



The Voices of Mixed Ethnicity Adopted Children

Ethnic Identities, Experiences of Discrimination and Ethnic Socialisation



Research Summary

Verity Clarke



Contact Details

Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies

Centre for Family Policy and Child Welfare

School for Policy Studies

University of Bristol

8 Priory Road

Bristol BS8 1TZ

URL: www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/hadley/

Email: sps-hadleycentre@bristol.ac.uk or verity.clarke@croydon.gov.uk

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Background: Why Focus on the Adoption of Mixed Ethnicity Children?

Historically, there has been much debate over the importance of ethnic matching in adoption; social workers and academics have questioned whether white parents can help adopted minority ethnic children to develop a “positive” ethnic identity and cope with racism. Most social workers would want to find an adoptive family that resembled the ethnic background of the child. However, ethnic matching requirements are significantly more challenging when finding families for mixed ethnicity children due to a variety of reasons. First, the ethnicity of their fathers may be unknown. Second, some children may have multiple aspects to their ethnic heritage (for example, if one or more of their birth parents are mixed ethnicity themselves) in which case, finding adoptive families who reflect this specific and complex mix may be a challenge. Third, matching may be complicated further because the children’s birth parents may have different religious beliefs as well as dissimilar ethnic backgrounds. Fourth, mixed ethnicity children are more likely than other ethnic groups of children in the care system to have siblings of a different ethnicity from themselves. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether to prioritise ethnic matching for each individual child over the need to keep siblings together. Furthermore, mixed ethnicity children are disproportionately represented amongst children who are in need, on the child protection register, adopted and in looked after statistics. The overrepresentation of mixed ethnicity children in care and adoption statistics makes considerations about mixed ethnicity adoptees particularly important.

Research Questions

This study intended to explore the following questions:

1. How do mixed ethnicity children, who have been legally adopted, view their ethnic identities, particularly in relation to their adoptive status?
2. Have the children in the study experienced racism or bullying and what was the nature of this?

3. How had the children's adoptive parents tried to teach their children about their cultural heritage and help them to cope with discrimination?

Methods

In order to address the research aims, I carried out semi-structured interviews with eighteen adoptive parents and eleven children. I used cue cards in the interviews with the children, which displayed various identity labels (for example, boy, adopted, child), to prompt discussion with the children about their identities. I asked the children to choose: the cards they felt referred to them; the cards that they felt represented the most important aspects of their identities; the cards that made them the happiest; and whether any of the cards made them feel unhappy. Information from the interviews was analysed thematically

Who Were the Children and Families in this Study?¹

The children had a range of minority ethnic backgrounds: four of the children had Caribbean heritage, one child had African heritage and two of the children were of Asian² heritage. Four children had birth fathers whose exact ethnicity was not known, but the fathers were thought to be of African or Caribbean origin. Seven of the children had at least one black³ or minority ethnic adoptive parent. Most of the children had come from birth families headed by single white mothers and had gone on to be cared for by white foster parents, as has been found in previous research (Selwyn *et al.* 2010). The majority (n=9) of the children were girls and most of the children had been placed by the same adoption agency. Nearly all of the children were adopted before the age of two, and all of the children were between six to sixteen years old at the time of the research visits. All but one of the families were living in neighbourhoods that had a higher percentage of black and minority ethnic individuals than the national average.

¹ Please note that some of the details about the children and families have been changed to prevent them from being identified.

² Please note that general terms such as African, Caribbean, and Asian have been used to prevent the children from being identified.

³ "black" is used in this document to describe individuals of African descent. Black can also be capitalised to denote its use in the political sense.

The Children's Ethnic Identities

Studies have found that some social workers considering adoptive placements for mixed ethnicity children regard the children as "Black", and prioritise the ethnicity of the children's birth fathers (who are usually the BME parents) when matching mixed ethnicity children to their adoptive parents (Selwyn *et al.* 2010; Banks, 1995). However, during the card selection activity, ten of the children chose the "mixed race" label as a self-descriptor. Additionally, ten of the children chose the label "brown" to describe their ethnicity. Only one child chose the black label, which the child amended to "sort of black". Ten of the eleven children also chose a British label (English, Scottish or Welsh⁴) to describe themselves. Seven of these children said that being British was one of the most important things about themselves. In contrast, only five children chose a label to represent their non-British heritage. Three of these children amended the labels slightly to show that they felt these labels only partially represented themselves. For instance, Caribbean was changed to "a bit Caribbean", by one child. As most of the children in this study saw themselves as "mixed race" or "brown" as well as primarily British, social workers who prioritise the ethnicity of mixed ethnicity children's BME birth fathers when matching them to adoptive parents, may be neglecting to take into consideration the children's perceptions of their ethnic identities.

