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(De)racializing ‘common sense’: media perspectives on adoption reform in England

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Abstract

The adoption of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children has long been deeply controversial in the UK, with tensions over racial/ethnic matching and transracial adoption into white families respectively. Media organisations have been key participants in these struggles, as commentators but also campaigners, yet there has been negligible research into their framing of the issues. This article explores press coverage in five national newspapers (plus Sunday sister papers) of the coalition government’s adoption reform programme. In particular, it focuses on patterns of deracialization and racialization of debates as they relate to identities, family dynamics and wider social currents with respect to race and ethnicity. While in some senses adoption represents a complex and atypical case study, coverage nonetheless reveals a powerful combination, simultaneously downplaying the significance of race, while amplifying the threat posed by ethnic matching. Findings are discussed in relation to the concept of ‘moral panic’.

Keywords: media; adoption; identity; deracialization; political correctness; reverse racism.

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Adoption of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) children has long been one of the most contentious aspects of social policy in the United Kingdom. In particular, controversy has raged over the respective merits of placing children in ethnically matched families or transracially into white ones (Barn, 2000; Barn and Kirton, 2012). Episodically since the 1980s, the debates have played out in the media spotlight, with strong intervention from politicians and sections of the press as key actors. Despite this involvement, there has been very little analysis of media coverage, a deficit this article seeks to address. Many of the flashpoints have involved cases of individual children and adopters, but here attention is given to press treatment of a wider programme of adoption reforms pursued by the coalition government (2010-2015) in England (child welfare/adoption policy is a devolved issue within the UK).

Of particular interest were the deployment of techniques of racialization and deracialization relating to adoption, and connections between adoption policy and wider social forces. Although the issues are complex, the analysis shows a dominant perspective in which the case for ethnic matching is systematically critiqued through processes of deracialization, while conversely the wider field of adoption is racialized to exaggerate its negative impact.

Historical background

The roots of controversy can be traced to the 1960s and the first concerted efforts to promote adoption for BAME children, previously regarded as unlikely to be adopted due to a presumed absence of minority adopters and wider racial prejudices. The British Adoption Project was regarded as a breakthrough in increasing BAME adoption, and its pattern of recruiting around 80 per cent white adopters continued until the 1980s (Thoburn, Norford,

and Rashid 2000). While transracial adoption (TRA) was congruent with assimilationist principles, it came under challenge from more radical perspectives. Initially in the US and later in the UK, critics argued that children's needs in respect of identity, culture and dealing with racism were often not met in white families, that adoption agencies were making insufficient efforts to recruit BAME families and that TRA was deeply rooted in racialized hierarchy (Small 1982). Led by urban left local authorities and sympathetic voluntary adoption agencies, 'same race' adoption policies were introduced in the early 1980s and as preference at least, largely became an 'orthodoxy' (Ivaldi 2000).

The merits of ethnic matching were always highly contested (Dale 1987) and its associations with the 'loony left' and later political correctness ('PC') ensured a typically hostile media reception. Nonetheless, a duty to give due consideration to 'religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background' was included in the Children Act 1989 (and later the Adoption and Children Act 2002) while the government officially endorsed the principle of ethnic matching in the early 1990s. However, a generally sceptical and antagonistic wider climate remained and successive guidance strengthened warnings that the 'ideal' of ethnic matching must not lead to delay. In opposition during the late 2000s, the Conservative party committed itself to increasing the scale and speed of adoption from state care, with ethnic matching policies identified as a major barrier (Rosemary Bennett. 2008. "Tories vow to remove inter-racial taboo in adoption." *Times*, November 10.). In parallel, the *Times* newspaper ran a campaign, commissioning Martin Narey, former Director General of the Prison Service and Chief Executive of Barnardo's, to write a blueprint report on adoption reform, which included strong critique of prevailing practice in relation to BAME adoption (Martin Narey. 2011. "The Narey Report: A Blueprint for the Nation's Lost Children." *The Times*, July 5.) Almost simultaneously, he was appointed as the government's adviser on adoption. The Conservative-led coalition government initially issued its own strengthened

guidance, but subsequently decided to repeal the legal requirement to consider 'ethnicity' in adoption decisions (Barn and Kirton, 2012).

Research has failed to resolve the controversy surrounding TRA. On the one hand, large-scale surveys have found it to be broadly comparable with other adoptions in relation to variables such as stability, education, employment and psychological measures of self-esteem (Rushton and Minnis 1997; Castle, Knight and Watters 2011). However, more in depth qualitative studies in the US and UK have regularly found that a significant minority of those adopted transracially face difficulties relating to their ethnicized identities (Patton 2000; Samuels 2009; Feast et al. 2013). Support for TRA comes in both 'hard' i.e. 'colour blind' (Hayes 2003) and 'soft' versions, the latter advocating it as a good alternative when BAME adoptive families are not available (Simon and Roorda 2000).

