AMBIVALENT MEANINGS IN THE ADOPTION PROCESS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT. The existence of diverse meanings, triggering ambivalent ideas and feelings on adoption, in the current Brazilian society, is the subject of this paper. The role of this ambivalence is analyzed, trying to show how it can reverberate in the decision to adopt a child. This paper discusses the dynamics that characterizes the meaning making, which occurs in the relationship between society and individuals, that is, between the first, conceived as collective culture, and the prospective parents for adoption, constituting their personal cultures. The analysis of the interviews with a heterosexual couple, enrolled in the National Adoption Registry (NAR) illustrates this meaning making process that, in this case, results in meaning "to be enrolled in the CNA" as allowing both waiting the desired child through this legalized form, as the possibility of obtaining the child through any other not legalized ways. We suggest that the attempt to reduce the ambivalence, created by coexisting contradictory messages, plays a central role in the meaning making process, that guides the chosen actions and options adopted by prospective parents, at the present time in Brazil.
Keywords: Adoption; ambivalence; culture.

SIGNIFICADOS AMBIVALENTES NO PROCESSO DE ADOÇÃO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

RESUMO. A existência de significados diversos, deflagrando ideias e sentimentos ambivalentes sobre a adoção, no momento atual da sociedade brasileira, é tema deste trabalho. O papel dessa ambivalência é analisado, procurando-se mostrar como ela pode se refletir na decisão de adotar uma criança. Este trabalho aborda a dinâmica que caracteriza a construção de significados, que ocorre na relação entre a sociedade e os indivíduos, ou seja, entre a primeira, concebida como cultura coletiva, e os pretendentes à adoção, constituindo as suas culturas pessoais. A análise de entrevistas realizadas com um casal heterossexual estéril, inscrito no Cadastro Nacional de Adoção (CNA), ilustra esse processo de construção de significados que, no presente caso, resulta em significar "estar inscrito no CNA" como possibilitando tanto esperar a criança desejada, por meio dessa forma legalizada, como poder obter essa criança por meio de quaisquer outras formas não legalizadas. Sugerimos que a tentativa de reduzir a ambivalência, criada pelas mensagens contraditórias coexistentes, desempenha papel central na construção de significados, que orienta as ações escolhidas e as opções adotadas pelos pretendentes à adoção, no momento atual no Brasil.
Palavras-chave: Adoção; ambivalência; cultura.

SIGNIFICADOS AMBIVALENTES EN EL PROCESO DE ADOPCIÓN: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO

RESUMEN. La existencia de significados diversos, deflagrando ideas y sentimientos ambivalentes sobre la adopción, en el momento actual de la sociedad brasileña, es el tema de este estudio. El papel de esa ambivalencia es analizado buscando mostrar cómo puede reflejar en la decisión de adoptar un niño. Este estudio aborda la dinámica que caracteriza

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la construcción de significados, que ocurre en la relación entre la sociedad y los individuos, o sea, entre la primera, concebida como cultura colectiva, y los pretendientes a la adopción, totalizando su cultura personal. El análisis de entrevistas realizadas con una pareja heterosexual, inscripta en el Catastro Nacional de Adopción (CNA), ilustra este proceso de construcción de significados que, en el presente caso, resulta en significar "estar inscripto en CNA" como posibilitando tanto esperar el niño deseado, a través de esa forma legalizada, como poder obtener ese niño por medio de cualesquier otras formas no legalizadas. Hacemos la sugerencia que el intento de reducir la ambivalencia, creada por los mensajes contradictorios existentes, desempeña un papel central en la construcción de significados, que orienta las acciones elegidas y las opciones adoptadas por los pretendientes a la adopción, en el momento actual en Brasil.

Palabras-clave: Adopción; ambivalencia; cultura.

The theme of adoption may be understood in different perspectives. In turn, they conceive and convey distinct nuances of the sociocultural environment in which the phenomenon of children's adoption is inserted. For example, assuming the anthropological, legal, economic, psychological, demographical, or health sciences viewpoint, it leads the researcher to conceive this environment in different ways to approach it.

