



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

*Lisa Marie Deblasio*¹

Introduction

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

I was first introduced to this idea by my PhD supervisors during my 'mock viva' in the summer of 2018. Having just submitted my 90,000 word thesis and anticipating the real viva voce in three weeks' time, I thought they were joking with me. Surely they realised I had just spent over three years immersed in the literature, the research and methodology, another 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 loved to find in a thesis and highlight in yellow, before informing candidates they had not passed. Even if my supervisors were serious, this felt like a walk before a crawl, as I had to pass my thesis defence first. I also felt 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 that I needed to put it away for a while, so I could remember there was more to life than just being a PhD candidate.

I managed quite successfully to pretend the monograph had not been mentioned, this despite the examiners during my viva voce asking me how I planned to develop this

¹ Dr Lisamarie Deblasio is a full-time lecturer in law in the School of Law, Criminology and Government at Plymouth University

work. It was not so much that I did not want to disseminate the thesis to a wider audience than the university open access research repository; it was simply down to a lack of belief in my own ability. How could I possibly begin to 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, which 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 sooner or later. So, having been provided with a contact at Routledge Publishers² by a colleague, 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 departments, I was contacted by the editor for Routledge Research in Law. I was provided with some helpful literature on the differences between a thesis and a monograph. For example, the overall focus of a thesis is on the author and what they have learnt, whereas a monograph focuses on the reader and what they will find of interest. A thesis must explain what it is going to show, using academic scaffolding such as headers, exposition, and pointers as to what each section contains, whereas a monograph presents the core argument clearly without the need for pointers. Chapters such as the literature review and methodology may be superfluous to the published work, despite being 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 felt as though I faced another mountain, but this time the higher summit of Ben Nevis, and without regular 'leg ups' from my supervisors.

The Publisher's Review Process

The cliché 'fake it till you make it' is sometimes apt. The publishers asked me to complete a book proposal template. Without experience of what I should say, I was ill-informed as to what Routledge would expect from me. Before completing the proposal, I looked at some other law monographs, which provided some ideas about structure and style but dented my confidence further and triggered mild panic. The

² Part of the Taylor and Francis Group

authors were so confident, practiced and proficient that I wondered if they had ever felt out of their depth, as I did.

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 regard my research as a book already published, considering who would read it, and why, what other similar books were available, and how was my book unique? I started to realise that I could possibly market it as a topic that was rarely researched, as a unique insight into a legal phenomenon that was little known, thus providing 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.

A few weeks later I received the feedback from the reviewers which was detailed and critical but essentially positive. Overall, the reviewers supported my argument that there was an absence of socio-legal literature on adoption law and connected issues, meaning my proposal was timely and relevant. It also noted that publications which focus on the impact of law on marginalised individuals are needed to inform practitioners, academics and students. The reviews were then presented to the publishers' editorial board who approved the project. I believe that the two factors identified by me and by the reviewers played a key part in the publishers' 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.

Deconstructing the Thesis

I had just over a year to turn a thesis of around 200,000 words including references to a 100,00 word transcript including references, 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 had that climbing a mountain feeling again. I discovered that the community of monograph authors were strangely silent on the process of adapting their theses, as though there was some esoteric element to the activity that I was yet to discover. There was actually very little guidance available, although the essay 'Thesis to Monograph:

notes from the judges' bench by Anne Laurence³ was helpful, because it 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 few months, I dedicated as much time as I could to revising the thesis. I realized that this adaptation should not involve a complete re-write but a focused modification or revision of each chapter. The word limit demanded a great number of deletions and the inclusion of some new case law and legislation to make the topic as current as possible. 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 revision process was essentially as intuitive as it was intellectual. In the absence of a trusted peer to provide feedback on my work, I had 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.

The Final Stages from Submission to Publication

I sent my final draft to Routledge in February 2020, a few weeks before the contract 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 may get back 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 had a lot of teaching during that period which kept me busy, so there was no time to ruminate on the outcome.

³ Ann Lawrence, *Thesis to Monograph: Notes from a Judge's Bench* (Open University 2019) <https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:154557b0-2dd1-4be2-8501-9dfa2e239ff1>

The first indication that things were moving forward was in early March when I was contacted by my 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 still waiting for the rejection email. I am pleased to report that the rebuff I had wasted so many hours crafting 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 prioritised and returned. I personally found this stage straightforward, as there were very few changes made to my final draft beyond some queries on secondary references, and to my surprise the editor left the content as I wrote it. I had feared large amounts of revision eating into my summer break but 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 express how I felt at that point; there was a sense of achievement and celebration that surpassed that which accompanied the submission of my PhD thesis and there was no viva to pass this time around. The real sense of accomplishment came at the end of July, when I received copies of my book through the post from Routledge.⁴ There were periods over the previous year when I had questioned my capacity 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 us from progressing and reaching our potential.

I was my own worst critic and yet, despite my lack of belief in my ability, I carried on. I am a determined person and often have to ignore the little 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 post doctorate researchers would be to just go for it. A lack of belief in your academic aptitude should not prevent you from trying to persuade a publisher to accept your

⁴ Lisamarie Deblasio, *Adoption and Law: The Unique Personal Experiences of Birth Mothers* (Routledge Law Titles 2021) <https://www.routledge.com/Adoption-and-Law-The-Unique-Personal-Experiences-of-Birth-Mothers-in-Adoption/Deblasio/p/book/9780367276157>

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 start; the important thing is that you think you may be able to and time will do the rest.