paper proposes a non-attachment based short-term therapy, the goal of which is to promote and strengthen mutual belonging in adoptive families through the use of present-focused narratives. Our therapeutic conversation with families, underpinned by a Post-Milan approach (Hoffman, 1988; Campbell, 1999; Ugazio, 2007), focuses on the generative nature of *hic and nunc* interaction, thus strengthening emotional ties and perceptions of mutual belonging within the current family.

The intervention we designed, and which is exemplified in this paper, does not aim at repairing the wound of disrupted attachment, but at building new relational pathways and opportunities in the present. As such, we accept the possibility that further individual interventions focused on trauma or

other past-related issues may still be an option if necessary, but we decided to prioritize the building of new family interactions and well-being.

Method.

This study analyses a one-year family therapy with an adopted adolescent, with regards to its outcome and process. Therapy sessions were held 1 per month, for a total of 9 sessions, in 2012 (see table 1). Two subsequent follow-up sessions took place 1 year and 3 years after the end of therapy.

We will present a qualitative analysis of parents' causal attributions of child's behavior. The study also analyzes the therapist's hypotheses and explanations, introduced with the strategic purpose of de-constructing and re-framing the family's view of the problem. Stratton's (2003a, 2003b) attribution scheme and unitizing coding system for causal attributions (Ugazio, Fellin, Colciago, Pennacchio & Negri, 2008) will be used for this purpose. *Verbatim* samples of therapeutic conversations will help the reader get a direct understanding of the case and a deeper emotional connection with the flow of the therapy.

Stratton's scheme aims at identifying core elements of an attribution styles in a family. Specifically, it allows distinction between:

STABLE or UNSTABLE

(Will the cause operate reliably in the future?)

GLOBAL or SPECIFIC

(Has it a range of important outcomes?)

INTERNAL or EXTERNAL

(Does it originate within that person or thing?)

PERSONAL or UNIVERSAL

(Does the attribution differentiate that person or thing from others?)

CONTROLLABLE or UNCONTROLLABLE

(Could the person or thing influence the outcome?)

(Stratton, 2003a, p. 165).

Unitizing coding system (Ugazio et al., 2008) allows a distinction between:

Monadic inference - behaviors of a person are explained by an inner variable, like the person's immaturity.

Dyadic inference - individual behaviors are explained by referring to a relationship with another person, e.g. the primary caregiver, like in attachment-based explanation.

Triadic inference - individual behavior is explained as embedded in a pattern of relationships in which at least two other persons are actively involved (for instance, a child's aggression towards mother might be perceived as instigated by father and perpetuated by mother's reaction).

For the purpose of this study, the first two sessions, the 9th session and the first one-year follow-up sessions were fully transcribed¹. Both Stratton's attribution scheme (2003a, 2003b) and unitizing coding system (Ugazio et al., 2008) were applied to the transcripts to identify the main features of attribution styles of the parents. Unitizing coding system was applied in a simplified fashion, to distinguish between monadic, dyadic and triadic attribution, although the system itself would allow more sophisticated distinction.

Only parents' attributions were considered in this study. This was mainly due to the initial consultation taking place with parents only. Although it would have been interesting to explore the child's attributions, we chose to exclude them from the analysis to ensure longitudinal consistency.

The goal of the study is to explore how the family discourse about attachment, mutual belonging and individual development changed throughout the therapy, and how the therapist uses hypotheses and explanations widely focused on present narratives, rather than past narratives, to lead this change.

For this purpose, we will compare attributions occurring during the initial consultation with those we obtained during the follow-up sessions. We will also provide an overview of some major changes that occurred in individual and family life.

Introducing Organa family²: structure and presenting problem.

The Organa family is from Bergamo (see figure 1). The adoptive parents Marco and Elena requested consultation in June 2012, apparently due to the increasing deviant behaviors and academic issues of their adoptive son

¹ Parents allowed the recording of sessions and the use of transcripts for research purposes, by individually signing a written consent before the start of the consultation.

² All names, places and sensitive data were modified in compliance with confidentiality policy.

Nino. Nino was 15 at the time of consultation. He was adopted under special regulation at the age of 9 (after being in foster care with the same family for two years), therefore he was allowed to keep regular contacts with his birth father and grandmother (the birth mother left home soon after his birth and never tried to get in touch with him).

