

## Negotiating multicultures, identities and intersectionalities

The publication of this special edition is timely in three ways. First, international debates about multiculturalism over the last decade have sharpened thinking about the challenge of living in what Cohen (1988) has termed ‘multicultures’ and the identity issues consequent on this. Families, as both microcosms of society and pioneers of new ways of living, are (often implicitly) central to this. Second, ‘transracial’ and ‘transnational’ adoption have been and continue to be the focus of longstanding debates in the USA and UK. Over time, these have broadened from a predominant focus on whether or not it is damaging and should be stopped (a perspective that continues to exercise many) to understanding how adoptive families live their lives and how their intimate day-to-day discourses around transracial or transnational adoption often construct contradictory positions around belonging, identity and sameness. Third, the strong feelings that transracial adoption has recurrently generated over the last 40 years have led to a fresh round of political and legislative attention to adoption in the UK. For these reasons, the call for papers for this special issue was broad based and included attention to current political debates on multiculturalism as well as ethnic matching, identities and legislative change.

The response to our call for papers was substantial enough to merit a double issue that includes articles from Europe and the USA, as well as reflections informed by Maori philosophy from New Zealand. The articles have different objects of study: families, children and adults from a variety of ethnicised groups; policy documents; adoptees and non-adoptees. Together, they constitute a rich mix that we hope will give readers a

good understanding of the current issues at play in family placement across racialised and ethnicised groups.

### Living ‘multicultures’ and ‘multiracisms’ while debating multiculturalism

To varying degrees, all the articles in this journal engage with what it means to live in multicultures. The ways in which societies engage with this reality set the context for how transracial/transnational placements are arranged, thought about and experienced. Most countries and nations in the world are culturally plural with many ethnicised groupings and languages. More than a quarter of a century ago, Phil Cohen (1988) suggested that while society is undeniably ethnically plural, ‘multiculture’ is contradicted by the ubiquity of ‘multiracisms’. This paradox lies at the heart of debates on, and experiences of, transracial adoption. Recognising this contradiction is helpful for understanding the context within which family placements and family formations create new kin who come from different ethnicised categories and/or were born in different nations. Some of the articles that follow discuss concerns that children who are visibly ethnically different from their parents have been, or will be, treated differently because of other people’s reading of physical ‘difference’. The term ‘multiracisms’ alerts us that there are many different forms of racisms, so that the racism experienced by a Chinese family in the UK may well be different from that experienced by a family in which the children are Chinese and the parents white. Equally, it alerts us to the importance of viewing the racisms experienced by ‘transracial’ adoptive families as part of a context where a variety of people experience multiple forms of racism.

While multiracisms are generally given more attention in work on family placements across ethnicity, multicultures are equally important. Paul Gilroy coined the term ‘convivial multicultures’ to describe the way in which ‘racial and ethnic differences have been rendered

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unremarkable . . . [and] become “ordinary” in much everyday living, so that they are not necessarily and always a source of difference and division’ (Gilroy 2006, p 29). This was also a theme in research with teenagers undertaken by Rampton and his colleagues (2010), who found that ‘instead of causing trouble, racial and ethnic differences were treated as uncontroversial and ordinary’ in school. This ‘conviviality’ may be at the heart of responses from transracially/transnationally adopted children that emphasise the ordinarieness of many of their interactions and lack of trouble around racism.

While the terms ‘multiracisms’ and ‘multicultures’ can help to illuminate everyday social relations, debates about ‘multiculturalism’ often underpin policies around transracial/transnational adoption. Frequently, over the last decade, politicians and other public figures in various countries have asserted that multiculturalism has failed because it has produced segregation and threatened national values. In the British context, current disapproval of multicultural policies at least partly underlies the strength of pronouncements that ‘race’ and ethnicity should not override other concerns in adoption (see below). This perspective also sows the seeds of distrust for those who consider that racism must be central to policy direction and practice.

