

When Adoption Becomes a Complication: First Evidence Regarding the Discrimination Suffered by Young Adoptees in Italy Due to Phenotypic Differences and/or because of their Adoptive Identity

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Keywords: *Adoption, Discrimination, Phenotypic differences, Adoptive identity*

Introduction

This work describes how young adoptees manage their hybrid identity when facing episodes of open racism or more latent, but equally pervasive, episodes of micro-discrimination. It also traces how adoptive families change their perception of racist and discriminatory risk, when their children grow into adulthood.

Between 2001 (ratification of the Hague Convention, L.149/2001) and 2017, 49,460 children were adopted in Italy by international adoption (IA). Their countries of origin are many. For instance, in 2014-15, as published by the Italian Central Authority (CAI), 4.422 children were adopted internationally of which 12,44% from Africa, 20% from Asia, 18,55% from Center and South America and 48,92% from Eastern Europe. The average age of children at adoption was 5,9 years, 44% of them between 5 and 9 years and 11,9% of them over 10. The next two years showed similar percentages. In 2018, 1394 children were adopted internationally of which 8,7% from Africa, 20,9% from Asia, 23,7% from Center and South America and 46,7% from Eastern Europe. The average age at adoption instead increased to 6,4 years with 47% of them between 5 and 9 and 15% over 10. These numbers represent clearly the broad ethnical background of adoptees in Italy. Adoption is widespread in Italy and, as a matter of fact, for many years until now our country has been the first European country in terms of numbers of IA, and the second in the world, after the US.

In the years 2001-2016, also 13,628 national adoptions (NA) were completed. Children adopted nationally were resident in Italy, but quite often they belonged to minorities (once again from Africa, Asia, Central and South America, Eastern Europe and also from the Rom and Sinti groups).

Adoption is clearly changing Italian society especially in terms of multicultural variety. Adoptive families face many challenges, indeed they spring from an encounter of biographies and they must take into account the displacement and losses undergone by the children along with their necessity of building an identity where the past experiences should have the room to be well integrated with the new life.

Very often Italian adoptive families find help in grass-root networks of family associations, sharing their experiences, feeling recognized, getting self and professional help. It is not by chance, therefore, that the Italian family associations have been particular active in identifying the needs of adoptive families and very successful in attaining important results in favor of the same. In 2014 Coordinamento CARE, network of adoptive and foster family associations, obtained the first set of national rules dedicated to the well-being of adoptees in school, unique case in Europe.

The most important and unique network of Italian family associations (Coordinamento CARE) has recognized the necessity to investigate the effect of micro and macro discriminations undergone by adoptees and their families; a field still studied very little in Italy.

1. Why and how.

Italian society is rapidly changing culturally and in terms of ethnical configuration. However too little is still done to understand the ways in which racism impacts on individuals with repeated macro and micro events (specifically on individuals with hybrid identities as adoptees, children of mixed couples, etc.). In particular, it is still missing an awareness about the morphing of racism from «overt» to «covert» forms (Garber, 2014). Covert racism is indeed widespread and very often misrecognized. «Color blindness», for instance, is not yet perceived as a form of racism in the Italian society and, sometimes, 'being neutral' with respect to the somatic features of children in a sort of blind normalization is felt (more too often in schools) as a form of good inclusion ('all children are equal'). Young Italian people with different ethnic background still miss good role models to follow and identify with (teachers, journalists, politicians, anchor-man or anchor-women, actors and actresses, scientists, etc.). Families in school textbooks are still represented in stereotypical ways.

Racism is studied even less when it regards adoptees, even though more and more often the literature speaks about their «negated mixed identities» (Edelstein, 2007) and about the 'quiet migration' they underwent, especially by IA (Di Silvio, 2008). Even though «the adoptive family is a multicultural family that lives in an intercultural context» (Edelstein, 2008), and it is necessary to «enter into a perspective of pluralist integration» in order to understand it, this ecological approach is seldom used.

Research data on racism episodes have been collected by Lorenzini (2012; 2013, 2018) in the years 1999/2000, in 2011, in 2015 until 2018. What emerges from the experiences collected in individual interviews of young Italian adoptees of different non-European origins is emblematic. Most of the interviewed, between 18 and 34 with more or less dark skin, reported episodes in which they were appealed with deeply derogatory words.

