

Becoming mother and father in late adoption: a case study

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Keywords: family, fatherhood, late adoption, motherhood

Accepted for publication: June 2008

ABSTRACT

Adoption in Brazil has long been related to practices of not disclosing the child's history and origins, which become a family secret. As a consequence, most couples who apply for adoption prefer newborns. Late adoption is still an uncommon practice and requires a 'family project' which accepts a different family model, new meanings of motherhood and fatherhood, and different ways of building affectionate bonds. It is important to investigate how a man and a woman become parents under those circumstances. This study aimed to follow up the emergence of adoption, motherhood and fatherhood meanings, in the discursive practices involved in the construction of adoptive parenthood in the Brazilian setting. This paper presents important meanings regarding parenthood produced by a couple who adopted two sisters, aged 4 and 5 years. Analysis revealed that to better understand the late adoption process, the meanings that emerge in the discursive practices should be considered. Those meanings pervade and circumscribe the family relationships, influencing how the individuals constitute their roles in the family. It is through the analysis of this dialogical process of construction that it is possible to identify the challenges in late adoption and to unravel the process of constructing affectionate relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Adoption in Brazil has long been related to practices of not disclosing the child's history and origins, which become a family secret. Children and adoptive parents were often victims of social prejudice. Such representations and practices are linked to a past in which the infertility of adoptive parents was regarded as shameful. At the same time, the pregnancy of a single or widowed woman was severely frowned upon, thereby favouring the rejection of children born out of wedlock.

This social stigma, also found in European and North American countries (Wegar 1997; Hoksbergen & Laark 2005), is aggravated in Brazil because of the poverty-stricken population, which leads many families (or mothers) to relinquish their children because they cannot afford to rear them, and also because of

the lack or inefficiency of public policies in this area (Fonseca 2002). Currently, and repeatedly in Brazilian history, the official policies regarding children who were abandoned, neglected, orphaned, abused or simply underprivileged were more inclined to sheltering them in institutions rather than favouring actions that would maintain them in their birth families (Rizzini & Rizzini 2004).

Brazilian laws did not encourage adoption either and, sometimes, even exposed the candidates to embarrassing situations, such as requiring a document (a medical certificate) proving sterility to be able to adopt a child. Adoption only appeared in the Brazilian Civil Code in 1917, even though different forms of adoption had been practised since colonial times. In this Code, only adults over 50 years of age without 'legitimate' (i.e. biological) children were allowed to adopt. Furthermore, the adoption could be revoked

by either party (adopter and adoptee) and, in general, it was not considered a 'normal' way of constituting family.

In 1957, there were changes in the law regarding adoptions that reduced the minimum age of the adopter from 50 to 30 years, thus enabling younger couples to adopt, and established a 16-year minimum age difference between adopter and adoptee. Nevertheless, when the adopters had 'legitimate' children, adoption did not involve inheritance rights. In 1965, further alterations were introduced, requiring adopters to be married at least 5 years without children or to present a medical certificate of sterility to be able to adopt (Granato 2003). In addition, the process involved a 3-year child care trial period before the adoption became legitimate. However, no changes were made concerning the adopted child's restricted inheritance rights.

'Full adoption' – when all bonds with the biological family are severed and a new birth certificate is issued – became a legal reality in 1979, and it was restricted to a specific group of children: those under 7 years of age, abandoned, orphaned and poverty-stricken. The guarantee of total equality between biological and adoptive children, including inheritance rights, became a reality with a new 1990 law, The Child and Adolescent Statute. Inspired by the principle of 'total protection for children and adolescents', the statute represents a landmark in the movement for adoptive parenthood awareness as well as a new conception of childhood (Fonseca 2002; Granato 2003).

This brief historical review demonstrates that adoption was considered a 'second-class parenting process' by Brazilian law and society. It was a type of parenthood accepted only for those who could not conceive legitimate children (Wegar 1997). Those discourses and meanings attributed to adoptive parenthood present in the laws that governed adoption were a reflex of worldwide social conceptions and practices that valued the biological family model.

