Variables in defining adoption breakdown, variables in adoption success

By Ana Berástegui Pedro-Viejo

While most intercountry adoptions develop well, it must not be overlooked that in a small number of cases integration is complex, and does not occur without outside professional help. In some of these cases the system itself even breaks down frustrating the needs of the children and the wishes of the families who adopted them.[7] Cases of separation and adoption breakdown are an extremely complex and painful phenomenon. Developments in training, matching, methods of support for families, streamlining adoption processes, and in post-adoption support resources have been aimed at reducing the breakdown rate. This is despite the paradoxical scarcity of knowledge in the area and the difficulties in accessing updated data.

Variables in the definition of adoption breakdown

One of the first hurdles in gathering and exchanging knowledge on adoption breakdown is related to its definition. J. Berrick and J. Coakley[8] have collected various definitions of adoption breakdown used in the research. In one group, the term 'disruption' is used to describe a process where the child returns to pre-adoption services after being placed in an adoptive home and before the adoption is legally finalised (disruption studies), *i.e.*, adoptions that are not fulfilled ('disrupted'). In a second group, the term 'dissolution' is used to describe a process where the adoption ends and the child returns to pre-adoption services after the adoption is legally finalised (dissolution studies).

It is noted that 'failure' which refers to the return of the child to the protection system, is not the only type of adoption failure. Previously, the term 'returns'[9] was the popular term used publically for disruption, and a great amount of technical work was required to change the 'return' paradigm to the idea of 're-abandonment'[10] as a way to interpret disruption.[11] Family separation carried a significant stigma, which led some families to give up public or official solutions and seek 'unofficial' ways to interrupt their adoption without involving child welfare services. For this reason, the issue of *pseudo* disruptions[12] or *de facto* disruptions[13] emerged – situations where the family stopped living together by sending the child to boarding school, on an open-ended study trip, to a private psychiatric institution, or to an establishment for children with behavioural disorders.

In parallel, cases of *unfulfilled adoptions* began to emerge. Situations where the family continued to reside together, but with no sense of a parent-child relationship beyond legalities (see *Lemieux, J., Section 1.1*). Some of these families did not feel the adopted child was part of the family, had showed low levels of family satisfaction and, in some instances, had considered giving up.

Families where attachment bonds are highly fragile face many difficulties during the intermediate time between childhood and adolescence. At times that fragility renders them incapable of withstanding the increasing conflicts that go hand in hand with adolescence, leading to breakdown during the teenage years (see *Rodriguez Gonzalez, A., Section 4.2*). Other families do not experience breakdown when the child is in his or her early childhood, but relationships fade as the child comes of age and the relationship breaks down, albeit when it no longer falls within the purview of child protection agencies – however, this does indeed amount to adoption failure. The above circumstances have led researchers to include situations such as *de facto* disruption, unfulfilled adoptions, and other precarious situations when considering which situations pose serious risks.

7   Berástegui, A. (2003). *Las adopciones internacionales truncadas y en riesgo en la Comunidad de Madrid*; Palacios, J., Sanchez-Sandoval, Y. & Leon, E. (2005). Intercountry adoption disruptions in Spain. Adoption Quarterly, 9(1), pp. 35-55.

8   Berrick, J. & Coakley, J. (2008). *Research Review: In a rush to permanency: preventing adoption disruption*. Child and Family Social Work, 13, pp. 101-11; Berastegui, A. (2003). *Op. Cit.* nº7; Palacios, J., Sanchez-Sandoval, Y., & Leon, E. (2005). *Op. Cit.* nº7.

9   Mauleón, A. (07/11/2009). *¿Puedo devolver a mi hijo?* La Opinión A Coruña.

10 Arrizabalaga, M. (24/06/2013). *Cuando la adopción termina en reabandono.* ABC Familia.

11 Leslie Hollingsworth takes an interesting approach about the public's attitudes on adoption breakdown as one of the relevant factors in working with this phenomenon. Hollingsworth, L. D. (2003). *When an adoption disrupts: A study of public attitudes.* Family Relations, 52(2), pp. 161-166.

12 Berástegui, A. (2008). *La ruptura de la adopción y las pseudorupturas* dans Berástegui, A. & Gómez-Bengoechea, B. (coord.) *Los retos de la postadopción: balance y perspectivas.* Madrid: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, pp. 59-69. Available at: http://www.msssi.gob.es/ssi/familiasInfancia/docs/retosPostadopcion2008.pdf (last visited 13 September 2016).

