



Satisfaction of Italian parents with inter-country adoption: The support of specialised operators

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the satisfaction of Italian adoptive parents with their experience and the support by specialised operators (i.e., accredited bodies and local public social services) using the survey data of 280 adoptive families. Inter-country adoption is a voluntary family choice. Italians welcomed an impressive number of children between 2003 and 2017 and are very satisfied with their experience. This research results show that the satisfaction of parents is strongly influenced by the (young) age of the adoptee and of the mother and by the professional support provided by specialised social workers belonging to private accredited bodies or a local public social service. These results are in line with the literature, according to which a younger child provides higher satisfaction to parents if parents are informed about the challenges of their parental experience by professional social workers. In such case, their self-confidence increases and is associated with feelings of satisfaction. Although referring to a limited sample of families, these results create new developments in the literature on inter-country children's adoption in Italy. Implications of results are provided for all social workers, juvenile courts, and the government.

1. Introduction

Italian parents welcomed over 45 thousand children with inter-country adoption in the 2003–2017 period, turning Italy into the second receiving country after the United States (CAI, 2018; Selman, 2016). Inter-country adoption is a voluntary parental choice, but it underlines the structural differences in a world characterized by inequality and involves delicate ethical and human rights issues (Hill, 1987). Other than demographical, the reasons for the impressive number of inter-country adoptions in Italy are sociological, historical, and religious. The debate on the pitfalls of inter-country adoptions goes beyond the scope of the paper, and economists never substantially contributed to this debate.

Adoption is a family voluntary choice, and the welfare of families depends on various interconnected factors. This paper investigates the satisfaction of adoptive families with their experiences and the support of professional workers in order to draw first social policies implications in this little researched area. Satisfaction is a subjective measure of well-being, and it can refer to certain domains (e.g., work, life, and family) in a hedonic perspective. Italian couples adopt children from abroad to satisfy their parental need, and the satisfaction associated with this experience is influenced by many subjective factors. The Italian central authority (Commission for Inter-Country Adoptions -

CAI) does not give access to data on the population of adoptive families to researchers, and in order to investigate the satisfaction of adoptive families with their experience and the support of professional workers, we submitted a questionnaire that follows the phases of the Italian adoption process from a demand-side perspective (i.e., parents' perspective) to Italian adoptive families.

The persistent baby shortage in the adoption 'market' (Landes & Posner, 1978) creates financial pressure on sending and receiving countries, and in Italy, it puts pressure on private accredited bodies and public social services managing adoptions. The 'demand' for children by Italian parents exceeds the 'supply'. The CAI testified that during the 2006–2013 period, 72% of couples that applied for inter-country adoptions with an accredited body finally succeeded (CAI, 2017, p. 66). Bearing in mind that the traditional demand-supply analysis cannot fit in with the adoption 'market' since the costs of inter-country adoption do not vary depending on the characteristics of children or parents, the research questions we investigate refer to the satisfaction of families with their adoptive experience and with the support provided by specialised operators (i.e., accredited bodies and public social services). A similar methodology and approach have been applied to Italian domestic open adoptions by Balenzano, Coppola, Cassibba, and Moro (2018).

The next sections describe the Italian system, provide literature

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review, outline the empirical methodology, and include the synthesis of the main characteristics of participants, econometric results, discussion, and implications.

2. Inter-country children adoptions in Italy: facts and figures

According to the [United Nations \(UN\) \(2009\)](#), adoption practice in receiving countries, including Italy, is characterized by a high level of data opacity and minimal standardization, as domestic legal institutions vary widely. ‘Despite the heightened attention towards these issues, much of the information on adoption remains anecdotal’ (UN 2009, xv); greater data homogeneity would help to achieve a higher level of coordination and effectively pursue the main purpose of adoption—fighting trafficking and the baby trade.

According to national data reported by the national bureau of statistics ([ISTAT, 2011](#)), Italian couples choose to adopt because they tend to get married late (after their ‘30s) when their fertility abruptly drops and go abroad due to the limited availability of adoptable children in the country. In fact, the likelihood of adopting domestically is extremely low (< 10% based on the aggregate data published by the Internal Affairs Minister). The openness of Italian families towards adoption occurs along with one of lowest birth rate in the world (1.4), as reported in the Italian census ([ISTAT, 2011](#)); surrogacy is prohibited, and medical procedures to become parents are strongly limited in line with the Italian legislation. 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.

