Articles

Adopted Adolescents Talk about Mental States: a Qualitative Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Adolescence represents a developmental phase characterized by several changes during which social and cognitive advances lead adolescents to the progressive improvement of mental states talk (MST), namely as a specific kind of language marked by semantic terms describing internal mental states related to both self and others. The use of MST within individual narratives has been associated with the capability to reflect on cognitive and emotional experiences, thus promoting a meaning-making process of self and others understanding. In light of that and considering the additional challenges characterizing the adolescent transition for adoption, this qualitative exploratory contribution aims to explore adopted adolescents' use of MST from their narratives deepening the meaning-making process of the psychological and relational dimension of self and others. The *Friends and Family Interview* was administered to 13 adopted adolescents after eight years from their first placement. The transcripts were analyzed through the use of thematic content analysis. The findings highlight the extensive employment of MST among adopted adolescents with broader use of the Self than the Other-oriented once. Self MST co-occurs with other categories related to significant relational contexts. This brings additional insights within adoption research providing valuable resources for working with adopted adolescents and their families.

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1. Adopted adolescents' changes and challenges

Adolescence represents a unique period of biological, psychological, and social development. The transition from childhood to adulthood is also characterized by profound changes addressing different levels: physical and hormonal changes; modifications to the brain and mind; changes in the family and social environment (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

During adolescence, individuals are driven to take a step back from the dependencies developed towards their primary caregivers throughout childhood to gain greater independence and

become fully autonomous. In this context, increased relational conflict with the parental figures may play a significant role in the progressive redefinition of family relationships triggered by the adolescent transition (Scabini & Cigoli, 2000; Tafà, 2007). Additionally, efforts made to build significant relationships with peers usually increase during this period and adolescents' evaluation of themselves in terms of personal and social value becomes more dependent on their peers' view (Allen, 2008; Blakemore, 2012).

The specificity of the adoptive condition throughout adolescence entails additional challenging issues caused by both pre-and post-adoptive factors (Rueter et al., 2009), and that may results in individual difficulties at behavioral, psychological, and relational levels (Branje, 2018; Wright & Flynn, 2006). Moreover, the separation and individuation process (Blos, 1967; Mahler et al., 1975), which comprises differentiating self from others (i.e., separation) and forming one's own individual characteristics (i.e., individuation), may trigger the adoptees to deal with their origins as well as to imagine their future. According to this, and aiming to form a mature sense of identity, adopted adolescents are required to deal with their relationships with both their birth parents and their adoptive ones. Overall, these emotionally demanding activities could trigger a reflective process on the meanings of the adoption experience in terms of both losses and gains. This involves a deep understanding of how their adoptive identity is integrated with other identity dimensions and also fits with the adoptive family system, thus leading the subjects to experience contrasting feelings (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019). In that regard, the adoptive family's capability to manage these issues by scaffolding adolescents' emerging sense of self as adopted individuals, could have a significant impact on their feelings and behaviors (Grotevant et al., 2001). In other words, positive adoptive family relationships could act as protective factors, allowing an open communication on adoption – or any other possible crucial issues - thus helping adoptees to make these contrasting feelings accessible (Paniagua et al., 2019a).

1.1 Mental states talk and meaning-making processes

As the features of the adolescent's social world gradually gain complexity, greater learning opportunities emerge and model the developing brain (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). The growing capacity to apply abstract and formal reasoning allows adolescents to achieve a more sophisticated understanding of emotions as well as greater self-consciousness and triggers their capacity to reflect on themselves, what others think about them, and their futures (Byrnes, 2003; Gavazzi et al., 2011). This social understanding depends on the capability to recognize and be aware of mental states (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) ascribable to both close social partners or the self, and it is therefore associated with the theory of mind (ToM) and mentalizing development

(Symons, 2004), intended as the imaginative ability to make sense of each other and ourselves in terms of and mental processes and to interpret and predict behaviors as driven by underlined mental states (Fonagy et al., 2002). Similar to the construct of mentalization, the theory of mind (ToM) has been referred to as the individual ability to understand self and others' minds and behaviors as defined by mental states (Devine & Huges, 2013; Harris, 2008).

Social and cognitive advances of adolescence are also associated with a more sophisticated use of mental states language through the progressive inclusion of internal states lexicon in the narrations (Fivush, 2008). Mental states language or talk (MST) refers to a specific kind of language characterized by semantic terms entailing categories of various intricacy describing internal mental states (cognitive states, desires, and emotional states) related to both self and others (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Jenkins et al., 2003). Cognitive states pertain to beliefs and other mental events and include quotes about mental processes regarding the mind, such as imagination, intellect, or metacognition. Desires concern elements that reflect desire states; while emotional states refer to feelings experienced both directly and indirectly (Symons, 2004). Mental states talk could be theoretically associated with the concept of Internal States Language, defined as the whole of linguistic means referred to inner states (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005), and it can also be considered the starting point of explicit mentalization (Halfon et al., 2020).