Nowadays, news about racist incidents in Italy fill more and more the media and they, of course, happen to involve also adoptive families; families that, in their pre-adoptive preparation, were trained very little to face this possibility. Perspective adoptive parents seldom receive any preparation about the multicultural aspects of the family they are going to build by national or international adoption, even though there are many critical issues to be considered. For instance, society is still unable to think of 'somatically different' people as Italians, consequently adoptees of different ethnic origins are often considered 'foreigners', especially when they grow up in their teens or adulthood. All these reasons prompted our study in the attempt to photograph, on one side the parents' perception of racism impact on their sons and daughters and, on the other the actual experiences reported by the adoptees, distinguishing between macro or microaggressions.

Very seldom microaggressions were analyzed in the experiences of adoptees and certainly not in the Italian context. Some literature can be found abroad and we refer the reader to Garber (2014), just to quote one.

First of all, we had to specify to our public what is intended as microaggressions (e.g., micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations) in order to understand their awareness about the matter. As examples, one may list

constant questions like 'Where are you from', misrecognition of origins (all Asians are automatically Chinese), derogatory hypotheses (South Asians are housekeepers, Nigerian girls are sex workers, Rom are thieves, Latinos are good at dancing or at sex, etc.).

In our work we found this type of microaggressions pervasive and we consider fundamental to further investigate this specific area so that anybody involved in adoption may become more aware of (and act more efficiently against) prejudice.

1.1. Methodology and panel

The research proceeded in a qualitative way, targeted at adoptive parents and adoptees by two different tools.

Adoptive parents, who adopted between 2001 and 2019 in NA or IA, were involved via an avalanche sampling, randomly distributed, without statistical significance. Questionnaires were distributed with closed and open CAWI questions. The variables were: age, education and geographical distribution. The explanatory questions regarded: description of character and personality of the child, detection of discrimination and racism occurrences against their children (description of the episodes), managing of those episodes, perception of the social climate about racism. Of the 2550 completed questionnaires, 2418 were valid (95%), 91.7% of the form compilers were between 40 and 59 years old, 78.8% of times they were mothers and 57.7% of them had an undergraduate or higher degree.

87% of the parents adopted in IA, 63.1% of the children are male and 36.7% of them is attending primary school. Geographically, 42.1% of the sample lives in the North West (Piemonte, Val d'Aosta, Lombardia, Liguria), 52.4% in a city with more than 30.000 inhabitants. Finally, 68.3% of the families have or had contact with a family association,

The research instead involved adoptees via interviews. The questionnaires were with closed and open questions CAPI. The variables were: age, education, geographical distribution. The explanatory questions regarded: undergone discrimination and/or racism (description of the episodes), perception of the social climate related to racism. The panel involved 20 individuals adopted, aged between 16 and 24 (10 males, 10 females), of which 6 were nationally adopted and 14 internationally. The average age of the adoptees was 18.75 years. Girls' birth countries: 3 Italy, 2 Russian Fed., 3 India, 1 Thailand, 1 Brazil. Boys' birth countries: 3 Italy, 1 Brazil, 2 Colombia, 1 Ethiopia, 1 Nepal, 1, Philippines, 1 Cambodia. Boys' average age at time of adoption: 4.5 years, girls' average age at time of adoption: 2.8 years.

