Matching, Ethnicity and Identity: Reflections on the practice and realities of ethnic matching in adoption

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Abstract

Ethnicity and adoption has taken centre stage in the coalition government's focus on child care social policy in the UK. The current political perspective is one of promoting the placement of children of minority ethnic heritage with white families, in order to avoid delay in adoption where no families of a similar ethnic heritage are available. This paper reflects on the contemporary debate by discussing the findings from a commissioned service evaluation of an adoption agency that specialised in recruiting families of black, Asian and dual heritage and placing children of black and minority ethnic (BME) heritage. This service evaluation provides evidence that focusing on recruiting BME individuals and families and matching them with children of similar heritage can be effective. The evaluation utilized mixed methods including interviews with staff in the service, prospective and current adopters, and statistical information that informed an understanding of the type of ethnic matches made.

Comparison was also made with a general adoption service within the commissioning agency using the same data collection methods.

Drawing on the evidence from this evaluation and the wider research literature on adoption and ethnicity, this paper examines the reality and nuances of ethnic matching in practice, and the problematic notion of focusing on ethnicity as a key factor in placing BME children with adoptive families. It highlights issues of flexibility and pragmatism in relation to the increasingly complex notion of ethnicity, particularly when placing children of dual or mixed heritage.

Introduction

The issue of ethnicity and adoption in children's services has long been, and continues to be, a controversial and complex area of child care practice. Against this backcloth, this paper explores some of the themes and issues that arose from an evaluation of a specialist adoption project that focused on the matching of black and minority ethnic (BME) and dual[1] heritage children with BME parents (Ridley and Wainwright, 2010).

The main purpose of this evaluative study was to assess the effectiveness of an independent specialist adoption project in developing, supporting and encouraging adoptive parents (and families) from BME backgrounds to provide permanent homes for children in need of adoption. This project specialized in recruiting a range of adopters from Black, Asian[2], minority ethnic and dual heritage backgrounds, and also, in matching adoptive families with 'looked after' children needing adoptive placements from BME backgrounds.

[1] This term is used to explain an identity and/or relationships that comprises of two or more ethnicities. For instance, Bangladeshi and English, or Ghanian and Jamaican. Importantly, the authors have avoided using the term 'mixed' as this implies 'races' are fixed real entities and that 'mixing' them is a result of two different 'races'.

[2] Asian is used as a generic identity for people of heritage from the Indian sub-continent, for instance, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian. Whilst it is an inadequate description, it is sometimes important to differentiate between Black (African/Caribbean) and Asian, when using the term Black and Minority Ethnic.

Background and context: Ethnicity and adoption in the UK

The 2010 election of a Conservative-led coalition government in the UK has resulted in renewed controversy and interest in the child care practices related to adoption and ethnicity. Michael Gove, the Education Minister, launched the government's new policy by arguing that too often children of BME and dual heritage are not placed for adoption because of some local authorities' preference to wait for a placement that is an exact ethnic match:

> *'I won't deny that an ethnic match between adopters and child can be a bonus. But it is outrageous to deny a child the chance of adoption because of a misguided belief that race is more important than any other factor. And it is simply disgraceful that a black child is three times less likely to be adopted from care than a white child.*' (Gove/Department for Education, 2012)

The Minister's statement and the subsequent promotion of trans-ethnic[3] adoption, meaning the placement of BME children with white families, are based on two cornerstones of government policy. These are, that speeding up the process of adoption and rewarding local authorities for the placement of children for adoption is more financially 'cost effective' than placing them in foster care or residential accommodation. Secondly, that the issue of ethnicity should not be placed above

[3] Trans-ethnic adoption is used as a term to describe the placement of children of BME and dual heritage with usually white adoptive parents/families. The term commonly used is Trans-racial adoption (TRA), but use of this term implies that 'race' is a valid concept, not one that is socially constructed to differentiate and discriminate. Whilst, ethnicity has its own limitations, it more appropriately articulates the levels of difference, complexity and nuance of an individual's and/or community's identity.

the overall needs of a child in adoption policy (Loughton, 2011). In contrast, the coalition government promoted a return to trans-ethnic adoption to address the disproportionate number of children of BME and dual heritage that are waiting for an adoptive placement (Department for Education, 2011). However, underpinning this move to reverse adoption policy to a pro trans-ethnic position is an ideological view that to integrate minority ethnicities into wider society, even within the small family unit, will contribute to a more cohesive sense of Britishness or Englishness (Cantle, 2001). Policies of multiculturalism (Modood, 2004; Parekh, 2006) have long been seen by the Conservatives as undermining the British national character (Barker, 1981, Cameron, 2011).