This paper chose to approach the theme of adoption in exploring the psychological processes of the person who decides to adopt, in their relationship with the sociocultural environment. In having this goal, we assume a theory, that of cultural psychology, in its semiotic branch (Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016; Wagoner, 2011; Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, & Ferring, 2013; Valério & Lyra, 2014), which considers that the psych is constituted in the relationship between the subject and the environment in which he is inserted, through the constant construction and reconstruction of meanings.

From the point of view of the psychological dynamics of the subject who adopts and of the society that is organized in the present time, particularly in the Western world, the theme of adoption has grown in interest both in Brazil and internationally (Jones & Hackett, 2011; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Queiroz & Passos, 2012; Riley & Van Vleet, 2012). The present paper analyses the adoption aiming at unveiling and discussing the different meanings that coexist for each person who adopts, as well as to those instances of the social and of the cultural systems – family, judiciary, public ministry, multidisciplinary teams, sheltering institutions, guardianship councils, and institutes for support of adoption. These meanings guide the responsible institutions in the process of adoption, just as myths and sayings, either explicit or implicit, that sustain, constitute, and transform the regulation of the process of adoption. Also, and most importantly from the point of view of those who are willing to adopt, these meanings create tensions and ambivalences at the personal level.

Studying a case of habilitation for adoption this paper illustrates the points of tension between the layers of meaning that ground the different instances and the real and concrete process that happens with people who are willing to adopt. Particularly, we wish to emphasize the tension between conflicting meanings that were identified both in the sociocultural environment and in the personal construction, which were investigated in the context of a couple, enrolled in the National Adoption Registry (CNA, acronym in Portuguese), who was willing to adopt a child. First, we describe the context of adoption in Brazil. Next, we show some of the basic tenets of Semiotic Cultural Psychology, which is the basis for our discussion. Finally, we illustrate the tension and ambivalences aiming at reaching at full understanding of the difficulties faces in the process of enabling adoption.

Adoption in contemporary Brazil and its actors

Adoption provides and authentic and public parenting relationship as it is experienced by any type of family. The legal instruments available (Constituição Federal do Brasil, 1988; Resolução CNJ n° 54, 2008; New Law of Adoption - lei nº 12.010, 2009 – herein, CF, CNA, NLA, respectively) give adoption a place of recognition, and, consequently, of more public acceptance by the society and by families formed through adoption.

Figueiredo (2009), analyzing the relation between the public and the private in what concerns adoption, points to a transformation in the direction of the imminent private domain to a growing role in the public domain. In the private domain, it would prevail the wills of the implicated parties (children's donors, intermediaries, and adoptive parents), and "the interests of the adults would prevail, prolonging these molds for centuries" (Figueiredo, 2009, p. 149). The public domain is evidenced in the changes adoption underwent in Brazil since the Civil Code in 1916 and the newest Brazilian judiciary instrument, the NLA – Law n. 12.010/2009, which shows an essential inversion in the focus of adoption. We can summarize in saying that previously there was a search of a child to a family, and today the search is of families to institutionalized children and teenagers who are available to adoption, foreseeing the best interest of the child/teenager, at least how it is expressed.

It is also observed that adoption has evolved from simple to full. If before the successive rights of adoptive children were not recognized, these rights were definitely secured after CF (Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil de1988, 1998) and the Statute of Children and Teenagers – ECA, Portuguese acronym (Lei n. 8.069, 1990). However, myths and prejudice that follow adoption remain in the culture, both collectively and at the personal level. These myths and prejudice may be manifested at different levels of the society, including among those who integrate the current System for reassuring the Rights of Infancy and Youth, as pointed out by Sávio Bittencourt, District Attorney in Rio de Janeiro:

> … adoption as an affective solution to children with no family is an institute clothed in prejudice and myths. And this prejudice may be verified even among social actors who are responsible to caring after the children and the teenagers. Biologism and demagogism hinder the system, justify inertia, murder childhood (p. 14-15).

