**Transracial Adoption in Britain: Politics, Ideology and Reality**

**Abstract**

Transracial adoptions (TRA) by white parents are situated at the intersections of family and public policy. Debates on racial integration are juxtaposed with child rights and the private sphere of the family. In Britain, the practices of transracial adoption and ‘racial matching’ continue to invite fierce debate and discussion. Several factors including the ongoing disproportionate representation of minority ethnic children in the public care system, the ‘unavailability’ of suitable minority ethnic adoptive parents, concerns about adoptees’ racial/cultural identity and the ‘suitability’ of white parents to raise racially competent children form the backdrop for such debates. For the last decade or so, political attention has been focused on permanence for children in care and adoption in particular. Within these wider debates, the allegedly low adoption rates of minority ethnic children, the ‘delay’ in finding suitable adoptive families, the ‘rejection’ of suitable white adoptive couples, and ‘ethnic matching’ are presented as some of the key concerns. This paper seeks to unravel the evidence base around TRA, and ‘racial matching’ in the symbolic representational battle being fought in the ‘best interests’ of minority ethnic children.

**Key words:** transracial, adoption, matching, minority ethnic, identity, multicultural

**Introduction**

The disproportionate representation of black and minority ethnic children in public care in not a new phenomenon but has been an ongoing concern since the 1950s (NCH 1954, Fitzherbert 1967, Rowe et al 1973, Bebbington and Miles 1989, Barn 1993, Owen and Statham 2009). Research evidence reveals a multiplicity of factors that mediate in the process of entry into care. Such factors include poverty, lack of family support, child abuse and neglect, parental ill-health, and family breakdown. The most recent government statistics reveal that there are currently 67,050 children and young people who are currently looked after in England (DfE 2012). Of these, 77 per cent are of White ethnic background, 9 per cent are Mixed, 7 per cent are Black, 4 per cent are Asian, and 2 per cent are of other ethnic background.

The vast majority of children in care are placed in foster family settings. In March 2012, this amounted to 50,260. With regard to adoption, government statistics show that 6,200 were placed for adoption and a total of 3,450 were adopted during the year ending 31 March 2012 (including 70 babies, 2,550 who were 1-4 year olds, and the remainder were over 5). In terms of ethnicity, the vast majority of those adopted were white (85%) compared to lower proportions of other ethnic groups such with mixed parentage at 10%, Asian 2%, Black – 3%, and other ethnic groups at 1% (DfE, 2012).

The gathering process of adoption reform has drawn heavily on the allegedly ‘low’ (though they have been historically high over the past decade in terms of adoption from care) adoption rates and the markedly lower rates for minority ethnic children. A second plank has been the focus on timescales – framed as ‘delay’ – and again the slower route to adoption for minority ethnic children. The most commonly advanced explanation for this in media coverage, political discourse and policy statements is that social workers are preoccupied with the blood tie and in seeking a (near) ‘perfect ethnic match’, they contribute to the rejection of white prospective adopters.

However, while certain headline statistics appear to support this view, closer scrutiny reveals a more complex picture. While lower rates are sometimes presumed to apply to all minority ethnic children, rates of adoption for children of mixed parentage are similar to, or slightly above their representation in the care population (10 and 9 per cent respectively), whereas those for Asian (2 and 5 per cent) and Black children (3 and 7 per cent) are indeed markedly lower. Put another way, while 16 per cent of white children leaving care during the year to 2010 were adopted, the corresponding figures for mixed parentage children were 14%, Asian children 3%, Black children 4% and other ethnicities 3%. (DfE 2012).

