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Reviewing the history of domestic adoption for racially minoritised children in the United Kingdom: Over half a century of controversy

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journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf**Derek Kirton**¹ 

Abstract

This article outlines, explores and reflects upon the history of adoption for racially minoritised children in the UK. This has been, especially in recent decades, one of the most controversial aspects of adoption, due both to low adoption rates for some groups of children and debate over the merits of ethnic matching and transracial adoption respectively. Deploying a desk-based review and commentary, the article provides an historical overview and identifies phases within these broader contours, from the so-called ‘brown babies’ born during and after the Second World War and the effects of post-war Commonwealth migration, to the establishment and consolidation of transracial adoption and subsequent challenges to it. It analyses the evolution of legal frameworks, policy, practice and research that casts light on these areas and their interconnections. This includes the policy situation pertaining since the late 1980s of an ‘uneasy compromise’ between endorsing preference for ethnic matching and concerns regarding its over-emphasis and potential consequences for racially minoritised children. These debates are contextualised with reference to adoption’s place within permanence options and to demographic (e.g. migration and the rise in racially mixed relationships) and wider social and political change with respect to culture, race and racism.

Plain language summary

This article covers long-running debates about adoption for Black, Asian, mixed-race and other non-white children in the UK. It traces the (post-)wartime history of the ‘brown babies’ born to white women and Black (mostly US) servicemen and later mixed-race children in the wake of postwar Commonwealth migration. At this point, adoption was rarely seen as an option (although it did occur on a small scale) due to assumptions that recent migrant families would not be a position to adopt and that white British families would not wish to do so due to widespread racial prejudice. In the 1960s, efforts were made to promote adoption for ‘non-white’

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children and these enjoyed some success. The majority of the families were white, and this was referred to as transracial adoption. This situation persisted through the 1970s, but came under increasing challenge, with questions raised about whether the identity needs of children (in terms of race, ethnicity and culture) were being met or whether they were adequately being helped to cope with racism. Adoption agencies were also challenged about their recruitment of families from Black and other minority ethnic communities and, in particular, whether their ways of working were too rooted in 'white' norms. This pressure resulted in dramatic change in the 1980s, and a preference was established that children should wherever possible be adopted into families from similar ethnic backgrounds. However, this policy was always controversial and debate has continued since, both about the principles and rationale for ethnic matching but also its consequences, which are often seen as causing delay to (or even denial of) adoption. The article reviews how these debates have played out in relation to legislation, policy and practice and looks at what research tells us about adoption for Black and minority ethnic children.

Keywords

Adoption, racially minoritised children, ethnic matching, transracial adoption, recruiting adoptive families.

Introduction

In the centenary year of legalised adoption in England and Wales, this article reviews one of its most persistent and public controversies, namely adoption for racially minoritised (RM) children. Language use is always challenging and often contested, but this term has been used to emphasise minority status as a result of social processes and power dynamics. Our focus will be on legal frameworks (including statutory guidance), policy, practice and research, and their interconnections, although knowledge of some of these areas remains limited. Adoption is contextualised not only by its interconnections with fertility and reproduction, but also alternative pathways to permanence and broader child welfare practices. In the case of RM children and families, contexts linked to race, ethnicity and often religion are also highly relevant.

The article is derived from desk-based research, and draws on a wide range of historical sources, though no claims of exhaustive or systematic review are made. It is structured by identifying and exploring key periods of change, and how they were shaped by controversy, followed by more focused consideration of (post-2000) research and practice. Our focus rests with domestic adoptions, for, although there are overlaps with international adoption, there are significant differences, adequate coverage of which is beyond the scope of this article. We also concentrate on England (adoption being a devolved matter within the UK) where controversy has been most evident. Ethical approval was not deemed necessary, as the article draws on publicly available documents and there are no sensitive or personal data being analysed.

Early construction of adoption for racially minoritised children as a social problem

The emergence of adoption for RM children as a 'public issue' came initially from the (post-) Second World War phenomenon of 'brown babies', born (mostly) to African American soldiers

stationed in Britain and white mothers. From her archival history, Bland (2019) estimates this involved around 2,000 children, and of her own oral history sample (around 50), almost half were 'given up' for adoption. The coercive climate pushing unmarried and sometimes married mothers towards adoption has increasingly been recognised (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022), but, as Bland notes, for white women the stigma of racially mixed relationships was often immense, albeit variably experienced. She describes efforts made to explore adoptions (beset by political complications within and between the UK and the USA, including barriers to mixed marriages) and reports that only a minority (roughly one in five) of her sample were adopted, either by non-relatives or grandparents.

At this time, RM children were rarely considered for adoption. Dominant assumptions were that few RM families would be able to adopt, while few white families would consider this in a climate where prejudice was 'normalised' (often being regarded with suspicion if they did; see Bland, 2019). This remained the case even as the number of RM children in care increased in the wake of Commonwealth immigration, with political sensitivities over race ensuring very limited government recognition of this population. Even at the close of the 1950s, formal recruitment remained rare, with a survey by the National Council for Civil Liberties reporting only five agencies attempting to place 'coloured' children for adoption (cited Gaber, 1994: 15; see also Braithwaite, 1962 for a first-hand account of recruitment efforts). Nonetheless, it is known that an unquantified, though modest, number of adoptions took place into both RM and white families during the 1950s, including some 'celebrity' adoptions (Caballero and Aspinall, 2018; Raynor, 1970).