Over the past 50 years in the UK, policies of adoption and ethnicity has shifted from one position, that of trans-ethnic placements, to the polar opposite, matching the ethnicity of adopters and children. The coalition government's pre-occupation with trans-ethnic adoption at the beginning of the 2010's marks a further shift. The practice of trans-ethnic adoption began in small numbers in the 1950s and increased significantly in the 1960s, involving the children of new migrants coming to the UK, initially from the Caribbean then Africa and Asia (Gaber, 1994). By the 1970s, trans-ethnic adoption had become an established practice in the UK (Kirton, 2000), which according to Triseliotis et al*,* (1997), was due to both a lack of minority ethnic adopters and an over representation of BME children in care.

There was little recognition that children from BME backgrounds may have had different placement needs to their white majority ethnic peers, and even less discussion of the related need to recruit and match them with BME adopters (Kirton,

2000). It took the intervention of the Association of Black Social Workers in the UK, calling trans-ethnic adoption 'internal colonialism' (ABSWAP 1983 in Gaber and Aldridge, 1994:206), and an evident lack of BME foster carers and adoptive parents, for local authorities to consider a change of policy to one of ethnic matching (Rhodes, 1991, 1992). In the context of anti-racist practice, many have argued that earlier failures to recruit BME adopters were a result of institutional racism where social service interventions often pathologised and were punitive towards black families, for instance, placing their children on the child protection register and/or the removal of their children into the care of the local authority. This inevitably led to reluctance, particularly from African Caribbeans, to engage with adoption/social work agencies (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005; Small, 1986; Sunmonu, 2000).

Policies and legislation

The importance of adoption and the placement of BME children were placed firmly on the public agenda by New Labour with the then Prime Minister's Adoption Review (2000), which highlighted that BME children remained amongst the most difficult children to place (Charles et al*,* 1992; Thoburn et al*,* 2000). Without trans-ethnic adoption as an appropriate option through which to place BME children, and in light of the continued shortage of BME adopters, the numbers of BME children 'looked after' have continued to grow. This has led to renewed debate concerning whether legislation and policies which have encouraged practice towards ethnically matched placements (DoH 2003), have resulted in more BME children having to wait an undue length of time for placement over the last 30 years (Gaber,1994; Loughton, 2011; Rushton and Minnis,1997; Selwyn et al, 2010).

More recently, statutory adoption guidance (Department for Education, 2011) from the coalition government has placed trans-ethnic adoption centrally back on the agenda as good adoption policy and practice (Loughton, 2011), with the UK Prime Minister committing to new legislation to ensure that policies of ethnic matching do not impede the adoption of dual heritage children to white families (Community Care, 2012).

Outcomes for adopted black and minority ethnic children

An important question for a study on ethnic matching is whether children matched in this way experience significantly better psycho-social outcomes in their childhood and adult life than those who are not. Research suggests that, for both fostering and adoption, ethnic matching has been found to be a successful way to place children and provide BME children with stable and settled placements. Crucially, it is argued that ethnically matched placements encourage and nurture a positive black identity within BME children, which is seen as central to their well-being (Small, 1982, 2000; Thoburn et al, 2000). However, there is also a wealth of research that suggests that trans-ethnic placements can also be successful in terms of outcomes, including rates of placement breakdown, psycho-social outcomes (for instance, successful relationships in school), and in coping with racism (McRoy et al, 1997; Thoburn et al, 2000).

Further, in both the US and UK, many studies have found no relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity, and conclude that trans-ethnic adoptees do not suffer any more adverse outcomes with regard to ethnic identity than do their peers in comparison groups (McRoy et al, 1997; Moffatt and Thoburn, 2001; Simon and Alstein, 1987, 1996; Thoburn et al, 2005; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). Even though earlier studies reported that white parents of trans-ethnically adopted children did not promote a positive sense of children's ethnic identity, with many BME and dual heritage children viewing themselves as 'white', they nonetheless concluded that trans-ethnic placements were successful. Children in these placements scored as well, if not better than children in ethnically matched placements, on various outcome indicators of placement success (Bagley, 1993: 294; Bagley and Young, 1979; Gill and Jackson, 1983:132). However, the question of whether BME children should be ethnically matched or not, cannot simply be resolved by research findings alone, as at the centre of the argument are the rights of BME communities to maintain their own cultures and bring up their children within these, which are moral and ethical issues (Quinton, 2012).

