

| **Beyond the adoption
order**

Beyond the adoption order

Challenges, interventions
and adoption disruption

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and Dinithi Wijedasa



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List of acronyms

ACA-SF	Assessment Checklist for Adolescents short form
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AFCARS	Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System
ANOVA	Analysis of variance
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
ASFA	Adoption and Safe Families Act
AUK	Adoption UK
BAAF	British Association for Adoption & Fostering
BESD	Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CLG	Communities and Local Government
CPR	Child Permanence Report
CPV	Child to Parent Violence
CVAA	Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies
DfE	Department for Education
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DDP	Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (of Mental Disorder)
EBD	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
EDT	Emergency Duty Team
EHA	Event History Analysis
FASD	Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GP	General Practitioner
HADS	Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale
ID	Identifying number
LA	Local Authority
LAC	Looked After Children
LEA	Local Education Authority
MP	Member of Parliament
MTFC	Multi Treatment Foster Care
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NHS	National Health Service
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PALS	Post-Adoption Linking Scheme
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RAD	Reactive Attachment Disorder
RO	Residence Order
SD	Standard Deviation
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SSD	Social Services Department
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VAA	Voluntary Adoption Agency

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1 Background to the study

Introduction

Adoption offers tremendous advantages for maltreated children, and the Government's adoption reform agenda in England has rightly encouraged the use of adoption for children who cannot return home. There is a strong evidence base for the benefits of adoption (see, for example, Quinton and Selwyn, 2007; Biehal *et al*, 2010; Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2013). Adoptive family life can help foster developmental recovery and many adopted children do make significant progress. However, for a minority of families, the adoption journey can, at times, be fraught with difficulty and, in some instances, results in the child moving out of their adoptive home prematurely (referred to as adoption disruption).

At the time this study began, there was some debate about the prevalence of adoption disruption. There was a view that adoptions disrupted frequently, with various commentators citing disruption rates ranging from five per cent to 50 per cent. However, there was little evidence to support these claims.

There has been no national study on adoption disruption in the UK or US. Most of the research to date has focused on narrowly defined populations, of children placed before 1990, and on disruptions that occurred before the adoption order was made. In the UK, adoption disruption has been considered as just one of the outcomes in studies that have examined adoption outcomes more generally; disruption has rarely received specific attention. This is partly because it has been impossible to use available administrative data to link a child's pre- and post-care histories, as the child's social care, National Health Service and pupil numbers change after the adoption order is made. There are similar issues in linking administrative data in the US (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). Furthermore, after the making of an adoption order, agencies are under no obligation to keep in touch with adoptive families and some adoptive parents want to cut ties with children's services.

Three key issues relate to the published research on adoption disruption: lack of agreed definitions, assumptions that findings from the US apply to the UK, and limited analysis of available data.

Inconsistent use of the term “adoption disruption”

The term “disruption” or “breakdown” has been defined in many different ways. In some studies, adoption disruption refers to the child’s return to the agency between placement and legal finalisation; other studies distinguish between disruptions pre- and post-order; while some use a wider definition based on whether the child is living in the adoptive home at the time of the research study. This distinction between pre- and post-order has not been made consistently in the UK literature and so, by conflating new placements with those that have been stable for some time, the relative risks have been difficult to ascertain. There is more movement in all types of “new” placements.

In the US, distinctions are usually made between breakdowns that occur before the adoption order (disruption) and those that break down post-order (dissolution). In more recent years, “dissolution” has started to be replaced in the US by the term “displacement” (e.g. Goerge *et al*, 1997; Howard *et al*, 2006). Displacement has been used in the US to indicate three possible outcomes after a disruption:

- the adoption is legally dissolved;
- the child remains adopted but stays in care; and
- the child returns to their adoptive home after spending some time in care.

It should be noted that in the UK there is no statutory basis for revocation of an adoption order except by the making of another adoption order (Masson *et al*, 2008). The adoptive parents remain the legal parents of the child whether or not the placement disrupts. The UK does not have terms that differentiate between pre- and post-order disruptions, and UK studies often use disruption and breakdown interchangeably.

Comparing US and UK adoption breakdown rates

There are important differences in the US and UK adoption populations that mean that comparisons of research findings should be viewed with caution. US data (AFCARS, 2013) show that in 2012, 52,039 children were adopted with child welfare services involvement and 101,719 were waiting to be adopted. Aside from the large numbers of adopted children in the US compared with the UK, a greater proportion (55%) of US adoptions were of minority ethnic children compared with England, where 18 per cent of children adopted were of minority ethnicity (Department for Education (DfE), 2013a). Importantly, in the US, the majority of children (56%) were adopted by their foster carers with stranger/matched adoptions accounting for only 14 per cent of adoptions (AFCARS, 2013). In the UK, the reverse is true, with only about 15 per cent of the 3,800 children adopted by previous foster carers and 85 per cent by strangers (DfE, 2013a).