The use of mental states talk in adult individual narratives has been associated with the capability to reflect on cognitive and emotional experiences, thus promoting a process of meaning-making (Symons, 2004). In other words, individuals who are able to explain their cognitive and emotional states within their narratives, are supposed to be involved in a process of affect regulation that is also associated with high levels of psychological well-being (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), although the exact mechanisms underlying this association are still debated. Moreover, researches focused on the developmental and relational processes through which children learn to think and talk about their internal states, have shown that parents' mental states talk, in particular talk about emotions, contributes to promoting children's social understanding (Hughes & Devine, 2015, 2019; Huges et al., 2014; Slaughter & Peterson, 2012; Tompkins et al., 2017).

Concurrently with the adolescence developmental process, mental states talk is gradually employed as a narrative meaning-making tool through which expressing knowledge and comprehension of self and others' mind (Dunn & Brophy, 2005). Contributions addressing the expression of mental states language in adolescence mainly involved community samples and focused on exploring gender and age differences within different narratives contexts, as well as

its relation with psychological well-being (Andrews et al., 2015; Bohanek, 2006; Graneist & Habermas, 2020; Styers & Baker-Ward, 2013). However, studies on gender differences in the use of mental states language remain scant and underline inconsistent results. While different contributions showed that females use more emotionally-laden personal narratives than do males, suggesting that they are more interested and involved in both sharing and understanding the emotional aspects of their experiences (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Fivush & Baker-Word, 2005; Fivush & Buckner, 2003); other studies didn't find significant differences (Graneist & Habermas, 2020; Scopesi et al., 2015), thus highlighting the need for several investigations. Furthermore, positive relations between the use of mental states talk and psychological well-being has been also found (Burton & King, 2004; Fredrickson, 2001) entailing possible gender differences, with males that use more mental states language displaying higher levels of well-being (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010).

Despite the growing research interest related to this topic, contributions addressing the adoptees' use of mental states talk still lack. A longitudinal study carried out by Tarullo and colleagues (2016) showed that parental mental states language gradually promoted emotional understanding development in internationally adopted preschool children. In this sense, authors suggested that parental use of mental states talk supports children in thinking and talking about internal states, thus promoting the development of emotional understanding even in the presence of adverse pre-adoptive experiences. In light of these considerations and given the lack of studies focused on adopted adolescents' use of mental states talk, the present pilot explorative investigation aims to deepen its use within a sample of adopted adolescents.

1.2 The current study

In line with previous qualitative contributions on adoption (Bastianoni et al., 2020; Benjamin et al., 2019; Farr et al., 2014), this study applied a qualitative methodology, represented by thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2003) to an attachment-based semi-structured interview (the *Friends and Family Interview*; Steele & Steele, 2005). The importance to consider the adoption process from an attachment perspective has been extensively highlighted, as adoption represents a drastic intervention into a child's life, which is able to progressively foster changing within the attachment path (Johnson & Fein, 1991; Pace et al., 2019; Roberson, 2006). Additionally, attachment-based interviews allow the investigation of mental representations of self and significant others through an inductive process, which also seems to work for individuals who have experienced possible ruptures of the attachment bonds (Benjamin et al., 2019). Taken together, these aspects may help to understand how adopted adolescents make sense and represent the psychological and relational dimensions of self and

others through the analysis of their own narrations (Bastianoni et al., 2020). In light of these premises and considering that through the act of narrating humans communicate and make sense of their experiences (Bruner, 1990), the principal intent of this contribution is to explore adopted adolescents' use of mental states talk within their own narrations derived from attachment-based interviews, and thus to deepen the meaning-making process connected to self-others understanding.

2. Materials & methods

21. Participants

The study sample was composed of consecutive adolescents (N = 13) aged between 12 and 17 years (M = 14; SD = 1.98), who have been internationally adopted by married heterosexual couples and that lived with both their parents in northern Italy. Overall, 6 participants were females (46%) and 7 were males (54%). Adolescents' age at placement ranged from 3 to 9 years (M = 5.40; SD = 2.63). Among the 13 participants, 38% came from Africa, 31% were from South America, 23% from Asia and 8% came from Eastern Europe. All of them were institutionalized before being adopted and 25% never lived with their birth parents. They all have been living with their adoptive families for at least eight years (M = 9.19, SD = 1.85) and among them, 73% have siblings (75% are birth siblings sharing the same adoption family). All participants are members of families that voluntarily choose to get involved in the original larger research project. Eligibility criteria for this study were the following: adoptees' age between 12 and 17 years; length of placement of at least 8 years; fluency in the Italian language; absence of intellectual disabilities and/or diagnosed mental disorders.