Race, ethnicity and media

Media analysts have identified (while acknowledging its heterogeneity) the prevalence of negative racialized reporting - focusing on issues of crime, welfare 'scrounging', terrorism, asylum and immigration – predominantly framed as (amplified) threat (Cottle 2000; Law 2002). This has often been closely intertwined with moral panics (Cricher, 2008), to which we return later. Conversely, there is usually little interest in minoritized experiences, with the exception of those 'authenticated' BAME voices supporting dominant tropes (Neal 2003). White racial frames, though varied, serve to project a positive national self-image of tolerance and humanistic values (Fortier 2005). Crucial to this is the rejection (outright or through quarantining) of racism, with anti-discrimination stories to establish bona fides.

Alongside historical continuities, wider contextual changes should be acknowledged. Two analytical strands suggest a de-emphasizing of race in the early twenty first century. The

first foregrounds neo-liberalism, arguing that its entrenchment has brought the ‘evaporation’ of race, with the legacy of racism buried (Kapoor 2013; Redclift 2014). A second relates to the rejection of multiculturalism for its promotion of ‘separatism’ and prevention of integration (Lentin and Titley 2011). However, these currents rest on conflicting empirical accounts of racialized relations, pitting ideas of a ‘post-race’ society (from which past inequalities and discrimination have (largely) dissipated) against depictions of growing division and segregation which must be reversed (Johnson 2007).

The Study

This article offers a ‘case study’ in media representation of race and ethnicity, focusing on press treatment of adoption reform in England during the period of coalition government. As noted earlier, BAME adoption has long been a focus of media interest but with very limited (and mostly US) research into coverage (Hollingsworth 2002; Briggs 2003). The focus on (racialized aspects of) adoption reform comes from a wider database of articles in five national daily newspapers (plus their Sunday sister papers) for the years 2010-14, included on the basis of addressing adoption reform either in general terms or specific reform measures. Articles were accessed via the Nexis database (www.nexis.com), which makes full text available but not original layout or pictures. The five newspaper pairings were as follows:

Times/Sunday Times

Guardian/Observer

Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday

Sun/Sun on Sunday

Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror

These papers were chosen to provide a spread on the axes of newspaper market (quality – (Sunday)Times, Guardian/Observer; mid-market – Mail(on Sunday); red top/tabloid - Sun/Sun on Sunday, Mirror/Sunday Mirror) and political leanings (right-wing – Sun/Sun on Sunday; Mail(on Sunday); centre-right (Sunday)Times; centre left/left-wing – Guardian/Observer, Mirror/Sunday Mirror. Other national newspapers were sampled, but it became clear that there was a high degree of saturation in terms of themes and analysis across other titles.

Articles were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) which works to reduce data through a combination of quantitative and qualitative (interpretive) coding. Insights from critical discourse analysis were also applied, although the primary concern was with an ‘overview’ of coverage. The principal aim was to explore patterns of racialization and deracialization in coverage of adoption reform first, as they related to issues of children’s ‘needs’ in respect of race, ethnicity and culture and the capacities of families to meet them, and second, how these debates articulated with wider framings of racialized social relations.

Making up the numbers....

Amid numerous barriers to the government’s aim to increase the scale and speed of adoption, ethnic matching policies were given by far the highest profile in press coverage. Of 361 articles, over 200 referenced this issue and for fifty six articles, race/ethnicity provided the primary frame. The dominant trope is captured in the following quote.

The obsession with ethnicity remains: despite a shortage of ethnic minority adopters and increasing numbers of white adopters, social services still often insist on "ethnic matching" - a form of racism that in any other context would surely be illegal. This is why, in part, 9 out of 10 black children in care never get adopted. (Minette Marrin.

2011. “Sorry, children, these zealots will never let you be adopted.” *Sunday Times*, October 2.)

Concentration on race and ethnicity partly reflects their wider signifying power (compared with other perceived barriers e.g. smoking, obesity, age and arguably class) but also the apparent solid evidence lacking elsewhere. Statistical reporting is over-racialized, first by exaggerating divergence, and second, its contribution to overall adoption figures. The two most cited statistics related to the percentage of children from each broad ‘ethnic’ group (classified as White, Mixed, Asian, Black and Other) adopted from care and their respective timescales. On adoption rates, official statistics (over many years) have shown white and mixed race children being adopted at very similar levels, both 6 per cent of looked after children in 2011-12, compared with figures of 2 per cent for their Black, Asian and Other peers (Department for Education (DfE), 2012). These figures were, however, regularly misreported, either through an exclusive focus on black children or by wrongly including mixed race children in the lower figure. Additionally, there was no questioning of the ratio, which was presented as clear evidence of discrimination on the part of social workers. This allowed journalists and politicians to position themselves as champions of equality for BAME children (“Adoptions reform bid.” *Sun*, February 4 2012.). Formal equality reached its zenith when a local authority was castigated by the DfE over its low adoption rates (Joanna Sugden and Rosemary Bennett. 2011. “For children in need of a family, it all depends where they live.” *Times*, April 22.), despite having a large number of asylum seekers, who at ages sixteen and seventeen were unlikely candidates for adoption, and were simultaneously being told to prepare to leave the country (DfE, 2014). More pertinently, formal equality in adoption ignored alternative routes in and out of care (e.g. return to birth families, kinship care, special guardianship or long-term foster care), which are known to apply more frequently to BAME groups (Owen and Statham 2009).

