

British Association for Adoption & Fostering

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Dear June,

Review of Research on Child Welfare Services for Children of Minority Ethnic Origin and their Families - Consultation

Thank you for sending me your report. I found it very interesting to read. We have not discussed this widely in BAAF but Savita de Sousa, our Black and Minority Ethnic Policy Consultant has read it in detail and made comments some of which I amplify below. She and Julia Feast attended your consultation seminar and both found it a stimulating event.

It is inevitable given the history and nature of the topic that ethnicity should be an evolving issue in research, policy and practice. Your comments on page 2 'many familiar statements about children of minority ethnic origin were based on out of date population figures' is an important reminder to us all that there is nothing static about the subject. This is then reflected in your second comment, 'the terms black or 'black and Asian' have become unhelpful in understanding the complex identities and needs of families who might be in receipt of a child welfare service'. I continued to remind myself of these observations while reading your report. I also thought that it was important to remember that this complexity is amplified when ethnicity is placed in the context of race, gender, sexuality, religion, language, disability and class. Indeed it may be helpful to provide some discussion in the final document of how ethnicity is defined e.g.

'of or pertaining to combinations of race, culture, nationality and/or religion' (DfES research glossary) or

'Ethnicity refers to the ethnic group or groups that people identify with or feel they belong to. An ethnic group is defined as a social group whose members have the following four characteristics: share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinctive history and destiny, possess one or more dimensions of collective cultural individuality, feel a sense of unique collective solidarity'. (New Zealand definition)

I wondered then how far research has helped us identify the interaction and significance of these variables. They all might be strongly indicative of oppressive and discriminatory forces and maybe the McPherson report is significant in identifying and punctuating the continuing institutional issues in relation to racism. But what sense we are to make of the concept of ethnicity in the context of the multiple identity issues that this list of descriptors gives us, I am not sure. A telling example of this recently for me was a child featured in 'Be My Parent' where the plan was to find parents who would promote his Yemeni, Pakistani, Scottish identity where he also needed 24 hour care and presumably was severely disabled. What sense are we to make of the description of this child and what barriers are we erecting to successfully placing him by describing him so? Is ethnicity

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being used in a helpful sense in this example and it might be added – how has research helped us to carry these kinds of issues forward?

All of these questions raise for me the importance of understanding ethnicity as a fluid and dynamic concept that changes over time and has different meanings to people depending on their history and context – as a group and individually. Research has great difficulty with this because of the necessity of locking the concept into an acceptable methodology. It is something that describes people but in a relatively crude way.

I thought your preliminary observations were important and need wide debate.

I continued to think about this issue as I read the rest of your Report. I am not sure if this is accurate but it seemed to me that ethnicity is used in research as –

- an indicator for the higher probability of social exclusion, unequal access to services, higher rates of child abuse and poorer outcomes for children. The question has been - is this a significant variable when set alongside other variables and when it is used as a variable – what does it tell us?
- an indicator of the extent to which service providers take ethnicity into account in planning and delivering services because if it is a variable that is ignored then the service in itself becomes excluding. In this question is the extent to which services structure themselves to equally reach those in need.
- an indicator of the extent to which services that take ethnicity into account succeed both in producing higher rates of use and participation and better outcomes for children

I think there is also a second issue –

- the extent to which ethnicity is subjectively meaningful in explaining what a person values in their life and supports them in their sense of identity, belongingness and personal and group security. As something that develops over time throughout childhood and adolescence, it is clearly of primary concern to social welfare agencies.

A complicating factor in addressing any of these issues and one that the report does not discuss (although it does recognise the strong feelings involved) is the political dimension associated with ethnicity and ethnic minority status. Research cannot avoid the fact that approaches to ethnicity are political and that power is a necessary dimension in understanding the relations between different groups.

A great deal of the discussion focuses on the question of over and under representation of ethnic minority groups in various populations. Although I think it varies in different research projects, one of the critical factors for me is what the measure of under/over representation is being compared to. Whole population comparators do not seem to me to be particularly helpful when the groups we are thinking about are highly likely to be distinguished by their social economic status. Single parenthood is likely to be significant here but as much as anything because of the social economic status that it tends to confer.