The children's individual characteristics affected their experience of their ethnic identities. First, the children's age seemed to have an impact: the parents of two of the children said they had a strong desire to look white like their adoptive mothers at the age of about four or five, but that this desire had reduced with age. Another influential factor was the different ethnic appearances of the children- some children's ethnic appearances were noticed and commented on more than others. The particular cultural heritage of the child seemed to have an impact, as did the ethnicity of people in the children's surroundings. For example, if children lived in an area with a large representation of people who reflected their ethnicities, some parents said it was much easier to teach their children about their cultural heritage,

⁴ Children used different British labels depending on where they were born and where their birth mothers came from.

and therefore, the parents argued that the children felt more affiliated with their minority ethnic background.

The Children's Experiences of Discrimination

The majority of the children (n=8) in this study said they had experienced racism at some point in their lives. However, these tended to be infrequent or one-off experiences of name-calling. The children who lived in the least ethnically diverse areas had experienced the most ongoing and frequent racism.

Six of the eleven children had been teased or bullied by their peers about their adoptive status. Some children explained that they had not been bullied about their adoptive status, but other children had misunderstood the meaning of adoption and these misunderstandings had caused the children to become upset. For example, in two cases, the children's classmates had assumed that the children had been "sold" by their birth parents. Teachers had also accidentally upset some of the children by asking them to bring in photographs of themselves as infants, which they did not have. Additionally, some teachers had celebrated father's day in lessons, which distressed some of the children, as they did not have adoptive fathers and did not know their birth fathers.

How Did the Children's Adoptive Status affect their Ethnic Identities?

The children's adoptive status affected their ethnic identities partly through the lack of information some of the parents had about the ethnicity of the children's birth parents. These children's adoptive parents could not teach them about their specific cultural heritage without this knowledge. Consequently, some of the children explained that they felt distanced from this part of their ethnic heritage. Therefore, the findings suggest that the missing pieces of the past may influence their ability to feel connected to their minority ethnic heritage.

The children's adoptive status further affected their ethnic identities because some parents and most of the children saw their adoptive status as overriding ethnicity in importance to their lives. Ten out of the eleven children chose their adoptive status as the most important thing about themselves during the card selection method, whilst only two chose "mixed race". The children said that this was because their adoptive status made them feel more "different" or "special" than being mixed ethnicity. Many of the parents discussed the difficulties and challenges of helping their children cope with issues relating to their past (before being adopted). Three of the adoptive parents said that discussing adoption related information was more of a challenge than teaching their children about their ethnicity, and that their child's adoptive status was a more troublesome feature of their lives than their ethnicity. Many of the adoptive parents found it hard to discuss adoption related topics, either because of the sensitivity of the information, or because they lacked information about the children's birth parents.

The Importance and the Absence of Ethnic Resemblances

The majority of the children (n=7) said that they stood out from their peers because they were one of the few mixed ethnicity children in their class or school. Most of these children saw this as something positive, and said this made them feel unique or "special". A small minority of the children did not like being different from their peers and said their appearance made them feel alienated from other children. The children's experiences of racism may have been responsible for their feelings of discomfort towards their ethnic appearance. One of the children, adopted by two white parents, said that he did not like looking different from his adoptive parents because his physical dissimilarity made it obvious to others that he was adopted. A small group of children⁵, with BME fathers, were also reported by their parents to have said in the past that they wanted to be white to resemble their adoptive mothers.

⁵ (girls and boys)

Teaching Children about Their Cultural Heritage

Parents took three different approaches to teaching children about their cultural heritage:

The deliberate approach: Ten of the parents had intentionally tried to teach their children about their cultural heritage by using books, cultural artefacts, music, food, cultural exhibitions, and travel. Some of the white mothers had tried to meet more black people by purposefully attending services and activities with an ethnically diverse or mainly black user group (for example, pre-schools and libraries in ethnically diverse areas). The mothers regarded extending their social networks as a way of providing their children with knowledge about their cultural heritage, as their black friends would give the mothers advice on relevant subjects (for example, guidance on looking after a mixed ethnicity child's hair). Additionally, the mothers argued that by ensuring that their children spent the majority of their time in ethnically diverse spaces, they could help their children feel "less different" from other people.

In this study, the only children who said that they knew "a lot" or "quite a lot" about their cultural heritage were the children whose parents used the deliberate approach. Studies of North American minority ethnic families (in the general population) have similarly found that children whose parents teach them about their cultural heritage demonstrate more knowledge of their cultural background (Marshall, 1995; Stevenson, 1994; Quintana and Vera, 1999). Cultural knowledge has been associated with an improved ability to cope with racism (Barnes, 1980) and higher self-esteem (Constantine and Blackmon, 2002) amongst minority ethnic adolescents in the general population. Therefore, the available evidence suggests support for the deliberate approach.