Reporting of timescales was similarly framed by assumptions of formal equality across ethnic groups and characterised by widespread inaccuracy. In 2011, government data were released showing that compared with white children, mixed race counterparts spent approximately 10 per cent and black children 40 per cent longer in care before adoption (adoptions for Asian children were 10 per cent quicker) (DfE 2011). A clear majority of articles, however, reported this as all BAME groups (often explicitly listed) taking three times longer to be adopted than white peers. This included commentary from Narey and some Times editorials, including one opining on President Obama as a potential mixed race adoptee, solemnly informing readers that “young Barack could linger in care for up to three times as long as his white counterparts” (“Yes we can.” July 9 2011.).

Racialization as a trope was also evident in the regular use of BAME data to explain trends in adoption overall, despite white children comprising 75-80 per cent of those in state care or awaiting adoption. Both historic and recent falls were explained as the result of prejudice against, or proscription of TRA (Amelia Hill. 2011. “Adoptions need to quadruple, says Narey.: Barnardo's chief blames prejudice for decline.” *Guardian*, January 22.), while a later rise was headlined as ‘Adoptions hit 20 year record as mixed race rule is eased’ (Steve Doughty. 2013. *Mail*, September 27.). Yet, in none of these cases had the underlying ethnicized distributions changed. Similarly, adoption reforms relating to race were often described as affecting thousands of children, when statistical parity at the time would have meant a rise (still very significant but much more modest) of around 300 children.

Love is all you need?

In reporting the experiences of adopted people, there was a sharp division between papers, but the focus was almost exclusively on transracial placements. The Times, Mail and Sun

covered several stories, all presenting ostensibly positive pictures of TRA, while the Guardian/Observer published several accounts, almost all problematizing it. The sufficiency of love, stability and security was pivotal to the dispute.

The proposition, voiced by many politicians and pro-reform commentators was that love was “the only thing” or “number one consideration” (Helen Pidd. 2010. “Inter-racial adoption should be promoted – Minister.” *Guardian*, November 2.). In positive TRA narratives (some taken from fostering), this message is played out autobiographically, “a no-brainer” (Hilary Rose. 2011. “How can ethnicity be more important than being loved?.” *Times*, February 12.). Interestingly, none refer to how parents helped them deal with issues relating to race or ethnicity (Barn, 2013), and to varying degrees, most acknowledged difficulties or differences in interactions with other BAME people. One, though strongly endorsing TRA, referred to the importance of a ‘cultural’ input the writer clearly felt she did not receive (Elizabeth Akingbade. 2011. “It’s tragedy kids aren’t adopted because of race.” *Sun*, September 30.). Elsewhere, messages were often those of a deracialized personal resilience.

I was brought up to believe that if you work hard and believe in yourself, you can achieve anything. (Ben Douglas. 2011. “My adoptive parents fought tooth and nail - I’ll be forever grateful that they didn’t give up!.” *Times*, February 19.)

The question arises as to whether these accounts represent ‘authenticated’ BAME voices, ultimately supportive of a dominant white framing and serving to disguise it (Neal 2003). What is clear is that the campaigning Times in particular included only ‘positive’ stories of TRA.

Conversely, the Guardian/Observer could be accused of a negative bias, but their coverage was more mixed and crucially, the only source of critique within the sampled

papers. A majority of accounts highlighted themes of exposure to racism, feelings of disconnection (often from both ‘white society’ and ‘communities of origin’), being poorly prepared by parents and unable to speak with them about issues of race (e.g. Joseph Harker. 2010. “This rush to downplay race ignores the truth of adoption.” *Guardian*, November 3.). Specific reference was made to these experiences being within loving families, underscoring that this alone was insufficient. Personal testimony was backed up by research from the British Chinese Adoption Study (Feast et al. 2013) and used to challenge the government’s downplaying of ethnicity (Mark Townsend. 2013. “How a generation of orphans fared when they were matched to mixed-race couples.” *Observer*, February 3.). In other papers, with occasional exception, such concerns were dismissed with assertions that there was no evidence to support the value of ethnic matching (Tracy McVeigh. 2011. “I’ve seen just how heartless the adoption service can be. We must change it now.” *Observer*, October 2.).