As Brodzinsky *et al.* (1998) point out in the North American setting, the principles and practices adopted by the professionals who placed children in adoptive families were for many years based on confidentiality, secrecy and anonymity. The child was removed from his or her biological family as soon as possible, to avoid the establishment of emotional bonds, and the birth parents were advised to forget the child and the events of his or her birth. For this reason, according to guidelines for adoptive parents, the best way to protect their child from prejudice was to conceal his or her origins from the interested

parties. Professionals were not concerned then with the long-term impact that adoption might have for the adoption triad: the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the birth parents.

Hoksbergen and Laark (2005) refer to the first generation of adoptive parents as those who adopted before 1970 and who, according to Kirk (1964), rejected the dynamic differences of the adoptive family, trying to keep the adoption secrecy. For those authors, this was the traditional closed generation. In the Brazilian case, those practices and meanings lasted much longer, practically into the 1990s. It is important to mention that until now there are no legal open adoptions in Brazil.

Furthermore, difficulties created by countless legal obstacles, as well as social prejudices related to both the mothers who handed their children over for adoption and the adoptive family and the child, became the proper moment for *adoção à brasileira* (loosely translated as 'the Brazilian way of adoption'). This cultural practice consisted in the adoptive parents receiving a child directly from an impoverished woman and registering him or her under their name, behaving as biological parents. Such a practice was coherent with the frame of mind of that time – in which the child's history was denied and secrecy was dictated. After 1990, with the new statute, *adoção à brasileira* was considered a crime. But it is still commonly practised and has left deep marks on the popular imagination as an easier alternative for adoption (Fonseca 2002).

Academic literature on adoption in Brazil reveals a context that was (and still is) marked by a history of infertile couples, philanthropy and the fear of late adoptions (Ebhraim 2001; Reppold & Hutz 2003; Weber 2003; Mariano & Rossetti-Ferreira 2006).

Nowadays, despite the increasing variety of family arrangements and parenthood role models (the consequence of intense social, economical and cultural transformations), the nuclear family, based on biological parents and their offspring, still prevails as the major paradigm. National studies conducted by Mariano and Rossetti-Ferreira (2006), Weber (2003) and Vargas (1998) demonstrate the preference of Brazilian adopters for newborn white children or of the same race as the adoptive family and preferably female.

At the same time, if in the past adoption was seen as a way to legitimate the necessities of some adults in particular, or the needs of certain societies, currently the main focus has shifted. Brodzinsky *et al.* (1995) argue that the philosophy regarding adoption has drastically changed in the USA, and although many

still believe adoption only serves as a purpose to solve the problem of infertile couples, currently the main focus is on 'the best interests of the child'. Palacios and Amorós (2006) describe a similar situation in Spain. They state that social and legislative changes have shaped a viewpoint that favours new adoption practices and new conceptions on adoptive families. As a result, there is in Spain an increasing number of internationally adopted children over 7 years of age or with special needs.

In Brazil, during the last decade, a social movement endorsed by new laws on adoption and fostering is striving to promote a new 'culture of adoption', aimed at finding families for children rather than a child for certain families. This is a relevant challenge because most institutionalized children who might profit from the insertion into a new family are well over 2 years old, have siblings and are not white (Silva 2004).

On the other hand, late placement (in Brazil, children over 2 years old) is still a rare practice and is socially stigmatized because it is believed that older children may bear the consequences of their abandonment or maltreatment. Many prospective parents fear late adoption based on the idea that older children may arrive with 'bad habits' or 'character flaws' acquired in their birth families or in previous foster institutions. What is at stake here is the fear of the child's history as well as the difficulties that adoptive parents face in knowing they are not their child's only or even first parents. There are no blood ties to guarantee the certainty of emotional bonds. Adoption highlights affiliation and parenthood that are not inferred but rather constructed through relationships. For Gailey (2000), adoption provides a lens through which we can see kinship being built and not imposed – kinship understood as a process in which people become related and constitute a cohesive group.

Consequently, when late adoptions are encouraged in our society, it is necessary to consider that this requires an 'uncommon family project' that accepts 'the different', which admits a different family model, new meanings of fatherhood and motherhood, and diverse ways of constructing emotional bonds.