### **The contemporary UK legislative context**

The history of matching minority ethnic children to adopters has been fraught. In the period where relinquished babies and infertile couples dominated adoption policy and practice, similarities between the physical features of the baby and the adopters were given great importance. A perceived need for ‘secrecy’ and concern that adoption should be seen as a ‘new start’ underpinned this. Few, therefore, considered that black children would either be wanted by or ‘fit in’ to white families and communities. But given that there were black children who needed a loving home, a number of

special projects were set up to explore the possibilities of transracial adoption. In the UK these largely focused on domestic adoptions but as the articles from Lind, followed by Hubinette and Andersson, demonstrate, Sweden was building a tradition of intercountry adoption. Rushton and colleagues’ work on the British Chinese Adoption Study indicates that, on a small scale, this was also happening in the UK in the 1960s.

At the point at which this edition of *Adoption & Fostering* is going to press, a draft clause is being proposed that will remove, in England only, the duty in section 1(5) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which states that ‘In placing the child for adoption, the adoption agency must give due consideration to the child’s religious persuasion, ethnic origin and cultural and linguistic background.’ The purpose of proposing this amendment is to address current concerns about delay in placing children for adoption because of the dominance of these issues in identifying a ‘perfect match’. The amendment is one part of a more general reform programme to improve the adoption system, including improving adopter recruitment, adopter assessment, matching and post-placement support. It is linked to the review and modernisation of the Family Justice System and more generally to the looked after children system as a whole.

### **The shape of the special edition**

The articles that follow provide a picture of dynamic patterns in the construction of identities in family placement and multicultures. A strength in all the papers is their emphasis on the importance of understanding the construction and evolution of identities, racialisation and ethnicisation over time. The categorical oppositions of black and white are no longer useful in the transracial/transnational adoption field. Caballero *et al* illustrate this by taking a step back from adoption to discuss three studies of family life where the children were not in care but where mixed ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ identities permeate everyday life. They note the enormous diversity

and complexity of these family lives and the continual negotiation of issues of sameness and difference, belonging and identity.

Many of the articles also take a historical perspective in understanding the context of transracial and transnational family placements, and learning from experience over time and representing the complexities of identities and racism. Barn and Kirton review the history of these debates, beginning with the disproportionately high numbers of black children waiting for family placements in the UK. In disentangling the trends and policies, they raise thorny issues about the persistent and disproportionate focus on transracial adoption as the solution to family placement problems, which is unlikely to reduce the numbers of minority ethnic group children in public care. They take a balanced approach, pointing out how social workers' well-intentioned and responsible attempts to address the formation of ethnic identity through placement are too easily derogated, but urging the further development of thinking and practice in recognising that there are no simple answers to these challenging judgments and decisions.

Writing from the USA, McRoy and Griffin provide an important warning about relying too heavily on primary legislation as a solution to these intricate and longstanding problems. The current legislative framework in the USA originates from a civil rights argument that to deprive a child of an adoptive home on the basis of their race was to infringe those rights. They argue that US legislation has not addressed the problems it was meant to solve. These problems continue to be stark, despite 15 years of implementation of that legislation. There are important messages in this experience for legislators as they debate the fitness for purpose of the new clause in the Children and Families Bill.

Wainwright and Ridley, in their study of a recruitment project for minority ethnic adopters, highlight the flexibility and complexity of ethnicity. They argue that attempts to achieve 'perfect ethnic

matching' are necessarily futile, oversimplistic and theoretically muddled. The way forward they advocate involves recognising the importance of ethnic and cultural identities but appreciating that children, particularly of 'dual heritage', should be placed with white, as well as black and minority ethnic parents.

Efforts to accord identities and ethnicities the complexity and holism they warrant sometimes lead researchers to produce their own theories of identities. Ung and colleagues and Sharley do this in very different ways. From the USA, Ung *et al* start from critical reflections on the shortcomings of many theories of 'racial' identity to develop a model of identity that, at least in theory, fits with the approach advocated by Wainwright and Ridley and Caballero and colleagues, as well as other articles in this edition. Their model aims to explain the development of racial identity in transracially adopted people and draws on what they call a 'transactional lens using ecology theory as a conceptual framework'. They propose that racial identity is a multi-dimensional construct consisting of genetic, imposed, cognitive, visual and feeling racial identity components. These are produced from interactions and reciprocal relationships between people and their social, cultural, and political environments. It remains to be seen whether this theory will be widely employed in other studies. However, the authors show that it can be applied fruitfully to published personal narratives of adults who were transracially adopted as children.