Adoption as a form of legal and affective sheltering in family context is not a simple and fast process, either from the legal point of view, or from the affective, cognitive, and cultural. Although in Brazil adoption finds support in laws that normalize the process, it is possible to observe that the norm deflagrates both the potential adopters and the actors of the judiciary system who have institutionalized the norm, the meanings, and ambivalent actions:

> … currently, the Brazilian judiciary level goes through a period of transition with the implementation of the most recent legislation that guides adoptive practices. This has led us to realize the extreme degree of ambivalence that is created after such fact. The norm is historically situated in an environment not yet transformed by those who form it, creating, by the ambivalence of the process itself, paths that are deviant to the norm. This ambivalence is experienced by social actors involved…, enabling paths that are deviant from current measures regarding adoption (Valerio, 2013, p.119).

Furthermore, often and again this path leads to psychic suffering both to the adoptive families as well to institutionalized children and teenagers.

The potential adopters and the new Brazilian scenario for who wants to adopt

Potential adopters are people who manifest the desire to become adoptive parents, for innumerous reasons, as will be discussed below. NLA and CNA guide the paths to the followed both by potential adopters and by adoption agents from the legal point of view. Once the decision of adopting has been made, the potential adopters will have to deal with innumerous challenges and rituals: announcing the decision to their family and friends, officially communicating it to the Justice department; preparing the necessary documentation, undergoing psychological evaluation, and, taking part in a mandatory course promoted by adoption agencies which aims at providing psychosocial and legal orientation, as foreseen by the recent Provision n. 36, by the CNJ (Provimento nº 36 do CNJ, 2014).

Infertility is pointed out in the literature as the main motivation for adoption (Levinzon, 2006; Schettini Filho, 1998). However, new settings and family profiles also seek adoption: widowers, single people, non-sterile couples, and homoaffective partners. This new scenario for adoption in Brazil, conformed to legal demands, is a mandatory path in order for people to fulfill their desire to become a parent. In some cases

the main challenge to potential adopters is faced inside their own families. The non-acceptance of the adopted child by relatives may result to a failed adoption process. Children are only truly adopted when they are fully inserted in the family tradition (Dolto, 1989), which includes the extensive family, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins (Dias, 2006; Valério & Lyra, 2014). However, during the process of habilitating adoption, psychosocial evaluation is restrained to the potential adopters, not far reaching the whole family.

Various authors, in what concerns the selection of adoptive parents, have demonstrated concern regarding the methodology used by teams responsible for adoption processed. Costa and Campos (2003) point out to the judiciary context of selection and preparation as an important catalyzer in change, but they also warn to the fact that this context may be the precursor of arbitrariness, given that it is the responsible for evaluating positively or negatively the potential adopters. Regarding the technical works in judiciary system carried out with potential adopters, Weber (2003) states that the work with potential adopters is of paramount importance, "not so much in selecting, but in preparing" (p.35) those interested in adopting. Supported by a psychoanalytic view, Silva (2012) highlights the importance of broadening conceptual discussions about family in the conduction of the work by multidisciplinary teams in various branches of childhood court every time an applicant enrolls for adoption.

The psychological preparation for adoption determines that interracial adoption should be oriented and stimulated. Various courts, according to Figueiredo (2009) have already given preparatory courses, some directly, others in agreement with adoption institutions". Bittencourt (2010) explains that the intention behind the psychological preparation of potential adopters is to enable them to deal with the "particulars of adoptive parenthood, and, if possible, to broaden the horizons of these potential adopters to children who have difficulties in finding parents" (p. 128)

Various aspects of a distinctive nature involved since before the decision of adopting has been made demonstrate the complexity of the process. We can highlight some myths, prejudice, and cultural beliefs about adoption that demand warning potential adopters and their families of this type of parenthood. We can also cite ethnic-racial beliefs that hinder the process of African-American children, who represent the majority of children available at CNA. What is more, religious ideology that carries cultural values may impede the adoption of homoaffective potential adopters. All these aspects lead to the fact that adoption cannot be simplified or "reduced" to the legal act of transferring parental responsibilities.