Despite early studies concluding that trans-ethnic adoptees have no worse outcomes than children in ethnically matched placements, nearly all of the researchers and commentators on this topic have, up until now, recommended that wherever possible, children should be placed with ethnically and culturally similar families (e.g. Adoption and Children Act 2002; Banks, 1995; Children Act 1989; Gill and Jackson, 1983; Selwyn et al 2004, 2006; Thoburn et al, 2000, 2005; Zeitline, 2003). Although not all involved in the debate would agree with this (Bagley, 1993; Simon and Alstein, 2001), there does seem to be a consensus that one of the best ways forward

in this field is to recruit more BME adopters (Banks, 1995; Simon and Alstein, 2001; Thoburn et al. 2000, 2005; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993; Zeitline, 2003).

More recent commentators in the UK are more equivocal about the conclusions that can be drawn. There does however, appear to be a consensus that trans-ethnic placements can be as successful in outcomes for adopted children, including later in adult life, as those that are matched on ethnicity (Selwyn et al, 2010; Thoburn et al, 2000; Quinton, 2012).

This paper aims to contribute to the contemporary debate on ethnic matching versus trans –ethnic placements by reflecting on the findings of an evaluation commissioned by a national children's charity to investigate the effectiveness of an independent specialist adoption project designed to support and encourage black and other minority ethnic group parents and families to provide permanent homes for children in need of adoption.

Methodology

The methods used for this evaluation predominantly involved collecting qualitative data through in-depth interviews, focus groups, an internet survey, documentary analysis and observation. Qualitative methods were considered the best way to explore individual experiences, and perspectives in all their diversity and complexity (Temple, 1998). To complement these methods, existing statistical information held by the specialist project was collated, permitting fresh analysis of, for instance, the

characteristics of both the children who were placed and the adopters recruited. For comparison, a similar range of data was also gathered from adopters and professionals involved with another of the agency's adoption projects.

Participants

A range of key stakeholders participated in the study including adopters, social work staff, panel members and local authority social workers and managers. Adopters' viewpoints were obtained through a variety of methods: fourteen adopters were interviewed, six adopters participated in a focus group and four adopters completed a postal questionnaire. In addition, records from the specialist project in respect of sixteen adoptive families were examined and information on the characteristics of 78 BME adopters and the 96 children placed with them were analysed. The records of seventeen children from the comparison site were also examined.

All the social workers, managers and administrators in both the adoption projects were either interviewed or took part in focus groups. Additionally, members of the specialist project's adoption panel were interviewed and agreed to one of the researchers observing a decision making meeting. A total of 30 local authority social workers across England who had recently referred a child to one or both services responded to an online survey.

Interviews were not conducted with children (all of whom were under five years), but records for sixteen children were examined, and information about the

characteristics of children placed by either service were analysed. A summary of the overall numbers of participants by type is shown in Table 1.

Analysis of statistical information and reports

Placement statistics from April 2004 to September 2009 were examined in order to provide a detailed picture of the children placed with the adopters in both services. In addition, data about enquirers to the specialist project over a one-year period from October 2008-2009 were analysed to look at reasons for not proceeding as adopters. Finally, published materials from each service were obtained to aid understanding of processes and strategies for promoting the services to target populations.

Findings

Flexible Matching

The specialist project staff explained that while they would not encourage a trans-ethnic placement because of the arguments against them highlighted above, they were not rigid within the context of ethnically matched placements. The goal was to achieve a holistic match rather than a match based solely on ethnicity. This was explained by the specialist project manager:

> *"I think it is looking at the needs of the children and obviously the culture and heritage that takes part in that. We have placed children where they don't*

closely match in terms of culture and heritage, but then in doing so it is looking at what resources the adopters have to ensure that the child's culture and heritage will be promoted. We also look at, there's a matching consideration because that goes in detail when doing the assessment, in terms of what the adopters feel they are able to cope with to care for a child with certain conditions, or parental history…We make sure that people (adopters) are not just attracted by the picture and forget all the underlying issues that come with the child." (African/Caribbean Manager – specialist project)

This flexible and holistic approach to achieving a 'good match', which involved considering a range of criteria in the various matching proformas, in accordance with known good practice (Quinton, 2012; Dance et al, 2010), was also evidenced by some of the adopters' responses. The experience of ethnic matching was explained positively by some adoptive parents because they felt the similarities, the 'same raceness', as they put it, outweighed any cultural variance. However, other adopters, who had a similar experience in terms of not having an exact ethnic match, viewed this more ambivalently:

"When it actually came to matching us with a child, there were few, if any, children of Hindu religion or ethnicity and all the Asian/white children that actually came up mostly seemed to come from Muslim families, and we weren't particularly worried about that if we didn't have to bring them up as Muslims...I suppose we felt rather pressurised into a little bit having to

*compromise on what our ideals and expectations had been." (*Adopter – Asian/Indian – specialist project*)*

Some adoptive parents' ethnicities and/or religions proved more difficult to find an exact match for because the needs of the children requiring adoption did not fit easily. In the same way, some children from specific ethnicities were difficult to find an appropriate match for because adopters of this ethnicity had not come forward. As the manager of the specialist project explained:

"We don't have a great pool of Chinese adopters, but saying that I don't think we've seen a lot of profiles of children…At the moment we have a restriction on Asian, or Asian and white, who are of Sikh or Hindu religion, simply because of the limited number of children... Although we have been able to place some, we have some adopters who have waited a long time, whereas there seems to be a greater number [of children] of Pakistani or Muslim religion, so those families are not hard to match." (African/Caribbean Manager – specialist project))

The potential for ethnic matching was as much about the needs of the children requiring adoption at any one time as it was about the desire to achieve a perfect match for available adopters. Further, other criteria were just as central to the process as ethnicity, including the child's health needs and/or disability; whether the

child had been neglected or abused; and aspects of the birth parents' history, such as whether they had been abusing drugs or alcohol.

Where there were significant numbers of children in need of a placement, there was far greater flexibility in matching children and adopters. This was particularly the case for children of black African/Caribbean and dual heritage African/Caribbean and white children:

> *"There is a fair amount of freedom that really the key thing was you showed you could meet the needs of the child, your ethnic needs and identity needs in a sense that therefore wasn't restricted to you know…African/English mix."*
> *(*Adopter / Caribbean – specialist project*)*

Prospective adopters often referred to how the specialist project staff encouraged them to think as flexibly as possible, to shape their expectations around their own needs, but most importantly, around the needs of the child. This applied to the more general matching criteria (for example, health issues), but also to the criteria for ethnic matching.

Some adopters referred to the project's and the local authority's lack of knowledge about the identity of one or both of the child's birth parents. This had a significant impact on the matching process, because there was no certainty regarding the

ethnicity of a child(ren), which therefore hampered decision making about the suitability of particular adopters. One adopter recalled their experience:

> *"A lot of the time they don't know and I had loads of forms where they'd say, 'well the mother is this because we know about her, that doesn't mean to say she necessarily knows what her ethnicity is, but we have no idea...you know, the father has vanished', whether he's Caribbean, whether he is African…"*
> (Adopter – Caribbean - specialist project)

Where an ethnic and religious match or fit was not possible, the most important criteria for matching was that the prospective adopters had the ethnic, religious and cultural sensitivity to bring up their adopted child(ren) to appreciate, understand and value their own birth ethnicity and religion. This has implications for the duration of the assessment, training and preparation of prospective adopters, as it is important for them to develop a good understanding of the ethnicity and culture of the child(ren) that they may adopt. Whilst the coalition government is committed to speeding up the adoption process (Department for Education, 2011), it could be argued that enabling prospective adopters to have a good understanding of ethnicity and identity issues may serve to prolong it (Dance et al, 2010).

The majority (70%) of social workers and managers who had referred to the specialist project expressed themselves as either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the project's adoption matching and placing of BME children. Further, the same

proportion of survey respondents stated that the project was successful at matching BME children's needs with suitable adopters, and 40% of these felt they were 'very successful' at this.

Resilience against racism

Whilst a good ethnic 'fit' or match was desirable, the rationale was to provide a secure, safe home for a child that enabled them to develop a positive sense of self and resilience against discrimination they may experience because of their ethnicity. As one manager stated:

> *"'If you look at a child, a mixed race African/Caribbean-white child or Asian-white child and you place them in another broadly speaking black family, they are going to experience less racism in my view than they would if they were placed elsewhere."* (white Manager, comparator project)

Therefore, ethnic matching was centrally about ensuring that the child would be secure in being able to deal with racism that they might experience. The issue of flexibility in matching was prefaced with an understanding that the primary importance was to secure a placement with prospective adopters that simultaneously developed a positive sense of ethnic identity in the adopted child, while developing the necessary coping mechanisms and resilience to cope with racism.