The inadvertent approach: Three of the parents stressed that it was not necessary for them to teach their children about their heritage, as they would naturally pass down this information to their children. Contrary to the parents' beliefs, the children in

this study whose parents had taken an inadvertent approach said that did not know anything, or knew only very little about the non-British aspect(s) of their cultural heritage.

The child choice approach: Five of the adoptive parents had waited for their children to express an interest in their cultural background before starting to teach them about their heritage. The children had not asked questions about their cultural heritage, which meant that they had not discussed their cultural background with their parents in any detail. However, during the interviews with the children, some of the children whose parents had taken the “child choice” approach expressed a desire to know more about their cultural background.

Preparing Children for Racism

Passive preparation approach: The majority of parents (n=10) had not actively tried to prepare their children for racism; instead, they had taken a passive preparation approach, which meant that they were silent about race and racism. The passive approach was slightly more common amongst the minority ethnic parents, compared to the white parents in this study. Five of the seven minority ethnic parents had taken a passive preparation approach, compared to six of the eleven white parents. Most of the parents who took the passive approach believed that it was unlikely that their children would suffer from racism. However, as most of the children in this study had experienced racism at some point in their lives, the children’s experiences contradicted their parents’ beliefs.

The protective approach: The protective approach, used by six of the parents, included explicit measures used to help children cope with future racism, or measures that parents took to help their children avoid experiences of racism. Most of the parents who took a protective approach tried to foster openness within their families to encourage their children to discuss possible experiences of racism with them in the future. The appropriateness of the parents’ attempts is supported by findings from a US study showing that transracial adoptees who reported positive past experiences of discussing their feelings about race were less likely to avoid

discussing racism with their parents, compared to adoptees who did not report such experiences (Docan-Morgan, 2011). A study of children in the general population also found that children in families who communicated more openly and affectionately were more likely to tell their parents about their experiences of bullying (Matsunaga, 2009). Several of the children in this study said they valued being able to speak openly with their parents about various topics of concern, which provides further support for the parents' attempts to foster communicative openness.

Rather than overtly preparing their children for racism, some of the parents who used a protective approach said they had deliberately sent their children to ethnically diverse schools to reduce the likelihood of their children experiencing discrimination. Studies carried out with children in the general US population have found that less ethnically diverse schools, classrooms and neighbourhoods result in higher levels of racial hostility (Graham, 2006; Juvonen *et al.* 2006; Bledsoe *et al.* 1995). Therefore, there is some evidence to support the parents' perceptions that careful school selection helped to protect their children from racism.

The promotive approach: Two of the parents said they had tried to prepare their children for racism by bolstering their children's self-esteem and feelings of ethnic pride. A US study with black adolescents (aged eighteen to nineteen) in the general population found that parental messages relating to cultural pride reduced the impact racism had on psychological stress (Bynum, Burton and Best, 2007), which suggests that the promotive approach may be an effective way of preparing children for racism. In this study, it was difficult to gauge how the children experienced the promotive approach because the approach is subtle, which meant that the children were not aware that their parents had tried to bolster their self-esteem to prepare them for racism.

Coping with Racism and Adoption Related Bullying

As well as being asked how they had prepared their children for racism, parents were also asked how they had helped their children to cope with racism and bullying *after* these experiences had occurred. Four of the ten children who had experienced racism or adoption related bullying had not told their parents. The nine parents who were aware of either their children's experiences of adoption related bullying or their experiences of racism had tackled their children's experiences passively or actively.

Passive approach: The parents who had tackled their children's experiences passively (n=3⁶) encouraged their children to think of their experiences as a normal form of childhood teasing or told their children to ignore the perpetrators. The children said that ignoring the perpetrators did not seem to have worked, as they had continued to receive hostile and negative comments. There is no clear evidence from other research studies as to whether the passive approach is an effective way of tackling racism or bullying. Mixed ethnicity adoptees (in the US) have reported that being told to ignore racism discounted the loss they experienced when racism continued (Samuels, 2009). However, 12 to 13 year old children in the general population of Finland reported that ignoring bullying was a more successful way of preventing future experiences of bullying, than appearing to be helpless (for example, by crying or asking an adult to resolve the situation), or counter-aggression (Salmivalli *et al.* 1996).

Active approach: Six parents had actively tried to prevent racism or bullying from re-occurring, by reporting their children's experiences to the school. The majority of children in this study whose parents had spoken to the schools had not experienced any further incidents. However, some of the children whose parents had complained said they had found this embarrassing. Previous research on bullying amongst school age children in the general population has found that communication between schools and parents can be an important strategy to combat bullying (Whitney and Smith, 1993), and that when teachers know about children's experiences, the actions they take usually prevent further incidents (Smith and Shu Shu, 2000). Thus, the

⁶ Of the nine parents who knew about their children's experiences of racism.

available research does support the active approach used by some of the parents in this study.

