

# Regional Support to Italian Parents in Children Inter-Country Adoption

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*Abstract.* This paper analyses an important component of well-being among inter-country adoptive parents in Italy: their perceived satisfaction related to the support by specialized operators (accredited bodies and public social services) before and after the child arrives in the family. In 2015, 280 adoptive families took part in a survey answering to a detailed questionnaire—the first of its kind in Italy—on their adoption experience. Results highlight that there are geographical differences in the support by specialized operators perceived by adoptive families in Italian regions. This confirms that if parents are informed about the challenges of their parental experience by professional social workers, their self-confidence increases, and this is associated with feelings of satisfaction. Some initial implications of these results are given for public social services and accredited bodies

*Keywords:* inter-country adoption, parent support, parent satisfaction, regional differences.

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## Introduction

In the 2002-2015 period, 42,102 children entered Italy, the second receiving country in the world after the U.S. (CAI 2017). According to the Italian bureau of statistics (ISTAT 2011), couples choose to adopt because they tend to get married late (after their '30s) when their fertility abruptly drops, and go abroad because of the absence of a sufficient number of adoptable children in the country. The openness of Italian families towards adoption occurs along with one of lowest birth rate in the world, with a value below the replacement rate of the population (1.4); surrogacy is prohibited, and medical procedures to become parents are strongly limited in line with Italian legislation.

Italy has ratified The Hague Convention and defines international adoption in the article 6 of Law 184/83 (as amended by Law 149/2001) as the adoption of a child in its home nation as prescribed by local legislation and enforced by local authorities. The Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on the protection of children and cooperation in international adoptions is the main instrument for guaranteeing the rights both of children and those who desire to adopt them, and for preventing conditions that might facilitate child trafficking for adoption purposes. Inter-country adoption is a voluntary parental choice, but it underlines the structural differences in a world characterized by inequality and it involves delicate ethical and human rights issues. In Italy adoption is not an inherent legal right, it is rather an act undertaken in the best interest of the child.

Legally binding international adoptions in Italy must adhere to the procedures stipulated by Italian and foreign laws, otherwise the adoption will not be legally recognised, the child will not obtain a VISA and as a result he or she will not be able to enter Italy. The Italian Government collects quantitative data on the entire population of adoptive children and parents, but does not give access to these micro-data; aggregate statistics are published in an annual report, with the latest edition available referring to 2014-2015 (CAI 2017).

The adoption procedure is long and complex; according to CAI (2017, tab. 2.14) families can welcome their children 3 years and 6 months after obtaining their decrees. However, the first step of the adoption procedure - the issuance of the decree by the Juvenile Court - takes one or two years more. Once the Juvenile Court has issued the decision, the family has a year to choose an accredited adoption body to collaborate with. At this point the adoption process begins in the foreign country, and the duration of this phase depends on the number of families on the waiting list. The foreign authority proposes adoptable children in its files to the family and when an

agreement is reached the adoption is carried out according to the civil law in force locally. When the adoption is concluded, the Italian Embassy in the foreign country issues the VISA for the child; afterwards the parents and the newly adopted child enter Italy and request the Juvenile Court's ratification of the adoption.

In 2015, according to CAI statistics (2017), there were 62 authorized accredited bodies in Italy, most of which were small- or medium-sized non-profit non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Only eight of these bodies managed more than 100 adoptions per year; they have multiple offices in various regions (a total of 210 in 2015), with 28 in Lazio, 27 in Lombardy, 17 in Piedmont, 16 in Tuscany, Apulia and Campania, and 13 in Sicily and Emilia Romagna.

The increasing trend of inter-country adoptions reversed in 2011, likely as an effect of shrinking supply (as explained by Selman 2016) resulting from improved regulation and services for families and children in sending countries, but also as the result of reduced demand, due to economic crisis and uncertainty in Italy. The demand for children largely exceeds the supply; in fact, during the 2006-2014 period, only 66% of couples that applied for adoptions with an accredited body succeeded (CAI 2017, p.65). We do not know for which reasons 44% of families did not succeed; they may have become biological parents, but some of them may not have become parents at all.