The consolidation of transracial adoption

A major landmark in the history of adoption for RM children in the UK was the establishment of the British Adoption Project (BrAP) in 1965. Building on their facilitation of adoptions from Hong Kong in the early 1960s, the International Social Services of Great Britain (ISS) established the BrAP to find families for 'non-white' children in Britain. This entailed collaboration with Bedford College, London University, to research and evaluate the programme (Raynor, 1970). Crucially this involved direct recruitment, whereas up to that time, many such adoptions had involved foster carers. In principle, BrAP aimed to place children 'whenever possible with adoptive parents of the same racial background as themselves' (Raynor, 1970: 26) but it was pragmatically assumed that most families recruited would be white. This proved correct, with the majority of adopters having a profile of being well educated, in professional/managerial roles, living in predominantly white areas, and for the white adopters, with birth children. Early assessment suggested that most of the children (51 in total) were developing well and integrated into their families (Raynor, 1970).

Having noted that interracial adoption was to an extent 'on trial', the BrAP's director, Raynor (1970: 98), argued that it offered a model to follow and this received a cautious (with questions about motives) official endorsement (Home Office Advisory Council on Child Care, 1970: 38). To support BrAP's aims, the Adoption Resource Exchange (ARE) was established in 1967 to link 'non-white' children and potential adoptive families across geographical areas, with 20 agencies involved by the end of the decade (Raynor, 1970).

Alongside these developments, however, was a wider climate of pessimism about finding adoptive homes for RM children (Caballero and Aspinall, 2018), and a guide for adoption workers described the placement of a black or Indian child in a white family as 'an extreme difference which shocks many people' (Rowe, 1966: 201; see also Kareh's [1970] contemporaneous account of attempts to recruit families and the perspectives and concerns of transracial adopters). Sandhu's

(2012) historical study of birth mothers' treatment also shows that (lasting in some cases well into the 1970s) many adoption agencies would not accept relinquishment from RM birth mothers.

The stirrings of challenge

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw major social change affecting adoption, with a marked fall in numbers, usually attributed to greater availability of contraception and abortion, declining stigma for illegitimate births and increased support for lone parents (Lewis, 2004). This sharpened the focus on 'hard to place' (including RM) children (Association of British Adoption and Fostering Agencies [ABAF], 1977). Also contextually important was a changing climate regarding migration and 'race relations' as it was then termed. This included the first anti-discrimination legislation in 1965 and 1968, but also more overt expression of opposition to immigration and to the presence of racial minorities in the UK. Within RM communities, there was increasing rejection of assimilationist assumptions and a more assertive stance taken against racism (Saggar, 1992).

In this context, transracial adoption, which could be seen as a progressive force breaking down previous barriers of prejudice, would face more questions and ultimately strong challenge. There is insufficient information to adequately map adoption for RM children in the 1970s, although it is known that most adoptions (approximately 75–80%) continued to be transracial at least through to the 1980s (Charles et al., 1992). Factors supporting continuity can be seen in the over-representation of RM children in care (Foren and Batta, 1970), remaining longer in care than white peers (Rowe and Lambert, 1973), the rise of permanence policies and the apparent success of trans-racial adoptions (Jackson, 1976).

Conversely, this status quo began to face challenge, albeit gradual and modest in scale. Amid growing recognition of the significance of race and racism in social work (Association of Directors of Social Services and Commission for Racial Equality, 1978; Husband, 1980), (trans-racial) adoption and fostering became focal points for challenge. A growing interest in identity for adoptees began to incorporate race, ethnicity and culture (Cohen, 1994), and there was critique of the impact of 'white environments' on RM children's identities (Community Relations Commission, 1975). In a broader article on identity, Triseliotis (1974) posed the question of whether Black children should be adopted only by Black parents, while noting the dilemmas that may arise if they are not available. Jackson, in her BrAP follow up, noted a more critical climate and asked, 'are we creating essentially white children in brown and black bodies?' (1976: 5).

Also challenged was the assumption that a shortage of RM (the primary focus was on Black Caribbean) families was 'inevitable'. The Soul Kids campaign was launched in 1975 under the auspices of the Independent Adoption Society (IAS), ARE and several London Boroughs and represented the then most concerted effort at recruitment. While only modestly successful in terms of the numbers recruited, the initiative was seen as 'a watershed moment' (James, 1986) in prompting debates and identifying the challenges more clearly. Material factors had long been recognised, but the campaign also highlighted the importance of understanding different traditions of childrearing, mediated by likely mistrust of 'white bureaucracy' and agency assessment practices (Arnold, 1981). A wide ranging and detailed Discussion Paper set out responses to this, including the need to deploy more workers from RM backgrounds, community outreach and introducing flexibilities to processes (Association of British Adoption and Fostering Agencies, 1981).