2.2 Procedure

The present exploratory study has been conducted in partnership with the local public adoption service as part of a larger research project aimed to make a follow-up evaluation regarding adoptive children and their families after eight years from the placement. The same social-health service has been involved in the recruitment process by providing a list of possible participant families (adoptive parents and adolescents) that have been followed by the same service throughout the adoptive procedures required by the public institutions. Families were then firstly contacted by the service manager through a phone call, during which the research's project goals and procedures were explained. Data collection has been carried out within the public service's offices, and all the voluntary attendees were asked to come there together (mother, father, and adolescent). Before starting with the instruments' administration, and according to the Helsinki declaration, mothers and fathers were asked to sign a written informed consent form for data management, personal protection, and for authorizing their adolescents'

participation because of their minor age. At the same time, adolescents were asked for indicating verbal consent. The study received ethical approval from the university research ethics committee.

2.3 The Interview

The *Friends and Family Interview* (FFI; Steele & Steele, 2005) is a semi-structured interview adapted from the *Adult Attachment Interview* (George et al., 1985) to fit the developmental abilities of children and adolescents in the age range 8-16 years. The method combines a narrative interview approach, where evaluations are supported by specific memories and personal elements, with developmentally appropriate questions and probes, aiming to explore attachment representations and perceptions of parental availability, as well as strategies for dealing with difficult situations. It comprises 27 questions that investigate adolescents' way of thinking about relationships with significant others (parents, friends, sibling and best teacher); self-perception and reflective functioning dimensions; in combination with typical attachment-related aspects (secure base, idealization, coherence), thus triggering emotions arising in close relationships as well as issues about the ability to mentally take the perspective of other people. Additionally, the FFI has been frequently used with adoptees at different ages (Abrines et al., 2012; Barcons et al., 2014; Pace et al., 2019). Within the present contribution, interviews were video-recorded, transcribed *verbatim*, and then qualitatively coded following the main principles of thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.4 Data Analysis

The thirteen interview transcripts were double read for gaining familiarity and then cross-examined for accuracy. Afterward, thematic content analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2003) were applied to inductively develop themes drawing on interview data. A 'theme' usually emerges from this inductive analytic process and represents a cluster of combined categories expressing similar meanings. Specific themes were thus firstly identified and then refined across multiple readings.
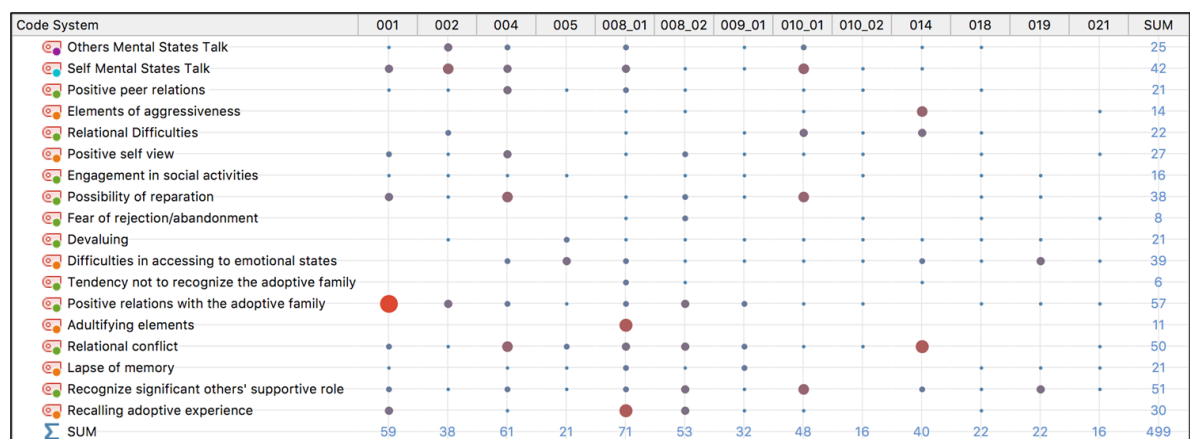
The coding process was delivered by three psychologists all familiar with the FFI and working in the attachment research field; it was also conducted using the software MAXQDA, which is specifically designed for qualitative analysis. Every coder autonomously created a set of categories (codes) from the original text; consequently, all the coders compared their categories in order to guarantee a robust coding framework. There was total agreement on the overall set of categories. This double process (independent parallel coding and checking category's clarity) was applied for assessing the consistency of the coding, as recommended by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2019) and De Gregorio and Lattanzi (2011). These procedures were developed

following the main principles of the 'grounded theory', which defines a qualitative methodology aimed to generate a theoretical model emerging from participants' narratives and which is 'grounded' in the empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, all the coding process was conducted keeping in mind that researchers' perspectives, background experiences, and other methodological biases are inevitable aspects of this theoretical construction (Kelle, 2007; Ralph et al., 2015). After coding for categories, co-occurrence analyses were performed, indicating the overlap of different themes/categories within the same interview segment.