His adoptive parents felt increasingly threatened by the presence of the birth father, as the social workers were putting a lot of pressure on them to allow more contacts between him and Nino. Nino himself manifested in more than one occasion the intention to stay with the man. Nino's individual psychotherapist, who has seen the child for 6 years, stated that Nino's birth father could be a positive presence for the child, allowing him to connect with his own biological roots. The situation, when we had our first session, was critical. The family felt cornered and surrounded by hostile presences, and a deep sense of illegitimacy and unworthiness was palpable in the room.

Results

During the consultation, Nino's parents produced 17 causal attributions regarding their son's behaviors (see Table 2).

All explanations and hypotheses provided by Nino's adoptive parents during the consultation shared some core elements:

1. They were focused on Nino's past and his blood ties.
2. They conveyed a view of Nino as inherently childish and immature.
3. They provided a view of the world outside the family as extremely dangerous and hostile, a place Nino was not fit for (and would possibly never be), highlighting the necessity of protection.
4. They resorted to a monadic or dyadic inference field (Ugazio et al., 2008).

The initial explanation of the problem is provided by Elena (attribution n° 1):

Elena: "We are very concerned about Nino. I would dare saying we're scared. He is displaying all these deviant behaviors. He gets in touch with his father without telling us, he drinks and smokes too much. It is like a scheme: every time he has to choose between the right thing and the wrong one he is like compelled to follow the more deviant path. He is clearly scared too about all these things he does. But he simply cannot stop. I think there is something inside him, something that he is scared of. He is like

crying for help, for our attention. It's like him telling us he is not ready to act as an independent person".³

This attribution can be described as “stable” (it is a “scheme” recurring in every similar situation), global (it is likely to affect multiple areas of Nino’s life and relationships), internal (originated inside Nino, with no external influence, it is “something inside him”), and personal (makes him different from others). It is apparently uncontrollable (Nino himself is scared by his behaviors but cannot control them), and originated into a unidirectional dyadic (Ugazio et al., 2008) inference field (Elena states he is unconsciously crying for their help and attention by displaying these behaviors). When asked to give his opinion about it, Marco (attribution n°2) added an interesting piece of explanation, as he says:

Marco: “I think that in some ways he shares something with his father. His father is a sort of stray cat, he used to live on the streets, making his money as a burglar until he was jailed. He has serious problems with alcohol, he is trying to recover but you know, when you have this thing you never get really rid of it. I think it is something in your blood. It is like a legacy”

Therapist: “A legacy of stray cats?”.

Marco: “Something like that, yes”.

Marco’s attribution confirms a stable, uncontrollable variable, which originates from the inside and makes Nino inherently different from other boys. He links this to blood ties with his father, adding a “genetic flavor” to the explanation. The “legacy theory” is accepted by Elena (attribution n°3), although she adds a more relational factor:

Elena: “I have a different idea. Nino’s father is more of a black cat⁴, rather than a stray one. He is so unlucky that everyone getting too close to him is doomed to suffer. Nino wants to save his father. But like everyone he will suffer if he gets too close to him. Add to this that Nino never had a positive role model he could cling to, and for all his first seven years he had no reliable attachment figure, no secure base. His personality is not strong enough to stay away from bad influences”.

Elena’s integration of Marco’s previous attribution enlighten us about the strong presence of a psychological discourse about attachment and construction of identity, which possibly originates from the long relationship this family had with Nino’s individual therapist.

³ Dialogues are translated from Italian.

⁴ Black cats are regarded as bearers of “bad luck” in the Italian tradition. Although this superstition only survives to its full extent in very underdeveloped areas of the country, it is often used as a metaphor in common language.

As this explanation introduces a principle of intentionality in Nino's actions (he is trying to save his father) it contains a potentially positive and non-pathologizing view of the child, but this is immediately counteracted by the idea that Nino is too fragile due to disrupted attachment, and therefore defenseless against bad influences. This vulnerability to bad influences comes back during the second session, with regards to Nino's relationship with his peers group (attributions n° 8 and 9).