Although some of these insights and ideas were not new, their framing had changed significantly from previous decades. This included a greater readiness to understand RM families' perspectives and moves towards an emphasis on their 'strengths' including dealing with racism (Rashid, 2000). Importantly, their lack of availability for adopting children was no longer necessarily seen as a

‘given’, but linked to social and agency practices, with a nascent problematising of their ‘whiteness’.

A decade of radical transformation – Paradigmatic shift and political controversy

Following the Soul Kids campaign, some of its stakeholders, notably IAS, attempted to progress its work. This led to the establishment in 1980 of the New Black Families Unit in Lambeth, which broadly followed the blueprint outlined above in the Association of British Adoption and Fostering Agencies (ABAFA) (1981) paper, including its own dedicated adoption panel. Similar projects were launched in other London Boroughs (e.g. Ealing and Wandsworth) and major voluntary agencies such as Barnardo’s and Coram. Crucially, these initiatives were linked to strong commitments that Black (and other RM) children should be placed with adopters from similar backgrounds – becoming known as ‘same race’ (later ethnic matching) policies (Fitzgerald, 1981).

The 1980s proved to be pivotal in respect of adoption for RM children, with changing terms of debate and greater recognition of the value and potential for ethnic matching, which was reflected in policy, law and guidance. While dramatic, the transformation was far from uncontested and, during this period, opposing positions were articulated that remain influential to the present day. The controversy is unsurprising, as the case for ‘same race’ adoption was being made in a context where transracial adoption had become well established, and on grounds that were implicitly and sometimes explicitly critical of it.

The debate appeared on a wider stage through a House of Commons Social Services Select Committee inquiry into children in care (1982–84). The most incendiary moment came from the recently formed Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (1983), which described transracial adoption as ‘a microcosm of the oppression of black people in this society’, and ‘internal colonialism and a new form of slave trade’ involving black children. Evidence at the time from RM young people highlighted negative experiences in care (e.g. poor skin and hair care or wider questions of identity), collectively attributed to being ‘brought up white’ (Stein, 2020). Around the same time, Gill and Jackson (1983) published their follow up research from the BrAP. Their assessment of the adoptions as generally successful, while observing that the (now late adolescent) children were ‘white in all but skin colour’ understandably proved highly controversial and faced strong critique (Small, 1986). Bagley (1993) reported similar findings, referring to the excellent ‘adjustment’ of adoptees and painting a positive picture of their implicitly ‘assimilated’ status.

Support for ‘same race’ adoption (and fostering) grew rapidly, among local authorities and voluntary agencies, with British Agencies (later Association) for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) (1987) setting out in practice guidance the rationale in terms of helping children cope with racism, providing role models and exposure to cultural heritage. These tenets were fleshed out in a growing social work literature (Ahmed et al., 1986). Concomitantly, expectations rose for transracial adopters to help their children with needs linked to race and ethnicity (Ali, 2014). Increasing support for ethnic matching was also apparent in the wishes of birth parents (Gill and Jackson, 1983: 138) and in public opinion surveys (Bagley, 1993: 256–263). The Children Act 1989 introduced a duty in England and Wales to give due consideration to a child’s ‘religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background’ in welfare decision making (subsequently referred to as the ‘ethnicity’ clause). This was later followed in Scotland and Northern Ireland, although there (and in Wales), there has been much less controversy and policy focus on RM adoption. Guidance made

clear that the clause did not invariably indicate 'same race' placements, but stated that this should apply 'in the great majority of cases' (Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer, 2000: 3).

By the end of the 1980s, a majority of local authorities in multi-racial areas (and many beyond) had written 'same race' policies (Butt et al., 1991). However, the wide support was found to be often quite shallow, with little concerted work on the recruitment of families, nor training to promote in depth understanding of the issues involved for children or families (Social Services Inspectorate], 1996a).

Moreover, as noted above, this shift in policy did not go unopposed. In 1986, the group Children First in Transracial Adoption and Fostering was formed, critiquing what it perceived as the rigidities of 'same race' policies, including their supposed reliance on fixed or 'essentialised' ideas of identity and culture, and defending the record and potential of transracial placements in meeting the needs of RM children (Gaber and Aldridge, 1994). Transracial adoption was also supported on grounds of a 'colour blind' humanism (Hayes, 1993). There was more vehement denunciation from a right-wing think tank (Dale, 1987) and sporadically from most of the national press, casting 'same race' placements as political and ideological, reflecting 'black separatism' and 'reverse racism', with labels such as 'apartheid', 'Nazi' or 'ethnic cleansing' frequently used (Kirton, 2000).

This often latent conflict was publicly manifested through fairly frequent 'scandals', typically triggered by the rejection of white prospective adopters and/or concern about low rates of adoption for RM children.