3. Results

The coding process of the 13 transcribed interviews, conducted according to the principles of thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and originally guided by the goal to capture adopted adolescents' inner world (Bastianoni et al., 2020), resulted in a total of 18 categories and 499 segments (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of codes across each interview

Code System	001	002	004	005	008_01	008_02	009_01	010_01	010_02	014	018	019	021	SUM
Others Mental States Talk														25
Self Mental States Talk														42
Positive peer relations														21
Elements of aggressiveness														14
Relational Difficulties														22
Positive self view														27
Engagement in social activities														16
Possibility of reparation														38
Fear of rejection/abandonment														8
Devaluing														21
Difficulties in accessing to emotional states														39
Tendency not to recognize the adoptive family														6
Positive relations with the adoptive family														57
Adultifying elements														11
Relational conflict														50
Lapse of memory														21
Recognize significant others' supportive role														51
Recalling adoptive experience														30
Σ SUM	59	38	61	21	71	53	32	48	16	40	22	22	16	499

Afterward, in accordance with the present study aims, researchers' attention focused on the two main categories capturing mental states talk related to adolescents' mental representations of self and others. Mental states talk was here intended as a specific language that conveys emotions, cognitions, and desires experienced during the course of life within the relationship with the self and significant others (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005; Jankins et al., 2003). An accurate description of the aforementioned categories has been delivered. Furthermore, co-occurrences related to the two main categories (Self and Others – Mental States Talk) were also reported. As mentioned above, co-occurrence refers to the overlapping of different themes/categories in the same segment of an interview. In this study, co-occurrences have been represented through a graphic (see Fig. 2), where overlapping themes are connected with a dashed line, whose thickness indicates the frequency of co-occurrences, the greater the line's

thickness, the more frequent the link between two themes. Examples of co-occurrences for both themes are also provided below.

Figure 2: Narrative co-occurrence among the selected codes
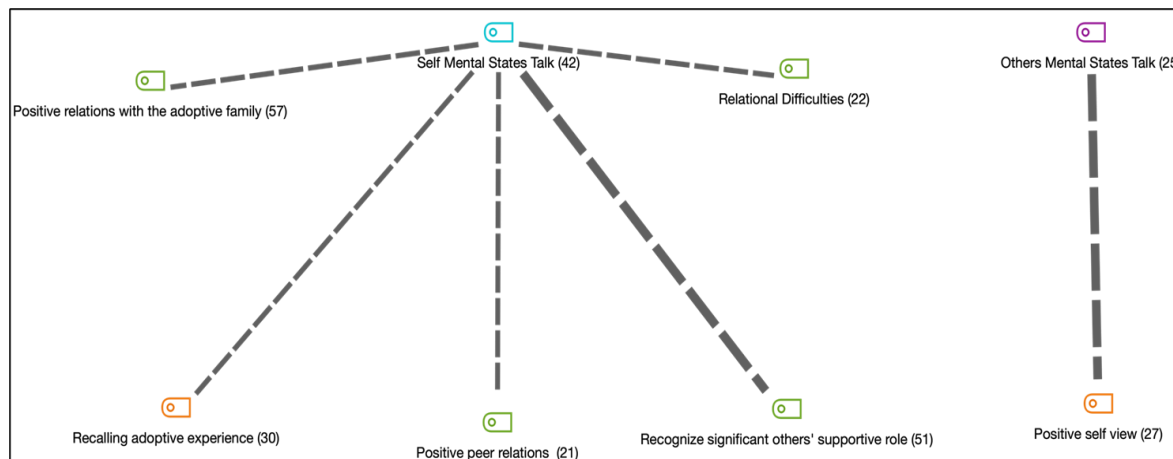
3.1 Self Mental States Talk

This category pertains to the adopted adolescents' use of mental states language within their own narrations, as well as the representations they gave about themselves in the context of significant relationships. It occurred (42 segments) in nine of the thirteen interviews, reflecting its quite broad adoption within the study sample. In particular, male participants showed slightly extensive use of this category (23 segments), comparing with females (19 segments). Adopted adolescents who have been coded for this category, used a more emotional, cognitive, and motivational oriented lexicon for sharing their representations of the self within multiple relational contexts and life events. Specifically, among the 42 segments coded as Self Mental States Talk, 11% referred to the perceived self; 11% were related to the self in relation with peers, while 38% addressed the perceived self within both school and family relational contexts. Additionally, participants used mental states language for describing perceived negative events in 24 segments (57%), whereas in 18 segments (43%) they referred to as perceived positive once. An example of this latter aspect is provided by the words used by this interviewed in recalling a specific moment spent with his adopted sister:

'I was lying down on the grass for sunbathing when my sister got close to me and hugged me and this made me feel thrilled and grateful for having her' [P 010_01].

Despite its simplicity, this shared memory appears to be positive emotionally marked by the use of mental states language that characterized the narration.

Conversely, the same participant used different emotional declarative words for describing his reactions to a perceived negative event involving a disabled mate and another peer who attend the same school:

'When I saw this school mate of mine who teased him, I felt very sad and I was disappointed. After that, I did everything I could not thinking about that scene but I didn't make it. Too many of the things I saw during that episode hurt me and made me feel upset' [P 010_01].