In this scenario, we need to investigate how the meaning of adoption is construed by the adopters and by the adopted, as well as by social actors who enable the process of adoption. We can, then, point out innumerous challenges that we may face: (a) late adoption (older children and teenagers), which demands psychological preparation from the adoptive family and from the adopted child; (b) adoption by homoaffective potential adopters, whose prejudice must be overcome; (c) the precariousness of multidisciplinary teams for the psychosocial preparation courses. What is more, we point out the coexistence of contradictory messages that, on the one side, highlight the importance of following the legal path, and, consequently, that of following the rules of legalized adoption, and, on the other hand, illegal adoption. In this case, for example, birthmothers who do not know the legal measures for giving an unwanted child for adoption promote illegal acts of adoption.

Transition and ambiguity in the new Brazilian scenario for those who want to adopt

We may suggest that currently in Brazil, as a consequence of the legislation of adoption process, there is a new transition moment (Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2011) to the institution of adoption. This moment that started with the implementation o NLA (lei nº 12.010, 2009) demands that social actors follow a different and standardized path to effectuating adoption. That is, the old fashion, informal, and non-legalized way of adoption gave place to innumerous formal and legal demands in order for a child to be adopted. However, the laws are not yet consolidated in this new scenario of adoption. It is precisely in these moments of transition that tensions are exacerbated, and that ambivalences of meaning coexist, resulting disconnected actions from different actors involved in the process.

In order for us to adequately understand the institution of adoption, O'Halloran (2006) says it is necessary to consider adoption in a "particular social context, in which legal functions are exerted" (p. 8). The importance of considering this particular context leads us to highlight the unique character of each

adoption case, and the necessity to attain to these facts. Nonetheless, embracing this uniqueness does not entail that the search with focus on meaningful processes peculiar to each instance involved in the adoption cannot reach more general denominators. The recognition and the identification of the ambiguity in messages might already mean a more general aspect of the current moment.

According to the theoretical framework of the project *Novos Vinculos* (Aconchego, 2012), learning how to deal with the specificities of adoption demands a long process of reflection about the expectations and the motivation for adopting. Psychological preparation foreseen by the law faces some difficulties that will be pointed out next, and that, above all, reassure the coexistence of orientations that not always are achieved harmoniously among the different social actors involved in adoption (Valerio, 2013). Not all infancy courts (VIJ, Portuguese acronym) in Brazil dispense with multidisciplinary teams available for carrying out this preparation. Recently, in an attempt to overcome deficiencies, CNJ obliged VIJs to sign non-profit agreements with universities and institutions that support adoption in order to give preparatory courses to potential adopters (provimento n. 36 do CNJ, 2014).

Another point that enhances tensions are messages that come from sheltering institutions that try to promote adoption by presenting institutionalized children and teenagers, who sometimes are not available for adoption, to potential adopters, who may not be habilitated for adoption, as an attempt to sensitize potential adopters toward adoption aiming at trying to change the profile of child they might want to adopt, and, thus, to finding a family to institutionalized children and teenagers. About the possible outcomes of the change in this profile, Silva (2012) calls attention to the fact that this practice may lead to the experience of adoptive parents returning their adoptive children, or to the experience of "the maintenance of these children in an abusive home" (p. 216).

In this paper we aim at reflecting upon the ambivalence experienced both by adopters and by the society by analyzing a case of habilitation of adoption. We employ the terms of personal culture for the first level, and collective culture to the second, according to the concepts proposed by Valsiner (2007). We base our analysis on the concepts of Semiotic Cultural Psychology that turns, especially, to the process of meaning construction inserted in a sociocultural context in which we live (Salvatore, Valsiner, Simon, & Gennaro, 2011; Valsiner, 2007, 2014; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007).