In Italy, as in most European countries, adoption gives the opportunity to childless people to transfer their goods and name. Italy has had a long history and experience of inter-country adoptions, and it ratified the Hague Convention in the domestic rule of law in 2001 (law n. 149 of 28 March 2001). The principles of the Hague Convention have been integrated in the Italian legal system ([Long, 2009](#)); the law n.476/1998 established the Commission for Inter-country Adoptions (CAI) that is headquartered in the Prime Minister's office, Department of Families Policies; its role is planning, coordinating, and interchanging with the central authorities of other countries, as well as the promoting and facilitating cooperation. By establishing a centralized authority, private adoptions have been eliminated, further limiting trafficking and abuse ([Hayes, 2011](#); [Hill, 1987](#)). The law n.476/1998 states that only organisations known as accredited bodies that have been approved by the CAI are entitled to manage the inter-country adoption's procedure. [Table 1](#) reports the timeline of the Italian procedure.

The first step of the procedure (the issuance of the decree) should take six months according to the law, but most juvenile courts cannot process all requests in less than one year, especially in the centre and south of the country (e.g., Rome, Naples). Juvenile courts have different internal procedures for managing the adoptions, and their speed is not homogenous; the national health care system is heavily involved in the analysis of willing-to-be parents, from a physical and psychological points of view, with local public social services, while the police verifies the integrity of parents. Local public social services are required to inform couples on the adoption process and challenges, verify their suitability to become adoptive parents, and monitor the adoption after

the child joins the family, usually for a period of one year. After 2010, the reduction of funding available for health care, police, and public administrations has further increased the length of the adoptive procedure. Public social services are managed by Italian regions, the first level of local public administrations, and they suffer from the negative effects of continuous health care spending’ cuts that produce austerity among social workers who ‘possess a permanently lowered expectation about their career prospects’ ([Garrett & Bertotti, 2017](#), p. 36). The precarious employment status can negatively affect the quality of services that public social services provide to families.

After the juvenile court has issued the decree, the family has one year to choose an accredited body to adopt with. Afterwards, the adoptive process starts abroad, and this step can take various years, depending on the number of families on the waiting list (wait and wish). The foreign authority proposes a child to the family, and the foreign adoption is concluded according to the civil law operating abroad (i.e., with full adoption sentence, with a partial adoption sentence or other solutions).

In 2016, in Italy, there were 65 authorized accredited bodies, most of which were small or medium-sized non-profit non-governmental organisations (NGOs): only eight managed > 100 adoptions per year. Their workers were often volunteers, ‘whose training and monitoring were not always up to standard, and ‘the proliferation of accredited bodies did not facilitate regular controls by the Central Authority’ ([Lammerant & Hofstetter, 2007](#), p.13). Accredited bodies, that are not mediators, should inform and help couples, manage their documents, and facilitate their adoption in the foreign country; they should also provide post adoption services to families. The cooperation between local public social services and accredited bodies at the national level is unstructured, and agreements are only local. [Gugiatti, Anzivino, Baglioni, Baldassare, and Iovino \(2011\)](#) analysed the pivotal role accredited bodies played in the Italian adoption system and found that the small number of adoptions reduced their operative efficiency, while their costs were highly opaque and the extent of their revenues from fees was not properly disclosed. Their income statement was not detailed, and their accounting system was simplified to the detriment of financial transparency. The European Parliament reached the same conclusion ([2009](#), p. 153). After 2010, the number of accredited bodies diminished because of the reduced number of adoptions Italian families applied for ([CAI, 2017](#)) and because of the increasing number of countries that blocked the inter-country adoption procedures (e.g., Ethiopia, Romania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

The Hague Convention prevents market forces from prevailing, and Italian adoptions are publicly managed, aspire to uphold human rights, and are strongly regulated ([The Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2014](#)). The Italian central authority collects quantitative data on adoptive children and parents; aggregate data are published in an annual statistical report, with the latest edition available referring to 2015; shorter reports on years 2016 and 2017 have been published in 2018.

Italian parents bear the costs of intercountry adoptions that vary from €5000 to €15,000, travel expenses excluded, for each adoption according to the Commission for Inter-Country Adoption ([2014](#)) and the [European Parliament \(2009\)](#). The CAI does not disclose any detailed data on the costs of adoptions, nor does it regularly update cost information on its website, as foreseen in the Hague recommendations on transparency ([The Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2014](#)). The costs of adoptions do not depend on the characteristics of children or parents and are paid to accredited bodies; donations are permitted. Expenses related to inter-country adoptions are tax-deductible for parents (19% of total expenses), but this incentive is not substantial enough to encourage adoption over other parenting options (e.g., fertility treatments, gestational surrogacy) and vanishes in the presence of tax-evasion.

Table 1
Inter-country adoptions by Italian parents – Timeline.

Step	Decree from the Juvenile Court	Choice of the accredited body	Wait and wish	Internal affairs
Time needed	(1 year)	(1 year)	(2.8 to 5 years)	(1 year)
Country	Italy	Italy	Foreign Country	Italy

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