Further breakdown of categories shows that among Asian children, it is those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds who are least likely to be adopted, whereas rates for Indian children (especially when young) are not significantly below average. While rates are generally lower than average for Black African/African-Caribbean children, this is much more so for those of Black African origin. Owen and Statham (2009) demonstrate that these patterns have, with slight variation, persisted for several years. What is striking here is that the groups where adoption rates are lowest are precisely those where there are often cultural or religious reservations or objections to formalised adoption. This was recognised in the Prime Minister’s Review (PIU, 2000) and helped support the introduction of special guardianship, but does not currently feature in policy debate. On timescales, there are, for the most part, few significant differences related to ethnicity. In comparison with white British children (919 days from entry to care to legal order), adoptions for Asian children are quicker (835), those for children of mixed parentage slightly longer (996) but those for Black children substantially so at 1302 days.

This more nuanced picture is often lost amid more general claims regarding minority ethnic adoption. Owen and Statham (2009) for example, express some surprise at their finding that children of mixed parentage have the highest rates of adoption of any ethnic group. This is of course, linked to the fact that a significant number are adopted into white families (Selwyn et al, 2010). Owen and Statham’s (2009) study also casts doubt on the assumption that lower adoption rates equate to languishing in care. Not only are rates of reunification higher for some (notably Asian) minority groups, but it is noteworthy that those ethnic groups with the lowest adoption rates are also those who often spend the shortest periods of time in care. Such statistics, no doubt, hide further complexity (including adverse effects for some children) and highlight the need for further research into care careers and permanence, but serve to warn against simplistic assumptions on the consequences of ‘non-adoption’.

Similarly, while research studies have sometimes suggested that plans change away from adoption more frequently for Black and Asian children (Selwyn et al, 2010), the official data released on changes of plan do not point to any such consistent pattern (DfE 2011, Ofsted 2012).

In spite of the nuanced picture around ethnicity and adoption, political sound bites and media headlines suggest that white parents are being denied the opportunity to offer suitable adoptive homes to minority ethnic children in need. Notably, such arguments were de rigeur in the USA before laws were passed to introduce a colour-blind policy – the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act 1994, and the Interethnic Adoption Provisions 1996. It is evident that the American policy framework which prohibits the consideration of race and ethnicity in adoption decision-making has achieved little to improve adoption rates for African-American children (Evan B Donaldson 2008). In Britain, set in the context of legal requirements (notably under the Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002) to give due consideration to the child’s religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background, successive governments have relied on the use of strongly worded guidance that this should not prohibit transracial placements nor lead to delay while an ethnic match is sought.

Given the renewed political and ideological interest shown in TRA by the coalition government, this paper seeks to explore the four key questions listed below. The authors consider these to be most relevant to the current debates and discussions within the realm of social work policy and practice –

1. What are the lessons from TRA research?
2. Are white families available to adopt minority ethnic children?
3. Is ethnic matching a racist practice?
4. How can the pool of adopters be increased to meet the needs of minority ethnic children in need of permanency in the form of adoption?

**1. What are the lessons from TRA research?**

To answer this question, it is important to briefly trace the history of TRA in Britain, but also to learn from some of the available literature.

Transracial adoption in Britain dates back to the 1960s following concern about high numbers of minority ethnic children in the care system (NCH 1954, Fitzherbert 1967). Concerns about the difficulties of finding suitable adoptive homes for these children led the British Adoption Project (BAP) to address the challenging question – ‘Can families be found for coloured children’? (Raynor 1970). The majority of the families found by BAP were white and a total of 53 babies of African, African-Caribbean, Asian and mixed-parentage background were placed with them. Three longitudinal studies into the lives of these children and their adoptive families signaled successful adjustments at three stages of their lives – pre-school, pre-adolescent, and adolescent (Raynor 1970, Jackson 1975, Gill and Jackson 1983). Detailed and widespread criticism of these studies in general and the last study in particular which identified racial/ethnic identity problems but pronounced the placements successful is discussed elsewhere (Small 1984, Divine 1983, Barn 1993, Barn 2000, Kirton 2000). In a similar vein to the controversy around the negative effects of transracial adoption in the USA, the BAP studies were regarded as located in a eurocentric framework that accords insufficient value to minority groups and their lives.

