

Beyond the adoption order: Challenges, interventions and adoption disruption.

Julie Selwyn, Sarah Meakins and Dinithi Wijedasa

London, BAAF, 2015, pp 393 (inc appendices), ISBN 978 1 910039 23 6. £16.95

This book recounts a research study that UK adoption practice has wanted for many years (Rushton 2003). The research, which was funded by the Department for Education deals with the difficult topic of disruption following the making of a legal order: disruption in this context meaning a child leaving the family home before the age of 18. Although the main focus was on adoption of looked after children, one part of the study did consider disruption rates for adoptive placements against rates for Special Guardianship and Residence Order placements. A mixed methods approach was used to achieve the study aims, which included:

- Establishing the rate of disruption (where adoption outcomes were set alongside those of Special Guardianship and Residence Orders).
- Investigating the factors associated with disruption
- An exploration of the experiences and perspectives of participating adopters and young people who had experienced disruption
- The views of participating adoption service managers.

The book itself is presented in a traditional research report format with the opening chapter reflecting on what is already known about disruption, followed by the detail of how the research was conducted. Several subsequent chapters cover what was found and a final chapter summarises and contextualises the findings making recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

The introductory chapter is understandably brief, given the paucity of research which focuses on adoption disruption (Rushton, 2003) but it does discuss the definitional difficulties associated with the term and it touches on the reasons why this study has been so long in coming.

The study design was impressive, including an analysis of administrative data, a questionnaire survey of adopters and interviews with adopters, young people and adoption agency managers but sadly the datasets were incomplete and the researchers struggled to obtain some of the samples they needed. For example, agency data was often incomplete and extra effort was needed to achieve the sample of adoptive parents and adopted young people who had experienced disruption. These difficulties do raise questions about representativeness and potential bias, a perennial problem in social care/social work research, but the researchers do discuss the limitations and highlight where their findings confirm earlier research.

Despite the difficulties, the quantitative administrative data permitted estimates of disruption rates and analyses identified differences between adoption, Special Guardianship and Residence Orders (now replaced by Child Arrangement Orders see section 12 of the Children and Families Act 2014) in terms rates of disruption. The findings suggest that, in comparison with other types of placement, disruption of adoptive placements occurred relatively rarely after an adoption order had been made. To a large extent the factors found to be associated with adoption disruption through these analyses are those that have been identified in other research (see for example Rushton, 2003). Age was the biggest predictor of disruption with those between 11 and 16 years of age being ten times more

likely to experience a disruption than those still under school age. Age at placement and the time between placement and the adoption order were also relevant (p39).

It is important to note that placement endings (or disruptions) before an order had been made were not considered and that the focus was largely on the factors associated with disruption rather than whether leaving the home was the right move for the child. This reflects the purpose and the method of this part of the research which was to understand variation in outcome across all types of permanent placement, rather than examining individual cases.

While the administrative dataset was large in terms of the number of cases the data lacked detail, particularly about how and why placements ended. Therefore, to better understand the experience of adoption after the order had been granted, and adoption disruption, the main body of the book examines qualitative interview data from 70 adoptive families – half of whom had experience of a child leaving the family home before the age of 18 and half of whom had reported difficulties although their children remained at home. Experience at school, relationships within the adoptive family and contact with the birth family are all discussed, as is adopters' experiences of help seeking and post-adoption services. The research also included interviews with 12 young people (all of whom had experienced disruption)

What was firmly identified from the parent interviews is that violence, from child to parent and from child to sibling, played a major part in many disruptions. It is only recently that children have been recognised as possible perpetrators of violence within the family (Pooley *et al*, 2015). This study found that violence emerged some time after placement for some adoptive families but for many it had been present from the outset. The narratives of adopters and young people make it clear that access to appropriate services was certainly a problem. This was particularly true when 'adoption aware' child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) were needed. Difficulty in accessing appropriate support from CAMHS has been a feature in the adoption literature for many years (Quinton *et al* 1998, Monck and Rushton, 2009). However, in considering this study's findings about service availability it is important to recognise that some of the disruptions had occurred some while before the interview and it is possible that experience in accessing appropriate services would be different now. Indeed, the interviews with managers suggested that practice in terms of working with CAMH specialists has been developing in some local areas but that this is very patchy. Young people who were interviewed tended to feel that their voices had not been heard either before or during their time with their adoptive family and there were difficulties with lack of appropriate support after they left the family home. Many had, or were in the process of, re-establishing relationships with their adoptive families, which echoes Howe's (1996) discussion of adopters' relationships with their children during adolescence and young adulthood.

In summary, this is an important book which presents all the study findings in one place. It should be essential reading for social workers and others whose practice brings them into contact with adopted children and their families and for those who are training to work in this area of practice. It will also be important for managers who are charged with developing good practice, but it is a 'heavy read'. It is hard-going, not because of the written expression or the way it is set out but because the experiences are hard to hear and the findings are disappointingly familiar. There is relatively little that is really 'new' but the messages are important and they have currency because

the study is up to date, because the focus was specifically on disruption and because of the mixed methods design, which offers perspective on the relative frequency of occurrence of post order disruption at the same time as informing us qualitatively of the impact for individual children and their adoptive families. The hope is that practice, policy and resource allocation can respond appropriately to the findings presented here.

Dr Cheryl Dance
Research Fellow
Manchester Metropolitan University

References

Children and Families Act 2014. C.6 Available at:

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/pdfs/ukpga_20140006_en.pdf. Accessed 5th January 2016.

Howe, D (1996) Adopters' relationships with their adopted children from adolescence to Early adulthood. *Adoption and Fostering* 20 (3) 35-43

Monck, E. and Rushton, A. (2009) Access to post-adoption services when the child has substantial problems. *Journal of Children's Services*, 4 (3) 21-33

Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C. and Mayes, D. (1998) *Joining New Families*. Chichester: Wiley and Sons

Rushton, A (2003) *The adoption of looked after children: A scoping review of research*. London: SCIE/The Policy Press

Wilcox, P., Pooley, M., Ferrando, M., Coogan, D., Lauster, E., Assenova, A., Mortensen, U., and Christoffersson, I. (2015) *Responding to Child to Parent Violence: Executive Summary*. Available at: <http://www.rcpv.eu/78-rcpv-executive-summary-may-2015-english/file>. Accessed 5th January 2016.