Ethnic matching under pressure – The bumpy road to reform

The end of the 1980s can retrospectively be seen as a short 'peak' in support for ethnic matching - based on its official 'endorsement' and salience in court proceedings (Johnson, 1991). Thereafter, warnings increased against it leading to delay, while publicised legal disputes gave less weight to ethnic identity relative to other factors, including attachment (Selwyn et al., 2010). A wider review of adoption law (Department of Health, 1992) became progressively more focused on tackling 'political correctness' (PC) in adoption (with ethnic matching cast as the most egregious example). Initial plans to include the 'ethnicity clause' in adoption law were dropped, while revised guidance diluted the preference for ethnic matching, and strengthened warnings against its over-emphasis (Social Service Inspectorate, 1996b). Controversy continued under the New Labour government after 1997, with further 'warning' guidance issued (Department of Health, 1998).

Research by Barn and colleagues (1997) and a national survey by BAAF (Ivaldi, 1998) demonstrated a landscape much changed from previous decades with transracial placements in the minority. Ivaldi reported that, of 125 adoptions for RM children (from a larger sample of 1,221 adoptions), 17% were into white families, although local rates ranged widely, reaching more than 50% in predominantly white areas.

In 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched a review of adoption that would lead to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). The main aim was to increase the scale of adoption from care. Measures promoting transracial adoption were widely anticipated, but, in the event, preference for ethnic matching was reaffirmed (citing Thoburn et al.'s [2000] research [see below]), alongside the now familiar warnings about avoiding delay. The review also reasserted the importance of RM family recruitment and cited some groups' reservations about adoption as one of the reasons for introducing special guardianship. Indirectly, however, pressure on agencies was increased through timescales, performance targets and the introduction of ethnicised data collection, which confirmed that while adoption rates for children of mixed ethnicity were comparable with white British peers, figures were markedly lower for those categorised as

Black, Asian or Other. Though official data are now gathered on the ethnicity of adopters (Children's and Social Care Secretariat, 2024), this has never been extended to matching.

With minimal change in terms of ethnic distribution, the overall number of adoptions rose significantly (from 2,710 in 2000 to 3,770 in 2005) before falling back to 3,180 in 2008 (Department for Education, 2024a). From 2008, the Conservative party began to focus on falling adoption rates and their reflection of 'PC' attitudes to ethnic matching. This was carried into the coalition government after 2010, and supported with a sustained campaign by the *Times* newspaper. The newspaper commissioned Martin Narey, a recent Chief Executive of Barnardo's, to write a 'blueprint' for adoption reform (published in July 2011), and two days later he was appointed as the government's adoption adviser.

By comparison with the New Labour reforms, the coalition government was much more forceful in its critique of adoption practice (through Narey, but also with frequent interventions by the Education Secretary, Michael Gove and the Prime Minister David Cameron), and calls were made for radical increases in the scale of adoption, with opposition to transracial adoption cast as the major barrier (Bennett, 2011; Hill, 2011;). In media coverage, the language and tone remained similar to that used in earlier decades (Kirton, 2020). After initially issuing new guidance against over-emphasis on ethnic matching (Department for Education, 2011), the coalition announced plans to remove the 'ethnicity clause' from adoption law as a means to this end. Despite widespread criticism during the passage of the legislation, and a compromise proposal to remove the clause but add its characteristics to others in the welfare checklist such as age and gender, the change became law under the Children and Families Act 2014 (CFA14). The passage of the legislation is highly instructive, because, while government pronouncements and newspaper headlines were emphasising the change as a long overdue purging of 'PC' adoption practice, assurances were ('quietly') being given in Parliamentary committee deliberations that ethnicity remained vitally important (Kirton, 2016). This divergence raises the question of whether the removal was, at least in part, for political reasons.

Adoption for racially minoritised children from 2014 to the present day

In principle, removal of the 'ethnicity clause' was to be a pivotal moment, increasing numbers and shortening timescales of adoptions for RM children (implicitly through facilitation of transracial placements) within the wider programme to boost adoption from state care. In practice, the period since 2014 presents a mixed picture and it is very difficult to discern an overall 'direction' in policy on adoption for RM children.

Statistics (Table 1) suggest a very limited impact of the CFA14 on adoption for RM children. Once again, numbers followed overall patterns for adoption, with a large rise between 2010 and 2015 and then a sharp fall after court judgements (*Re B (A Child)* [2013] UKSC 33 and *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146) that emphasised adoption's status as a 'last resort', restricted to situations when the child's welfare demands it. Importantly, throughout this period, there was no change in ethnic distribution.

The coalition and later Conservative governments' adoption drive achieved more success in reducing adoption timescales, and narrowing the ethnicised gap, although this has persisted while timescales have increased again in recent years (Children's and Social Care Secretariat, 2025).

Reviewing oral and written evidence on the working of the CFA14, a Parliamentary Select Committee (House of Lords, 2022: 19) concluded that removal of the 'ethnicity clause' had had little impact. The committee recommended creation of a task force to examine ethnic and racial disparities in the adoption system, but this was rejected by the government (Department for Education,

Table 1. Number of adoptions of looked after children in England by ethnicity (percentages in brackets).