When a child is born, together with him or her, symbolically, are born a father, a mother and an extended family. There is thus a period of 'crisis' in the family, a moment where there is a necessary reorganization in the couple's relationship and an elaboration of new roles and social identities related to maternity, paternity and kinship. In the case of late adoption, this situation is different from the biological

model. The older child has a more active and questioning position than a newborn and can become a challenge for the parents.

It is important to consider that even though there is great amount of research on adoption, the main focus has mostly been on child development. Several authors (Vargas 1998; Gailey 2000; Prynne 2001; Rushton 2003; Weber 2003) suggest the need for more follow-up studies on adoptive parents to better understand the construction of this type of parenthood. In Brazil, as yet, there have been few studies on this issue. Thus, it is important to investigate how a man and a woman become parents under those circumstances. The originality of our proposal is to understand how meanings of adoption, motherhood and fatherhood emerge in the discursive practices involved in the construction of adoptive parenthood in the Brazilian setting.

According to Davies and Harré (1990), *discursive practices* constitute the different ways in which individuals actively produce psychological and social realities through discourses. This implies moments of re-signification, discourse ruptures, production of new meanings, and the regular and irregular use of an active language. Thus, discursive practices can be defined as the means by which individuals produce meanings and position themselves in daily social relationships.

We consider that the production of meanings concerning parenthood in discursive practices occurs in daily life; the meaning is a social construction, a collective and interactive enterprise, in which individuals make sense of the phenomena they experience. It is not an intra-individual cognitive activity but a dialogical social practice based on the use of colloquial language (Bruner 1990).

All in all, the experience of motherhood and fatherhood is relational and situated, that is, it is defined in interactions pervaded and circumscribed by a social-historical matrix, which set limits and possibilities for certain actions, emotions and meanings rather than for others. This individual developmental process of construction occurs in networks of interaction, in specific socially and culturally organized historical contexts, in which the partners are mutually constituted.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a case study. It is focused on a couple, Marta and Cristiano (all names are fictitious), who decided on the late adoption of two girls (Luciana and Cristina – 5 and 4 years old, respec-

tively) and at the same time had an unexpected biological son (Fernando). The couple belong to the middle class and are white. Both of them stopped studying after finishing high school. Marta is 32 and Cristiano.

Both parents were firstly interviewed together, prior to the arrival of the children in the household. The six following interviews were done individually. The interviews were open, although thematic, because the objective was to discuss the participants' experiences as father and mother. Each member of the couple was also asked to record in a personal diary their experiences as parents. All contacts and interviews were conducted by the first author. After agreeing to participate in the research by signing a Term of Consent, the couple was followed for 1 year and 3 months, with interviews held at their household.

The analysis of the interviews and of the parents' diaries began with a detailed transcription, followed by exhaustive reading, sequential thematic mapping of each interview, assessment of reiterated themes and of the interlocutors involved in the interaction, ending up with a selection of the most noteworthy episodes which showed meanings and senses related to parenthood.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a result of the analysis of the interviews and of the diaries provided by Marta and Cristiano, it was possible to identify two different moments in their narratives related with the process of becoming mother and father:

First moment – marked by the relationship with an imaginary child, prior to the arrival of their children. This was when Marta talks about her fear and reluctance of being a mother, while Cristiano talks about his desire of becoming a father. The physicians and the social worker and psychologist appointed by the court appeared as their main interlocutors at this time. Subsequently, they show the re-significations that occurred, from the initially desired child (a female infant), until they initiated the stage of living with real-life adoptees.

Second moment – marked by the arrival of the adoptive daughters in the household and the unexpected pregnancy and birth of their son, or rather, by the presence of real children. This was a period of intense change in the family relationship, during which Marta and Cristiano described parenthood being built *in* and *through* the relationship with their children. Marta's narrative is about the differences between the children

and her difficulties in becoming a mother, while Cristiano's narrative oscillates between the possibility of returning the children and a strong sense of personal and family accomplishment.

In this paper, we present some noteworthy meanings which indicate tension in both narratives with relation to the construction of parenthood in late adoption and the challenges faced during this process.