In Italy, as in many other Western countries, the level of income, of consumption, of wealth of the population varies across regions together with the level of public and private services to families; the literature has never investigated whether in Italy these geographical differences affect the support provided during the adoption. Italian Regional bodies manage the health care system, including the public social services, and are funded with local taxes, share of national taxes and revenues from services provided to citizens. Different levels of regional income directly reflect in region's expenditure. In this paper we analysed the characteristics of Italian adoptive families in order to investigate whether there is any geographical difference among adoptive families' support by specialised operators, also with respect to the satisfaction of adoptive parents.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on the determinants of satisfaction in the family has considered the characteristics of children (e.g., age and gender) and parents (e.g., age, wealth and education) (Bjornskov, Dreher and Fischer 2003). Most of the empirical analyses in the adoption literature refers to the United

States, the first receiving country; Paulsen and Merighi (2009) described with a survey on 326 adoptive families their preparedness, the level of parental preparation and satisfaction, the participation to informative activities, and confirmed that (high) satisfaction was associated to preparation of parents. Barth and Miller (2000) focused on post adoption services provided by specialised operators to investigate which variables influenced adoption's satisfaction, and then contributed to reduce disruptions. Barth, Brooks and Wind (2007) with a survey of 560 families found that they underutilize pre-adoption services; according to their findings post adoption services should be available for a long period, especially for families adopting a child with special needs.

Furthermore, the literature focusing specifically on adoptions' satisfaction has confirmed that the demographic characteristics of children (age, gender, and absence of need) are positively associated to parents' satisfaction (Navalany, Glidden and Ryan 2009). Smith McKeever (2006) focused on a sub-group of US parents (African Americans) and found that the attachment between parents and children further explains parents' satisfaction.

Italian government policies do not promote fertility, as shown by Rovny (2011) in the 1990-99 period. In Italy, foster care and adoption are not parenting alternatives, and policies supporting foster care do not directly affect adoption, as described in Hansen (2007) among the others. Other than demographical, the reasons at the base of the impressive number of adoptions are sociological, historical, religious and their discussion goes beyond the scope of the present paper.

According to the literature, the monetary cost of inter-country adoption determines market segmentation among parents (Blackstone, Buck, Hakim, and Spiegel 2008). The self-selection of adoptive families is confirmed in Italy, as the couples who undertake inter-country adoptions are better educated and wealthier than the national average (CAI 2017, Tables 2.9-2.12). According to CAI data (2017) most inter-country adoptive families live in the rich Regions of Italy, i.e. Lombardy, Veneto, Lazio and Tuscany (table 2.1 of CAI 2017), have no biological children and mostly adopt one child (table 2.13 of CAI 2017).

According to the Italian law on inter-country adoptions, local public social services should inform couples on the adoption process and challenges, should verify their suitability to become adoptive parents, and should monitor the adoption after the child enters the family, usually for a period of one year. Public social services are managed by Italian Regions, and suffered of the negative effects of continuous public spending cuts in the social area, that produced austerity social workers, who "possess a

permanently lowered expectation about their career prospects” (Garrett and Bertotti 2017, p. 36). The precarious employment status can negatively affect the quality of services that public social services provide to families.

The Italian law is not very detailed with respect to the level of professional services of accredited bodies to adoptive families. No other European country counts nearly as many accredited bodies as Italy (65 in 2015), and their workers are often volunteers, “whose training and monitoring are not always up to standard”. Moreover, “the proliferation of accredited bodies does not facilitate regular controls by the Central Authority” (Lammerant and Hofstetter 2007, p.13).

Segatto and Dal Ben (2013) measured the positive effects of (increased) public social services’ support to adoptive families in the Veneto region; the Veneto region is in the North of Italy, and has a per capita gross domestic product of €29.531 (in 2012) that is higher than the national average of €25.728 (measured by ISTAT). Authors confirmed the results provided in the international literature according to which the availability of informative activities and the support to families for a long period foster their sense of preparedness and then positively influence their satisfaction (Barth and Miller 2000, Barth, Brooks and Wind 2007, Paulsen and Merighi 2009).

## **Survey Methodology**

In order to investigate whether there is any geographical difference among adoptive families’ support by specialised operators also with respect to the satisfaction of adoptive parents, we generated a questionnaire addressing the phases of the Italian adoption process from a demand-side perspective; we obtained data on family demographics (parents and children), adoption’s costs, specialised operators’ support and parental perceptions of the adoption procedure. The purpose of the questionnaire was to explore the parental perceptions of the adoption procedure, and to capture individual comments on the support provided throughout the process. The families answered a range of closed questions in multiple choice and Likert scale formats (Sue and Ritter 2012). Open questions were also incorporated to allow respondents to expand on their experiences.

The survey, which was conducted from December 2014 to August 2015, was posted on Survey Monkey and advertised by means of adoption newsletters, blogs, forums, press articles, a Facebook marketing campaign and two interviews on national TV featuring the principal investigator. Interested parents were directed to a secure URL where they were supplied with details regarding the survey, they confirmed their eligibility by

answering Yes to the filter question: “Have you adopted one or more children abroad?”; parents provided informed consent before proceeding to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed anonymously and did not require the disclosure of any personal detail.