The principal exception, a Times editorial, signalled an intriguing feature of much pro-TRA discourse, namely slippage between positions. It noted that “ethnicity and roots matter enormously to children”, citing supportive research, but segued on via the problems of BAME children remaining in care, to endorsing the US federal prohibition of any consideration of race and ethnicity in adoption decisions (“One Chance: Ministers are grasping the nettle of adoption. They should go even farther.” *Times*, November 2 2010.). Similarly, key players such as Narey and Education Secretary, Michael Gove, oscillated between unexplained acceptance of preference for ethnic matching and a hard ‘colour blind’ approach (James Chapman. 2012. “Gove: I’ll make it illegal to block mixed-race adoption.” *Mail*, February 24.). While this may reflect some ambivalence or uncertainty, it is perhaps best viewed as highly contingent, dependent on the need to appear sensitive/reasonable or tough respectively. An alternative strategy was to locate identity issues firmly in the past, safely superseded in a ‘post-race’ society with its “rainbow mix of children and parents”

(Minette Marrin. 2011. "Public servants' closed minds will thwart mixed-race adoption." *Sunday Times*, February 27.).

The concept of culture has figured prominently in debates on race, ethnicity and adoption and respect for a child's culture of origin has been enshrined in domestic law and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Unsurprisingly, it has also been open to divergent interpretations and in relation to TRA and international adoption tensions between 'museum' and 'lived' versions. Everyday 'cultural differences' (of language, style, taste) were often apparent in adoptees' narratives of disconnection, although these may reflect class differences also (Butler-Sweet 2014; Harris, 2016).

In its adoption usage, culture has been critiqued from a range of perspectives, some concerned about 'essentialist' constructions, others more individualistic and rejecting any presumed connections (Gaber and Aldridge 1994). Yet, here were also clear expressions of hierarchy, as in the following celebration of loss of birth culture, with strong assimilationist undertones.

Who would want to cherish a culture of inferior rights for women and the fear of female circumcision when she could grow up safely in suburbia?..... People are all of equal value, but the same cannot be said of cultures: not all cultures are desirable or admirable. (Minette Marrin. 2011. "Public servants' closed minds will thwart mixed-race adoption." *Sunday Times*, February 27.)

The writer goes on to deride suggestions that white parents can help their children in relation to cultural identity as 'more of the same old town hall political correctness'. Crucially, however, such accounts fail to engage with the power of ascribed identities (Song 2010).

‘Too white....’

Often ‘invisible’, whiteness was strongly present in coverage of prospective adopters, with an over-racialization of the problems they reportedly faced. For although there was critical commentary on a highly bureaucratic (‘Kafkaesque’) recruitment process and various other elements of ‘PC’, by far the most attention was devoted to issues of race and ethnicity.

Reporting of an Adoption UK survey of rejected applicants gives an indication of this:

A quarter of would-be adopters are turned away on making their initial phone call to a local authority. **The reason for this?** More than one in ten such inquirers are told that their ethnicity does not match the children waiting to find a new home. (“Child Support: Britain's adoption system is broken.” *Times*, January 24 2011.) (emphasis added).

This figure equates to roughly 3 per cent of initial approaches, but was reported (often exaggeratedly as 10 per cent of all inquiries) on several occasions and the only specific reason for rejection discussed. Similarly, a clear majority of adopter accounts focused on this issue, with a particular trope of being rejected as “too white”, often accompanied by “middle class” and in one oft-repeated case, “too heterosexual” (Harriet Sergeant. 2010. “Branding families too white to adopt isn't just barmy, it's unspeakably cruel.” *Mail* October 5.). The importance of these markers is evident in the *Times*’s regular reference to readers’ anger driving its campaign and their particular sympathy for those rejected “because they were too white or too middle class” (Rosemary Bennett. 2011. “Times praised for alerting No 10 to the need for action.” *Times*, October 6.).

Given that the overwhelming majority of adopters are white and middle class (and probably heterosexual), this is a powerful inverted construction of victimhood. While rejections on the basis of (mismatched) ethnicity are not infrequent, those on the grounds of

class are almost certainly spurious. Such an interpretation may occur in cases where applicants' lifestyles or expectations have been judged unsuited to taking on children with histories of maltreatment or other special needs. However, these are likely to be quite rare and extremely unlikely to arise, as often claimed, on an initial inquiry. Rather, the coupling (and occasional further embellishment) of race and class serves to highlight the depth of the 'PC' assault. The discourse is one of 'decent couples' with professional careers and good homes as victims. In the words of one adopter, "if you are white and have a decent living, the adoption authorities put you to the bottom of the pile." ("Too white and middle-class." *Mail*, October 31 2011.)

