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## FROM PHD THESIS TO MONOGRAPH: A REFLECTIVE ACCOUNT OF THE PROCESS

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### Abstract

This essay provides a personal and reflective account of the process of adapting a PhD thesis, which was written for a panel of examiners to demonstrate academic competence, to a monograph, which in simple terms is written for a wide audience including students and academics with the aim of communicating ideas. It is hoped that this article provides insight to postdoctoral researchers who may be thinking about submitting a proposal to a publisher for adaptation of their PhD thesis to a monograph.

**Keywords:** thesis adaptation; monograph; academic publishers.

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### [A] INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to the idea of adapting my PhD thesis to a monograph in the summer of 2018 by my PhD supervisors during my ‘mock *viva*’. Having just submitted my 90,000-word thesis and anticipating the real *viva voce* in three weeks’ time, I assumed they were being flippant. They were aware that I had spent over three years immersed in the literature, the research and methodology. I had spent a further year writing up the findings and several more months feverishly trying to identify the kind of mistakes and errors that I had heard PhD examiners love to find in a thesis and highlight with a large yellow felt-tip before announcing the candidate has not passed. Even if my supervisors were serious, this felt like a walk before a crawl—I had to pass my thesis defence first. I also felt strongly at that moment that I did not want to read my thesis again for a very long time. It was something I had been attached to emotionally for so long, I needed to put it away for a while, so I could remember there was more to me than just being a PhD candidate.

I managed quite successfully to pretend the subject of a monograph had not been mentioned, this despite the examiners during my *viva voce* asking me how I planned to develop my work. It was not that I did not want to develop the thesis to disseminate to a wider audience than the university open access research repository, where my thesis would ultimately reside; it was simply down to a lack of belief in my own ability. I wondered how I could possibly transform my thesis into something that people would want to buy, read and even reference, let alone persuade a publisher that I could. The other perceived obstacle was the subject of my PhD. I had addressed a largely under-researched area of child law, that of adoption and the impact on birth mothers within a social-legal context. Although this is an important area of law, it is relatively specialist and not of universal interest.

In October 2018, soon after being awarded my PhD and with an awareness that my peers expected me to follow up my thesis, I knew that I had to address the issue of the monograph. So, having been provided with a contact at Routledge publishing house<sup>1</sup> by a colleague, I decided I had nothing to lose by emailing an enquiry. I was surprised to receive a response almost immediately and, after my initial email was passed to a number of different departments, I was contacted by the editor for Routledge Research in Law and was provided with some helpful literature on the differences between a thesis and a monograph. There was plenty to think about in the guidance, for example, the overall focus of a thesis is on the author and what they have learnt. The monograph focuses on the reader and what they will find of interest. Where academic scaffolding is concerned, the thesis must explain in depth what it is going to show. This is often done with the use of headers, exposition and pointers as to what each section contains. The monograph presents the core argument clearly without the need for pointers. Chapters such as the literature review and methodology may be superfluous to the overall work, despite being such essential elements of the thesis. I remembered the feeling I had at the beginning of my PhD, analogous to climbing Mount Snowdon. Looking at the ‘thesis to book’ guidance, I once again felt as though I was at the bottom of a mountain, but this time the higher summit of Ben Nevis, and, without the regular ‘foot-ups’ by my supervisors, this stood to be an unknown journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the Taylor & Francis Group.

## [B] THE PUBLISHER'S REVIEW PROCESS

The cliché ‘fake it until you make it’ is sometimes apt. The publishers asked me to complete a book proposal template. Without experience of what I should be communicating, I was ill informed as to what Routledge would expect from me. Before completing the proposal, I looked at other law monographs which provided me with insight about structure and style, but which also dented my confidence further and triggered mild panic—the authors were confident, practised and proficient, and I wondered whether they had ever felt as out of their depth as I did at that moment.

The review process required me to justify my proposal with reference to key messages from the completed research, the overall aims, the potential market and current competition. I tried to consider my research as a book already published: who would read it, and why, what other similar books were available, why was my book unique? I started to see that I could possibly market a topic that was rarely researched as a unique insight to legal phenomena that little was known about, thus disseminating important new knowledge. My proposal was then sent for external review to a panel of reviewers of my own choice. Unsure if I was being wise or naive, I sent the editor a list of academic lawyers and well-known researchers into child law whose work I had cited in my thesis. By this point, I was feeling my way in the dark and had no idea what the outcome of the review would be.

Several weeks later, I received the feedback from the reviewers, which was comprehensive and critical but essentially positive. Overall, the reviewers supported my argument that there was an absence of socio-legal literature on adoption law and associated issues, meaning my proposal was timely and relevant. The reviewers also noted that publications that focus on the impact of law on marginalized individuals are needed to inform practitioners, academics and students. The reviews were then presented to the publishers’ editorial board which approved the project. I feel that the novel aspect of the work identified by myself and by the reviews played a key part in the publisher’s decision to offer me a contract, which I entered into in February 2019, agreeing to provide Routledge with a transcript of the finished book by March 2020.