The questionnaire was formulated on the basis of existing literature, such as that submitted by the Commission for Inter-Country Adoptions to Italian adoptive families and that submitted by Skidmore et al (2014) in Michigan (USA). It comprises 59 questions divided into seven sections. A total of 390 families undertook the survey on a voluntary basis, but 110 of these families did not continue beyond the filter question, as they had not adopted a child abroad. The remaining 280 families proceeded to complete the questionnaire.

Table 1.

*Questionnaire structure*

<b>Section</b>	<b>Issues</b>
I. Adoptive family data	age, education, income, number of adoptees, adoption duration
II. Information and support	information and support from social services, accredited bodies
III. Characteristics of the adoptive child	child age, country of origin, presence of needs
IV. Period spent abroad	duration and satisfaction, parental leave after returning to Italy
V. Post-adoption period	support from social services and accredited bodies
VI. Current family situation	satisfaction with the adoption, child’s requests and needs
VII. Adoption costs	accredited body, travel, information, health care

In the first section of the questionnaire, families were asked to provide sociodemographic information (age, level of education, income, number of adopted children), and the duration of their adoption; the second section addressed the support provided by public social services, by accredited bodies, and the perceived satisfaction before the child arrived in the family, with questions like “How much are you happy with the accredited body (or public social services) support before your child entered the family?”. Answers range from 1 (min) to 10 (max). The third section was devoted to the adopted child, and his/her characteristics (age, gender, special needs, birth country). The fourth section asked about the period spent abroad

with the child (duration and satisfaction) and the parental leave taken after returning to Italy (how long have parents been away from work after returning to Italy). The fifth section asked about the support provided by public social services, by accredited bodies, and the satisfaction of this support after the child joined the family, with questions like “How much are you happy with the accredited body (or public social services) support after your child entered the family?”. The sixth section looked at the current family situation and asked about the satisfaction of the adoptive experience, to what extent parents felt that the child is aware of his/her story, and his/her relationship with the other family members (aunts, grandparents) and the school. In the final section families were asked about the costs paid for their adoption (fee for the accredited body, health-care treatments, other expenses).

## **Data Elaboration and Results**

The questionnaire findings illustrate the unique social scenario of adoptive parents. After closing the questionnaire, authors elaborated data and checked for the presence of multiple respondents (i.e. respondents with the same i.p., email address, or demographic characteristics – age, city of residence, number of children). Open questions filled by adoptive parents are of particular sociological interest, since they all had positive feelings to share on their experience, wanted to contribute to improve the adoptions’ system, to give a family to as many infants as possible. However, the heterogeneity of responses did not allow researchers to employ these answers in the analysis.

Answers to questions in sections I, II, IV and V were of particular interest for this research.

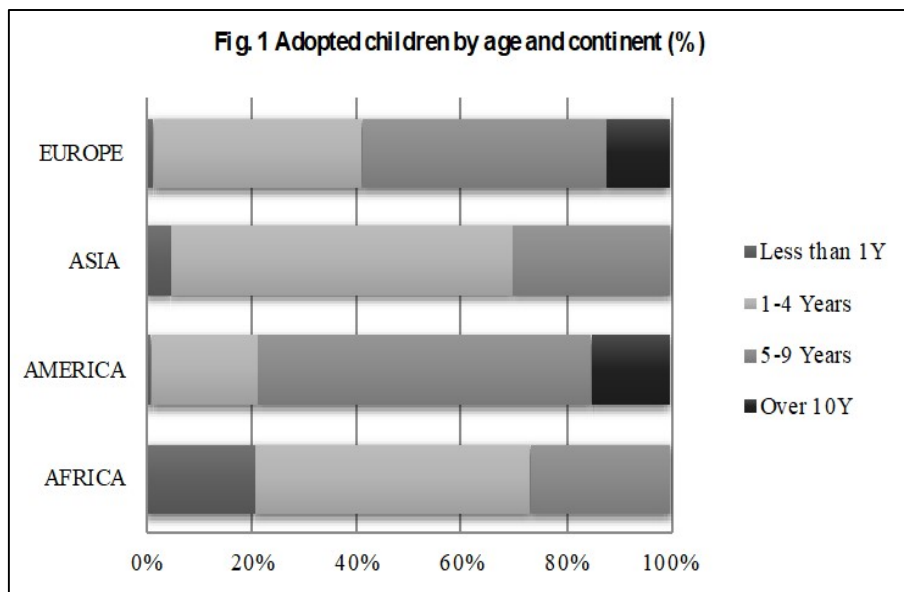
Section I reports the demographic characteristics of respondents. Over 55% of mothers were over 40 years of age when the child joined the family and 40% of adoptive fathers possessed a university degree, in contrast with the national average of 12% (reported in the 2011 ISTAT Census), confirming their presumed characteristics (Blackstone et al 2008). Adoptive mothers were better educated than adoptive fathers; adoptive parents frequently hold high-profile jobs as professionals, executives and entrepreneurs.

