The politics of Matching: Ethnicity, Religion and Muslim-heritage Children in Care in the UK

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Abstract:

In 2014, in order to improve outcomes for children from ethnic minority backgrounds and to speed up the adoption process, the UK government changed the Children and Families Act. The legal requirement on adoption agencies to consider ethnicity in the decision around 'matching' was removed, thus clearing the way for transracial placements. This article interrogates the impact of the change in law on social work practice around adoption, using the experiences of diverse Muslim-heritage children as a case study. Grounded in the sociology of religion, the findings presented here are based on semi-structured qualitative interviews (n=28) with those involved in the care of Muslim-heritage children. In discussing qualitative findings, all adopters and prospective adopters interviewed in this research insisted on adopting children who 'look like them', and social workers continued to look for the 'best' possible matches. Children from minoritised backgrounds continue to wait for long periods before finding permanent homes. Our evidence raises questions about the efficacy of policy guidance. Based on this evidence we conclude that greater strategizing is needed around the recruitment of adopters from diverse backgrounds.

Key words: adoption, looked-after children, matching, minoritisation, religion, transracial placements

Teaser Text:

All children need homes where they can be safe, secure and happy. For looked-after children and young people from 'minoritised' ethnic and religious backgrounds, having a home that offers security, stability, and belonging can provide a space to negotiate the complexities of their circumstances and identities. Children from these backgrounds are consistently among those

who wait the longest to find permanent adoptive homes. In 2014 to address delays in placement, the UK government removed the need for adoption agencies to match adopters and children by their ethnicity or their religion. This article examines the politics of 'matching' on everyday social work practice in relation to Muslim-heritage children. Our research findings suggest that the change in the law is not meeting the needs of minoritised children and further strategic interventions are needed around diversifying adopter recruitment and cultural competence training for social workers and prospective adopters.

Introduction

Children benefit from permanent and secure homes in which they can explore their identities and evolve as human beings, citizens and family members (Barone *et al*. 2017; Cassidy and Shaver, 2016; Quiroga *et al*. 2017; Selwyn and Quinton, 2004). Homes in which they have a sense of security, continuity, stability and belonging. However, statistical data around adoption suggests that children from black and minority ethnic groups are among those who wait the longest for permanent homes (HM Gov, 2021). Compared to children from white backgrounds, black children are more likely to be in looked after care, yet less likely to be adopted (HM Gov, 2021). At the same time, the historical positing of race still resonates in families today (Caballero, 2012).

In 2014, to improve outcomes for children from minority ethnic backgrounds and speed up the adoption process, the UK government introduced changes to the Children and Families Act. The legal requirement on adoption agencies to consider ethnicity in decisions around 'matching' was removed, thus clearing the way for transracial placements. This change in Adoption Law has prompted significant debate: with critics arguing that the change was based on inadequate evidence and is best understood as a political move (Kirton, 2016). Using the experiences of Muslim-heritage children as a case study, this article interrogates the impact of this change in the law and considers how social workers and adoptive families have responded to this shift in policy towards matching. Thus, this paper responds to Wainwright and Ridley's call (2012: 58), for more research on the 'impact of

multiple and varied ethnically matched adoptive placements, in order to help policy makers better understand the complex interplay of ethnicity, culture, adoption and children's identities'.

Minoritised Ethnicities and Children in Care

The need for children to be placed with families from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds is well-researched (Gill and Jackson, 1983; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000, 2005; Selwyn *et al.*, 2004, 2006; Wainwright and Ridley, 2012). One solution is for more recruitment, emphasis, and investment on ethnic minority families to come forward to adopt (Tizard and Phoenix, 2002; Simon and Alstein, 2002; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000, 2005; Zeitlin, 2003). Correspondingly, more research is needed on challenges faced by prospective Muslim-heritage adoptive parents and children and those from other minoritised backgrounds who are going through adoption. The impact of religion and spiritual beliefs on the development of character and resilience is well articulated in literature (Sharley 2012; Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Dutt and Phillips, 2010). Yet, less has been said about understanding the social, cultural and religious factors that affect adoption decisions, including the significance of the changes in the Children's and Families Act 2014 on the lives of religious and ethnic children and young people in care.