1.2. Results

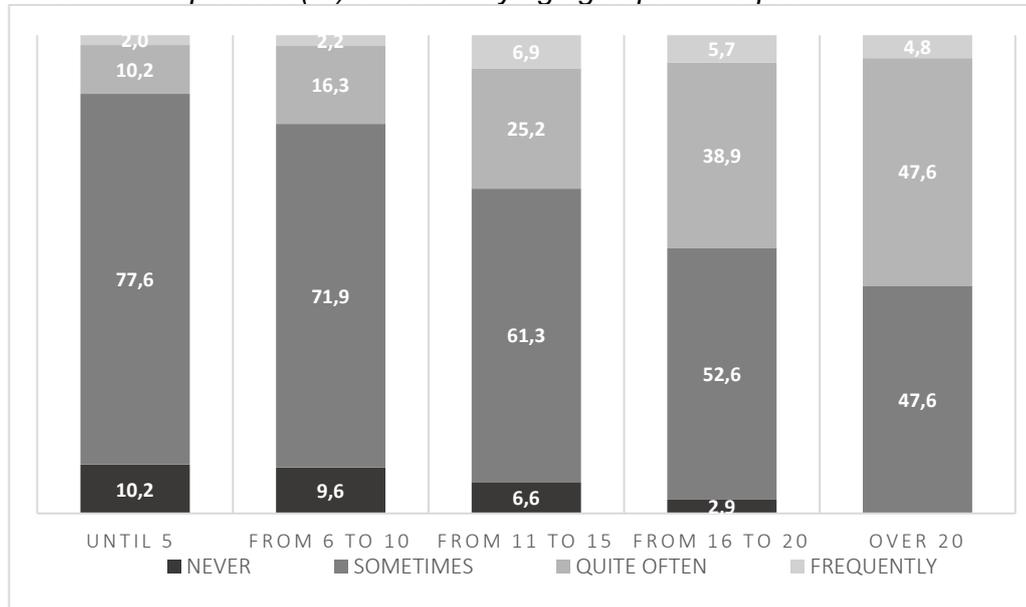
The research dealt with two types of discrimination: discrimination against the adoptive identity and racism.

In our research we addressed fundamentally three main questions: What is the perception of adoptive families and the experience of young adoptees about discrimination and racism? Is racism in Italy against adopted people? Are adoptive families prepared to face discrimination and racism against their children? In this work we present the initial results regarding the analysis of the racist episodes.

The collected data actually confirm what has been felt by adoptive parents since a long time: in Italy, if you are phenotypically different, you can be victim of racist episodes (even when you have Italian citizenship). By the collected data, 70% of the adoptive parents with children of different ethnical backgrounds declares that their children suffered at least one episode of racism. Furthermore,

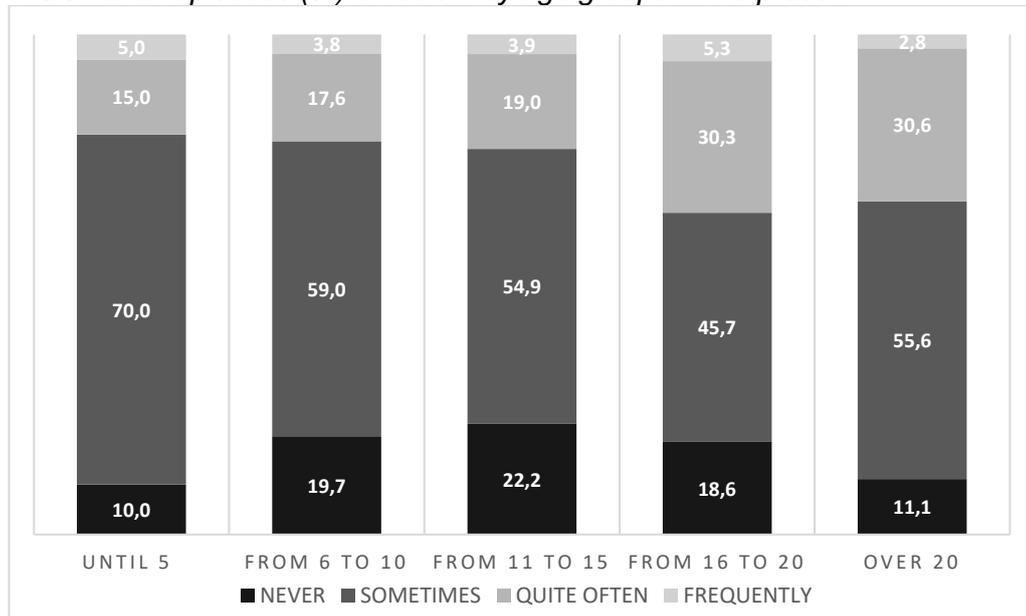
those who most denounced episodes of racism (almost 61%), are the parents of children of African origin.