A few other small-scale studies into the outcomes of transracial adoption have been carried out in Britain. For example, in a study of eight mixed-parentage children, Tizard (1977) describes the families as living in predominantly white neighbourhoods. She reports that children were experiencing immense difficulties around their mixed identity and in forging links with black children, and that transracial adoptive parents were trapped by an unconscious racial prejudice. In two small longitudinal studies involving ‘Afro-Caribbean and mixed-race’ children, at age 7 and 19, Bagley and Young (1979) and Bagley (1993) conclude that although white parents demonstrated a ‘lack of black consciousness’, these adoptive placements were successful in meeting the ‘psychosocial and development needs’ of the majority of the children. The researchers employed a range of psychological and educational tests to support their hypotheses of psychosocial adjustment in transracial settings.

A study by Thoburn et al in 2000, is to date, the only research in the UK to compare transracial permanent (adoptive with some permanent fostering) placements with ethnically matched ones. While noting many positive qualities in the former, they also note the additional challenges faced, notably in relation to ethnic identity. They conclude (2000:208)

*‘the many advantages which adoptive or foster parents of the same cultural and ethnic background bring to the task lead us to conclude that placement with a family of a different ethnic background….should be unusual and should be clearly linked to specific reasons in individual cases. Whilst some white families can successfully parent black children, they have additional tasks to negotiate, and the job they have to do in parenting a child who has already suffered adversity and at least one separation and rejection is difficult enough without making it more difficult.’*

Three broad lessons can be learned from the existing TRA research. Firstly, there is a broad consensus arising from many research studies, that while on criteria such as breakdown rates and psychological tests, there are few differences between ethnically matched and transracial adoptive placements, that the latter do pose significant additional challenges which are often reflected in a range of stressors and discomfort for adoptees (Rushton and Minnis 1997, Evan B Donaldson 2008). Secondly, in debates, these challenges have typically focused on issues of identity, cultural heritage and dealing with racism. Thirdly, while support for ethnic matching reflects a spectrum of opinion, a core tenet is that ethnicity ‘matters’ and should be reflected in matching preferences (Barn 2000, Thoburn et al, 2000; Harris 2006).

**2. Are white families available to adopt minority ethnic children?**

Much of the current reform agenda (including measures to improve the treatment of adoptive applicants and the use and performance management of time limits) is premised on the notion that proscription of transracial placements is pivotal to low rates of adoption from care (DfE, 2012 paras 50-52). Delay has become a significantly racialised concept, almost invariably the favoured example for critics of ‘barriers’ to adoption. This has included being cited as a major factor in the recent fall (Times editorial, 29 September 2011)., even though official statistics show that the fall has been almost entirely among white children (DfE, 2011)). Both media and politicians have enthusiastically taken up the grievances of white families as a stick to beat ‘politically correct’ social workers, generating regular stories of prospective adopters deemed ‘too white’ and ‘too middle class’, even while most approved adopters are both white and middle class.

Seemingly, most such narratives arise from situations where applicants are turned away typically by local authorities on the basis they are not regarded as an appropriate potential match for the waiting minority ethnic children. There is little firm evidence in this area. A survey of members by Adoption UK (2011) found that roughly a quarter had been turned away by adoption agencies, of whom 13 per cent (i.e. 3 per cent of the sample) were told that this was due to their lack of potential for ethnic matching. While this survey of largely approved adopters may underestimate the scale of ‘rejection’, it scarcely supports the notion that a focus on ethnic matching represents *the* major barrier to adoption. Moreover, neither the survey nor wider critical commentaries address the nature and extent of adopters’ ‘offer’, either in terms of ethnicity or the many and often complex needs of children awaiting adoption. A senior manager of a voluntary adoption agency has commented that ‘our experience is that white applicants who offer to adopt black children are interested in babies or toddlers’ (Liz Webb, Assistant Director TACT, letter to Times 4 November 2010). Yet these are often likely to be the children for whom ethnic matches will be most easily found (Selwyn et al, 2010; see also Hawkins-Leon and Bradley, 2002 for similar findings in the US), raising questions about how far more transracial adoption would increase the number of children placed as opposed to ‘competition’ for the most desirable.