I also think that under and over representation needs to be placed within the context of whether receiving services is a good or a bad thing. Is under representation indicative of family strength and resilience to cope with adversity or indicative of unequal access to

much needed services. In itself, the concept should probably be treated neutrally unless researchers are specific about how we should understand how this is being regarded.

In the section on outcomes of long term placements, I think breakdown rates is a fairly crude outcome measure although when it happens it is of enormous significance. But as you say, ethnicity, as opposed to age, is not strongly related to breakdown anyway. The more important question may relate to the extent to which any placement adds value to the child in relation to the development of a secure identity of which their ethnicity is a part and the extent to which they reach their psychosocial, health and educational potential. This seems to me to be the problem in your section on 'What makes a difference?' - ethnicity does not have an independent impact on outcome. Yet in terms of definition, ethnicity should itself be an outcome when it refers to membership of a particular social group. Do children have on going sense of their ethnicity as part of their identity as a result of their contact with social welfare services? Or is it something that becomes fractured and unreliable as a source of individual and group resilience and meaning?

I don't know what plans you might have for publishing this, but it seemed to me that there would be some advantage in trying to identify some policy and practice guidelines from this. This might mean going back to some of the conceptual issues surrounding ethnicity particularly when you have identified some of the relatively crude ways that ethnicity become represented in research and the problematic interpretations that can result from it.

I have included below some bullet points made by Savita de Sousa after reading your report. I found them very helpful. If you have any questions about these, I know she will be happy to amplify them for you.

With very best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

John Simmonds
Director of Policy, Research and Development

A RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW OF RESEARCH OF CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OF MINORITY ETHNIC ORIGIN

THE POSITIVES

- The need for up-to-date comprehensive information on the circumstances of black and minority ethnic children and families is useful. This is particularly important because the census data does not cover the range and depth of information to meet policy and practice requirements.
- The review of other research studies will be valuable in providing comparative work.
- Through its consultation seminar the research project has tried to foster a sense of ownership with different organisations having an interest in the research.
- It might be able to identify changes such as transition in culture, identity, integration, social networking etc.
- The project appeared to have the support of the ethnic minority participants at the consultation seminar.
- The strengths of the research review are that it could (a) provide a general picture for use by organisations; (b) identify gaps/problems which have yet to be resolved; (c) cite examples of good practice.
- In the absence of such data, there is a tendency for organisations and practitioners to make stereotypical assumptions which exacerbate disadvantage.
- It recognises the importance of differentiating between different ethnic minority groups and variations between regions.
- The project could help in future planning and to effect change.
- It is good that the project is focussing on how ethnic minority children and families are faring.
- We will be able to judge a) whether children are protected and are being protected better, b) how families are being supported to protect children.
- The evidence to date shows we are still not engaging with families.

LIMITATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- There is a need to consider:
 - the impact of the research upon different groups, and the benefits to them.
 - whether research will effect change?
- There is little at national policy level which recognises the findings of the available research.
- The research focuses on cultural and not racial issues.
- It is important to look at what we do know too. Racial discrimination and disadvantage continue. There are concerns about services, practices and relationships with black and minority ethnic communities.

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- There are questions about how policy is currently shaped and its relationship to research has to be considered.
 - Will the findings be linked to policy and tied to action?
 - Will the project affect practice?
 - Will it lead to a better definition of who provides services and how?
 - The political context of the research is not addressed.
 - The research seems to value the “hard” over the “soft” data. So, it is worth emphasising the need to value people’s views.
 - The research is being created/conducted in a particular context and therefore it is bound to present a particular point of view.
 - The voices of children are not included in the research
 - Fathers and men are also excluded from the research.
 - The contribution from black people to the research is missing.
 - There is no mention of resources – namely, finance.
 - How will: -
 - a) the “dissatisfaction” with existing provision of services be addressed?
 - b) the lessons from the “satisfied” customers be learned?
 - How do the services being provided to “white” families and communities compare with those to Black families?

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- There is an under-representation of the South Asian communities in the take up of services. Why is this the case? What is being done to address the situation?
- How will the research change the perceptions of the different communities towards service provision?
- How do we acknowledge the “resilience” of the black communities?
- How will the over-representation of the African Caribbean communities in the L.A.C system be addressed?
- Why is the situation of Chinese children not addressed?