The term 'minoritised' is a further analytically framing through which to explore children's experiences around ethnic and religious identity as they journey through care. 'Minoritisation' acknowledges the social power hierarchies within society that determine how various social groups and individuals are perceived within society. It provides a socially grounded understanding that particular groups of people are minoritised by others rather than naturally existing as a minority (Gunaratnum, 2003). In using the term minoritised to describe looked-after children's ethno-religious identities acknowledges the diversity among these children. The social hierarchies that minoritise these children's ethnic identities also shape how their religious identities are perceived and catered for while they are in care. Without a robust body of data, both quantitative and qualitative, efforts to

implement policy or develop best practices around placements of minoritised ethnic children may be hindered or fail to deliver appropriate care.

Despite high proportional numbers of minoritised ethnic children in the care population and low proportional numbers of those adopted out of care (HM Gov, 2021), local authorities are not required to collect data on religion or language (Selwyn and Wijedesa 2010). Therefore, children in care records on intersectionality in children's identities are often inadequate. Other studies have highlighted large gaps in social workers' case recording of basic details such as a child's ethnicity, religion, and culture, and the impact these have on policy initiation and planning at every level (Barn *et al.*, 1997; Dutt and Phillips, 2000; Lowe *et al.,* 2002). It is argued elsewhere that adding to the difficulties in social care practitioners providing care for complex identities is a lack of information on adoption planning for minority ethnic children (Thoburn *et al.,* 2005).

Scholars have highlighted ethnicity and culture as significant determinants in the permanent placement of children in care (Thoburn *et al*., 2000; Gailey, 2010). Additionally, the legal provision for religion as a protected characteristic in public services, such as education, health and child welfare, suggests that social workers take into account looked after children's religious heritage when considering placements (Children's Act, 1989; Equality Act 2010). For minoritised ethnic children who are more likely to be from a religious background (ONS, 2019), their faith background further compounds decision-making in relation to their journeys through care. Barn and Kirton (2012: 26) observe that 'among Asian children, those from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, who are usually of Muslim-heritage, were least likely to be adopted compared to Indian children (especially when young)'.

The change in UK Law and adoption

One challenge in the low rate of adoption of children from minority ethnic backgrounds is attributed to the historic requirements of the 2002 Adoption and Children Act, which emphasised that 'due

consideration' be given to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural, and linguistic background in adoption placements. Since 2002, although the UK government stressed that such statutes should not prohibit transracial placements nor lead to delay while an ethnic match is sought; the clause remained challenging as it could lead to delay or non-placement due to a shortage of appropriate minority ethnic adopters (Wood, 2009, Barn and Kirton 2012).

The current political solution to the resulting disproportionate number of minoritised children, such as black, Asian and minority ethnic heritage (including children of mixed parentage or heritage) in care is to speed up the adoption process by removing the need to find 'perfect' ethnic matches for children. The Children and Families Act 2014 was intended to improve outcomes for children from ethnic minority backgrounds to speed up the adoption process. The UK government's 2021 Adoption Strategy reiterates this, asserting that:

> Ethnic minority children wait the longest to be found a new home. Maintaining continuity of the heritage of their birth family is important to most children; it is a means of retaining knowledge of their identity and background. However, social workers should avoid placing the child's ethnicity above other relevant characteristics when looking for an adoptive family for the child (DFE, 2021: 31)

This governmental shift towards allowing more transracial and religious unmatched placements has seen Ministers and governmental advisors continue to suggest that ethnicity and religion are a secondary concern when placing children (Miller and Butt, 2019). The removal of ethnicity from Adoption Law and Guidance in England promotes the consideration that when minoritised or Muslim-heritage children enter local authority care, social workers are no longer required to place them in Muslim homes or indeed in homes that match their ethnicity. The change in law is by no means uncontested. The children's religious-heritage may become a contested identity and political subject when placed in homes that do not reflect their faith or ethnic identity. It is argued that by removing of ethnicity from matching considerations, the law devalues the significance of ethnicity to individual identity (Lewis and Phoenix 2004), fails to acknowledge the multitude of ways in which ethnicity and

faith matter in adoption (Ali 2013), and as asserted by Kirton may be understood as a form of 'neoliberal racism' (2016).