By way of contrast, Sharley, who works in the UK, draws on her experience in New Zealand to present insights from Maori social work literature. These challenge 'western models centering on the individual person, disconnected from his or her community' and consider the intersection of 'person (identity) with place' and spirituality. The Maori approach starts from the perspective that people can have deep spiritual connections with the physical environment in which they live and deep senses of belonging and attachment based on

place. Sharley considers this Maori spiritual analysis in the context of family placement practice in the UK. She suggests that it fits with an ecological model of child development (in a somewhat different way from Ung *et al*'s ecological formulation), a strengths-based approach and spirituality as a source of resilience. While Sharley recognises the dangers of importing (and decontextualising) cultural practices, she suggests that this approach has implications for thinking about child development when children are separated from their home environment and birth family. In particular, this Maori model focuses on the possibility of placements with members of the wider family that can help to nurture children's identities and attachment to place.

International comparisons are further enabled by two articles from Sweden. Lind and then Hubinette and Andersson illuminate the interplay of policy, history, experience and identities in transnational adoption. Lind's analysis of the guidance and education material published by the Swedish Intercountry Adoption Authority shows how their suggested strategy of encouraging transracial adoptees to develop pride in their non-Swedish origins implicitly reinforces their exclusion from full 'Swedishness'. In a parallel way, Hubinette and Andersson explore processes of racialisation in a context where 'colourblindness' is privileged. Both contributions underline the importance of an engagement with discourse and narrative for understanding the contexts within which transnational adoptees negotiate their identities in their families and Swedish society.

Richards also provides insights into the identity issues raised by transnational adoption. Drawing on her UK study of transnationally adopted Chinese girls, she reveals the complex negotiations that the girls and their mothers make in attempting to pass on or produce origin stories that sanitise histories of abandonment without demonising the birth mothers assumed to have done the abandoning. Rushton *et al* explore the

further development of these issues in a study of girls adopted into the UK from Hong Kong institutions in the 1960s and how, over their lifetimes (up to their late 40s), these issues become embedded into the lived experience of belonging, connectedness and participation as citizens alongside well-being, life satisfaction and a sense of control.

Taken together, the articles in this journal may be said to map the pre-occupations of those concerned with studying family placement in multiculturalures and across constructed racialised and ethnicised boundaries. It is striking that many carefully lay out the terminology they use, in recognition of the unsatisfactory and plural nature of the concepts currently available, and that no term is right for all time. This, together with recognition that 'transracial adoption calls into question our ideas of racial and ethnic boundaries, identity and belonging' (Barn and Kirton, p 00) differentiates this collection from the work of earlier decades, which tended to employ these concepts less critically and, therefore, more simplistically. This more nuanced treatment reflects changes in identities, globally and in the UK. In particular, theorisations of identities have moved from viewing identity as fixed and singular, to recognising that they change over time and are different in different contexts (Hall, 2007; Wetherell, 2009).

What it might mean to be British and what that might signify in terms of values, beliefs and traditions as lived out through daily experience in families and wider society have also changed markedly over the last 50 years. These changes have impacted not just on concepts of race, ethnicity, culture, religion and language but on gender, sexuality and other aspects of identities, necessitating what has been termed an 'intersectional' approach to understanding identities. Not surprisingly, this is reflected in the various studies reported here.

The articles in this special edition emphasise the importance of the continuing exploration of theoretical and

practice issues in the growing body of contemporary research on transracial/transnational adoption. They strike a positive note without shying away from reported experiences of racism, alienation and unhappiness. As several authors suggest, further research is needed, including into how removing children from what is viewed as their ethnic heritage, culture, religion and language to be socialised into a different set of values and beliefs provokes strong feelings, protest and concerns about post-colonial relationships. It is important that those making decisions about children's placement take these issues seriously without being trapped into indecision, a lack of timeliness and an adult, rather than a child, focus. It is also to be hoped that the enactment of any new legislative clause (currently limited to England) does not add to this sense of entrapment.

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