In addition, we consider that, despite the fact of Marta and Cristiano's being a single case, it is possible to find meanings and events that are shared by other couples, which makes each biography intelligible. Their uniqueness is situated in social time and space, within shared contexts, which are likely to be recognized as a cultural experience. Some of the results of this study were also reported in other domestic studies on late adoptions. In some Brazilian regions, more than 70% of the couples who did or intend to do an adoption have characteristics similar to this couple (Vargas 1998; Ebhram 2001; Weber 2003).

Marta

In Marta and Cristiano's interviews, both state that when they got married they had different goals in life concerning maternity and paternity. Marta desired to delay maternity, to study and to reach financial stability, whereas Cristiano desired to be a father and to have a family. They debated this for 9 years, and upon deciding to have a child, their infertility was discovered.

In this process of negotiation between husband and wife, it is possible to observe gender differences, understanding gender as a type of differentiation category that can be attributed to individuals, behaviour, events or artefacts which draw a sexual image, and are means by which they become real in social relationships (Strathern 1988). Therefore, Marta fears the restrictions that maternity can bear on her life (resigning from her job, taking care of the house and the children), while Cristiano anchors his accomplishment as a man on paternity. Within the patriarchal inheritance of the Brazilian culture, Marta objects to what would be the traditional role model of a mother, whereas for Cristiano the children are essential to enable him to adjust to his role model.

Synthesizing Marta's discursive production, it is possible to affirm, among other things, that her narrative reveals her difficulties in becoming a mother after a history of infertility and in accepting the changes in her life after the adoption. Her maternity is felt and signified as simultaneously complicated, inva-

sive and pleasurable; she finds herself in a dilemma in the construction of maternal bonds and in accepting some of the girls' behaviours. These points are exemplified in the following excerpts.

Difficulties in becoming a mother after a history of infertility

First interview, 8 days after the girls' arrival:

M: I've done all the medical exams, my husband has done the sperm gram, and we've taken them to the doctor. He said it wasn't possible to get pregnant. Only in-vitro pregnancy. Then I lost all my trust in him! I really didn't want to do that . . . Because that is difficult for a woman to do. And for me . . . *if the pregnancy doesn't happen naturally, it's not necessary to have it.* Anyway, I accepted because he [the husband] wanted the fertility treatment.

Interviewer: And how was it between the decision to adopt and the actual beginning of the process?

M: It was still more complicated then! This decision . . . to start an adoption process. It was his idea, if I had to do it alone, I think I would have died before deciding anything.

When Marta discusses the couple's infertility, she narrates events which clearly show a network of meanings related to motherhood. She criticizes motherhood brought through medical technologies. She positions herself as a non-believer in relation to physicians; she does not like the medical exams, and states she does not want to be a mother using this method. She faced the treatment simply because it was her husband's wish. At the same time, she values biological motherhood as the 'natural method' of conceiving.

For Strathern (1992), in the 'Euro-American' representation of kinship, the procreation process is believed to belong to the domain of nature and not to the domain of society. To have intercourse, to transmit genes and to have an infant are facts of life which are the foundation for the relationship between spouses, siblings, parents and children, that is, those facts give ground for kinship relationships. Kinship is seen as a social arrangement of natural facts, a hybrid concept; consequently it is considered a fact that is enrooted in society through facts of nature. Marta reproduces this naturalized speech on motherhood.

Throughout the interviews, she shows that there are gender differences in a process of medically mediated motherhood. This process is much more painful for the woman because it involves her body. Symbolically, it is as though she was to blame for the infertility. In addition, in order to 'expiate this guilt', the woman must suffer the consequences. Marta objects to that and begins a process of boycotting fertilization. Thus,

when faced with the impossibility of conceiving and the difficulties involved in a medically mediated motherhood, she began to consider motherhood through adoption as an alternative, delegating the final decision to her husband.

We observed Marta's tension on being or not being a mother, which was aggravated because of the number of choices the couple was obliged to make when deciding for adoption. Weir (2003) argues that the sudden transition to parenthood tends to provoke stress in couples because of the multiple options and the decision-making involved, resulting in a more complex and multidimensional process than the transition to parenthood in biological parents.

It is important for the adoption specialists who follow adoption processes to be alert to the stress experienced by the adopting mother, because most of them may have elaborated the idea of maternity for a long period of time. In Brazil, 50% of the couples who seek adoption are motivated by their infertility (Weber 2003).