The Semiotic Cultural Psychology approach

Meaning making, collective and personal culture, and internalization and externalization processes

The conception proposed by Semiotic Cultural Psychology considers that we are inherently social and cultural beings. Our minds and actions are build in and through culture in which we are inserted in a given time and space (Valsiner, 2007; Lyra & Valsiner, 2011). We constantly build meanings as unique beings, although inherently social and cultural. In this proposal, called inclusive separation, it is argued that we are always constituted in and by the culture in which we live, but we are also distinct from it (Valsiner, 1997). The constant processes of internalization and externalization, inseparable in their functioning, although possible to analyze and characterize each, are enablers of this inclusive separation (Valsiner, 2007), which allows for a unique personal culture. This personal culture finds its foundations on the collective culture more broaden in which we are immersed. However, personal culture constantly reconstructs collective culture rebuilding messages that are imposed by the later. In turn, we externalize personal meanings in collective cultures, source and recipient of transformations we create or not.

Thus what we investigate are the internalization/externalization processes that occur in a time that cannot be reversed (Lyra & Valsiner, 2011). Semiotic Cultural Psychology is the foundation of our analysis and comprehension about human phenomena (Valsiner, 2007, 2014), putting forth three fundamental aspects: (a) the meanings that guide our actions are in constant development because they occur in a irreversible time. In this constant construction of meanings we are guided by previous experiences, which, in being retrieved in the here-and-now present, are guided by the perspective of the future of what is to come, of what is unknown to us (Valsiner, 2007). Thus, the present depends on the past, but also on this future. (b) The second aspect is concerned with the nature of the mechanism that allows us to use the past and to imagine the future. It has to do with the functioning that allows men to distance from here-

and-now, which is only attainable through the use of signs (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). We retrieve our past in the present, and foresee the future because we construct signs that constitute meanings – their "prime matter". (c) Thus, sufferings and joys, pleasures and displeasures, axial judgments that guide our actions, past and future experiences are semiotic constructions that compose our imagination, guiding our actions (Zittoun et al., 2011). It is because we dispense with imagination that all we just describe is possible. That is, through our imagination we use signs to retrieve the past and to project the future in present time, which rapidly becomes past and cannot be repeated.

Four other concepts elaborated in Semiotic Cultural Psychology are particularly relevant to the understanding of construction and reconstruction of meanings: the notion of ambivalence, semiotic set, rupture, and transition, about which we discuss next.

Ambivalence and semiotic set rupture and transition

The concept of ambivalence used here requires us to accept that we exist in a world of meanings that do not follow Aristotelian logic in which the judgment of truth and false exclude the possibility of something to be both at the same time. That is, the coexistence of opposing fields of meanings – something that can be, at the same time, white and non-white – integrates the concept of ambivalence in the meaning making process. In this process, Valsiner (2007) states, "opposing fields are automatically implicated each moment" (p. 160). That is, in the process of meaning construction, in a here-and-now context, there are meaning possibilities, including the meaning in focus and its diverging meanings. For example, if I want to adopt I can follow the legal steps, which is to enroll in at CNA, and, also, I may chose not to follow the legal steps, such as accepting children offered by anyone.

This ambivalence, present in the construction of meanings, may be identifies both at the personal cultural level and at the collective cultural level. What is more, this ambivalence guides the action carried out by a person, and may be identified in aspects promoted by the society. Ambivalence comes into play whenever there is an incompatibility in semiotic sets present in an event.

Semiotic sets may be understood as "preferred patterns of signs, feelings, and actions, mobilized in routine actions" (Zittoun et al., 2011, p.60). These sets may be formed by distinct mediating signs, from "values or semantic fields" (Abbey, 2007) to concrete memories of experience (Werner & Kaplan, 1963 as cited in Zittoun et al., 2011). For example, dancing ballet mobilizes in the ballerina automatic actions, attention to the choreography, corporal expression, and a sense of lightness. This joint mobilization denotes to someone personal (sense of lightness) or collective (sense of belonging to a larger group) experiences characterizes the semiotic set.

People do not only experience regularities and continuities in throughout their lives, but also moments in which these regularities are interrupted, reoriented, and challenged, conceptualized as ruptures, and, consequently, as transitions that require a change in signification and reorientation in the trajectory of life (Zittoun, 2012). For example, one finding out that they are unable to conceive a child is considered to be a rupture in their trajectory of life. These ruptures constitute bifurcation points – entailing the need to change the trajectory of life. These ruptures may be triggered by internal factors (e.g., decision to break up a relationship, move to another city, etc.), or external ones (e.g., dismissal of a job, loss of a beloved one, etc.).