Most US children live with their foster carers for some time before an agreement is signed that converts the foster placement to that of an adoptive placement. US disruption studies consider disruption from the point that the adoption agreement was signed and not when the child was first placed. This administrative decision is likely to explain why US research (e.g. Barth *et al*, 1988) has found that foster care adoptions have lower disruption rates than stranger adoptions, as problematic placements are likely to have already ended.

Limited analysis

Particularly in the UK, and because of small sample sizes, analysis has been generally limited to examining statistical associations between factors thought to be associated with breakdown. However, these analyses have failed to take into account those adoptions that are continuing and may therefore find statistical associations where none exist. Few UK studies (an exception is Fratter *et al*, 1991) have used more sophisticated regression techniques, and none, to our knowledge, have taken into account the length of time between order and disruption.

Research on disruption rates pre-order

The vast majority of studies in the US and UK have examined disruptions before the placement was legalised (Appendix A). In the US, disruption rates pre-order range from 10–25 per cent, depending on the population studied, the duration of the study, geographic and other factors (e.g. Festinger, 1986, 1990, 2002; Goerge *et al*, 1997). In the US, efforts to reduce delay in adoption have been ongoing since the mid-1990s. Shortened legal timeframes and decreased time to adoption led to fears that this might lead to inadequate selection and preparation of adoptive homes and therefore an increase in disruptions. These fears have not been realised. Since the introduction of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA, 1997), which brought reduced timescales and a greater focus on adoption, there is evidence that the disruption rate has, in fact, reduced (Festinger, 2014). Reviewing data in Illinois, Smith *et al* (2006) found that there was a 12 per cent greater risk of disruption before ASFA than after.

In the UK, Rushton's (2003) review of four UK and eight US studies estimated a general breakdown rate of 20 per cent (range 10–50 per cent depending on age at placement). However, it should be noted that most of the UK studies combined pre- and post-order and included adoptions that had broken down within a few weeks of the child being placed. UK studies that have separated out pre- and post-order generally indicate a disruption rate of 3–10 per cent pre-order, depending on the sample of children studied (Appendix A).

Research on disruption rates post-order

In the UK and US, there has been very little research on adoption breakdowns post-order. In the US, Festinger (2002) reported a 3.3 per cent rate of adoption dissolution four years after the legal order. A similar rate (3%) was reported by McDonald and colleagues (2001) in a study of children 18–24 months after legal finalisation. Earlier studies reported higher rates (Groze, 1996; Goerge *et al*, 1997). It should be noted that these studies had a very short follow-up period, and none have tracked a population up to 18 years of age.

In the UK, it has been estimated that four per cent of children return to care every year after an adoption order is granted (Triseliotis, 2002). In a study of late-placed children, all of whom had many behavioural difficulties, six per cent of adoptions had ended, on average, seven years after the making of the order (Selwyn *et al*, 2006a). Rushton and Dance's study (2004) of late-placed children described a higher rate (19%), but highlighted how a return to care did not necessarily mean a breakdown of relationships. Shared care between the local authority and the adoptive parents could be used as a way of supporting the family. However, both these studies had samples of older and harder-to-place children and were not representative of adopted children generally. The few studies that have separated out pre- and post-order disruptions quote a breakdown rate of four–six per cent (Appendix A).

Factors associated with disruption

Since 1998, the UK Government has promoted the use of adoption for children unable to live with members of their family (Department of Health, 1998). New legislation (Children and Families Act 2014; Adoption and Children Act 2002), regulations, and guidance have been introduced to minimise delay, and to improve the support given to adoptive families. These interventions may have helped reduce disruptions. There have been a number of substantial reviews of the adoption disruption literature (Rosenthal, 1993; Sellick and Thoburn, 1996; Rushton, 2004; Evan B Donaldson Institute, 2004; Coakley and Berrick, 2008; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012) and specific reviews and research on the process of matching in adoption (Dance *et al*, 2010; Evan B Donaldson Institute, 2010; Quinton, 2012). The research evidence is consistent on factors that are associated with disruptions. These include child-related factors, such as older age at placement and behaviour difficulties; birth family factors, such as child maltreatment and domestic violence; and system-related factors, such as delay and lack of support to adoptive families. Some studies have also identified multiple previous placements and inaccurate assessments of the child's difficulties as

increasing the risk of disruption. Placements of children with physical or learning disabilities are not at higher risk of disruption (Fratter *et al*, 1991); indeed, some studies show that the risks of disruption decrease for children with physical disability (Boyne *et al*, 1984; Glidden, 2000).