Maternity is felt as complicated, invasive and pleasurable

First interview, 8 days after the girls' arrival:

Interviewer: How do you feel being a mother?

M: Well, I like to take care of them, but it isn't easy. They test us!! *It's difficult.* It doesn't seem tiring and stressful, but it is. *It is pleasurable* as well, you're taking care of them (. . .) The youngest one doesn't want to leave, but the oldest contradicts herself, saying: 'I'm going back to the foster institution. I don't like this house anymore'. She used to say that to me everyday.

Second interview, 5 months after the girls' arrival:

Interviewer: How did you feel as a mother during this period?

M: Now it is easy. But at the beginning, it was complicated for me to adapt, as it was for them as well. But I still miss my space. Because I have always been an individualist and, with a child, there's no way of having that anymore. *It's still a little complicated, you still have some invasion,* but I'll adapt . . . Formerly we had a lot of trouble imposing limits, accepting the way they [the girls] arrived. They arrived without any rules, it was like having a herd of cattle let loose inside the house. Let's put it this way, they are curious and invade your space.

When Marta discussed motherhood, she emphasized her process of adaptation. When questioned how she felt as a mother, in different moments of the study, she stated she enjoyed taking care of the girls, but being a mother was not easy; on the contrary, it was rather complicated. Although she conveyed meanings to motherhood, valued by her and by society as pleasurable (taking care of the children, cuddling), her

emphasis was on the difficulties: she felt tested and tired, and her space and time were invaded. She missed her space, which seemed to have been taken away when she became a mother. Motherhood is associated with a loss of privacy and independence. Her relationship with her husband also changed, and Marta now experiences a position of dependency that disturbs her.

In her speech, Marta shows that the practices of caring, culturally associated with motherhood, are discouraging, a type of gender subjugation. Thus, to Marta, maternity becomes manifest as socially constructed in contradiction with the supposedly natural attributes of maternal love and care (Badinter 1984).

Marta thinks her daughters demand limits all the time and finds their 'excited' behaviours very challenging. However, this testing refers not only to the disarray the girls cause in the house but also to behaviours Marta does not approve of and the transgression of some rules. Marta feels tested by the oldest girl, because when Luciana is contradicted, she affirms she wants to return to the foster institution, thereby stripping Marta of authority, which the position of being the mother bestows her in their relationship. In spite of Luciana calling Marta her mother, she does not always recognize her as such.

According to Vargas (1998) and Brodzinsky *et al.* (1992), on late adoptions these children commonly test the acceptance of their adoptive parents. The adopters, therefore, need to be prepared to deal with this situation, in order not to see the children's behaviour as a personal attack or rejection but as a part of the adaptation process in a new context of relationships. Moreover, it is part of the process of becoming a son or a daughter.

The narrated complications are centred on what Marta labels the girls' lack of limits, on their invasion of her space, on the things the girls say (which are felt as excessive) and on the constant need to impose rules on the girls. Those are factors Marta mentioned to describe her feelings of invasion.

Thus, the sense of 'motherhood as complicated' has a pervasive meaning around which Marta builds her motherhood, starting with the experience of medically mediated motherhood treatments, and she restates this assertion in every interview. Motherhood is complicated because Marta is becoming a mother of two children who already argue, deal with, agree or disagree with her and, aside from all this, already have a history of living with another family and in a foster institution.

Moreover, Marta demonstrates how she sees the girls' past: without rules and laws – 'disarray'. Many adoptive parents appear to be willing to talk to their children about their life history; however, they bear very negative conceptions and values about the child's past, which are present in their discursive practices (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1992).

Difficulties in maternal attachment construction

Third interview, 1 year and 3 months with the girls:

Interviewer: How did you feel as a mother during this period?
 M: I think what I feel for Cristina is coming close to what I feel for Fernando. I like him as much as I like her, but with Luciana I have difficulties. The difference is great! It was only after he was born that I actually felt what it was like to be a mother! A mother is . . . I think the love we feel for our children is so strong that it hurts! But it's funny. Now he is growing up and so is Cristina, we are getting closer, with love for both of them, I'm far from this with Luciana (. . .) When he was born, it was as if he were a stranger, but in a few days he became important. It's interesting, it's so quick. Adoption should also be like this, with love appearing just like that!