Tellingly, such stories appeared frequently in the *Mail* and *Times*, but were ignored in the left-leaning *Guardian/Observer* and the 'working class' tabloids. Like much coverage, there was in these accounts negligible sense of any challenging elements of TRA, nor of the qualities, experiences and circumstances of adopters in meeting them (see Barn, 2013 for discussion of these challenges in a US context). Reporting often highlighted (a colour blind) willingness to adopt as the key factor. "We don't mind race, colour or creed." ("We, too, know what it's like to face the great PC inquisition." *Mail*, November 26 2012). "Any coloured baby would have been fine by us." (Joanna Sugden. 2010. "They said we were difficult. It was a Kafka nightmare'." *Times*, November 16.)

Yet, as the experiences of adopted adults and more contemporary research attest (Jennings 2006; Ali 2014), willingness alone gives no indication of racial literacy or networks. One of the principal effects of media coverage of thwarted adoption was to over-estimate the scale and scope of interest among white applicants in adopting BAME children. Although there is a paucity of relevant research evidence, practitioners dismissed widespread interest as "a fantasy" (Carol Midgley. 2011. "They need more than just love, they need your

understanding and hard work’.” *Times* May 9.), especially in relation to those (older or with special needs) for whom it is most difficult to find BAME adopters.

An important additional element in many of the adopter stories was a turn to international adoption (IA), captured in articles such as Francesca Polini’s “We had to go to Mexico to escape UK's twisted system.” *Mail*, September 30 2011. Prime Minister David Cameron’s party conference speech, “We've got people flying all over the world to adopt babies, while the care system at home agonises about placing black children with white families”, was widely quoted and the link was made in almost fifty articles despite the small scale of IA in Britain. Though invariably portrayed as successful, international adoptions were framed as a regrettable by-product of flawed domestic adoption and worked primarily as a shaming mechanism. “In one of the richest countries in the world, children are languishing in local authority care while would-be parents travel to China and Eastern Europe to find children to cherish.” (“One Chance: Ministers are grasping the nettle of adoption. They should go even farther.” *Times*, November 2 2010.) The experiences of BAME adopters (typically with unusual ethnic backgrounds) were mainly reported in ways to underscore the rigidities of the system and its alleged insistence on precise ethnic matches, although most had successfully adopted.

Largely absent was any probing of the ‘shortage’ of BAME adopters. One exception was a *Times* article reporting a call from MP Keith Vaz to promote adoption among the Indian diaspora in Britain (Anushka Asthana. 2012. “Vaz urges more Asians to look at adoption.” *Times*, May 19.), and there was brief mention of Action for Children’s dedicated BAME family recruitment service (Rosemary Bennett. 2010. “Adoption changes to sweep away race rules.” *Times*, November 2.). More broadly, however, coverage was in line with the government stance that the solution to more BAME adoptions rested with facilitating TRA rather than more targeted BAME family recruitment (House of Lords 2012, 485).

Dismantling the barriers – deracializing the adoption system

As noted above, practices in relation to race and ethnicity were placed centrally within a broader and overwhelmingly critical coverage of the adoption system. However, commentary occupied a wide spectrum, from accounts that acknowledged ‘good intentions’ underpinning ethnic matching to much more vitriolic denunciations. A majority of accounts eschewed granting any logic to ethnic matching policies, widely supplementing Gove’s “misguided nonsense” epithet (Hugh Muir. 2012. “Social workers' morale 'driven to rock bottom'.” *Guardian*, November 6.) with descriptions such as “scandalous”, “absurd”, “disgraceful” and “shameful”. Importantly, a number of these were supported by erroneous and misleading statistical claims outlined above. In assessing such commentary, much clearly depends on the degree of rigidity within practice, given that critics often accepted the ‘ideal’ or ‘bonus’ of an ethnic match. Law and policy were reported with variable accuracy. As highlighted earlier, adoption law from 2002 onwards required due consideration of religion, race, culture and language, although it was widely portrayed as being misinterpreted or even flouted in order to block TRA. Both the Times and Mail reported a ‘ban’ (implicitly national) on TRA, the latter claiming that this had been in place since the 1990s (“We'll let white families adopt black children pledges the PM.” *Mail*, October 6 2011.).

Evidence on this is extremely sparse and often anecdotal. Snapshot surveys over the past two decades have found between approximately a fifth and a half of BAME adoptions into white families (Ivaldi 2000; Selwyn et al. 2010). Although clearly far short of a national ‘ban’, it should be acknowledged that many of these cases involved those already connected (e.g. foster carers) or children deemed ‘hard to place’ due to age or special needs. There appears sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that at least some agencies ‘routinely’ turn

away white applicants for their BAME children, but the Adoption UK (2010) survey showed that this was far from pervasive. What is also typically unclear is the match-up between those children's needs and the offer of prospective adopters.