Coping With Differences between Family Members

Parents used three different approaches to cope with physical and ethnic differences in their families:

Finding similarities and acknowledging differences: Four of the parents acknowledged that their children were ethnically and culturally different from them, but they also tried to find similarities by drawing comparisons between their own and their child's cultural backgrounds or by emphasising physical resemblances (for example, face shape) or the similarities between their personalities. The parents' approach is supported by arguments from a number of authors (e.g. Benson *et al.* 1995; Kaye, 1990), who state that the adjustment of adopted children is maximised when parents acknowledge their children's psychological similarities, but accept their physical and ethnic differences. Some of the children's accounts in this study suggested that their parents attempts to emphasise the characteristics they had in common had encouraged the children to feel that they "belonged" in their adoptive families.

Legitimising differences: The second approach, used by the majority of parents (n=9), involved acknowledging different ethnic appearances in the families, and emphasising ethnic differences between people in wider society. Parents discussed ethnic differences openly (using prompts such as books) to try to normalise difference. If the parents discussed differences regularly, they risked "over insisting" on differences (Kirk, 1964; Brodzinsky, 1987; Benson *et al.* 1994). Over emphasising differences can give children a feeling of being alienated from their parents and can lead to poor mental health outcomes and frequent externalising behaviours⁷ amongst adoptees (Benson *et al.* 1994; Anderson, 2013). It was difficult to judge whether any of the parents were over-insisting on differences, as parents were not

⁷ For example, physical aggression and verbal bullying.

asked about how often they had talked about ethnic differences with their children. However, as a large proportion of the children in this study explained their desire to resemble their parents in some way, an optimal approach may have involved the parents pointing out the characteristics they had in common with their children, as well as legitimising their differences.

Colour-blind approach: The final approach, used by five of the parents, was the colour-blind approach, whereby parents encouraged their children not to see skin colour differences as important. Some of the children in this study expressed concern about “looking different” from their parents, despite their parents’ colour-blind approach. US studies have found that transracially adopted children with parents who deny ethnic differences within their families have worse mental health outcomes than children whose parents accept ethnic differences (Benson *et al.* 1994; Anderson, 2013). Therefore, the available research evidence suggests that a colour-blind approach is not an advisable method of coping with ethnic differences within adoptive families.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

In conclusion, the results of this study prompted the following recommendations to be made:

Adoptive placements for mixed ethnicity children: This study suggested that many different factors seemed to affect the children’s feelings about their ethnic identities, such as, their specific ethnic appearance, where they lived, and their age. The individual experiences of each child in this study highlight the importance of an approach to the placement of mixed ethnicity children that recognises the uniqueness and specific needs of each individual child, and avoids treating mixed ethnicity children as members of a homogenous ethnic group.

Coping with adoption and the children’s past: Several findings from this study suggested that the families found coping with adoption-related issues equally, if not

more, pressing than coping with issues relating to their children's ethnicity. The centrality of adoption in the families' lives, suggests that it is important that practitioners do not focus on ethnicity issues when selecting, preparing and supporting adopters, and sideline issues relating to adoption. For example, parents may need ongoing support to help them cope with their child's emotional state or challenging behaviour. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that adoptive parents might need particular assistance to help them manage sensitive information about their children's past, and guidance to help them deal with unknown information about their children's birth parents.

Supporting adopters to help their children cope with racism and adoption-related bullying: Adoption agencies need to provide more pre-adoption training, ongoing support, and advice to help adoptive parents prepare their children for racism and adoption related bullying, which this study has suggested that they are likely to face. Most of the parents in this study said they had received little or no preparation to help them discuss issues of racism or discrimination with their child. Studies have found that some social workers assume that only white adoptive parents need help to prepare their children for racism (Selwyn *et al.* 2010; Wainwright and Ridley, 2012). However, the findings of this study suggest that both minority ethnic and white parents are likely to need further support.

Suggestions for schools: The findings of this study and other studies of adopted children (Thomas *et al.* 1999; Selwyn and Wijedasa, 2011; Selwyn *et al.* 2014) show that teachers need to be aware that adopted children are at particular risk of being bullied. Schools need to be particularly sensitive to the circumstances of adopted children when discussing issues relating to families. Educational authorities do offer policy recommendations to schools to help them meet the needs of adopted children (see guidance issued by Kent County Council, 2013). However, the findings of this study suggest that authorities need to ensure that all schools are actually implementing these suggestions.

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