As discussed above, experience from the United States found that while a legally enforced colour blindness increased transracial adoption, the effect was very modest (Evan B Donaldson 2008). While it might be argued that any increase is valuable, there is little doubt that the scale of interest is exaggerated by proponents. This is also evident in the regular claims (including Prime Minister David Cameron and Martin Narey, Coalition Government’s Adoption Advisor) of many adopters being ‘driven abroad’ because of domestic restrictions, claims that not only misrepresent much interest in international adoption, but overlook the historically small (and falling) scale of international adoption in the UK.

In addition to questions regarding the likely number of prospective transracial adopters, there are also issues surrounding what expectations there may be of them. Policy discourse is somewhat contradictory on this point, essentially putting forward three different positions. The first is one that foregrounds avoidance of delay and the sufficiency of love and otherwise demands little or nothing in relation to ethnicity –

*it is not in the best interests of children for social workers to introduce any delay at all into the adoption process in the search for a perfect or even partial ethnic match when parents who are otherwise suitable are available and able to provide a loving and caring home for the child.* (DfE, 2012)

A second related position might best be termed ‘minus ethnicity’. This is set out in various places within the Adoption Statutory guidance, with references to adopters who can meet ‘most’ of the child’s needs, where the missing element is implicitly any needs relating to ethnicity. However, in contrast to these ‘undemanding’ discourses, the guidance elsewhere sets out a third position, in which the importance of identity, culture, heritage and racism are all discussed both in terms of applicants’ awareness and the support that could be offered to them (DfE, 2011). More generally, policy discourse wavers between the downplaying of differences required to justify a tough stance against any perceived over-emphasis on ethnic matching, and acknowledgement of the latter’s advantages. In the Preface to the guidance, Children’s Minister Tim Loughton argues that an ethnic match may be a ‘significant advantage’ before going on to say that it cannot be a ‘deal-breaker’. As one of the above quotes demonstrates, seemingly significant advantage cannot translate into any form of ‘purposeful delay’, however short.

Thus, there are glimpses of a more sophisticated understanding of transracial adoption, its challenges and how best to meet them. Worryingly, however, they fall far short of serious debate on ‘cultural competence’ and racial/cultural socialization (Vonk, 2001, Barn, 2013 forthcoming) or the requisites for successful transracial adoption as set out in Roorda’s (2007) Multicultural Adoption Plan. Moreover, they are clearly subordinate to the desire to break down ‘barriers’ to transracial adoption and this leads to at best grudging recognition of challenges. This is apparent in the inconsistencies outlined above, and when Narey (2011) for instance, dismisses the idea that once supported white families may (still) struggle to meet the needs of minority ethnic children as ‘just preposterous’.

**3. Is ethnic matching a racist practice?**

While rarely stated explicitly***,*** there are two related senses in which critics of ethnic matching might argue that it is ‘racist’, first in relation to minority ethnic children and second, to white prospective adopters.

*“It is outrageous to deny a child the chance of adoption because of a misguided belief that race is more important than any other factor. And it is simply disgraceful that a black child is three times less likely to be adopted from care than a white child.... I promise you I will not look away when the futures of black children in care continue to be damaged,” (Michael Gove, cited in Pemberton, C., 2012).*

It is useful to consider the issues both in terms of principle and in the contexts of policy and practice. In relation to the former, ethnic or racial matching is most readily cast as racist within a ‘colour blind’ perspective which emphasises formal equality and the exclusion of considerations of ‘race’ or ethnicity (Bartholet 2008, Hayes 1993). From this standpoint, ‘making ‘race’ an issue’ is itself racist. However, it has long been recognised that formal equality in a context of significant economic, social and political inequality has discriminatory effects and that in order to address inequalities it is necessary to identify, measure and understand them (Goldberg, 2002; Esposito and Biafora, 2007). Yet it is also acknowledged that such endeavours have mixed effects and carry certain risks, for example, of homogenising categories, over-emphasising boundaries and so forth (Parekh, 2008).