Experienced ruptures demand substantial changes, and processes of adjustment between the individual and the environment – this Zittoun (2012) has called *intransitive changes*. In such cases, semiotic sets mobilized to face daily situations become inadequate. At the same time, feelings of ambivalence start to arise (Abbey, 2007) in the process of meaning construction of that experience, since incompatible semiotic sets may be at the disposition of an individual in the process of resignification. Every time this ambivalence is produced to an individual ("what can I do now that I can't conceive a child?") through confrontation of incompatible semiotic sets (expectation of pregnancy versus expectation to become a parent), the individual is, then, according to Zittuoun et. al (2011), called into giving meaning to a situation and acting upon it, either socially or personally:

> Ambivalence, as we have suggested, emerges when more than one semiotic set is mobilized in relation to a single event… when conditions change, or people find themselves in unfamiliar environments,

facing unfamiliar experiences, contradictory semiotic sets present themselves as possible interpretations. We consider ambivalence as the experience troubling semiotic saturation in relation to an event. In addition, we suggest that the social context is deeply implicated not only in the *emergence* of ambivalence, but also in enabling or constraining the possibilities for the *handling* of ambivalence. (Zittoun et al, 2011, p.73, original emphasis)

According to Valsiner (2007), in the meaning making process (construction of new signs), in general, there is tension between what is considered to be personal (personal culture) and what is considered to belong to the social world (collective culture), and the creation of new signs is a way to overcome this tension. In this dynamics proper to the meaning making process, we make distinction between possibilities present (incompatible sets) to which we attribute value that moves us in future directions in the process of meaning construction.

Up to this point, we may concluding in saying that the ambivalence is considered, in this study, as a semiotic process between the individual and the world (Abbey, 2007), emerging when this individual experiences ruptures in the course of life. He operates at the level of mediation and semiotic regulation that constitute the process of meaning construction of potential adopters, aiming, this, at reducing the ambivalence that has been experienced.

Method

Participants, instruments, and procedures for gathering and analyzing data

The participants for this study were a heterosexual couple who were potential adopters in a city at the state of Pernambuco, in Brazil, already enrolled at CNA, and, therefore, habilitated for adoption. The interviews with the couple integrate the corpus of the Laboratory of Studies and Development in Culture: Communication and Social Practices – LabCCom/UFPE.

Three interviews with the couple were conducted between April and August in 2012, at the house of the participants, with a time span of approximately 40 days between interviews. The first interview was of an open question type, "Tell us about the first time you considered adoption". The second interview was semi structured and it dealt with themes connected to process of choosing adoption, support received from others, the process of enrollment, doubts about the experience of adoption, visits to institutions and families. The third interview was also semi structured and it dealt with the following themes: previous experience, frustrated experiences, proposals for adoption outside Brazilian laws, involvement in social projects connected to infancy and in events/actions pro-adoption; clarification on some information obtained in previous interviews.

All interviews were fully transcribed, and thorough check up was made in order for us to identify specific excerpts that would illustrate the ambivalence of meanings experiences by the couple during their process of legal adoption. Once the excerpts selected, we analyzed them in light of the theory previously discussed here.

Results and discussion

The birth of a child is one of those landmark moments in any model of family cycle, as argues Duvall (1971). The biological delivery of a child is considered to be the cultural norm, and those who are not able to conceive a child may face ruptures in the course of their lives. Under these conditions some people opt for adoption as the means to form a family.

Although the current main goal of adoption is to find families for institutionalized children and teenagers in order to provide them the right to a family, meeting legal demands, we have identified that a cultural practice that during a long time guided adoption processes in Brazil, that is, children searching for couples who could not conceive their own child, through different means, not always complying to the law. This practice still echoes today among those who want to adopt, just as it still pervades Brazilian

society in general. Thus both messages, loaded with explicit and implicit meanings, coexist, and determine the process of adoption, including the potential adopters enrolled at CNA.