Elena: we are also rather worried about his new friends, they are all kids with a bad reputation. In facts his old friends from the Parish are avoiding him now. My fear is that he can throw himself away. Because of course he has this emotional dysregulation, due to his story, and also maybe because he is growing up. He is so eager to cut this umbilical cord he has with me... I am scared he could get into alcohol, that's it! Or drugs. As he smokes so much, so uncontrollably. Since his father already has a story with alcohol I am scared he will end like him. His father is not a bad person. He is just someone who is not able to say "no" to anyone. I see the same trait in Nino, he never learnt to say no".

Here the attribution scheme dances between a phase-related explanation (connecting the behavior to a sort of adolescent crisis, and therefore less stable and personal) and one more rooted into Nino's internal working models, constructed within his relationship with his birth father. However, the trait of immaturity and vulnerability is confirmed. Elena is also blaming her husband's selfishness, which is driving Nino away from them (attribution n° 15).

Elena: I think he needs a father figure. He never had a reliable one. All these behaviors... Also, the fact he continues to say he wants to get back to his father...

Marco: he said he wants to see him more, not that he wants to stay with him.

Elena: No, forgive me Marco, he clearly said he is planning to stay with him. I think he is telling us he wants Marco to be more present with him. Problem is, my husband is a lone wolf, he is so self-centered. He lets you in his own world, but only at his own conditions. If you want to stay with him, you need to share his interests, he never shares yours. This is wrong. We cannot ask Nino to do this, he already went through so much, he is entitled to have a father who wants to spend time with him regardless.

In this attribution, Elena connects Nino's behavior with current family relational patterns, but does so relying on a dyadic matrix (*he needs a father*) based on Nino's primal wound (*since he never had one*). As a result, Nino is still in the “needy child” position, and Marco is blamed for not being able to meet his needs. This kind of hypothesis is dangerous in family

therapy as it makes both the co-parental sub-system and the marital sub-system vulnerable to conflict.

Stray cats, black cats, tabby cats: re-framing the problem.

Our strategic goal is to introduce a degree of dissonance (Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1980; Ugazio, 1989; Hester and Adams, 2014), enabling a shift in narratives around the problem. Therefore, we privileged hypotheses:

1. Focused on current family relationships.
2. Positioning Nino as a competent member of the family, promoting a non-pathologizing view.
3. Re-framing the concept of “protection”, enabling a different relationship between family and the outside world.
4. Resorting on a triadic inference field (Ugazio et al., 2008).

When we addressed the “need for a father” theory in the second session, we embraced Elena’s idea that there was an element of intentional provocation in Nino’s behavior, but we introduced a triadic matrix of hypothesizing (see figure 2), suggesting Nino’s behavior could have a different, and less self-centered, purpose.

Therapist: “What you say, Elena, is very interesting, because we are used to see young boys trying to get rid of their parents the more they can. We need to understand where all this extra need for a father may come from, because, from our perspective, Nino had plenty of father. His father was Nino’s only caregiver for the first years. We may question the quality of the caregiving, nonetheless, it was a strong bonding. They were together all the time, they were two stray cats surviving together on the streets.

Now, it is very unlikely for a stray cat to have all these extra needs”.

Elena: “I never saw it that way”.

Our choice to “raise a comparison with a developmental norm” (Tomm, 1987, p.177), has the purpose of introducing a degree of reflexivity in the parents’ idea that Nino’s position is the only possible for an adopted child. Our intention was to re-frame Nino’s behavior as an intentional (although not necessarily conscious) move in the triadic game of the family.

We were aware of the difficult relationships Elena had with her own family, in which she is a sort of outcast, and her persistent, yet unsuccessful attempts to involve Marco in this conflict. She would like to have Marco “on my side”, as she repeated more than once in the session, but her

husband seemed to avoid any sort of call to arms. As a result, Elena's sense of loneliness and exclusion increased.

Therapist (talking to Marco): "Do you think it would be possible that Nino perceives Elena's loneliness? His vulnerability to others' expectations, that you both described, is likely to have also made him very receptive to others' needs as well, especially with Elena that is so close to him".

Marco: It is true that Elena is cornered by her family, don't know... possibly she would like me to be on her side but, you know, it's her family, what role could I play in?"?

Elena: "I did not choose them, I chose you. You should simply choose me".

Curiously, Marco proposed the “blood ties” explanation again, when it comes to the couple. This explanation privileges vertical relationships (parent-child) over horizontal ones (husband-wife). Conversely, Elena displayed a more distrustful attitude over blood ties, recalling the dimension of mutual choice.