	White	Mixed or multiple ethnic group	Asian or Asian British	Black African, Caribbean or Black British	Other ethnic group	Total (*)
2010	2670 (83)	350 (11)	50 (2)	90 (3)	20 (1)	3200
2015	4430 (83)	580 (11)	90 (2)	120 (2)	50 (1)	5360
2020	2880 (83)	370 (11)	40 (1)	60 (2)	50 (1)	3480
2021	2430 (84)	280 (10)	50 (2)	50 (2)	40 (1)	2890
2022	2480 (82)	350 (12)	40 (1)	60 (2)	30 (1)	3010
2023	2520 (84)	310 (10)	40 (1)	60 (2)	30 (1)	3000
2024	2530 (84)	330 (11)	40 (1)	50 (2)	30 (1)	3020
2025	2540 (84)	320 (11)	60 (2)	50 (2)	20 (1)	3040

(*) It should be noted that the looked after population rose from 64,450 in 2010 to 81,770 in 2025.

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-looked-after-children>

2023) on the grounds that it was implementing an Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board (ASGLB) report (2022) on this issue. The ASGLB had proposed a three-pronged strategy of increasing recruitment of black adopters, rebuilding trust, and resourcing interracial adoption, and the government stated that regional adoption agencies (RAA) were already progressing these aims.

In the years immediately following the CFA14, adoption for RM children generally had a much lower profile, with very few individual cases making headlines. Marking a significant divergence from previous ‘scandals’, the most high-profile case involved a Sikh couple (supported by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019) successfully suing an adoption agency for racial discrimination when the agency informed them that they only expected to be recruiting families for white children and that white applicants would be prioritised.

There was also little focus within government policy documents (Department for Education, 2016). A later strategy document (Department for Education, 2021), however, echoed the more forceful language of the coalition government, declaring (continuing) low levels of adoption for RM children an ‘outrage’, and blaming the ‘prejudices’ of adoption workers and agencies. In its denunciation of these ‘prejudices’, the strategy explicitly highlights love and care as the only necessary qualifications for adoptive parenthood, including transracial adoption where no other criteria are mentioned.

While ostensibly following this document, the most recent published strategy from Adoption England is markedly different in tone and content on race issues, including reference to the adoption system being ‘institutionally racist’ (Adoption England, 2024: 7). There is more detailed coverage of the barriers facing Black adopters in particular, and a commitment to work more closely with young Black people, emphasising the need for cultural competence and sensitivity.

Tracing the influence of wider political contexts in adoption is always difficult and beyond our scope to attempt here in any detail. An important factor has been an increasingly complex environment regarding ethnicity, with a growth in mixed relationships and wider patterns of migration leading to what has been referred to as ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007). This has become visible in the rise of more complex and/or multiple ethnic heritages for looked after children. For the coalition reforms, it is noteworthy that the Narey report (2011) included an emphasis on Britain having become a ‘post-racial’ society, with social work practice rooted in the past. Subsequently, debate on race and ethnicity became more clearly divided and fractious. Competing movements included, on the one hand, a turn away from multiculturalism towards assimilation and increasing hostility to immigration, while on the other, a growing focus on racial inequality and disparity, given greater

impetus by the Black Lives Matter movement. Within children's social care, there was a renewed interest in this theme, both in research and policy. This, mostly quantitative, research has focused on the links between child welfare interventions and intersecting inequalities of ethnicity and (area) social deprivation (Bywaters et al., 2020); ethnicised patterns for outcomes within and following care (Ahmed et al., 2022); and pathways through care proceedings (Edney et al., 2023).

In the policy domain, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (IRCSC) (2022: 62) described racial inequalities as 'amongst the most pronounced disparities in children's social care'. The broader thrust of the IRCSC was, however, towards more prevention and use of kinship care and implicitly away from adoption. This shift of focus contributed to the closure of the ASGLB in 2022, the board having been established in 2014 to drive the government's adoption policies. Current Labour government policy has placed little emphasis on adoption beyond commitment to continue funding for support (Department for Education, 2024b). Recent relevant practice developments will be discussed in a later section.

Research (in the 21st century) – A brief overview

Due to word constraints, this review will focus largely on the period from 2000 onwards. Areas covered will include experiences of adoption, pathways, adoption practices, search and reunion, contact, birth families and adoption support. (Further details on methods and sample sizes for these studies can be found in Appendix Table 1). Findings from many (earlier) studies have been mentioned above, and, towards the end of the last century, a review was provided by Rushton and Minnis (1997). Deploying a Black/white binary discourse, they analyse the controversy through the lens of research, dividing 'the arguments' into two categories – 'psychological' and 'political'. The former covers general developmental markers and psychological measures (e.g. adjustment, self-esteem), but also some specifically relating to racial or ethnic identity. The authors' broad conclusion is that most transracial adoptees fare well developmentally (while noting certain methodological challenges, such as selection bias, attrition and reliance on parental views) but that evidence on racial/ethnic identity is limited and often inconclusive.