Given the plethora of research which documents that ethnicity matters in the permanent placement of children in care (Thoburn et al., 2000; Gailey, 2010), it is difficult to argue that ethnic matching is ‘racist’ judged in terms of having detrimental impact on minority ethnic children. However, factors linked to ethnicity must be considered in relation to the range of needs that children may have and here, there is a reasonable proposition that over-emphasis may work against children’s interests. Delay or non-placement due to a shortage of appropriate minority ethnic adopters are the most frequently cited problems, but it is also possible that prioritisation of ethnicity might lead to the neglect of other important needs, such as those relating to disability or that matching may be unhelpfully ‘crude’. Similarly, if it is accepted that at least *some* white families can make good adopters of minority ethnic children, there is a risk that they will be lost.

Rattansi (2007) warns against attempts to classify phenomena in binary terms as racist or non-racist, highlighting instead the concept’s multidimensional nature. For our purposes, while acknowledging the possibility that highly rigid, restrictive interpretations or implementations of ethnic matching may have negative outcomes for minority ethnic children, it is important to add some caveats. The first is that if there are (significant) advantages to ethnic matching, then modest delays could be judged as ‘purposeful’ where they lead to a good match. However, perhaps prioritizing a ‘get tough’ approach, recent policy has tended to portray any delay as unacceptable or damaging. The White Paper in 2000, for example referred to the impact of ‘every extra day’ (Department of Health, 2000: para 5.15), while going well beyond any evidence to suggest that delay in early adoption decision-making is linked to high rates of early pregnancy and offending among care leavers (para 1.16). This relates to a second important caveat, namely that we know relatively little about the outcomes for (minority ethnic) children who are not adopted, including their attainment of ‘permanence’. Again, claims that lower adoption rates represent a ‘scandal’ rest on assumptions that go beyond any evidence base. A third and final caveat is that although media and political discourse assumes a rigid and universal operation of ethnic matching (in running its recent campaign the Times has declared transracial adoption ‘almost unheard of’, while the government’s adoption action plan repeatedly warns against the pursuit of a ‘perfect match’), such evidence as exists suggests a more nuanced picture.

A recent OFSTED (2012:7) inspection of nine local authorities found ‘little evidence of delay caused by an unrealistic search for a ‘perfect ethnic match’, while Biehal et al (2010) found that ‘rigid’ approaches were confined to a minority of agencies, an appraisal endorsed by Adoption UK. Commenting on the OFSTED report, its Chief Executive Jonathan Pearce (2012:1) writes:

*“The hard data provided by the report on the reality of mainstream adoption practice is a useful counterpoint to the misrepresentations and myths that circulate around the adoption process. As Adoption UK has regularly pointed out, issues of overly prescriptive approaches to racial and ethnic matching are not a nationwide issue. While there are pockets of such practice in the country, this is more of a practice matter for specific agencies, requiring training and advice in those localities.”*

Similarly, in their study of linking and matching, Dance et al’s (2010) found a mixed picture, with a substantial minority of respondents prioritising ethnic matching over existing attachments (usually to white foster carers) but overall only 56 per cent regarding ethnic matching as an ‘essential’ matching criterion, ranking it well below a range of other concerns.

A key difficulty in debates on matching is the paucity of data. The only major study to address this was that by Ivaldi in 2000 who from a national survey found that 17 per cent of minority ethnic adoptions involved white families. In a paper on transracial adoption, Barn (2000) cited a Department of Health Audit by the Social Services Inspectorate which documented significant numbers of transracial placements. This survey of seven local authorities showed that placement patterns for minority ethnic children were varied. Over 50 per cent of the SSI sample were placed in white families. Recent studies have found transracial adoptions comprising between a quarter and a third of placements (Farmer et al, 2010; Selwyn et al, 2010). Albeit from extremely limited samples, these adoptions appear more likely to apply to children of mixed parentage, to those with additional needs and those already placed with white foster carers who apply to adopt. The lack of reliable data, however, is itself worthy of comment. Given the sensitivity of debates on adoption from minority ethnic children, it seems extraordinary that in an era that has seen an explosion of official data gathering, there has never been an attempt to collate data on matching or incorporate this into a similarly burgeoning system of performance management through targets, performance indicators and inspection. Significantly, Dance et al (2010) felt unable to collate agency responses to their questions on ethnic matching because the data supplied was so unreliable. Neither has there been an attempt to apply ‘sufficiency’ criteria to recruitment in line with other areas of child welfare and childcare.