As we will see next, the development of the trajectory of the couple in question, here analyzed from the point of view of the rupture experienced (not being able to conceive a child), occurs facing ambivalent messages. These messages allow for the construction of opposing meanings, that is, the making of the decision – deciding to adopt and to enroll at CNA – implicates the "giving up" of "other possibilities of adoption", that is, informal offers of children by different social actors. This means that this couple finds themselves facing two contradictory possibilities from the legal and procedural point of view, yielding ambivalent meanings: enrollment at CNA and, therefore, waiting for the arrival of a child that fits the profile for which they have asked, versus accepting offers of children that come in sociocultural norms based on the search for children to those who do not have children, that is, based on the inverse logic that is defended today, and, thus, drawing further from what is prescribed by law, even though this is presented as the most common possibility to find a child.

The process of habilitation and the wait for a child at CNA: legalized adoption

Lucas and Maria were inserted at CNA's database in June of 2011, exactly one year after they started the process. Parents to a biological daughter, they found out the chances of a new pregnancy were null, because of a surgery Lucas underwent. They were hoping to become parents again and were considering becoming adoptive parents. Thus, they initiated the legal process of habilitation for adoption.

The sentiment displayed by Lucas and Maria denotes the meaning of "wanting to do the right thing". This demonstrates a semiotic set according to the abiding law (adopting legally), as reveled both in the discourse of VIJ and in the group of support to adoption responsible for conducting the course of preparation of potential adopters in the city where they live.

> M: We just see so much illegal stuff that we decided to opt, even if it took longer … But we would have some security for the child as well…
>
> L: With all difficulties, see?
>
> M: And to us, once it is totally legalized, we would know that there would be no problem to anyone that is at our door, who wants to take the child away, to blackmail…
>
> L: What really helped was the course we took… [course for potential adopters] The testimonials that we listened to… Thus from that point on we were even more sure. This is the path, it will be a little difficult, we will have more work, but it is the right thing to do.

We can observe three components of this semiotic set: the rejection of illegal practices; the desire to do what is "right", and the security provided by the law. These three aspects guide the construction of meanings about their decision in adopting legally.

The other "side" that persists, and the construction of a synthesis

Before the habilitation for adoption, the couple had experienced some cases of offer of babies for adoption. After deciding to adopt legally, they underwent the legal procedure and the habilitation process for adoption. Everything they experienced led them to making new meanings about adoption: they could only accept these offers of babies who are not under the state of protection, when they were enrolled at CNA already, as shown in the excerpt bellow:

> L: … my sister called me once: 'Here in Olinda there are twins, a boy and a girl, they are adorable! If only you saw them!" [but he interrupts his sister] No, no! It is not this way. We are not even habilitated yet. I will not try.
>
> M: We were waiting for the result of the enrollment… we hadn't heard back yet.

After the couple had been inserted at the CNA database, they started to consider the possibility of adopting a child that was not appointed by the justice system. These children were suggested by other people or they themselves would find out. Therefore there is new emergent meaning being construed and transforming the semiotic set in an attempt to achieve a new personal synthesis. Being habilitated for adoption at CNA also allows one to search for children in other places, or even accepting children from illegal sources. Thus we can infer that the couple starts to see the condition of being enrolled at CNA as a kind of "authorization" to search for a child anywhere and everywhere, as we can attest bellow.

> *L: Since we are enrolled, today, if someone calls and say: Oh, there is this little girl, or a boy here, in a city near by, they're about this age (…) We go there to check out and see what can be done, you know?*

> *M: I was talking to Lucas saying that I think that in our city it is hard to adopt, I want to check out other cities.*

> *M: I know other people from the city have priority… Or not, right? I have never received a phone call in my life. I dream about it.*

> *L: She said we should go this week and check out…*

> *M: Go to Olinda. I search shelters on websites…*

This attempt in lowering the level of ambivalence between the two possibilities of adoption – the legal and the illegal – finds support in the high speed of the second option, since it reduces the time of wait.