Another male participant shared his view of himself using a vivid lexicon containing several words referred to self-oriented mental states:

'I think I am a very shy and reserved person, especially in the situation where I have to talk with girls. But I'm learning to deal with this worry and slowly slowly I'm getting better and I'm learning not to have it. I'm also a boy who easily losses his temper, especially when I play soccer' [P 008_01].

As briefly presented through the given examples, this category emphasized participants' capability to employ mental states language for sharing how they perceive themselves from an emotional, cognitive, motivational perspective and across several relational situations, without avoiding possible negative feelings associated with the reported events.

Concerning co-occurrences, the analysis revealed an overlap of Self Mental States Talk with other themes. Specifically, Self Mental States Talk has been frequently mentioned closed to other categories, generating the following pairs of themes: *Self Mental States Talk – Recognize Significant Others' Supportive Role; Self Mental States Talk – Positive Relationships with the Adoptive Family; Self Mental States Talk – Positive Peers Relationships; Self Mental States Talk – Relational Difficulties; Self Mental States Talk – Recalling Adoptive Experiences.*

Specifically, the co-occurrence of *Self Mental States Talk* and *Recognize Significant Others' Supportive Role* emphasizes the fundamental role of perceived others' support in triggering self mental states' disclosure within personal narrations. In other words, the possibility to trust in others' cares and emotional presence could act as a fundamental matrix for sharing individual experiences by using a specific kind of language expressing mental states oriented to the self. This may therefore promote possible reflections regarding themselves within these events, while close others are perceived as a source of support in dealing with them. For instance, this female participant talked about her upset feelings in strict connection with the emotional support provided by her biological sister:

'That time I was upset about my scares achievements in mathematics, I confided everything to my sister. I told her about my fear of failing this subject, as well as all the school difficulties I am afraid of, and I know I can count on her because she is always by my side, willing to support me' [P 001]

These aspects may entail additional importance for adopted individuals who experienced possible adversities, such as separation and loss during their pre-adoptive lives, and who may also benefit from close others' support for facing them.

The co-occurrence *Self Mental States Talk – Positive Relationships with the Adoptive Family*, could be considered in continuity with the previous one. In the following passage, a male adopted adolescent talked about himself within the adoptive family as follow:

'When we are all together watching a movie, I feel that there is nothing to be worried about, nothing bad, because we are all together as a family, smiling at each other. And that means that I am really lucky and happy to have this family, because I know that even when I make mistakes, they are always here, ready to help me; and this thing makes me feel really happy' [P 010_01].

This co-occurrence, together with the example given, emphasized the possible fundamental function of the adoptive family as an emotional recovery environment, able to provide nurturing relational context for adopted subjects (Palacios et al., 2009).

In close connection with these elements, we found an overlap between *Self Mental States Talk* and *Positive Peers Relationships* category. Despite several studies found adopted adolescents to have more difficulties in establishing friendships than non-adoptees (DeJong et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2004), the relevant role of peer relationships seems here to emerge. Since friends provide emotional, social, and instrumental support, friendships have been linked both directly and indirectly to emotional adjustment (Oliva, 2015; Thompson, 2014). Taken together, these aspects may play an important role in facilitating the adoption of a mental states language both in everyday life conversations among friends and also in adopted adolescents' way of narrating themselves. The three aforementioned co-occurrences seem to highlight the strong interplay between the use of self-oriented mental states language and subjective significant-close relationships, which are perceived as a scaffolding space that helps giving voice to multiple internal states as well as to define the self.

Additionally, an overlap between *Self Mental States Talk* and *Relational Difficulties* have been found. Specifically, narrations related to perceived relational difficulties with different subjects (parents, peers, siblings) seem to be connected with the use of a self-oriented mental states language. This aspect may suggest a tendency not to avoid negative mental states associated with the described events, as well as a possible role of these narratives in triggering mental states regarding the self. For instance, a male participant described his difficulties in the relationships with his school mates expressing different mental states:

'Sometimes I am mistreated by my school mates and so I feel upset because I always try to be nice with them, to behave myself in their regard. For example, when they say that they are not sure I can be the friend of them, it bothers and upsets me, because there is something that I didn't say yet about myself: I am a very emotional person. Even if at the very first sight I might look as incredibly agitated and hyperactive, it's not like this. It's not true and it hurts me, it disturbs me, and after all, this affects my daily mood' [P 002].

This segment seems to reveal the internal reflective process activated by the adolescent about himself, that starts from the negative feelings emerging from his relationship with these peers. As a matter of fact, the capability to shape a narrative of negative events that includes mental states language may indicate an on-going meaning-making process of self-reflection and evaluation (Fivush & Baker-Ward, 2005). Nevertheless, the associations between this ability and levels of psychological well-being are still debated.