The question of recruitment of minority ethnic adopters will be explored in the following section, but at this point it is worth noting that such efforts are crucial in determining whether an emphasis on ethnic matching will in practice lead to greater placement choice or restrict it.

**Ethnic matching and multiculturalism**

The striking similarities between the Prime Minister’s review and the coalition government’s reforms attest to the continuities of perception surrounding adoption from public care, notably a dominant narrative of rigidities denying loving homes to minority ethnic children. However, the broader climate surrounding debates on ‘race’ and ethnicity has changed significantly over the past decade, in ways that have combined to challenge policies in relation to multiculturalism (Modood, 2007; Barn 2012). Important changes identified have been a growing anti-immigration stance that is however, arguably less overtly racialised, notably with a significant focus on migrants from Eastern Europe. A second crucial development has been the rise in Islamic radicalism and concern with both international and domestic terrorism. Third, analysis of urban disturbances in 2001 suggested that ethnic (especially South Asian) groups ‘living separate lives’ was a key factor in their genesis, a theme later developed by Trevor Phillips, head of the Equality Commission as the danger of ‘sleepwalking into segregation’ (although the empirical evidence on this is much disputed, Johnson, 2007; Finney and Simpson, 2009). However, as Alexander (2007) argues, this changing climate meant that in mainstream political discourse, multiculturalism moved from being part of the solution to part of the problem. The new ‘community cohesion’ agenda promoted under New Labour and endorsed within David Cameron’s call for a ‘muscular liberalism’ enshrines a core concern for ‘Britishness’ and the duty upon minority groups to integrate, understood as a largely one-way (and implicitly assimilationist) process.

Multiculturalism is arguably a historical and conceptual concept associated with diversity and in particular how nation states deal with accommodating different religious and cultural groups in a way that provides equal opportunity, civic status, individual freedom, and group recognition (Barn 2012). Thus notions of human rights, democracy, equality and social justice are the foundation stones of such a policy framework. Crucially, the notion of multiculturalism is open to competing interpretations with respect to the nature of the groupings involved and their interaction, with for instance different weighting attached to power dynamics (Modood, 2007; Parekh, 2008). Its relationship with adoption is similarly complex, requiring resolution of tensions between ‘personal’ and ‘social’ identity and forms of individual and collective belonging (Hearst, 2002). Particularly for its advocates, transracial adoption is often taken to be synonomous with the ‘multicultural’ (Quiroz, 2008). This may simply entail some notion of transcending ethnic barriers, but implicitly the ‘multicultural family’ recognises the minority ethnic child as the ‘bearer’ of a culture, with varying degrees of effort made by adopters to generate or maintain connections. Yet such efforts have often been fraught, whether due to diminishing enthusiasm on the part of adopters and/or children, tensions between ‘lived’ and ‘museum’ culture, or fears that emphasising differences may work against feelings of belonging within the family. There are also those who question the value and basis of any link with ‘culture’. This is sometimes articulated in a proposed restriction of such concerns only to those with ‘formed identities’ (Brooks et al, 1999; Narey, 2011).The difficulty with such arguments is their neglect of social identities and the challenges that arise for minority ethnic young people (and adults) as they interact in a multiethnic society. This key proposition is regularly overlooked, not least when it is assumed that the purpose of ethnic matching is to ‘replicate’ the birth family. Martin Narey writes:

*I find arguments that we need to construct some sort of ethnic identity with a father who has abandoned his child unconvincing.*

going on to argue that

*for babies at least, the suggestion that a child’s earlier cultural experiences, including food eaten and festivals celebrated, should have such a significance in adoption .....seems to me to be dubious.*

While such views from the government’s adoption Czar are perhaps unsurprising if nonetheless worrying, similar sentiments can be found in Quinton’s recent review of matching, where he refers to the assumption ‘that birth parents are equally attached to all aspects of their ethnicity’ (2012:24). For although birth parental practices (and wishes) may be relevant in various ways, they have rarely been decisive and have had little underpinning influence over ethnic matching policies.

Multiculturalism is also relevant in relation to issues of voice (Hearst, 2002). What is striking about debate and official discourse, is a lack of any recognition that matching may be perceived differently depending on ethnic background. Yet research studies in both the US and the UK have shown that, at least in the relatively recent past, transracial adoption has enjoyed significantly more support among white social workers than their black and minority ethnic colleagues (Kirton, 1999; Fenster, 2002). It is difficult to gauge the relationship between adoption, including the reform programme and views on multiculturalism. A Times editorial (18 April 2011) characterises ethnic matching as a corrupted doctrine, an originally well-meaning policy but that has since ‘developed into rigid prohibitions’. The wider turn against multiculturalism, however, can be seen as more powerful, facilitating as Rattansi argues of the US – a backlash against ‘political correctness’ and forms of ‘affirmative action’ and their replacement by colour blind approaches. Although the UK has yet to introduce equivalent legislation to that of the Clinton government, it is not difficult to imagine that if the current reforms ‘fail’ in respect of increasing transracial adoptions, that pressure will grow for this.

What then can be said of ethnic matching and racism? We would endorse Rattansi’s view that no simple judgement can be offered. Any adequate judgement must consider the meanings attached by various parties to matching, the manner of implementation, wider social and political contexts and the impact on the lives of minority ethnic children, families and communities. From the above discussion, it might be argued that, while ethnic matching policies may at times have negative consequences, notably when implemented in rigid and crude ways, on balance they do much more to combat racism than to embed it. It is noteworthy that the only form of ‘racism’ acknowledged in the current reform agenda is the perceived proscription of transracial adoption itself.

**4. How can the pool of adopters be increased to meet the needs of minority ethnic children in need of permanency in the form of adoption?**

Though often subordinated by other concerns, the recruitment of adopters for minority ethnic children has been an important thread within debates on the latter’s ‘best interests’. Given the widespread if not universal, acceptance of ethnic matching as a preferred option, the core question has been that of a ‘shortage’ of minority ethnic adopters, its extent and causes.

As transracial adoption was challenged in the 1970s, so too was the taken for granted nature of the shortage and attention was increasingly turned towards the practices and performance of adoption agencies. Early projects such as the Soul Kids campaign in 1975 and more so the establishment of the New Black Families Unit in 1980 enshrined a critique of traditional adoption agency recruitment practices, seeking a more ethnic-sensitive and less formal approach.

The relative success of such initiatives, through to contemporary successors such as Action for Children’s Adoption Black Families (Ridley and Wainwright, 2010) has called into question how far the ‘shortage’ is ‘inevitable’ and how far it may be overcome with sufficient commitment and imagination. Survey data has indicated that (some) minority ethnic groups may have a greater interest in adoption than white peers (Rule, 2006).Indeed, although there are no reliable data available, it may well be that some are over-represented relative to population, while falling short of the number of looked after children from similar ethnic backgrounds.