Whatever its accuracy, the 'ban' required a 'muscular' response. 'Naming and shaming' recalcitrant local authorities and government threats to remove their adoption powers were widely reported and lauded, and there were many celebratory accounts of dynamic politicians "tearing down" barriers and "sweeping away" or "ripping up" rules. Interestingly, such depictions began well before the announcement of legal change, as in the following response to the government's issuing of new guidance in 2010, which represented only quite modest change.

The Children's Minister Tim Loughton has just earned his place in Heaven. He has finally lifted the barrier preventing white couples from adopting black, Asian or mixed-race children in this country. (Harriet Sergeant. 2010. "Branding families too white to adopt isn't just barmy, it's unspeakably cruel." *Mail* October 5.)

While some papers (especially the Times) and commentators were ready to proclaim victory/ies, others expressed scepticism about any likely change. This appeared to reflect the "deeply engrained" desire for ethnic matching among social workers –and the history of previous promised reforms. According to Minette Marrin ("Public servants' closed minds will thwart mixed-race adoption." *Sunday Times*, February 27 2011.):

Gove might just as well be spitting in the wind. I remember Paul Boateng, health minister in the early months of the Blair regime, solemnly promising that he would do something about the political correctness surrounding adoption. I was sure at the time he meant it, but nothing happened.

Adoption, race and society

Controversy over adoption has always drawn upon, and contributed to wider perspectives on race and ethnicity, recognition of discrimination or racism and the shape of counter measures. For papers other than the Guardian/Observer, the overwhelming pattern was to play down the significance of race and relatedly, critique those who over-emphasized it.

The language of ‘colour blindness’ was invoked as aspiration, especially by government spokespersons, if as observed earlier, not always consistently. “It seems to me that in so many other ways we say colour doesn't matter any more, so why should it matter in bringing up a child?” (Narey, as quoted in Joanna Moorhead and Hugh Muir. 2010. The truth about inter-racial adoption, *Guardian*, November 3.) Again as reported above, favourable comparisons were drawn with the US where federal law proscribes any consideration of race in adoption decisions. Yet racial equivalence serves as a means to obscure the significance of race and asymmetries of power (Song 2014). It offers an important liberal tool, allowing the demonstration of opposition to racism while offering no challenge to historical and/or structural inequalities.

The techniques of equivalence appeared in several articles, with for example, columnist Rod Liddle welcoming the potential loss of racial identity in TRA: “We have too much of a sense of racial identity in this country, black and white.” (“Ban on mixed race adoption is racism.” *Sun*, November 3 2011.) Referring to rejection of applicants because they were white, Narey contended that if this happened to black prospective adopters “we'd put social workers in handcuffs” (Randeep Ramesh. 2011. “Adoption: Initiative launched to find homes for black children in care system.” *Guardian*, October 3.). He and others also spoke of TRA in ‘vice-versa’ terms. Such equivalences de-contextualize the issues in two senses. First, the rationale for ethnic matching sprang from concern about discrimination and

minoritized identities in ways that would not apply to children from majority backgrounds. Second, with extremely rare exceptions, TRA has been a one-way process and indeed other articles readily accepted that the central issue was the position of white adopters (Minette Marrin. 2011. “Public servants' closed minds will thwart mixed-race adoption.” *Sunday Times*, February 27.).

Liberal credentials were also deployed in the unfavourable comparison between the embrace of same sex adoption (arguably exaggerated) and continuing opposition to TRA, generating some strained implicit equivalence, with same sex and white adopters as (historic) victims of discrimination. (Jack O’Sullivan. 2013. “Children and families bill: our panel responds.” *Guardian*, February 5.).

In a similar vein, various facets of ‘mixedness’ were utilized to critique ethnic matching. The Mail declared the rising mixed race population “a rebuke” to those seeking to prevent the formation of mixed race families through adoption (Steve Doughty. 2011. “Immigration 'Boosted the UK Population’.” *Mail*, May 19.). ‘Mixedness’ is seen as both as decreasing the ‘visibility’ of TRA and as a signifier of an increasingly ‘post-race’ society. Against this, opposition to TRA was cast as reactionary. “Society seems to have changed much faster than the mentality of social workers.” (Minette Marrin. 2011. “Sorry, children, these zealots will never let you be adopted.” *Sunday Times*, October 2.) This elision of mixed race relationships and adoption has a long history (Tizard and Pheonix 1993), but alongside the familial similarities, obscures important differences including those arising from racialized adult and child relationships and extended family networks.