Five years after the change in legislation, national statistics indicate that this has not had the desired impact of decreasing the number of children waiting (ONS, 2020). Figures released by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board show that although the number of children in care in England is consistently increasing, the number of adoptions has fallen, and children continue to wait (ASGLB 2021). Furthermore, to date there has not been a review of the impact of this change in the law on social work practices and adopter choices around adoption. This article addresses this gap and uses qualitative data around the journeys of Muslim-heritage children to explore how adopters and social work practice have responded to the changes in the law around matching. We demonstrate the significance of children's identities within decision-making processes and practices that that determine their journeys through and if possible out of care.

Researching Muslim-heritage Children in Care – Methodological Choices

The research aimed to understand the journey of Muslim-heritage children in care by exploring the attitudes, practices, and lived experiences of social workers, adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents. The research is situated within the sociology of religion - a theoretical framework that prioritises individuals' socially contextualised lived experiences of belief. A qualitative methodological approach was selected to encourage bridge-building or 'responsive' data that could produce deep, 'thick', meaningful material (Geertz, 1973: 310; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Semi-structured interviews were used to provide a space for participants to discuss their experiences and explore unaccounted for themes and concerns (Page, 2018). Moreover, interviews afford the co-creation of knowledge, transparency about a researcher's social location and address asymmetry in the research process (Oakley, 2005; Phillips, Porter, and Slee, 2018).

The individual semi-structured interviews were built around questions and/or themes based on the project research objectives, questions raised by existing literature on the adoption of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children and consultations with frontline children's social work practitioners who acted as advisors for the research. Themes explored in the questionnaires included questions about the participants' adoption/ foster care / social work journeys; any motivations from their religious identity or culture; any barriers/problems that they encountered in their caring or social work roles; and future plans (a full list of questions is available in appendix 2 of Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2018). The decision to have a list of themes and/or questions for the participants, rather than unstructured interviews, was based on good practice from other studies on religion, which found that 'sometimes you need a question' to gain more insight (Porter, 2018: 95). Likewise, Sarah-Jane Page's (2018) research on young religious adults found that some participants were more comfortable disclosing when they had a clear understanding of the boundaries of the research.

Particular emphasis was laid on the ethos that we aimed to create within the interview setting. We were careful to present a relationship of collaborative enquiry that actively dismantled researcher-researched hierarchies – the interviewer aimed to learn from participants' experiences. Although all three researchers on the team are experienced sociologists, they were not social workers. Instead, we were the 'curious' researcher, which we understood as 'asking questions that give and solicit information without being intrusive or making the [interviewee] feel threatened. These should be open-ended and allow for additional probing' (Williams and Chisholm, 2018: 203). It was especially important while talking to adopters who on occasion felt more able to share intimate detail of their journeys to becoming adoptive families. However, interviews are not without difficulties when striving to address the power asymmetry in research with participants (Cerwonka, 2011; Finch, 1994; Page, 2018; Porter, 2018).

Ethical Statement

As a diverse research team with different approaches to faith, there was a continual interrogation of our positionality, social location and ethical standpoints. This included how our positionality informs the discourse, as it is insufficient to disclose our autobiography without understanding how this affects the interview structure. For example, the research team found that disclosure regarding the establishment of *mahram* or familial relationships through breastfeeding only occurred with the principal researcher, who is a visible Muslim woman and an adopter herself. Recognising our race, gender, and religion does not automatically erase power differentials and, in some cases, our positionality may infer greater authority to speak for and about others (Alcoff, 2009). The research was undertaken after securing ethical approval from Coventry University, which included a commitment to securing written informed consent from all participants. To comply with ethical requirements around anonymity and confidentiality, all identifiable details have been masked or blurred and pseudonyms are used throughout this article. Interviews were audio-recorded after securing written and voluntary consent from participants.

Sample size, methods and analysis

In total, 28 research participants took part in this research including five adopters, four prospective adopters, and 19 social workers. Sample recruitment was through gatekeepers. Having a gatekeeper for recruitment is useful as it gave potential participants sufficient distance between themselves and the research team to accept or decline invitations to become part of the study. We also publicised the research by working with large adoption charities and Muslim news outlets to contact individuals who had adopted or were considering adopting children of Muslim heritage. The wider research project also included ten foster carers and three care leavers, however due to a focus on adoption and matching they are not included in the sample for this paper.