This discrepancy offers interesting therapeutic options, as Nino represents both a vertical relationship (being their son), and a horizontal one (as adoption strongly relies on choice). We then invited the couple to take our alternative explanation into consideration.

Therapist: "You see how Nino is provoking Marco, using his own explanations against him. I mean, who lives by blood ties, dies by blood ties. Marco has to face the competition with another father, who has an advantage over him, so he has to be more involved to bridge the gap. By doing this, Nino is forcing Marco back to the family, and back to you, Elena, in the end".

Elena: "He is doing it for me? I never thought he could do something like that. It is true that Marco is irritated by the competition with Antonio, though. I have to think about it".

Marco (laughing): "Sons are always on the mother's side, it seems!".

We were promoting a main shift in narratives, from a narrative about “blood ties” - irreversibly related to attachment and biological legacy - towards a narrative about “co-construction of a choice”, where belonging occurs as a result of mutual acknowledgment. We were also aware that our previous hypothesis was putting Marco in a difficult position, as we acknowledged Elena's loneliness and that was at risk of blaming him. We had to regain neutrality, intended as “the generation of a state of curiosity in the therapist's mind” (Cecchin, 1987, p. 405).

Possibly, one of the more crucial passages towards this desired outcome is displayed during the fifth session. The “cats metaphor”, already used in the second session, is taken a step forward, including Nino as a competent observer.

Therapist: “Your mum says you are a stray cat who likes cuddles like a tabby cat”.

Nino: “I love cuddles”.

Therapist: “And what cat is Marco?”.

Nino: “He is a European cat. The kind of cat you see on the streets. He is independent and does not like cuddles”.

Therapist: “Your mom thinks Antonio is a black cat instead”.

Nino: “He is. But it is not his fault. He is just unlucky”.

Therapist. “Your mom thinks it’s dangerous for you to care so much for this black cat, not because he’s bad, but because this bad luck can be contagious somehow. She thinks that if you try to save him you can go down with him. Would you agree?”.

Nino: “I just want to see him. I don’t want to forget about him”.

Therapist: “Nino has a strong sense of loyalty, not only with Antonio. He did not want to come here because he did not want to betray his therapist. Usually cats are described as loyal to houses, whilst dogs are loyal to people. Where do Nino’s canine traits come from?”,

Elena: “I think I am a very loyal person”.

Nino: “She is 100% altruistic”.

Marco: “She is a professional martyr”.

Therapist: “So, if there was a poor black cat on the street, wounded and hungry, mom would try to save him, despite the danger, much like you do?”.

Nino: “Much more than me. Mom is fond of black cats”.

Therapist: “She has some black cats to take care of?”.

Nino: “Both her mom and brother are black cats. They make her cry all the time, nonetheless she keeps them close».

Therapist: «What does dad think of it?».

Nino: «He gets mad at her because she is wasting lots of money and time and energies. He says they are never going to give he what she wants».

Therapist: «What does she want?».

Nino: «Don't know. Love, I guess».

Therapist: “So, your altruism may cause you trouble, according to mum. And mum's altruism will cause her trouble, according to your father. Altruism is a disease running in the family!”.

Marco (laughing): “I am immune”.

Marco's immunity to Elena's altruistic attitude towards black cats was the final piece of the triadic hypothesis we were co-constructing with this family. In the family's attribution style, Nino's behaviors were mainly described as stable, global traits of personality, originated by his damaging history of disrupted attachment.

In the piece of conversation above, we started introducing a different idea: Nino was carrying on a sort of “reductio ad absurdum” (Boscolo & Bertrando 1996; Ugazio, 2013) of Elena's principles of loyalty and altruism. Showing her how dangerous it could be to stay so close to “black cats”, he was helping Marco.

Therapist: “Nino, it seems all these behaviors that make you not independent force your mum to be involved with you all the time. What do you think could happen if you were a bit more independent?”.

Nino: “She would have more time for herself, I think”.

Therapist: “Are you sure? Because you told me that there are black cats all around the house that crave mum's attention. What would they do if she had a little less to do with you?”.

Marco (laughing): “They would eat her alive”.

Nino: “Grandma would like to have her all day”.