It is suggested that BME adoptive parents are able to nurture and provide a context for nurturing resilience against racism, in contrast to a placement with some white adoptive parents that may potentially not be able to do this (Small, 2000). This is because the psycho-social elements that are viewed as helping to produce a positive ethnic and cultural identity, such as personal experience of racism, and preparedness to deal with discrimination in the wider community, may not be available to some white adoptive parents bringing up trans-ethnically placed children (Hollingsworth, 1997; Rushton and Minnis, 1997).

Physical resemblance

Physical resemblance (or lack of it) is a central element of the life long process of adoption for both the adopted child and the prospective parents as similar appearance may enable a child adopted into a family of similar ethnicity to be seen by outsiders to 'fit in'. Both staff and prospective adopters identified physical similarity as a key element in successful matching. There was only one exception to this viewpoint, and this was from the manager of the comparator project who argued that an adoption should be about meeting a child's needs, not a substitute birth child that physically resembled the adoptive parents.

A staff member from the comparator project raised the issue of the importance of physical resemblance between prospective adopters and adoptees:

"On a very simple level, the children do have to look like the family in order to fit with that family, because if they are very different in looks then you know that is an added dimension to it all." (Specialist project staff, African/Caribbean)

Physical resemblance was considered by the specialist project in the matching of a child of dual heritage whose birth father was of Iraqi/Kurdish origin and Muslim, and birth mother white British Romany, with adopters of South Asian and white British heritage. The adopters did not view themselves as religious and had indicated a willingness to be flexible regarding religious practices. A match was seen as acceptable because both adopters and child were of dual heritage and so assumed to have some ethnic compatibility. In other words, although the adoptive parent and child did not have exactly the same ethnic heritage, there was a physical resemblance, as both could be described as dual heritage Asian/Arabic and white.

Discussion

Some key themes emerged from this comparative study. The first is that adopters' connectedness and matching with a child is strongly associated with physical resemblance between them. This finding poses interesting questions regarding the philosophy and values of matching, and whether positive outcomes in adoption placement are more likely if they share physical similarities that help them to identify with the family that they are placed because it helps them to feel that they belong,

both physically and emotionally. In other words, whether matching a child with a family should seek to ensure resemblance as a key factor so that both child and adoptive parents feel that there is a good 'fit', and that they belong by virtue of appearance as well as in other ways.

Emphasis on resemblance by adoptive parents may, however, detract from placing the adopted child's needs at the centre of decision making in the matching process (Quinton, 2012). Nonetheless, acknowledging the importance of resemblance, particularly in the context of ethnically matched placements in contrast to trans-ethnic ones, does raise the issue of (in)visibility, that is, of fitting into a family and a community of a certain ethnicity. For placements where the adoptive parents and children are of the same ethnicity, the child matched will have the psychological and emotional security that they do not present as visibly different from other family members or those in the wider community. The importance of physical resemblance is highlighted when adult adoptees embark on a search for their birth family since they are reported often to comment on the similarities of mannerisms and features they share with members of their birth family (Harris, 2006; Quinton, 2012). Physical resemblance in trans-ethnic placements is an oxymoron, impossible to realise, because BME children placed with white parents will always present as different, visible, and not appearing to fit into the adoptive family (Harris, 2006).

Flexibility and a child's identity

Many of the ethnic matches that the specialist project made between prospective BME adopters and BME children were a good 'fit,' or at least clearly compatible. In other words, the ethnicity, culture and religion of the adopters and child were similar. Nevertheless, there were several examples of this not being the case, where the ethnicity, culture and/or religion of the adopters and child were very different. The rationale for this was that in those cases where an exact match was not possible, the priority was to ensure that a child would be brought up by their adoptive parents with a clear sense of *identity,* who they are, what their ethnic background is, and an understanding and appreciation of their birth parents' religion(s). In this way, adoptive parent(s) with broadly the same heritage, for example, dual heritage white English/African, would be viewed as a possible match for a child of white English/ Caribbean dual heritage, with the same religion.

Focusing on an identity that broadly reflected the child's ethnicity highlights the importance accorded to developing a positive Black or Asian identity for a child as they grow up and become familiar with individuals and communities from similar ethnic and cultural background. A positive Black identity can also enhance the development of resilience to experiences of racism in the wider society (Small, 2000). In trans-ethnic placements, the fostering of a positive ethnic identity may be more complex and challenging to achieve, which may result in the adopted child reaching adulthood and feeling ambivalent about their identity (Gill and Jackson, 1983; Silverman, 1993; Vroegh, 1991).