The 'political' covers a range of factors, including sufficiency in recruitment of Black families, ethnocentricity in social work services, the relevance of social disadvantage and for transracial adoptions, of social geography in its outcomes. With partial exceptions, such as the significance of family socialisation and social geography in shaping identities, Rushton and Minnis conclude that research is again limited and/or inconclusive. They also note a general under-representation of Black voices among researchers. Based on political and value judgements (having found claims of 'psychological harm' unsubstantiated), they conclude by supporting ethnically matched placements, albeit with caveats on delay and weighing children's other needs.

In 2000, Thoburn et al. published *Permanent Family Placement for Children of Minority Ethnic Origin*. This remains a landmark UK study, partly for its size but also its sample including those placed transracially and those in families with at least one RM parent (though some of these were permanent foster families). The researchers found that expression of racial identity and pride was stronger among those in RM families. On the basis of their findings (including very widespread support from participants) and the 'additional challenges' involved in transracial placements, Thoburn and colleagues (2000: 208) concluded that ethnic matching should be the norm other than in very specific individual circumstances.

Other UK studies of (domestic) adoptees since 2000 have typically been small scale (Patel, 2007). New pathways have, however, opened up through autobiographical and other writings from transracial adoptees in anthologies, most notably those edited by Harris (2006; 2008;

2012). While variable in format, the depth of many contributions brings experiences of (transracial) adoption to life in a way sometimes lacking in interview-based research, including regarding the challenges linked to identity and belonging (whether to RM or white communities), but also its positives. These are of course, adult voices and there has been little exploration of children's experiences, excepting some of Thoburn et al.'s sample. Recent Adoption UK Barometer surveys (<https://www.adoptionuk.org/the-adoption-barometer>, for example for 2023 and 2025) have confirmed many of the sentiments expressed in the anthologies, with an overwhelming majority of transracial adoptees stressing the importance of their heritage and the value (denied for many) of mixing with those from similar backgrounds during childhood, alongside feelings of 'not belonging' to any particular cultural, ethnic, racial/or religious community. While some have found this position liberating, for a majority it appears to be experienced negatively.

The 21st century has also witnessed a noticeable shift in research from adoptees and families towards concerns such as pathways for RM children (with delay as context) and recruitment of minoritised families. Selwyn and colleagues (2010) investigated the former, and provide a rare (though fairly small in sampling terms) update on ethnic matching outcomes, showing that most Black and Asian children were placed in matched families, while those of mixed heritage were placed mostly in white or mixed families, with fewer in families from their RM heritage. Asian and Black children were more likely than white peers to have adoption plans changed, reflecting a mix of alternatives being found and failure to find adoptive families. Selwyn and colleagues' research is also useful for highlighting some of the complexities around assessment, planning and matching processes, including challenges relating to mixedness (for a review see Wood, 2009) and the overlapping but not co-terminous categories of race, ethnicity, culture (and religion). Reporting a frequent lack of recorded information/detail, and imprecise usage, Selwyn and colleagues (2010: 227) call for 'a more sensitive and sophisticated approach to assessment, matching and placement'.

Although small scale, Agu's (2022) study of adoption for children of mixed-race heritage, and how 'ethnicity' is assessed and acted upon, develops some of these themes and includes data gathering from adoption workers and panel members. She focuses particularly on racial literacy and finds variability on this among social workers, and in their capacity to support racial literacy in adoptive families.

Mostly associated with National Children's Homes/Action for Children (AfC), there have been studies of recruitment for RM families. Selwyn and colleagues (2004) investigated recruitment strategies and (perceived) barriers, highlighting key factors and potential solutions, many of them long standing (see above). Additionally, through national and local census profiles, they identified demographic challenges arising from the relatively 'young' profiles of certain ethnicised groups, creating unfavourable ratios of children and adults as prospective adopters. Ridley and Wainwright (2010) explore many of these themes and solutions in an evaluative study of AfC's Adoption Black Families project, reporting significant success in its recruitment efforts, in terms of both scale and speed (judged in comparison with a similar but less specialist agency). Ali's (2014) critical appraisal of the coalition government's adoption reform programme also includes ethnographic work on recruitment. Here, she draws a contrast between the government's oversimplified explanations and solutions for delay and the nuanced testimony from her interviews and observations with social workers and prospective adopters. Ali notes significant variation in levels of racial awareness among prospective transracial adopters.

Within Howe and colleagues' (2000) large scale study of searching and reunion, a sub-sample of RM adoptees (almost all of mixed heritage and transracially adopted) offers insight both into the core topics but also other aspects of adoption, echoing many of the issues and challenges collated in the work of Harris (see above). Compared with white peers, RM participants had a distinct

profile, namely starting searches younger (on average by five years) and being more likely to search for (typically RM) birth fathers. Exploring and connecting with their birth heritage was a motivator for some, but overall, experiences of reunion were less satisfying on this issue and more broadly, than for white peers.