Elena (smiling at Nino): “Now that you say it, I think the only thing that keeps her from calling me every hour is that she does not want to talk about Nino and his problems”.

Both parents acknowledged that, with his behavior, Nino protected Elena both from her mother's pressure and her husband's wrath. This was a strong moment of mutual connection and a shift in narratives seemed forthcoming, as we reached a non-individual, non-innate triadic way of understanding Nino's issues (see figure 3).

Our final reframing was very distant from the original attributions, yet the family seemed ready to consider this, as we were able to match dissonance with plausibility (Ugazio, 1984):

Therapist: “Nino was enigmatic for us, as we saw a smart stray cat who seemed to have lost his whiskers. He presents himself as clumsy, immature and needy, but this is inconsistent with his story. Now, what if Nino did not lose his whiskers? What if he simply traded them in exchange for something more precious? What if those whiskers were the price he wanted to pay, in order to belong to you? As a member of this family, he is altruistic and a bit blind when it comes to loyalty, like his mum. But he is also sensitive to his father’s needs for independence. He is the perfect product of this family. Would it be possible for us to help him staying connected to this family without having to give up his whiskers entirely?”

The reaction of the family was very positive, as Elena said it was “a really encouraging perspective” and Marco added “we can learn to protect each other in a different way”.

These positive signs were confirmed by the intermediate follow-up session. Elena and Marco reported that they decided not to renew the request for Nino’s special needs teaching assistant (who used to help Nino in class since he arrived in the new family), and Nino was able to complete the academic year along with the rest of the class, gaining a boost in self-confidence.

The family also identified a possible strategy to let Nino increase his contacts with his birth father, without giving up protection. They decided to organize regular dinner meetings all together, with Nino’s birthfather and his grandmother. It was a real openness in adoption (Brodzinsky, 2005)!

Both parents reported during our first follow-up that they were all enjoying these meetings, and Nino seemed to have lost any interest for secrecy when getting in touch with his father.

Our final follow-up confirmed the progress that had been made. Nino completed his studies and started working as a mechanic, a field in which his “stray cat” dexterity was an added value. Meetings with his biological father continued regularly. Social workers significantly decreased their pressure on the family, with a consequent increase in systemic well-being.

Family attribution style also changed towards a less pathologizing view of Nino’s behavior, which is described both as less individual and more controllable (see table 3). Elena was able to summarize the journey of her family, and the shift in narratives they achieved:

Elena: “We were so concerned about Nino and his desire to save Antonio, but I think we were wrong. As a family, we have always been inclusive. We are helpful and altruistic. That’s who we are, that is why we are together

in the first place. Nino is part of us, and we shall not be worried by recognizing he acts like us”.

Discussion.

This case study highlighted some positive aspects of family therapy for adoption, based on a post-Milan approach. The dramatic change in attribution styles and explanatory models (see figure 4), achieved in a relatively short time, supports the idea that focusing on current relationships and patterns of mutual connection in the present can be a valuable strategy when dealing with crystallized perspectives like those often encountered in adoptive families.

A post-Milan approach frees the therapist from the constraining goal of restoring normality, thus allowing the child and his/her family to engage in a constructive process, rather than a repairing one. For this reason, our team focused on issues and problems related to the current family situation.

In some respects, it is a less ambitious therapeutic process, since it does not aim at healing the wound of disrupted attachment. Nonetheless, it presents the advantage of empowering legitimacy and mutual belonging, thus promoting a sense of hope within the family.

There are of course limitations of this study. Primarily, its “single case” nature does not allow us to draw any conclusions about translation of this approach to other families and contexts, although our recent practice with adoption in two different countries (Italy and UK) is giving promising results.

Second, a three years follow-up does not tell us enough about further development of Nino’s relational skills. For instance, we were not able to explore how internal working models could affect long-term emotional relationships.

On a methodological level, the mixed structure of settings (consultation with parents, therapy with the whole family) poses some question about our material, as we can assume some of the core themes and narratives emerging during the family sessions would have possibly been expressed differently in a couple setting.

However, there is an encouraging consistency between our strategies and the predicted outcomes, as the family seemed to respond positively to our attempt to re-frame the presenting problem within a different matrix. Further research with larger and more reliable samples could hopefully confirm viability of this approach in adoption family therapy.