In Marta's narrative, biological motherhood appears as 'the true one', when she states that after Fernando's birth she felt what it was actually like to be a mother. This is a strong social speech on motherhood (Strathern 1992; Wegar 1997; Gailey 2000). However, soon afterwards, the value of the bonds between mother and biological son seem to have been attenuated, now coexisting with other meanings. Marta reorganizes her argumentation around biological motherhood, reporting that although Fernando is a biological son, he also went through the process of being 'a stranger', followed by a quick process of emotional bonding. She concludes saying that with adoption love should also come in this manner, 'quickly'.

The maternal love for her daughters, the emotional bond, is still under construction, even after more than a year of being together. Moreover, this construction is different with each child through an individual interactive process. Cristina is still more loved and accepted than Luciana. The tension between adopting and rejecting her daughters is present at all times in Marta's narrative.

This seems to be one of the difficulties of late adoption: establishing a relationship of motherhood, fatherhood and love towards older children. It is possible to think that our cultural ways of experiencing parenthood do not favour this, for we are accustomed to become mothers and fathers mainly of newborn babies. Indeed, other questions must be addressed,

such as the immaturity of the human infant who demands care for his or her survival, favouring a rapid establishment of emotional bonds and the development of an attachment relationship. It should also be considered that, in late adoption, children negotiate affection and the construction of filial love, positioning themselves in a more active way in the relationship. The ability in the use of language and the experience of a prior history point to another being who is not so incomplete, demanding from the parents' diverse methods to establish an affectionate bond.

Cristiano

In the analysis of Cristiano's fatherhood, he emerges as a participative father taking care of his daughters: taking them to school, tucking them into bed, feeding them and playing with them. Regarding discipline, he is rather demanding, behaving as the authority of the household.

Even though he rejects an authoritarian and distant fatherhood model, he recognizes that his own upbringing was rigid, and many times he emulates those ways and positions himself in the same way. At the same time, he reproduces new discussions on fatherhood, where 'the modern' or the 'new' father is the one who takes care of his children, not only in the sense of providing but also in who gets involved with their physical care, is affectionate, present and communicative (LaRossa 1988; Atkinson & Blackwelder 1993; Badinter 1993).

Cristiano's narrative stresses that fatherhood is co-constructed in the relationship with each child. For him, the father provides life guidance, imposes limits and assumes authority; and fatherhood is a way of fulfilling the destiny of his manhood by constituting 'a family'. The following excerpts exemplify those meanings.

Fatherhood as a way of fulfilling the destiny of his manhood by constituting a family

First interview, 15 days with the girls:

Interviewer: You didn't have any children, and suddenly, you have two. What is it like?

C: Wow! It is a real major change! The part of being a father, I like it very much. *You have another reason for living* (. . .) there are times when it seems we are already a family.

Third interview, 1 year and 1 month with the girls:

Interviewer: Have the hopes you had with relation to being a father been confirmed?

C: I like it, *I have always wanted to be a father, I love it*. It's like coming out of a dream, you leave an ideal world for a real one. Then you have to adjust, because you say: 'That little girl I have always dreamt of doesn't do this, she does that . . .', but all of this is very gratifying – being together, with the daily experiences, what you do for them, what they do for you. I like this; we are having an opportunity to shape [. . .] to create their personalities, helping and becoming this family we are today, because our home today is not that old home anymore. *Now, all we do is redirected as a function of the family and the children . . . I'm fulfilled.*

When Cristiano describes his routine and the changes that happened in his life from the moment the girls arrived, he reports the pleasure of becoming a father. Although there was a 'major change', he perceives it was very positive, and it gave another meaning to his life and to his relationship with Marta. He has always wanted to be a father and, unlike Marta, he does not have any doubts in relation to this. A strong meaning of family constitution appears then; it seems they are a family, even after only 8 days of being together. Although in other moments he talks about giving the girls back, Cristiano shows his strong bonds with the girls in these excerpts.