FIGURE. 1. Episodes (%) of racism by age groups in the past



Source: Coordinamento CARE (2019)

FIGURE. 2. Episodes (%) of racism by age groups in the present



Source: Coordinamento CARE (2019)

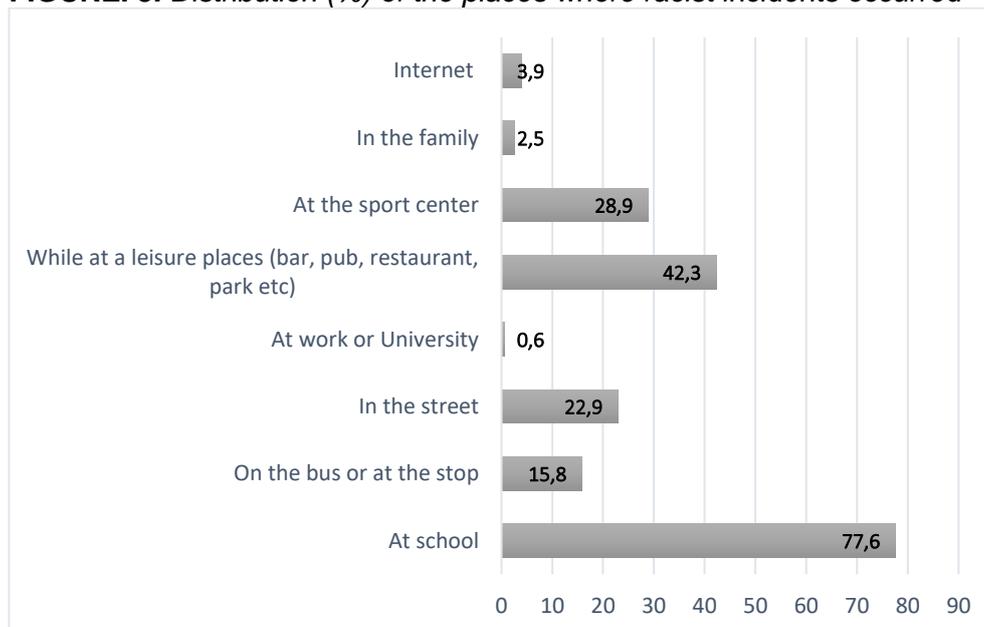
Parents were also asked to estimate the frequency of racist incidents, comparing present and past. Counterintuitively, the episodes seem to have occurred more in the past than in the present, also in terms of intensity. Indeed, speaking of the present, 19.8% of the respondents stated that the children had never suffered racist incidents, 54.4% sometimes, 21.7% quite often and 4.2% frequently. When speaking of the past, the percentages worsened with 6.8% of respondents saying that their children had never suffered racism, 63.6% sometimes, 24.8% quite often and 4.7% frequently. Fig.1 and Fig. 2 represent a finer description by age groups.

To understand these differences, one might consider three possible reasons, that may coexist. First, adoptive families get formed by an encounter among people stranger to each other and the sense of mutual extraneousness might even last for some time. Thus, it can happen that, when the family ties are still fragile, parents may be very sensitive to the signals from society that point out differences.

The physical diversity reported from others resonates internally amplifying the perception of distance from the children. Secondly, in the early years of adoption, most children were attending kinder-garden or the first years of primary school, when class relationships are little filtered. Italian society is yet not sufficiently multicultural and young children are little aware of differences and poorly educated about inclusiveness, so it can happen they act in a racist way. This could be a reason why parents perceive a higher incidence rate of discriminatory acts in the past. Thirdly, parents may come to know about the past episodes when children grow up, since at the time of the events, those dealt with them by themselves.

Another important point emerging from our inquiry is that the most frequent place where the racist episodes occur (40%) is school, as clearly shown in Figures 3 and 4.