The complexities of ‘superdiversity’ were also cited to claim the “virtual impossibility” of perfect ethnic matches. “How easy is it to find parents who match a child who is a quarter Portuguese, quarter English and half Ghanaian?” (Cherry Wilson. 2011. “We

thought we were perfect to adopt a child in need - but we didn't get past the first hurdle.” *Mirror*, October 18.) One writer argued that the emphasis on matching was such as to “deny almost every mixed-race child a home” (Camilla Cavendish. 2010. “Broken adoption system. Grown-ups needed.” *Times*, 18 November.). Yet, while over-zealous pursuit of highly unusual ethnic mixes can give rise to difficulties for some children (Selwyn et al. 2010), as reported earlier, mixed race children as a group have very similar adoption rates and timescales to white British peers.

‘Reverse racism’

In opposition to commentators’ self-presentation as compassionate and the declining significance of race, support for ethnic matching was cast as racist in a number of ways. In several critical articles, it was tagged as (one of) the only area(s) of British life where discrimination is still tolerated/lawful (Steve Doughty. 2011. “Two million of mixed race living in Britain.” *Mail*, October 7.). Yet, setting aside the status of adoption vis a vis employment, it might be argued that ethnic matching has obvious parallels with a ‘genuine occupational requirement’ as defined under equality law, with its emphasis on welfare and cultural needs and sensitivities. However, ethnic matching was frequently declared simply to be racist (Rod Liddle. 2011. “Ban on mixed race adoption is racism.” *Sun*, November 3.). Although such verdicts were sometimes linked to perceived negative effects for BAME children, most appeared to rest more on a principled objection to the use of race or ethnicity in decisions and the associated ‘separatism’ implied.

Use of language arguably gives a more powerful sense of reverse racism. In particular, terms were chosen to maximize both the ‘racist’ nature of ethnic matching and the irony of its being supposedly ‘anti-racist’. By far the most commonly used word was

“apartheid” which appeared in sixteen articles in total – all in the Mail and Times/Sunday Times - including several headlines. The related terms of “colour bar” and “race bar” were also used and frequent references to rejections based on “skin colour” also served to underscore the colour racism involved. There are of course, genuine points at issue here, but crucially, such characterisations did not engage with the complexities of power, racialized hierarchy or defensive ‘separation’, instead offering a ‘common sense’ definition of racism (Barn and Kirton, 2012).

Counter-narratives?

Counter-narratives were relatively rare and found almost exclusively in the Guardian/Observer (see e.g. Celia Burke. 2013. “Will adoption reforms improve the system?” *Guardian*, March 1). Most focused on the personal and familial challenges of TRA, notably as shaped by experiences of racism, and were framed in opposition to the government’s determination to downplay the significance of race. Against a mainstream approach that depoliticized and deracialized the emergence of, and support for, ethnic matching, a Guardian article highlighted the role of minority social workers and activists (Hugh Muir. 2012. “Social workers' morale 'driven to rock bottom'.” *Guardian*, November 6.). Additionally, a small number of articles reported positive comment on the value of ethnic matching. However, there was little comment on the record of adoption agencies in recruiting BAME adopters, or the historic contribution of ethnic matching policies to recruitment. Likewise, there was no discussion of reservations regarding formal adoption found among many Muslims and those of African descent, which were an important factor behind the introduction of special guardianship (involving a less complete and irreversible transfer of parental responsibility) under the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Discussion

In concluding the article, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. These arise particularly from its ‘overview’ focus which inevitably fails to capture the nuances of many press articles and their divergent authorship. Nevertheless, there is value in such an overview in illuminating the construction of meanings and setting of emotional tone in coverage. This includes here the distinct place of the Guardian/Observer as sources for critical comment in a press otherwise overwhelmingly supportive of government reform. Additionally, despite some investigative journalism (Sambrook, 2012), it is not possible to fully chart or evaluate the significance of networked connections between the Rupert Murdoch owned Times and government regarding the roles of Martin Narey or Michael Gove as Education Secretary who has held various positions at the paper. Yet as Sambrook argues, these links raise important questions about private interests appearing to drive public policy.

As regards the press coverage itself, it can be seen that a majority shares many of the principal characteristics of ‘moral panic’ as set out initially by Cohen (1973) and later in the work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009). In his classic study of reaction to clashes between ‘Mods’ and ‘Rockers’, Cohen emphasises the role of the mass media in constructing, in stylized and stereotypical terms, these groups as threats or ‘folk devils’. This may be reinforced by the activities and commentary of ‘moral entrepreneurs’ and politicians attempting to defend social norms and building pressure for punitive responses. Although far from inevitable, the latter may in turn prompt further deviant behaviour and punitive measures in a cyclical pattern. These features are readily apparent in the present study, with crude stereotypes of social workers and strong TRA advocacy from Narey as a moral entrepreneur and a range of politicians. Collectively, these and press coverage articulated the unacceptable nature of social work practice in respect of BAME adoption and backed by

varying degrees of threat, pressed the need for radical change, eventually expressed in legal reform. There is a paucity of evidence to gauge the impact of these measures, though there has been little change in the relative scale of BAME adoption (DfE, 2018).