Lastly, *Self Mental States* also co-occurs with *Recalling Adoptive Experiences* theme. The present overlap may highlight the complexity of these adolescents' inner world, where adoption did not represent a single event but rather an emotional, cognitive, and relational process involving self and significant others. One example was provided by this young girl and her memories of the very first days with the adoptive parents:

'When I first came here, especially during the very first days, I was really more stuck to my parents than I am now because I didn't know how they were as persons. And I was also worried because I was not able to talk in Italian and to be open to others' [P 001].

The possibility to express multiple mental states within the narrations of adoption-related events, especially in the context of family relationships, has been postulated to promote healthier psychological adjustment (Alegret et al., 2018; Brodzinsky, 2006). In other words, the possibility to freely communicate possible unresolved adoption-related issues also using mental states language may represent a protective factor that helps to emotionally deal with these fundamental aspects.

3.2 Others Mental States Talk

The present category pertains to the use of others-oriented mental states language within the participant's narratives. Specifically, it refers to how interviewees described significant others in terms of mental states (cognitions, emotions, desires), therefore indicating an imaginative mental activity related to others' minds. It emerged with 25 segments in 8 of the 13 interviews. Additionally, specific questions from the interview protocol, such as '*What do you think your father/mother/friend/sibling thinks about you?*', or '*How do you think he/she/they felt at that moment?*' seemed to induce the use of this specific language, as they are thought to activate mental representations of others, as well as explicit mentalizing abilities (Steele & Steele, 2005). As reported for Self Mental States theme, its adoption was more frequent in males (15 segments; 60%) compared with female participants (10 segments; 40%). Moreover, with regard to the main figures targeted by this category, 76% of the coded segments directly referred to one or both adoptive parents, while 12% concerned siblings and the rest 12% peers. These data may open a deep reflection about the relevance that close relationships may have in mental processes

addressed to others' understanding, especially in the case of adopted individuals who have been struggled with relevant changes in inner representations of significant others.

For example, an adopted adolescent girl answered as follow to a question about her best friend's feelings related to a quarrel episode among them:

'She probably felt betrayed because... I don't know. Maybe she thought that I had not respected her decision, and maybe she was also upset because after all I am her best friend, and nevertheless I did what I did to her. However, in the end, we forgave each other and we moved ahead' [P 004].

It is possible to argue that the specific nature of the question could have triggered the use of mental states language, even if this association can't be expected as automated. However, despite the negative nature of the underlined event, this segment shows the use of different mental states terms (cognitive and emotional) concerning the friend's mind, thus indicating a possible reflective and meaning-making process about what has been going on between the two girls' minds in that situation.

Another example is provided by a female participant talking about her adoptive father:

'In this period my father is extremely busy with his job, he comes back home from work very tired and so he gets angry very easily. Yesterday evening we had to go to my grandpas' house for dinner but my brother had some pain to his foot and he was not sure to come. My father got really mad with us, because he didn't want us to be late. But I understand that his humor is also influenced by things that happen not only here at home but also outside, within his external environment' [009_01].

This passage shows how the girl was trying to understand her father's behaviors by considering his own perspective. This aspect seems to emerge from the use of mental states talk oriented to her father's point of view, to go beyond the observable behaviors and deeply look at the cognitive and emotional states that move his actions. The higher number of segments related to the parental figures stressed the importance of the role played by the family context for the development of a mentalistic language. Parental use of mental states language may thus improve children's ability to think about significant other's mental states underpinning their overt behaviors, consequently helping them to make inferences about people's inner world.

In terms of co-occurrence, *Others Mental States Talk* theme has been found to overlap only with one theme, which is *Positive Self View*. One example is provided by a male participant, who answered a question about what his mother thinks about him in this way:

'Uhm, I don't know, I'm not sure about what she thinks. I can say that she thinks I'm helping other people. In other words, she thinks that I am that kind of person that uses to help others, who is available for others' [008_01].

This segment showed the adolescent's efforts to reflect on what his mother could think about him. In doing so, the use of others-oriented mental states talk seems to come to the surface, revealing an intense mental activity that could also be connected to a mirroring process where the subject searches for himself in his mothers' mind, therefore enhancing a positive self-view.