## [C] DECONSTRUCTING THE THESIS

I had just over a year to turn a thesis, which with references came in at around 200,000 words, to a 100,000-word transcript, which would

include all references, plus other text such as tables and appendices. I had my contract, a list of author guidelines on everything from style to copyright and a senior editorial assistant as a point of contact. I had no idea where to start and experienced that ‘climbing mountain’ feeling again. I discovered that the community of postdoctoral monograph authors was strangely silent on the process of adapting their theses, as though there was some esoteric element to the activity that I was yet to determine. There was very little guidance available, although the essay ‘Thesis to Monograph: Notes from the Judges’ Bench’ by Anne Laurence (2019) was inspiring because it simply advocated the uniqueness of monographs, along with the recognition that the writer’s passion for the subject covered should not be suppressed by severe editing to meet the book word limit.

Over the next seven months, I dedicated as much time as I could to revising the thesis. I realized that this adaptation should not involve a complete rewrite but a focused modification or revision of each chapter. The word limit demanded a great deal of deletions and the inclusion of some new case law and legislation to bring the topic up to date. As with my PhD journey, this was a lonely experience, often clouded with uncertainty. The editor at Routledge played no part in this stage and, although she responded to my queries, she made it clear that decisions concerning what to include or not were mine alone to make. The editing process was time consuming and painstaking. I struggled to edit out parts of the story that I felt were important to the message, yet I had to be ruthless. Over time, the transcript began to take shape. The chapters dealing with the law were more concise, and the parts that articulated the stories of the birth mothers became central to the message, which was my overall aim. Looking back, the reworking process was essentially an intuitive one, as much as it was intellectual. In the absence of peers to review and feedback on my work, I was required to critique it myself, which is a valuable skill to develop. Only *I* could decide when the transcript was ready to send to the publisher, and this level of autonomy felt like an important milestone in my academic and professional progress.

## [D] THE FINAL STAGES FROM SUBMISSION TO PUBLICATION

I sent my final draft to Routledge in February 2020, a few weeks before the contracted deadline. I felt apprehensive and uneasy about the quality and standard of my work. I had no experience to draw upon and envisaged all manner of responses that I might receive from the editor, ranging from ‘this needs more work’ to ‘are you serious?’ The only clause in my

contract that I could recall at this time was ‘the publisher reserves the right to reject the final transcript’. I realised this was not a useful thought process and, fortunately, as I had a lot of teaching during that period which kept me busy, there was no time to ruminate on the outcome.

The first indication that things were moving forward was in early March when I was contacted by the editorial assistant advising me the production process had begun. At this point, I was sent the publication schedule, which detailed all of the stages my transcript would go through. The plan was for the book to be available in July 2020. I was, of course, excited by this but found myself waiting for the rejection email. I am pleased to report that the rebuff I had wasted so many hours constructing in my imagination never arrived. The production process was swift and well managed. I worked with the copy editor through May and June. She made it clear that they were working to strict deadlines to get the book published on time. I did not feel pressured, but I would stress that editors expect their authors to meet the deadlines they themselves have to meet. This means the edited drafts sent to you for approval should be prioritized and returned. I personally found this stage straightforward. There were very few changes made to my final draft beyond some queries on secondary references, but to my surprise the editor left the content as I wrote it. I had feared large amounts of revision eating into my summer break: in fact, there were none at all.

Following my approval of the final proofs, my book was sent to press on 4 July 2020. It is difficult to articulate how I felt at that point: there was a sense of achievement and celebration that surpassed the feeling that accompanied the submission of my PhD thesis; there was no *viva* to pass this time around. The real sense of accomplishment came at the end of July when I received a copy of my monograph through the post from Routledge (Deblasio 2021). There were periods over the previous year when I had questioned my capacity or ability to finish the work to a high enough standard. The deadline loomed in the back of my mind over those months, and, even though I am not a procrastinator, I am aware that a lack of confidence in one’s ability can prevent them from progressing and reaching their potential.

I was my own worst critic but, despite my lack of belief in my ability, I carried on. I am a determined person and often have to ignore the negative inner voice and forge ahead towards my goals. Having a book published and well received has been a turning point for me in terms of my academic confidence. My advice to postdoctoral researchers who want to publish their thesis would be to make enquires to publishing houses. A lack of

belief in your academic aptitude should not prevent you from trying to persuade a publisher to accept your proposal. That self-doubt will be challenged along the way in a very similar manner to the PhD process. You do not necessarily need to be 100 per cent certain that you can do it at the beginning of the process; the important thing is that you think you *may* be able to do it, and time will do the rest.

## References

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