In their model, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) set out five key characteristics of moral panic, which can be considered as follows. *Concern* is generated over the perceived practices of social workers in thwarting TRA. These are constructed as deviant both for their alleged flouting of law and guidance, and through adherence to ‘PC’, a threat to the moral order. While some concern rests with the impact on BAME children, as the Times reported, it is primarily the treatment of white, middle class applicants that angered its readers.

Hostility is readily apparent towards social workers and local authorities, with the former being variously described as ‘mutton-headed’, ‘barmy’ and ‘cruel’ among other epithets. To demarcate the boundaries of ‘us and them’, a *consensus* is projected. Key elements of this ‘common sense’ include views of racial/ethnic identity for BAME children (and adults) that, to varying degrees, deny or minimise its significance in adoptive family life. With the limited exception of coverage in the Guardian/Observer, there is no grappling with the ‘complex, challenging and at times, very painful’ experiences of TRA as articulated by Harris (2016, 209). Similarly, the substantial challenges, including of networks and social capital, posed to white families adopting BAME children receive little recognition (Barn, 2013; 2018). Such deracialization is linked to claims regarding an increasingly mixed, post-race society, and forceful assertions of formal equality and equivalence, against which support for ethnic matching is portrayed as a form of ‘reverse racism’.

While *disproportion* is always difficult to judge, press coverage provided clear evidence of threat amplification, typically through processes of racialization. Beyond the regular claims of a national ban on TRA and presenting accounts from aggrieved adopters as

typical of applicants' experiences, perhaps the most striking example comes from the frequent misreporting of statistics. This invariably worked to exaggeratedly problematize the scale and speed of BAME adoptions, to offer racialized interpretations of trends where no such link existed, or to heighten the sense of white applicants being rejected. Whatever the degree of intent, such threat amplification was crucial in justifying calls for strong action from politicians. As Wise (2000) observes in the context of sexual orientation, moral panic can serve as a useful device for underpinning and organising backlash, where previously taken for granted privileges are challenged, and this seems apposite for treatment of BAME adoption.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda's final characteristic is that of *volatility*. Controversy surrounding BAME adoption has typically revolved around individual children and families, often fierce but relatively short lived. In this instance, linked to a wider campaign of adoption reform, it was sustained over a much longer time period. However, it is noteworthy that since the passing of legislative change in 2014, the issue has attracted minimal attention from media or government, despite a lack of change in adoption rates.

While in some respects BAME adoption, with its complex child and family dynamics and perceived discriminations, represents an atypical example for media reporting of race issues, more established patterns in the use of deracialization and racialization to deflect anti-racist critique and amplify threat to (white) liberal values are readily discernible. Debates were dominated by white voices, whether those of key politicians or appointees, child welfare spokespersons, editors and journalists (largely reflecting the ethnic make-up of these professions), or adopters. In most papers, only supportive BAME voices were aired, including coverage given to former equalities chief, Trevor Phillips and his regrets over not challenging ethnic matching policies ("We're all fallible, says the Pope of PC." *Sunday Times*, May 19.). Compared with the time of their introduction in the 1980s, ethnic matching

policies had markedly fewer (BAME) champions, and received negligible positive coverage or recognition as a product of anti-racist struggle. The debates were thus to a significant extent white middle class struggles over (dis)entitlement to parent BAME children. The question of voice is important for two reasons. First, amid heterogeneous views on ethnic matching, research in both the US and the UK has found its general level of support markedly higher among BAME respondents than white counterparts (Barn and Kirton, 2012). Second, while not all would accept the proposition that ethnicized communities should hold sway in judging the interests of children, it is difficult to defend a situation where the latter takes place within a ‘moral economy of whiteness’ (Garner 2015).

None of the above is to deny potential problems within the logic of ethnic matching and sometimes more so, its practice. Critics highlight that it may enshrine ‘essentialist’ notions of identity, and lead to crude mismatches when race, ethnicity and culture do not coincide (Gaber and Aldridge 1994). Similarly, if it is accepted that some white families may parent BAME children very effectively, then routine screening out based on ethnicity represents a loss. Despite the media portrayal of social workers ‘obsessed’ with ethnicity, research suggests that attention is often under-developed and formulaic in terms of children’s needs (Selwyn et al. 2010). These dangers are far from inevitable, however, and they point to the need for a more sophisticated treatment and dialogue on complex issues. Yet, the framing within mainstream press coverage, which remains tightly confined by favoured, well-established tropes, highlights the need for an ongoing struggle to create the necessary space for such debate.

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