According to Cristiano, in a real and not ideal sense, the relationships need adjustments. Perhaps because of this, after 1 year of adoption he can make a positive assessment of his fatherhood. Cristiano feels he is fulfilling his role as a father when 'shaping' and 'creating' a personality (chiefly in Luciana's case).

Cristiano's narrative evidences how fundamental paternity is for him. Being a father means he has finally constituted a family, his major achievement. For Badinter (1993), man, masculine and father are qualifications that define a way an individual is inserted in his culture. Even being 'subtle fictions', those qualifications control the individual subjectivity and define a standard behaviour men should follow. Additionally, it is possible to affirm that fatherhood is symbolically a confirmation of masculinity in the Brazilian social imaginary – and probably in that of many other countries and cultures (Atkinson & Blackwelder 1993; Badinter 1993).

Fatherhood is co-constructed in each relationship

Third interview, 1 year and 1 month with the girls:

Interviewer: How do you feel about each child?

Cristiano: Yeah! Each one is different. Fernando, how can I say? Our own son, biological, is one feeling. And the girls . . . I think, if they were not my adopted daughters . . . but they are my daughters, the feeling would be the same. But both are also different. The youngest is more unarmed, she's only a big baby

and everything she does is with her heart. Now, with the oldest one, things are more artificial. It creates a certain distance between us. I tell her: 'Be genuine, I want to feel you are my daughter. When will you adopt us?', but I think it's difficult for her. Because of everything she has been through, it's difficult for her to devote herself entirely to it.

Instigated to talk about his relationship with each of his children, Cristiano narrates different fatherhood relationships. He describes Fernando, the baby, as the loved son, with whom he has a blood tie. Concerning Luciana and Cristina, had they not been adopted, he would have the same feelings for them. It is interesting how he conveys ambiguity in accepting them as his daughters, even after 1 year together. He oscillates between declaring that they are or they are not his daughters, which indicates an ongoing process of fatherhood construction with them.

However, the feeling of being a father is also divergent with Luciana and Cristina. The relationship with Cristina is a loving one, 'unarmed', mainly because Cristina does not remember much of her past. It seems easier for Cristiano to see himself as her father because there is no stated memory of a prior father. He occupies a place, which as far as he knows, is void.

He feels that it is difficult for Luciana to devote herself to them because of her difficult past of loss and abandonment. Nevertheless, Cristiano also expresses his difficulty in accepting her as a daughter and wonders whether she has adopted him as a father. This difficulty is constructed in their relationship, especially because Luciana deals with what is more important in his image of a father: his authority.

The father as the one who provides life guidance and assumes authority

Third interview, 1 year and 1 month with the girls:

C: *The father's role for the child, I think, is the limit.* With the oldest two, you have the commitment to show what is right and what is wrong. So, you can't be the child's partner, you must be a father, *you must be a reference and provide life guidance.*

First interview, 15 days with the girls:

C: We got to a point where it was useless to talk any more. I had to be strict and stick to some rules. Because they, I don't know if they are asking for limits or if they don't have the habit . . . I even talked this over with Marta: 'Perhaps we are being a bit too severe'. But they get even more excited. I've already said: 'Look! You are not adopted yet. You either adapt or . . . Because, if you don't like it, you will go back'. They said: 'No, we don't want to leave'.

In the process of adopting, fatherhood differs from the imagined one; there are many challenges and

moments of tension. Cristiano questions whether he is being too 'strict' with the girls, and many times he says he is unsure of what to do. However, when faced with the difficulty of being obeyed by the girls, he becomes rather severe. In his conception of fatherhood, it is especially up to him to impose limits and be respected by the girls as an authority (Atkinson & Blackwelder 1993).

In Cristiano's discursive practices with the girls, he resorts to threatening them, saying he will give them back, as a way of controlling them, although he states his satisfaction with the family. He negotiates his fatherhood with them. At this moment, the unequal power they have in their relationship becomes evident.

It is possible to think that every fatherhood demands some changes. However, the fact that the girls are older and, in interaction with him, they assume positions of denying rules and answering back, makes Cristiano feel tested and questioned in his role as a father. When his authority is questioned, he reaches the end of his limits, perhaps because authority is the exact meaning related with fatherhood which he and Marta value most, the central meaning around which he builds his fatherhood.