However, research and practice experience have identified a number of ‘barriers’ to recruitment. For some minority ethnic groups, these include material issues such as below average incomes and housing constraints and in this context it will be interesting to see how far government commitment to facilitate adoption through ‘upsizing’ within local authority housing impacts on minority ethnic families (Savage, 2011). In the case of lower incomes, this places a premium on willingness to publicise, provide and strengthen adoption allowances, conditions equally applicable to special guardianship allowances. For some minority ethnic groups, demographic factors have been highlighted, such as relatively young populations and/or a lower ratio of adults (of adopting age) to children (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005), although their impact vary dependent on the size of relevant looked after population. ‘Cultural’ factors or those arising from racialised divisions are also relevant. In some cases, these may take the form of discomfort with, or opposition to, formalised adoption (Lowe and Murch, 2002; Frazer and Selwyn, 2005) but otherwise may impact on expectations and experiences of the adoption process, its inquisitorial assessment and battery of checks. While the perceived discriminatory treatment of white families attracts most media attention, minority ethnic families report similarly poor service responses (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005). Recognition of this has led to agencies (spearheaded by specialist projects) working to create a more informal approach, employing minority ethnic staff and working through community and sometimes faith groups (Kaniuk, 1991; Ridley and Wainwright, 2010). Rule (2006) also highlights the importance of an integrated approach to such links across the range of child welfare services.

Research on recruitment has found that while this is inevitably influenced by the ethnic geography of particular areas, much also depends on agency proactivity or passivity (Barn et al., 1997). In this regard, wider studies have found practices highly variable, with some agencies making no targeted efforts to recruit minority ethnic families despite recognition of difficulties (Dance, 1997; CSCI, 2006). Practices would also seem to be quite variable in terms of the use of voluntary adoption agencies for matching, some of whom have very good records of recruiting minority ethnic families.

It is difficult to predict what impact the current reform agenda may have in this area of work, and as described earlier, policy can be seen as somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, there are exhortations to actively recruit minority ethnic adopters (DfE, 2011:61). However, these sit uneasily with the repeated warnings against any delay for the ‘perfect ethnic match’ or exclusion of white adopters. These goals are not of course mutually incompatible, but the dominant thrust of policy and performance management suggests that agencies will be judged more on timescales and ‘openness’ to transracial adoption than on minority recruitment or delivery of ethnic matching. That said, much will depend on agencies’ and workers’ own commitments. Research in the US has shown that while the MEPA/IEP framework required ‘diligent efforts’ to recruit adopters whose backgrounds reflected those of children in public care, this had not been well implemented (EB Donaldson, 2008:8). In the UK, meanwhile, the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (2011:9) has expressed some concern about whether in light of the government’s emphasis on avoidance of delay that what it describes as ‘some excellent initiatives’ can be sustained and developed. Crucially, and perhaps reflecting a hardening stance since the issuing of the 2011 Statutory Guidance, the Adoption Action Plan makes no reference to improving minority ethnic recruitment, concentrating exclusively on the removal of barriers to transracial adoption (DfE, 2012: 21-22).

**Conclusion**

Transracial adoption calls into question our ideas of racial and ethnic boundaries, identity and belonging. In Britain, the disproportionate focus on transracial adoption as the panacea remains a concern. The asymmetry between adoptive parents’ ideal adoptee and what is available in reality presents a major obstacle to the adoption of children in need. Given this context, and the fact that colour-blind adoption policies in the USA have not resulted in any significant growth in TRA, it is highly unlikely that such policies, to the exclusion of other efforts, can lead to the reduction of minority ethnic children in the care system in Britain.

The misconception of social workers’ efforts to find racially and culturally similar families for minority ethnic children as segregationist and racist is also a worrying trend. Equally, it is imperative upon social workers to ensure that a balanced approach is taken in the adoption of minority ethnic children and that crude matching is avoided. It is also important that a range of supportive measures are adopted to firstly obviate the need for minority ethnic children to enter care, and secondly to seriously explore varied possibilities including kinship, guardianship, and long-term foster care as valid options to achieve permanency. Unless and until politicians and policy makers begin to understand the nuanced nature of permanence and stability for minority ethnic children in care, simplistic and popular notions of TRA as a ‘one-glove-fits-all’ strategy will prevail. Such a notion is not only misguided, it prevents the development of other possible solutions.

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