On many human, political and theoretical levels, taking a flexible approach to matching ethnicity is a laudable stance because the matches focus more on the commonalities between ethnicities, not the differences. Conversely, this flexibility could be viewed as contrary to the philosophy and ethos of ethnically matched placements, as the match is based on general ethnic characteristics, phenotype and/or geography.

Where matches between adopters and child(ren) appear therefore to have been made for pragmatic reasons, the nuances of ethnicity can be lost under the guise of flexibility. This point is acknowledged by Selwyn et al (2010:19) who argue that the ever increasing diversity of dual heritage birth parents provides adoption agencies with 'formidable' conceptual and practical difficulties when trying to establish an exact ethnic match between children and adoptive parents. More flexible matches, as well as the more straightforward ethnic 'fits', were made by the adoption projects evaluated in the study that informs this paper, ensuring that adopted BME children were placed in BME families who could enable them to develop resilience against racism (Barn, 2000, 2003; Thoburn et al, 2000).

Towards a nuanced understanding of ethnicity

In light of the ever increasing and myriad dual ethnicities emerging (Barn and Harman, 2006; Hall, 1991; Modood, 1994), the policy and practice of flexible matches may make increasing sense. This is in part a consequence of the UK being a large, diverse multi-ethnic/cultural country, but also because ethnicities and

communities are constantly merging and mixing to create new and different dual ethnicities and cultures (Ali, 2003). Thus further dialogue and debate is needed regarding how adoption services best respond to this context (Hall, 1991; Harman and Barn, 2005; Selwyn et al, 2010).

There are particular implications for adoption agencies that locate their policy and practice identity around the political concept of 'Black'. This is because a more complex, fluid theoretical understanding of ethnicity would question the concept of 'Black' as too one dimensional and not sufficiently nuanced (Ali, 2003; Modood, 1994; Wood, 2009). This may provide opportunities for adoption agencies that focus on ethnic matching to increase and widen the recruitment of prospective adopters from diverse ethnicities. Are the values of adoption projects that focus on ethnic matching concerned with the contested nature of identity, culture and ethnicity, or are they about ensuring children from a broad range of ethnicities are resilient against racism?

Religion and identity

While some matches by the specialist project were straightforwardly based on religion, others appeared to be more pragmatic. Clearly, birth parents' wishes are one factor that must be considered in seeking to find suitable adoptive parents. However, it was clear from our findings that this did not always happen. Again, while it is necessary to give due consideration to religion in adoptive matches (Adoption and Children Act 2002; Children Act 1989), greater discussion is needed generally

regarding the rationale for a good ‘fit’, or a flexible match on grounds of religion, and also on whether a child needs to maintain a religion that they are considered to have been ‘born into’ or inherited.

Conclusion

Whilst the intention of the specialist adoption agency’s practice was to match adoptive parents with children of a similar ethnicity, the findings of this study suggest that the rationale on which this practice was based is theoretically muddled. As can be evidenced by this and other studies (Rushton and Minnis, 1997; Thoburn et al, 2000), ethnicity and culture are fluid and flexible concepts that mean different things to different people within specific communities and changes across space and time. Thus, to try to achieve the perfect ‘fit, is in many ways futile, as there can be no such thing as fixed or definitive ethnicity or culture. Ethnicity, culture and religion are an ever-changing mosaic, not a fixed binary choice between white and Black. Furthermore, much of the debate highlighted in the literature on trans-ethnic and ethnic matching, oversimplifies a much more subtle and complex process. Ethnic and cultural identities are important, but not the only factors for the development of positive identities for adopted children.

The research evidence available suggests that children, particularly of dual heritage, can thrive and have as positive outcomes with (some) white parents as those placed with BME parents. The ethnic identity of an adopted BME child is only one factor in determining their happiness (Thoburn et al, 2000).The conclusions that follows from the findings of the study reported here are that the current UK government’s

preoccupation with trans-ethnic versus ethnic matching oversimplifies a much more complex issue, which has both political and moral dimensions. Future research is therefore, urgently needed into the impact of multiple, and varied ethnically matched adoptive placements to throw more light on the outcomes for children, in order to help policy makers better to understand the complex interplay of ethnicity, culture, adoption and children's identities.

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Key words

ethnic-matching, trans-ethnic adoption, dual heritage, identity, Black, social work

Appendix

Table 1: Summary of evaluation samples by participant type

Type of Participant	Service		
	Black Adoption Service	**Comparator Service**	**ALL**
Adopters	18	6	24
Social workers in adoption service	8	6	14
Service managers	2	1	3
Senior Manager	1		1
Local authority social workers	-	-	30

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