63% of respondents adopted one child, 34% had adopted two and 3% had adopted three children; only one family had adopted four children and none of the respondents had adopted five or more. 66% of adoptive children were male and over 60% of these adoptions took place after 2010. At the time of adoption, 47% of the children were younger than three years

of age, 20% were aged between three and five years, 30% were aged between five and nine years, and only 4% were above nine years of age. This age distribution correlates with the children's continent of origin, as adoptive Asian and African children are younger than their European and American counterparts. Of all the adoptions reported, 32% of children came from Asia, 27% from Africa, 22% from Europe and 19% from Latin America (fig. 1).

Figure 1.

*Percentage of adopted children by age and continent.*



Source: Survey data (2002-2014).

Among the respondents, 214 adoptive families voluntarily declared their place of residence. According to their answers, most of these families lives in the northern (62%) and central Italy (31%); 35% of adoptive families lives in Lombardy, 11% in Tuscany, 14% in Lazio and 8% in Piedmont. Slightly less than 8% of families lives in southern Italy and the islands (table 2).



Table 2.

*Questionnaire data: regional distribution of families\**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Observations</b>	<b>%</b>
Piedmont	17	7,9%
Lombardy	74	34,6%
Veneto	17	7,9%
Liguria	3	1,4%
Emilia Romagna	13	6,1%
Friuli Venetia Giulia	6	2,8%
Valle d'Aosta	1	0,5%
Trentino	1	0,5%
	<i>NORTH</i>	61,7%
Tuscany	24	11,2%
Marche	3	1,4%
Umbria	2	0,9%
Lazio	30	14,0%
Abruzzi	6	2,8%
	<i>CENTRE</i>	30,4%
Molise	0	0,0%
Campania	6	2,8%
Apulia	3	1,4%
Basilicata	2	0,9%
Calabria	3	1,4%
Sicily	1	0,5%
Sardinia	2	0,9%
	<i>SOUTH AND ISLANDS</i>	7,9%
Total	214	100,00%

\*214 out of 280 families declared their region of residence

In the sections II and V of the questionnaire, parents have been asked about the support received by public social services and accredited bodies, before and after the child arrived in Italy. Pre-adoption support by accredited bodies and local public social services translates in informative activities, bureaucratic help and psychological support. According to the answers, 180 families have been offered mainly bureaucratic help and informative activities by accredited bodies (table 3). Pre-adoption activities provided by local public social services show smaller figures than those referring to accredited bodies, but a similar distribution among activities. The relative small number of families using pre-adoption support is in line with the literature referring to the U.S. (Barth, Brooks and Wind 2007, Paulsen and Merighi 2009).

Table 3.

*Questionnaire data: pre-adoption activities undertaken by families*

<b>Provided by Accredited Bodies (180 respondent families)</b>		<b>%</b>
Psychological	108	60,0%
Bureaucratic	168	93,3%
Informative	155	86,1%
<b>Provided by Public Local Social Services (166 respondent families)</b>		
Psychological	48	28,9%
Bureaucratic	53	31,9%
Informative	61	36,7%

Post-adoption support by accredited bodies and local public social services is given with informative activities, bureaucratic help, psychological support and health care support (table 4). Health care support refers to the child, and can be related to the presence of special needs or to curable diseases (e.g. malnutrition). According to the answers, 144 families have been offered mainly bureaucratic help and psychological support by accredited bodies. Post-adoption activities provided by public local social services show higher figures with respect to accredited bodies, but a similar distribution among activities

Table 4.

*Questionnaire data: post-adoption activities undertaken by families*

<b>Provided by Accredited Bodies (144 respondent families)</b>		<b>%</b>
Psychological	106	73,6%
Bureaucratic	119	82,6%
Informative	60	41,7%
Health care	11	7,6%
<b>Provided by Public Local Social Services (161 respondent families)</b>		
Psychological	75	46,6%
Bureaucratic	61	37,9%
Informative	30	18,6%
Health care	25	15,5%

Unfortunately, we cannot investigate whether there is a statistical relationship between the level of income of families, their region of residence and the adoptions' accredited bodies, because families are free to choose an accredited body headquartered in another region.