13 Palacios, J., Jiménez-Morago, J.M. & Paniagua, C. (2015). *Rupturas en adopción y acogimiento familiar en Andalucía.* Incidencia, factores de riesgo, procesos e implicaciones. Junta de Andalucía- University of Sevilla. Non published document.

Pre-adoption variables impacting adoption success

Several issues pose problems for the risk assessment and forecast of each adoption: the *multitude and complexity* of the factors involved; the *lack of knowledge* of the child's story; and *diversity* in the quality of the care provided, even when the type of pre-adoption family or institutional experience is known. Finally, it is necessary to factor in *adjustments* in the impact of these variables according to *when* the damage occurred (how early and for how long), what the *impact* is/was of the trauma (frequency of occurrence and intensity) and the *links* between the variables (interaction and co-variation).[14] With this in mind, it is clear that developing a reliable forecast of the future of the adoption cannot be limited to presenting a linear account of the risks involved. Rather, it is a highly complex task with a wide margin of error.

Conversely, focusing exclusively on the risk variables associated with the individual child reduces the chances of finding a family for those children with a more complex story.[15] For this reason, adoptability must not be understood as a variable that is exclusively related to the child. Not all families adopting a child who presents with 'difficulties' fail. In fact, most of them do not. Thus, the family itself may serve as a protective factor mitigating the early influences of the risks associated with adoption. Therefore, researchers and practitioners should direct their efforts to ascertaining which variables and dynamics facilitate adoption and those that hinder it. The fact is not every child may be adoptable by *any* family, just as not every family is suited to adopt *any* child (see *Fronek, P. and Morales, R.,* Section 3.2).

Adoptability will therefore be closely related to the concept of suitability of adoptive candidates. If the processes to select suitable families are directed to finding 'average' or merely 'standard' families, we will be constrained in our adoptability assessment – obliged to exclude those children who are far from the 'average' child, *i.e.,* young, healthy and with no special risks. On the other hand, if we accept children with greater needs and risks as adoptable, we will have to train and select families who are more prepared and have greater capacities. The risk is based on a 'relational calculation', the more open we are in the adoptability assessment, the more restrictive the suitability assessment process; likewise the more open the suitability criteria, the more restrictive the concept of adoptability becomes (see *Appendix 1*). Bearing in mind that the best interests of the child should be the primary consideration, it logically follows that it is the suitability assessment that should be restricted in order to open the concept of adoptability. However, this runs into the problem of 'availability'. The more open the concept of adoptability, the more adoption is distinguished from biological families, and the smaller the number of families that are not only able, but above all, available to take care of these children. For this reason, placing restrictions on suitability assessments may be contrary to the interests of children – the majority being in low and moderate risk situations – given that this would pose problems in finding them a family. If we only select families who are able to adopt *any* child's profile, including complex ones, we may very well end up with no families to adopt at all.

Finally, it is essential to remember that adoption success will not only rely on pre-adoptive variables but also on variables related to the adoption itself and in the post-adoption stages.

Variables at the adoption and post-adoption stages which impact the success of the adoption

The adoption stage commences from the moment parents are informed of the matching, until they begin cohabitating with the child. The first important variable is *transparency in information* about the child and the family, which is key to providing support during the first stages of the adoption process (see *Dr. Möller-Bierth, U., Section 2.2*). Secondly, the *matching process* is essential when it comes to adjusting the resources and expectations of families to meet the needs of the children, there must be an effort to offer the families with more resources the children presenting with greater risks (and presumably greater needs), and not the reverse (see *Hoseth, B.* and *T. Sawadogo, A.,* Section 3.2). Historical practices in adoption, such as adopting older children to one-parent families who do not have much support, or children with special needs to families who already have biological children, are not in line with this need for a balance between resources and needs.[16] Finally, *support to the family* at the beginning of the adoption, including during the journey and the first meeting, is also important. Most parents who are happy and satisfied with the adoption have a positive and accurate impression of the first meeting (see *Elefterie, V.; Dulanjani Dygaard, I. and Danish CA,* Sections 3.2 and 3.3).

Additionally, promoting adoptability of all children also entails work in the post-adoption stage given that it entails not only 'placing' a child in a family with a high probability of success, but also providing the necessary resources that allow the parents to successfully meet the stressors of family adjustment, both at the beginning and throughout the changes and transformations in the family cycle (see *Lemieux, J.* and *Petersen, S.,* Section 3.4). The more

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14   Berástegui, A. (2013). *La postadopción en España: entre el riesgo, la recuperación y la resilencia* dans Charro, B. & Carrasco, M.J. (coord.). Crisis, *vulnerabilidad y superación.* Madrid: Pontifical University of Comillas, pp.167-180.