Thus, according to Cristiano, the role of a father is characterized as one who exerts authority and shows what is right and wrong and becomes a reference to his children.

FINAL COMMENTS

This study sought to understand part of the couple's process of becoming adoptive parents. The focus was to identify the challenges and tension points in the process of parenthood construction in late adoption. We singled out the moments in the narratives in which processes of signification and the emergence of new meanings were perceived. The analysis showed that it is possible to unravel the process of affectionate relationship construction, which, although singular, may portray the challenges encountered by other couples who make a late adoption.

It is important to emphasize that, although our focus was on the couple's narratives, those do not occur in a void space. The situated and historical character of the discourse is present at all times, circumscribing certain possibilities of signification more than others. For instance, Marta and Cristiano repeatedly classified non-conventional families as 'disorganized', implying the children they were adopting originated from this type of family. Here, interactions

were pervaded by social narratives, which give a seal of normality to certain familiar contexts (and not to others).

Analysing Cristiano's paternity, we found that it is characterized by the tension of being a respected and unquestionable authority, as the head of the family in a patriarchal sense, or a father who is present and affectionate, as a caretaker. This tension is highlighted in the literature.

Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) and LaRossa (1988) analyse the image of fatherhood throughout the 20th century and state that there has been a clear change in the role model where the father as a provider has been redefined as a caretaker and a present father. This image involves new positions regarding paternity and generates ambiguity.

Badinter (1993) states that the traditional father was distant and more committed to the standards of discipline and punishment rather than to the demands that appear in the father-child relationship. Among other things, the current father experiences issues of identity, conflict between being a companion to his children and wife and being the authority and the head of the family.

As far as Marta is concerned, the tension is contrasting. She seems to be centred on the decision between being a mother or not, and in her decision to be a mother, the process of becoming one is installed. She conveys her process of affectionate adoption for her children at all times. Her diary closes expressing her ongoing difficulties in becoming a mother: 'I had never imagined it was so strenuous to be on the other side; to stop being a daughter to become a mother'.

Marta's experience refers us back to some current questions on becoming a mother for many women, for whom the loss of autonomy, the need to resign from working outside the home and the lack of personal time are undesired situations associated with maternity. Examining Marta's process, we can question the natural character socially attributed to motherhood. Becoming a mother is an identity hallmark that interacts with other marks, such as being a woman who belongs to a particular social class, ethnic group, religion and profession (Scott 1995).

The multiplicity of being a mother is interestingly observed in Marta, even though maternity in our culture is encompassed by standardized discourses that do not contemplate this multiplicity; on the contrary, the essence of 'being a mother' is discussed, assuming a fixed and determined form of behaviour, reifying sentiments.

Impregnated by the socio-historical matrix that they live in, Marta and Cristiano come to light in their narratives different voices and social discourses. Those polysemic discourses pervade their discursive practices and help structure their process of becoming a mother and a father. This process is dynamic, situated in the present context, and it constrains the relationships that are established with the various partners.

In effect, to be able to help the integration process of an adoptive family, it is fundamental for the professionals involved to be alert to the meanings produced by the couple in their discursive practices about their parenthood construction process (as well as about adoption and about each child); for this reason, a post-adoptive follow-up is advised. We have advocated the creation of assistance centres that follow-up pre-adoption and post-adoption.

Unfortunately, in our country there is no such specialized public service. In the judicial scope, the couples are assisted by psychologists and social workers until the moment the adoptions are achieved. In fact, even up to that moment, the assistance is not quite regular, given the various demands of work that encumber the professionals of the judicial system.

Post-adoptive support is especially important in the cases of late adoption, when the tension is even more complex because the child positions himself or herself in the interactive process, denying and negotiating positions that are imposed on him or her. Furthermore, it is recognized that this child usually has a history of institutionalization. We can conclude that late adoption is a challenge for the construction of maternity and paternity, demanding flexibility and a great deal of negotiation between all the parties involved in the adaptation process in order to create an adequate dynamic for each family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge grants from FAPESP, CNPq and CAPES.

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