Table 5 reports the average values and the geographical differences of parents' satisfaction with their adoption, with the public social services and with the accredited bodies, before and after the child joined the family; answers range from 1 (min) to 10 (max). The parents' satisfaction of adoption was very high throughout the country, although families living in the southern regions seemed to be happier (average 9.8) than those living in central (8.5) and northern (9.3) Italy. The differences among the three areas were lower than 20%.

Table 5.

*Satisfaction: average values and geographical difference*

<i>Average</i>	Adoption satisfaction	Public social service's satisfaction (before child arrival)	Accredited body's satisfaction (before child arrival)	Period spent abroad satisfaction	Public social service's satisfaction (after child arrival)	Accredited body's satisfaction (after child arrival)
North	9,3	3,8	6,1	7,7	5,9	6,8
Centre	8,5	3,5	3,5	6,6	3,7	3,2
South and Islands	9,8	3,1	7,1	7,4	5,9	6,5

<i>Difference</i>	Adoption satisfaction	Public social service's satisfaction (before child arrival)	Accredited body's satisfaction (before child arrival)	Period spent abroad satisfaction	Public social service's satisfaction (after child arrival)	Accredited body's satisfaction (after child arrival)
North - Centre	8,9%	6,5%	74,6%	15,8%	59,8%	115,5%
North - South	-5,2%	20,0%	-13,5%	4,5%	0,3%	5,8%
Centre - South	-13,0%	12,7%	-50,5%	-9,8%	-37,2%	-50,9%

Note: The dimension of the samples and the missing data for some regions do not allow for further check.

Public social services are managed by the Italian regions, whose resources have been reduced by the government in recent years. After obtaining the adoption decree and before the child arrived, 33% of respondent families had contact with public social services, and their satisfaction was low (average 3.5). After the child entered the family, 45% of respondents parents needed the help of social services. The satisfaction associated with the support from public social services in northern (average 6) and southern (6) Italy improved after the child's arrival, though it did not increase for families in central Italy (4). The differences among the three areas of the country with respect to satisfaction with public social services' support were not high before the child's arrival. After the child's arrival, social services in northern and southern Italy seemed to provide better support, whereas families living in central Italy reported very low satisfaction.

Before the child arrived in Italy, 78% of families had contact with accredited bodies, and their satisfaction was higher in the south (average 7) than in northern Italy (6), while was very low in the central Italy (3.5). After the child arrived, the satisfaction increased for families living in northern Italy (average 6.8) but decreased for families living in central (3.2) and southern (6.5) Italy. The differences among the three areas of the country, with respect to the satisfaction of accredited bodies' support, was high both before and after the child's arrival; accredited bodies in northern and southern Italy appeared to provide better support, whereas families living in central Italy reported very low satisfaction (Abruzzi, Lazio, Marche, Tuscany, and Umbria).

In the sections IV of the questionnaire, parents have been asked about the perceived satisfaction associated to the period spent abroad to meet the child; results show an average satisfaction of 7 in all geographical areas.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our results cannot be generalized to the entire population of Italian inter-country adoptive parents, because of self-selection of respondents; however, these findings can contribute to improve the adoption system by underlying the factors that enhance the perceived satisfaction of parents.

According to our findings, there are geographical differences among adoptive families' support by specialised operators in Italian regions, and these differences seem to influence the satisfaction of adoptive parents. In particular, families living in the centre of the country experience a lower average satisfaction with social services and accredited bodies, before and

after the child enters the family, that is directly reflected in their (lower) adoption's satisfaction.

Disparities in the different geographical areas of Italy are the results of multiple factors, such as economic conditions, culture, politics, and are directly influenced by the efficiency of the administrative bodies; nevertheless, regions can adopt legislative strategies and organization models differing from one another.

Our results are in line with the literature referring to the U.S. that affirms that in order to increase the perceived satisfaction of adoptive parents, specialised operators should improve the pre- and post-adoption assistance to families.

This is especially relevant for local public social services; basing on the respondents' perceived satisfaction, we suggest to improve them, especially in the centre of Italy. Regions can improve the adoption system also by introducing a common framework for pre- and post-adoption support to families, lowering the geographical differences.

The elevate number of accredited bodies operating in Italy has been already questioned, and the continuous reduction of adoptions will inevitably lead to a restructuring process in the coming years; families seem to be satisfied with the support provided by accredited bodies, but our findings confirm that their operational efficiency can be improved, especially in the centre of Italy.

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