4. Discussion

The present pilot exploratory study applied a qualitative methodology to an attachment-based interview (the *Friends and Family Interview;* Steele & Steele, 2005), with the aim to explore adopted adolescents' use of mental states talk emerging from their own narrations. This investigation addresses the adoption issue in terms of a life process rather than a single event, following a recent trend in adoption research focused on the underlying processes and factors operating in adopted persons and/or in adoptive families (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), and resulting in line with previous qualitative contributions (Bastianoni et al., 2020; Benjamin et al., 2019; Farr et al., 2014). Thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was therefore applied to the 13 interviews, identifying a total of 18 categories. Among them, *Self-* and *Others- Mental States Talk* were selected and then further explored for deepening adopted adolescents' meaning-making process connected to self and others' understanding. In fact, mental states language has been related to the development of both theory of mind and social understanding, following Vygotsky's concept of *internalization* (1986), which underlines how representational models of self and others originally develop during childhood within *collaborative conversations* on mental and feeling states with significant adult figures. In other words, participation and exposure to discourse about the mental states of self and others may teach children about those mental states, which in turn is reflected in their use of mental states language and the development of social understanding (Chandler & Carpendale, 2003; Symons, 2004). Settled within these theoretical considerations, the results obtained by qualitative analysis show a frequent adoption of general Mental States Talk (both Self and Others oriented) within adopted adolescents' narrations, with an overall frequency of 67 segments. As indeed mentioned above, the improvement of metacognitive skills as a consequence of the mental maturation characterizing the adolescent period allows adolescents to develop a greater self-consciousness and a more complex understanding of emotions, which may be also reflected in the way they represent themselves within their own narrations (Byrnes, 2003; Gavazzi et al., 2011). This aspect, together with the acquisition of metalinguistic terms, seems to trigger an evolution in the use of mental states talk from a tool used for simply conversational intentions, to a more complex device employed to display awareness and knowledge of the mind (Dunn & Brophy, 2005). Specifically, more extensive use of *Self* (42 segments), compared to *Others* (25 segments), *Mental States Talk* was observed, underlying that participants were more oriented to adopt a mental states language

in talking about themselves rather than a narration about significant others. This result may be associated with the specific developmental challenges implied within the adolescence transition in its early stage (participants' mean age = 14), which in turn is characterized by the need to differentiate self from others and build an individual identity (Blos, 1967; Mahler et al., 1975). Concerning adopted adolescents, this complex dynamic also requires to deal with both their pre-adoptive biography and the present life, in a constant tension toward the integration. These complex interplay of changes and challenges may promote greater attention toward the self, therefore triggering a major use of a Self-oriented Mental States Talk as the self has been constantly reflected in the relationships with significant others. This differentiation seems also to reflect recent research and clinical interest regarding the distinct components of mentalizing ability (operationalized as Reflective Functioning - RF; Fonagy et al., 1998), which are represented by self-focused RF (mentalizing about oneself) and other-focused RF (mentalizing about others) (Ensink et al., 2015). The split of the overall RF into two specific dimensions was primarily adopted for assessing mentalizing abilities in middle-childhood and adolescence, within the context of attachment relationships (Bizzi et al., 2019, 2020; Vanwoerden et al. 2019). Studies' results stressed the different domains covered by these two components of global mentalization and conferred a significant role to self-focused RF in mediating the relation between attachment coherence and internalizing problems in a community sample of middle-aged children (Bizzi et al., 2020). These contributions corroborate the thesis that high levels of self-focused RF may help children to make sense of their emotions, thus allowing them to build a deeper understanding of their emotional experiences. Moreover, this thesis has to be considered in looking at the slightly higher use of Self Mental States Talk for talking about perceived negative events (compared to positive once), also keeping in mind that adopted adolescents have probably passed through both pre-and post-adoptive difficult experiences. As a matter of fact, the capability to express cognitive and emotional states in sharing narratives of adverse events has been assumed to activate meaning-making and emotional regulation processes that may lead to higher levels of psychological well-being (Frattaroli, 2006). In lights of these considerations, participants' broad use of self-oriented mental states talk in reporting perceived negative events, could be considered a consequence of their capability to reflect upon the reported events and also to deal with the possible complex emotional activation implicated in their own narrations, thus supporting a meaning-making on-going process related to their lives.

Concerning the overlap of two themes/categories within the same interview segment, qualitative analysis revealed several co-occurrences of *Self Mental States Talk* with other themes. Specifically, three of the five co-occurrences (*Self Mental States Talk – Recognize Significant Others'*

Supportive Role; Self Mental States Talk – Positive Relationships with the Adoptive Family; Self Mental States Talk – Positive Peers Relationships) emphasize the fundamental role of significant others in promoting the use of Self oriented Mental States Talk. Specifically, the possibility to experience a loving family environment, where complex emotional needs can be expressed and contained, maybe thus connected to adopted adolescents' use of self mental states talk in referring about their own experiences, as they perceived them as accessible and embraceable. This suggestion is also supported by different contributions showing higher levels of Parental Reflective Functioning (PRF; Slade, 2005) in adoptive parents compared to non-adoptive ones (León et al., 2018; Palacios et al., 2009; Priel et al., 2000). In other words, due to possible adversities brought into the family system by the adopted child, adoptive parents are frequently required to think and reflect upon the child's behaviors as a consequence of complex internal states. This may lead to more sensible parenting, as well as a more frequent use of mental states language, both aimed to help the child handling his/her intricate feeling and that could be reflected in a progressive adoption of this kind of language by the child during his/her development (León et al., 2018). Additionally, a study conducted by Tarullo and colleagues (2016) on a sample of adopted children and their parents showed that children who are exposed to intense use of mental states talk from the adoptive parental figures, reported higher levels of emotional understanding already at an early age. In the same way, *Positive Peers Relationships* theme was found to co-occurs with *Self Mental States Talk*, suggesting the existence of similar dynamics connected to the relation between the use of Self oriented Mental States Talk and the scaffolding role played by significant-close figures, such as peers and friends. Despite adopted adolescents were found to display more difficulties in establishing friendships compared to non-adopted peers (DeJong et al., 2016; Rushton, 2003), this co-occurrence seems to confirm the positive influence that relationships with friends may have in the lives of adoptees (Paniagua et al., 2019b). In light of these results, it is possible to argue that peers' relational matrix – together with the family system - may scaffold and therefore promote the use of mental states language in these subjects. Finally, the last two co-occurrences of *Self Mental States Talk – Relational Difficulties* and *Self Mental States Talk – Recalling Adoptive Experiences*, together with the high use of Self Mental States Talk in referring to perceived negative events, may suggest participants' tendency to face negative affects and/or cognitions connected to adverse experiences. Particularly, the latter reported co-occurrence is in line with other contributions showing the importance for these adolescents to gain access into their adoptive experiences in terms of cognitive and emotional memories, especially in the context of family relationships (Alegret et al., 2018; Brodzinsky, 2006).