The coexistence of contradictory possibilities in personal culture and collective culture, and the reduction of ambivalence through a new synthesis

Lucas and Mary, who anxiously wanted to adopt, created affective bonds and have put forward the request of guard of institutionalized children that are not yet available for adoption, that is, their birth parents still have family power over them, although it could be overruled temporarily by the State. At the same time Lucas and Maria are enrolled at CNA.

The ambivalence that is generated at the level of personal culture, when, for example, they affirm that they want to adopt legally, but, in opposition, they search for children and formally request their guard, with no success. However, this ambivalence is also revealed in collective culture through social actors from the system of protection and care for children and teenagers. As we will see next, Lucas and Maria, having been enrolled at CNA, are invited by a sheltering institution to keep a child, who is not available for adoption, during the weekend:

> *M: It happened in the following way, this baby was in the shelter, but the mother has psychological problems. And the board said they wanted to do a test when the mother got there, the biological mother, and did not find the child. What would be her reaction. The intention was to prepare her for the future, because the child could go…*

> *L: To a possible destitution …*

> *M: So as we were used to, and we were looking for a child, the board asked us if we wanted to keep her for the weekend … She explained the purpose of things. We accepted ...*

> *L: We thought it was one thing… and I guess because we were in a rush to adopt… then it came… other accompanying packages …*

> *M: It was really hard to give back the child… it was awful!*

> *L: a feeling of… of… loss… a feeling of impotence, of knowing you can't do anything …*

> *M: From that point on we fought for the guard.*

The couple decides to fight for the guard of the child, but they have their request denied. Next, comes another institutionalized child, since every potential adopter had free access to the institution in that city, during the time of the interviews:

> *M: This other girl at the shelter was abandoned by her parents. Her case is easier with the justice system. Because her parents are junkies, and they left her with a neighbor to take care a year ago or so.*

> *L: And didn't come back.*

> *M: … Thus, we were informed that this neighbor too is a junkie that she lives in the middle of a trafficking point… She has been arrested once… And she would leave the baby with a third neighbor …*

> *L: Until now nothing has been done. She's not destitute …*

> *M: So we started a new process … and we're waiting.*

In the occasion of the last interview, they were still visiting the child on a weekly basis at the sheltering institution, while they waited for the decision regarding the request, as well as a possible indication of another child by CNA.

What we observe in the case of Lucas and Maria is the coexistence of two meanings acting on the personal culture of this couple: "adopt legally" or "adopt according to the norm prior to the Law 12.010/2009". These messages act at the collective culture, both in institutions that should promote legal adoption, as well as in the messages of relatives, and friends, through social suggestions. Both are materialized in concrete actions that we identified in the excerpts above. In turn, Lucas and Maria, in order to reduce ambivalence, they make a new synthesis that composes the new semiotic set that enables them to reduce ambivalence, and, thus, to deal with the perspective of the desired future of being parents again.

Final considerations

Dealing with uncertainties due to ruptures in the course of life (Zittoun, 2012) creates tensions and ambivalences (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005), and channelizes the need of meaning making processes that will ensue present actions aiming at a desirable future (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). These meanings compose a new semiotic set that guides these actions. In order for it to be possible to act it is necessary that the ambivalence be reduced, and, thus, construed as a trajectory of chosen action. In the present case, the synthesis created by the couple, which is "being enrolled in CNA it is possible to accept children offered from any source, both through CNA and other non legal sources", enables them to make in the present towards the desired future: be parents again.

This paper aimed at reaching an understanding about how a couple in current Brazilian society deals with the rupture of not being able to give birth to a biological child. Facing the decision of legal adoption, a transition process is required to which a new set of semiotic values arise. The process of creating new meanings that compose this set aims at overcoming the ambivalence of existing meanings about the process of adoption and about the period of waiting the arrival of the adopted child. The results show opposing poles with contradictory meanings – the desire to adopt regulated by illegal sociocultural practices, which have been experienced for decades, present in sociocultural practices versus the current norms established to legal adoption in the country, which demands the enrollment at CNA and the rejection of any other illegal practice – lead to ambivalence and the necessity to overcome it.

Contradictory messages coexist and may have a central role in the meaning making by those who intend to adopt, guiding their action in current Brazilian society.

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