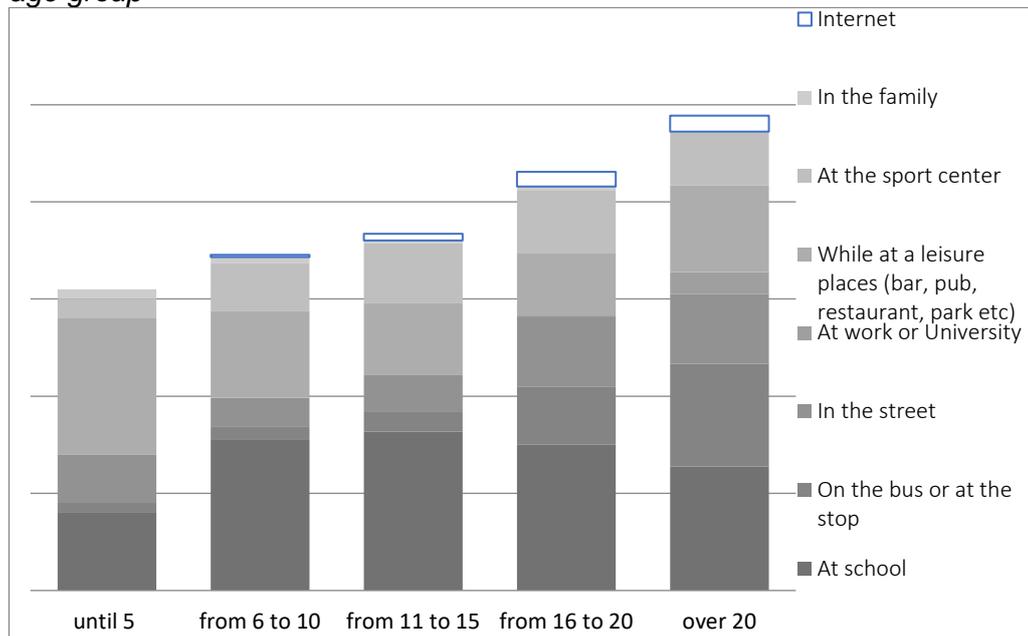
FIGURE 3. *Distribution (%) of the places where racist incidents occurred*



source: Coordinamento CARE (2019)

The research recorded also the adoptive parents' reactions to the racism episodes: around 6% of them reported the incidents to the authorities, while about 38% talked directly to the person responsible of the episode. The vast majority of the parents talked with their children about the possibility of future incidents. It is notable that, when seeking for an appropriate course of action, about 40% of parents asked their adoption agency for help, around 30% asked the social service or a family association, while 70% of them collected information from independent sources (such as social media),

FIGURE. 4. *Distribution (%) of the places where racist incidents occurred by age group*



Source: Coordinamento CARE (2019)

It is crucial to better analyze why this happens and to elaborate on what can be done to prevent the phenomenon in the Italian classes.

2. The interviews

The individual interviews confirmed the frequency of racist episodes and the perception about their timing (14 out of 20 underwent racist incidents mostly in the past and often in school). The interviews reveal racial slurs, some very important.

We were at the beach and there was a man who was loudly praising Mussolini and then started shouting that we had no place in Italy.' 'The first day in high-school I was sitting near a black student. Another guy arrived and threw a piece of paper on the floor telling me to pick it up since I was black like him.' 'In the locker room of the gym other boys started pointing and sneering at me.' 'I was at a beach and I went to a bar with friends. As I entered, a group of guys started laughing and saying I looked like a chimp. My friends stood up for me very strongly.' 'In junior school somebody organized a WhatsApp chat against me.' 'I was very little, in a playground, and this grandpa says to his niece: Don't play with gypsies.' 'I was in my scout group. It was after Charlie Hebdo and this guy blurted: I would burn the face to all the colored people! The worst was that I was unable to make the scout leaders to understand the gravity.' 'When they see me with my daughter in playgrounds they always ask if I'm the baby-sitter.'

These are just few examples. Most of the interviewed reported also being often questioned about their origins. 'Where are you from?' is a constant, but also questions about the language they speak (being clearly Italian speakers) are frequent. Some report of being denied a hiring possibility, because 'customers would not like a black person'.

Most of the interviewed told, what happened, to parents, relatives and friends finding help, solace and sometimes (but not always) a solution. Almost all of them said that parents had never spoken to them about the possibility of a racist

incident before it happened. The interviewed were asked what they suggested to tackle the matter proactively and all of them answered it was necessary to build a correct culture giving more voice to the protagonists, pointing out that Italian society still knows little about adoption and they underlined the central role of school.

Conclusions

The first results of our research already suggest some paths of work for the adoption system in Italy: to actively introduce, in the preparation of couples by social services or international adoption agencies, concepts on strengths and weaknesses of the multi-ethnic family; to create post adoption services, on this specific topic, dedicated to families and young people with adoptive backgrounds; to strengthen further the school awareness on the meaning and the impact of episodes of micro-racism.

It is actually very urgent to be proactive on the matter in order to prevent situations of discomfort and crisis in the more and more multi-ethnic Italian adoptive families.

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