Regarding *Others Mental States Talk* category, its lower frequency compared to the Self-oriented once, could be interpreted as a possible consequence of the role played by adverse experiences

connected to the adoptive biography in compromising the youngsters' ability to understand and interpret other people's states of mind and emotions (Tarullo et al., 2007). Moreover, results showed more extensive use of Others Mental States Talk in referring to parental figures. As indeed mentioned before, the parent-child relationship represents the primary context in which mental states language emerges and develops. Furthermore, its use by the parental figures serves not only to address the child's attention toward mental states but also to introduce and teach him/her a mental states vocabulary (Symons, 2004). Lastly, the co-occurrence *Others Mental States Talk - Positive Self View* may be viewed as a consequence of a dynamic and mirroring mental process in which the possibility to find positive reflections within significant others' mind, may act as a fundamental factor for the identity formation path in which adolescents are involved (Erikson, 1963); especially for what concern international adopted adolescents who face the additional challenge of different cultural background (Mohanty, 2013).

5. Limitations and future directions

Despite its interesting results, the present contribution involves different limitations that needed to be mentioned. First of all, participating adolescents and families were directly contacted by the local public adoption service, thus defining a possible sampling bias connected to its self-selected nature. Secondly, the small sample size and the associated small number of collected interviews didn't allow for a more in-depth qualitative exploration. Moreover, *Mental States Talk* themes were obtained by the use of qualitative methodology and not through other coding methods based on computer software, such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software (LIWC, Pennebaker et al., 2001). This aspect must be strictly considered in looking at the results and their possible interpretation. Finally, the *Friends and Family Interview* protocol does not contain any specific questions addressing the adoption issue, leading to a possible lack of information regarding this topic. This additional aspect has to be taken into consideration for the overall interpretation of the results.

Future contributions on these topics should follow the direction provided by this relatively new research trend addressing adoptive issues (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), with the double intent to both look at dynamics and factors underlying the adoption process, and also to focus not only on adoptees' maladaptive outcomes and their causes but also on their possible individual and relational resources. In this regard, mixed-method studies combining quantitative and qualitative methods, also defined by longitudinal design, may offer new and interesting insights to a deeper comprehension of the adoptive process and its evolution during the life course.

5.1 Conclusions and implications

The present qualitative contribution, aiming to explore the use of mental states language within internationally adopted adolescents' narratives, highlights several considerations. First of all, results emphasize the importance to consider personal narratives in order to build a deeper understanding of how adopted adolescents communicate their experiences and how they acknowledge the past from their present point of view (Bruner, 1990). Additionally, the use of mental states language within these narrations may be considered a fundamental indicator of on-going reflecting processes, which are particularly important for making sense of personal life events and for promoting an individual shift from the "landscape of action" to the "landscape of consciousness" (Bohanek & Fivush, 2010; Bruner, 1987). This dynamic process is assumed to be notably relevant in the context of adoption, which can be characterized by possible adverse biographical experiences that require to be elaborated and repaired in order to gain psychological adjustment (Paniagua et al., 2009). In addition, results emerged from qualitative analysis stressed the importance to keep a positive and salutogenic approach to the adoption issues, not assuming relational dynamics to necessarily be challenges for adoptees but instead looking at the relational protective factors involved in the adoption process (Bastianoni et al., 2020; Paniagua et al., 2019a). Lastly, this contribution could provide valuable information for social workers operating within the adoption field, giving the chance to use adopted adolescents' direct narratives for a better understanding of their own point of view as well as the meaning-making process they are involved in. This latter aspect may also reinforce a possible virtuous relation among research and clinic, with the intent to imagine and improve clinical interventions rooted within health public services.

Author contributions

CB and SCM contributed equally to this work and should be regarded as joint first authors. FB codified the interviews with CB and SCM, and she supervised the methodology of the study. DC and the other three authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee (DISFOR, University of Genoa) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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