Research on RM birth relatives and white parents of RM children has been limited. Cane (2024) has offered some useful insights into Black birth parents' perspectives and role (often not facilitated) in maintaining cultural connections for transracially adopted children, including through early permanence planning. In studies of contact within adoption, there has been little coverage of issues of race and ethnicity due to sampling (Neil et al. 2015; Smith and Logan, 2004) (these studies are not included in Appendix Table 1). Some research has found greater levels of birth family contact in situations of ethnic matching (Thoburn et al., 2000), although this may in part reflect permanent fostering compared to adoptive placements. Finally, limitation also generally applies to research on adoption support for RM children/adults and their families. Drawing on sub-samples from a larger study of adoption support, Harris highlights the experiences of Black birth relatives (2005) and transracially adopted adults (2014), respectively. In both instances, she highlights marginalisation and the need for non-ethnocentric, culturally appropriate provision, and the value of mutual support. Adoption UK's 2023 Adoption Barometer report notes how a significant minority of transracial adopters felt ill equipped to deal with their children's identities, and that only around half felt well prepared by social workers in that respect. A majority of new adopters expressed a need for help.

New data have recently been released on adoption disruption rates (Selwyn and Gardiner, 2025). Updating previous research that found no link between ethnicity and risk of disruption, these findings show Black children having a higher risk of disruption for adoption than those from other ethnic groups, though the difference is very modest once age is taken into account. Overall reported disruption rates are low for all children.

... and practice

There are limited sources through which to gauge adoption practice (especially frontline) for RM children, and we are largely reliant on external research findings, inspection commentary and guidance. Particularly led by CoramBAAF and predecessors, there has been a succession of practice notes and guidance publications which can indicate both long running themes but also capture contemporary concerns. For instance, BAAF's Practice Note 13 (1987) acknowledges the likely 'hurt and anger' among transracial adopters, while explaining the rationale for ethnic matching (see above). Later guidance would cover specific topics such as recruitment (Rule, 2006) or be broader in coverage and more generic (Prevatt Goldstein and Spencer, 2000). Research has shown that social work practitioners frequently report that they do not feel well-equipped to deal with the issues (especially in respect of identities and matching) involved in the adoption of RM children (Dance et al., 2010; Selwyn et al., 2010). On the question of 'rigidity' in pursuit of ethnic matching, most studies (and inspections) have found significant pragmatism, but there is a lack of in-depth research in this area.

There have been some noteworthy recent practice initiatives, often with links to research. These include work on Islam and adoption, addressing theological issues but also charting the experiences and perspectives of Muslim adopters (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2025; Shah and Siyech, 2025). An academic-led collaboration involving CoramBAAF, Adoption England and people with relevant lived experience has developed the Anti-Racist Framework for Decision-Making and Transitioning Children from Minoritised Racial and Ethnic Groups into Transracial Adoptive

Families or AFDiT (Cane et al, 2024). Taking a phased approach to transitions, the framework explores cultural literacy, identity challenges for adoptees and the distinction between racial consciousness and racial intentionality for parents – and how such concepts can be used within assessments. Finally Adopt London, a consortium of four London RAAs working with an external consultancy, has launched its Black Adoption Project (BIAP). This aims to address racial disparities for Black (and Black mixed ethnicity) children, primarily through recruitment of Black families. An initial report addresses the lower assessment completion statistics for Black (compared to white) prospective adopters – and identifies factors facilitating or hindering potential adoptions (Brown et al, 2023). For the former, the authors cite a range of personal motivations, though often linked to ethnicity. Factors hindering potential adoptions are summarised as: financial barriers; challenges within the adoption process; the need for (culturally informed) support after adoption; and the impact of racism, and it is noted that formal adoption remains ‘misaligned’ with norms of informal adoption in Black communities. While these factors show significant continuity from previous generations, the BIAP (like AFDiT) incorporates more recent concepts and discourses in understanding racialised dynamics, such as the workings of intersectionality, microaggressions, (racial) trauma and racialised privilege.

Concluding comment

In outlining the long history of adoption for RM children and families in the UK, distinct phases have been identified, moving from a largely hidden but ‘normalised’ situation where adoption was rarely available, to more organised attempts to find adoptive homes (overwhelmingly trans-racial). Growing challenge to this led to the primacy of ‘same race’ or ethnically matched placements by the end of the 1980s. However, this has always been contested, including outside the adoption domain, where the majority of media and political discourse has been highly critical of ethnic matching policies and/or their implementation.

The ensuing situation can be framed as an ‘uneasy compromise’ between visions for adoption resting on different, and arguably sometimes opposing, values and perspectives on the salience of race and ethnicity. In the policy domain, this is evident in the irregular and reactive interest of governments, a repeating cycle of revised guidance reiterating the primacy of ethnic matching while warning against its over-emphasis, and a significant (and highly contested) legal change that has had minimal impact. Successive governments have done little (e.g. in terms of resources, inspection or performance regimes) in any sustained way to tackle the complex structural and sometimes ‘cultural’ barriers to recruitment of RM families, largely leaving any initiatives to adoption agencies. Conversely, despite regular critique of (rigid) ethnic matching and calls to increase transracial adoption, there have been few discernible measures to enable this, nor consistent messaging on expectations of adopters. It is also telling that the absence of data collection on ethnicity and matching persists. The overarching challenge of ensuring that needs relating to ‘ethnicity’ are met, alongside sufficiency in terms of recruitment remains.