There have been mixed findings on the impact of separation from siblings. Early research suggested that separation from siblings increased the risk of disruption (Fratter *et al*, 1991), but as Rushton (1999) noted, separated siblings were more likely to have challenging behaviour and to have more special needs than children placed together.

There has been a focus, in research, on understanding outcomes for older children, because research has consistently found that age at placement is a strong predictor of disruption (see the research reviews by Coakley and Berrick (2008) and the Evan B Donaldson Institute (2008)). Consequently, we know very little about the infants who have been placed over the last 20 years, although the developmental risks they carry, such as maternal misuse of alcohol and drugs, are much greater than the risks carried by infants placed before 1980.

Clinicians' accounts (e.g. Hopkins, 2006; Rustin, 2006; Wright, 2009) of working with adopted children highlight the importance of the internal world of the child and, in particular, the child's search for a coherent account of their life and origins. Lack of attention to the child's grief and loss, and incomplete or misunderstood histories are thought to play an important part in the child's inability to develop an integrated sense of self and are associated with disruption.

Most of the studies have a short follow-up, and few include late adolescence and young adulthood. Howe's (1996) research suggested that some of the disruptions that occurred during teenage years were not permanent and that many young people returned to their adoptive families in adulthood. This chimes with the findings in recent research from the US (Festinger and Maza, 2009), but we have no published longitudinal studies in the UK of children adopted from care, or studies that have examined the transition to adulthood for adopted children.

Most studies examine the family situation at a point in time. All those working in the adoption field know that family life changes rapidly, often from day to day. Parents who appear to be coping well can suddenly call an agency, in crisis. Conversely, families whose relationships are thought to be fractured can report that relationships are improving. The dynamic nature of family life is important in any consideration of disruption and raises questions about the language used. The terms “disruption”, “displacement” or “breakdown” can evoke undesirable negative images and a sense of finality.

It has been argued that labels can trigger changes in the behaviour of the “labelled” and in those who apply the label (e.g. Stager *et al*, 1983). For example, the bleak connotations attached to “breakdown” might influence adoptive parents’ willingness to seek support and affect social work judgements and behaviours towards the child and the family. It has been suggested that adoptive parents feel that they are more harshly treated than birth parents by social workers if their child returns to care. As Treacher and Katz (2000) point out, ‘social workers too are bound by the same narratives and myths, subject to the same emotional need to rescue and to blame, and buffeted by the same powerful media and political forces as the other points in the triangle’ (p. 216).

The number of adoption disruptions tells us only something about where the child or young person is living. They reveal nothing about the quality of family relationships. Some young people may move out of home, but retain meaningful relationships with family members, albeit from a distance. On the other hand, children living in their adoptive home may have unfulfilled relationships, with little family cohesion.

There is much to learn about the mechanisms of adoption disruption – how they disrupt and what might make a difference to those who live through crises and disruptions. In the next chapter, we set out the aims of the study, the research questions, and the design.

Please note, the names of all survey respondents in this study have been changed.

Summary

- The UK research literature on adoption disruption is very limited. Most of the research to date has focused on narrowly defined populations, of children placed before 1990, and on disruptions that occurred before the adoption order was made. In the UK, adoption disruption has been considered as just one of the outcomes in studies that have examined adoption outcomes more generally. Disruption has rarely received specific attention.
- Disruption has been defined in many different ways, pre- and post-order disruption numbers combined and there is little evidence on the stability of adoption over time. In the UK, “disruption” and “breakdown” are used interchangeably. In the US literature, “disruption” applies to placements that end pre-order and “dissolution” is used for placements that end post-order.
- The available evidence from UK studies suggests that pre-order disruptions range from 3–10 per cent and post-order from 4–6 per cent, depending on the characteristics of the children studied.
- There are important differences between the US and UK adoption populations and therefore it is not possible to assume that US findings apply to the UK. In the US, the majority of looked after children are adopted by their foster carer, whereas the majority of these children in the UK are adopted by strangers. Furthermore, in the UK it is not possible, except in exceptional circumstances, to revoke an adoption order. Despite the differences in the populations, research from the UK and US has found similar factors to be associated with adoption disruption.