15   Berástegui Pedro-Viejo, A. (2010). *Adopción internacional: ¿solidaridad con la infancia o reproducción asistida?* Alhoma, 27, pp. 15-37.

16   Berástegui, A. (2003). *Op. Cit.* n°7.

1. Qualification, quantification and information sharing of intercountry adoption breakdowns

salient matters of the adjustment process that relate to disruption are mainly connected to two important issues: the development of an emotional relationship between the parents and the child; and control over any disruptive behaviour of the child which may require the implementation of programmes to strengthen these particular areas. The following approaches are recommended:

Preventive work: Assist in the development of secure attachment bonds in the first stages of the adoption, through programmes that focus on the child's difficult behaviours, without causing harm and which at the same time take into account the importance of the bond.[17]

Early detection and intervention: Focus on identifying the areas where the adoptive family needs support. Some studies point to the fact that practitioners have a tendency to ignore risk indicators, overvalue families and exaggerate their wishes and capabilities rather than offering them the resources required. To be able to intervene effectively in the early stages of a problem, it is important not to negatively label the difficulty, given that it could be counterproductive in the search for support (see *Marinopoulos, S.* and *Chistolini, M.,* Section 4.1). It has been seen that out of the possible resources, support groups for parents are the most satisfactory and efficient in risk reduction (see *Parent, N., Section 4.2*).

Family preservation: R.-P. Barth and J.-M. Miller[18] classify adoption services in three groups: attachment therapies; services based on the social learning model; and systemic family therapy. Beyond aiming to prevent disruption, it is also important to develop protective interventions for children whose adoptions have broken down (see *Section 4.2*).

Ecological approach: it is essential to respond to risk and protective factors which are dependent on the adoption system and procedure (see *Bonkoungou, B.* and *Dambach, M. for the ISS,* Section 3.1), and to identify which macro factors (*e.g.,* the school system, society's view of immigration and diversity in the receiving country) are at work to minimise risk and to provide protection in adoption[19] (see *Cabral, C.* and *Guerrieri, A.,* Section 3.4).

Beyond the numbers and defined factors, each breakdown involves a child to whom we were unable to ensure the family life to which he or she was entitled. It involves a child who − in many cases − will not have another chance for a family. Breakdown also involves a family who dreamt of a family with a child that it could not and did not know how to make their own, how to take care of and how to protect him or her. Each breakdown is ultimately the failure of a system that is motivated solely by protecting children, but that, in several instances, fails to find the successful approach.

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17   Groeneveld, M. G., Vermeer, H. J., van Ijzendoorn, M. H. & Linting, M. (2011). *Enhancing home-based child care quality through video-feedback intervention: a randomized controlled trial.* Journal of Family Psychology, 25(1), p. 86; Weir, K. N., Lee, S., Canosa, P., Rodrigues, N., McWilliams, M. & Parker, L. (2013). *Whole family Theraplay: Integrating family systems theory and Theraplay to treat adoptive families.* Adoption Quarterly, 16(3-4), pp. 175-200; Salvá, C. P., Barrutieta, A. H. & Berástegui, A. (2016). *Mejorar las relaciones de apego tempranas en familias vulnerables: el programa Primera Alianza Improving early attachment relationships in vulnerable families: program Primera Alianza.* Clínica, 7(2), pp. 137-146.

18   Barth, R. P. & Miller, J. M. (2000). *Building Effective Post-Adoption Services: What is the Empirical Foundation?* Family Relations, 49(4), pp. 447-455.

19   Berástegui, A. (2008). *La postadopción más allá de la familia y del niño: reflexiones y propuestas* in Berástegui A. & Gómez-Bengoechea, B. (coord.). *Op. Cit.* n°12, pp. 191-203; Palacios, J. (2009). *The ecology of adoption* in Wrobel & E. Neil (Ed.), *International Advances for Adoption.* London: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 71-94; Schweiger, W.K. & O'Brien, M. (2005). *Special Needs Adoption: An Ecological Systems Approach.* Family Relations, 54, pp. 512-522.

1. Qualification, quantification and information sharing of intercountry adoption breakdowns

Recommendations/strategies:

- Given the foreseeable increase in cases of adoption breakdown as the number of adopted children and their age increases, maintaining an active watch over the situation is recommended to ensure adequate decision making. **Gaining better knowledge about this reality, in terms of number, factors and indicators will help us to better understand and plan for the adoption process.**

- Giving recognition to a breakdown can be viewed with a feeling of resignation and hopelessness, often a defence mechanism in the face of potential criticism, conversely, **it can serve to encourage creativity and commitment to building a society where no child lacks a family.**

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