In research terms, the (up to date) knowledge base for adoption of RM children in the UK is quite limited with important gaps or reliance on older studies. The ‘shortfall’ includes understanding RM children’s pathways to adoption or permanence more broadly, more contemporary experiences of (transracial) adoption, how children’s needs relating to ‘ethnicity’ intersect with others, the workings of ‘mixedness’, and adoption agency practice in recruitment, training, matching and support, or in relation to contact, search and reunion.

As regards practice, promising initiatives (importantly with RM voices prominent) give some cause for optimism about better adoption and child welfare outcomes in the future. However, to

realise their potential at scale will require significantly improved government support and oversight, a challenge at a time of fiscal constraint and volatility in the wider politics of ethnicity.

Recommendations for policy and practice

In some senses, there is ample guidance on key areas relating to adoption for RM children, including but going well beyond examples mentioned above (see especially publications by CoramBAAF and Jessica Kingsley Publishers). Similarly, the ASGLB report's tripartite strategy of increasing recruitment of Black adopters, rebuilding trust, and resourcing interracial adoption provides a solid foundation for progress. Here, recommendations will focus on requisites or aids to facilitate that progress, aiming for both good outcomes for children and racial justice.

Government should:

- In all its actions, recognise the importance of race and ethnicity in children's lives and consequent needs. This should include an in depth understanding of the potential benefits of ethnic matching and the significant challenges of transracial adoption.
- Provide adequate resources both for effective recruitment of RM families and support for (transracial) adoptions.
- Rigorously and consistently use levers of government (e.g. inspections, performance management) to assess and improve agency practices. Where problems are identified, engage constructively to foster improvements.
- Add 'ethnicity' to the welfare checklist of relevant characteristics for adoption law, as in the proposed amendment rejected in the passage of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- Collect and publish statistical data on ethnicity and matching at frequent intervals, preferably annually.
- Engage with communities of origin who may have less affinity with adoption, to promote understanding of it, but also flexibility with regard to different routes to permanence.

Adoption and social work services should:

- (Although resource dependent) ensure that all stages of activity – recruitment, assessment, training, matching and support – are informed by in-depth understanding of the issues facing RM children and their (birth and adoptive) families.
- Monitor key areas of provision, such as recruitment and access/use of support services by ethnicity.
- Ensure adequate training and internal dialogue to promote cultural competence in front line services and embed this within management practices.

Front line practice should:

- Address dilemmas arising from ethnicity intersecting with other needs – for example, continuity of existing relationships, sibling placement or contact, disabilities or other 'special needs' – on a case-by-case basis, focusing on children's needs and parenting capacities. Where needs linked to ethnicity are 'outweighed', address these both at the individual case level, but also more systemically when there are wider implications.

Building trust with racially minoritised service users and communities is key and relevant to all levels, and in turn this requires consideration of voice and appropriate representation of diverse voices throughout the adoption system.

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Author biography

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Appendix Table 1. Methods and sample sizes from cited 2000–2026 studies

Authors	Methods	Sample size
Agu (2022)	Interviews with social workers, managers (a); Focus groups (b)	(a) 16 (b) n = 8
Ali (2014)	Participant observation recruitment/training events (a); Interviews with professionals (b); and (prospective) adoptive parents (c)	(a) 9 (b) 8 (c) 3
Harris (2005)	Survey (a); interviews – birth relative sub-sample in brackets (b); focus groups (c)	(a) 36 (b) 41 (5) (c) n = 5
Harris (2014)	Survey (a); interviews (b); focus groups (c)	(a) 36 (b) 6 (c) n = 6
Harris (ed.) (2006)	Written submissions (including poetry and artwork) from transracial adoptees with some interviews	56
Harris (ed.) (2008)	As above, with a mixed sample of transracial and white adoptees (a) co-authored contribution (b)	(a) 86 (b) 23
Harris (ed.) (2012)	As above, with a mixed sample of transracial and white adoptees	51
Howe and Feast (2000)	Survey (a); interviews (b); (number of racially minoritised, almost all transracial adoptees in brackets)	(a) 472 (35) (b) 74 (13)

(continued)

Appendix Table 1. Continued.

Authors	Methods	Sample size
Patel (2007)	Interviews with transracial adoptees	6
Ridley and Wainwright (2010)	Documentary and data analysis; interviews (adopters and managers) (a); focus groups (b); survey of referrers (c); observations of meetings	(a) 17 (b) n = 20 (c) 30
Selwyn et al. (2004)	Literature review; interviews with managers and panel chairs (a); focus group (b); questionnaire for prospective adopters (c)	(a) not known (b) n = 8 (c) 12
Selwyn et al. (2010)	Case file analysis (a); interviews with social workers (b) (plus follow ups)	(a) 272 (b) 49
Selwyn and Gardiner (2025)	Quantitative analysis of adoptions 2004-2023	70,170 adoptions (White 58,360, Mixed, 7390; Black 1590; Asian 1070; Other 940; Unknown 820)
Thoburn et al. (2000)	File analysis (a); interviews with families (b); young people (c) standardised scales	(a) 297 (b) 38 (c) 24