Once the data was transcribed, from the audiotapes, the data was analysed using thematic analysis, taking an inductive approach to coding. Following convention, the thematic analysis was conducted in a six-phase approach: familiarity with the data; initial coding; searching for themes; reviewing;

defining and naming themes; and producing a report (Braun and Clarke, 2012). During this process, there was considerable discussion on the operational definition: 'children of Muslim heritage' or 'Muslim-heritage children'. The term 'children of Muslim 'heritage' allows for a space within which children can determine their identity irrespective of the socio-religious contexts within which they were bought up. It also accounts for the significant diversities within British Muslim communities in relation to religiosity and levels of religious practice. For example, there may be Muslim-heritage children who may never have encountered religion in their everyday lives prior to coming into care, Muslim-heritage children who themselves do not self-identify as Muslim or indeed children for whom their Muslim heritage is a key aspect of their identity. We recognise that children inhabit a range of identity positions in relation to their faith (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2021). Therefore, in this article we aim to focus on children's religious identities without being prescriptive about levels of religiosity.

Muslim-heritage Children and the 'politics' of Matching

As described above, social work practice has been fraught with debates around ethnicity and religion in the matching of children. Should faster adoptive placements be prioritised over considerations of ethnicity and religion? What long term impacts might this have on a looked-after child's sense of identity? These are questions that continue to be interrogated. We examine the role of ethnicity in foster placements elsewhere (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2021). There are other pathways to permanency including special guardianship and kinship care that require further scrutiny in relation to provisions for ethnicity. In this paper, using evidence and quotes from our qualitative research we consider the impact of the change in the law on adoptive placements for children of Muslim-heritage.

Firstly, it is important to note that finding a 'best' possible match is not something that social workers insist upon when placing children, rather this emphasis on sharing identity traits with their children came from adopters. In this research, every adopter and prospective adopter in our sample (n-9)

wanted a child that looked like them and/or who shared their religious heritage, as shown in the following extracts:

> We go to India a lot, twice a year, and we wanted our child that looked like us[...]. Our child is not an ethnic match, but they do look like us. […]if we had adopted a blonde, blue-eyed child every time we go to Tesco's, we would stand out as a family. I also felt that in the playground, it can be a cruel place and we didn't want other 'people's children to say to everyone that we were a family out of the ordinary, so we said that we would adopt a child of people of Spanish heritage, Latin American, Asian or even those with a dual heritage that can look similar to us.
>
> *Muslim Adopter, British Indian*

> Because we have a birth child already that sort of gave us the requirements because we wanted a child to fit in with our own child in terms of religion and skin colour.
>
> *White Christian Adopter with a Muslim Partner*

> We definitely want a child to be raised as Muslim, so preferably from a Muslim background and preferably the same ethnicity as us, just because it makes it easier in the community […]. We think it will help the child to settle, and the child won't stick out, so it will be much easier to integrate.
>
> *Prospective Adopters, British Indian*

Adoptive parents' desires for children who 'look like us' underscores their preference for ethnic matches. The research, therefore, reveals that matching children and parents based on the similarity of ethnicity and religion is well supported by Muslim adopters and prospective adopters. At the same time, local authorities require some flexibility in the 'best' possible match, a dilemma as demonstrated in the following example of a Greek Orthodox adopter. This adopter was aware of a large number of Muslim-heritage children looking for adoptive homes in her local authority. She felt that a Muslim

child would look similar to her and so was keen to adopt a Muslim child. She was prepared to work with the child to ensure that religious heritage is maintained. However, her local authority refused to place a Muslim child with her:

> We were prepared to take a child of any religious heritage, and we preferred a younger child. The only thing we were certain of was we wanted them to fit into our family, so they had to look similar to our other children, so we looked for children of mixed heritage. I think that religion shouldn't matter when matching a child, the most important thing is they have a home where they are cared for. I don't understand why children should be left in care because they can't find foster homes or adopters that have the same religion, it is better that they are bought up in a different religion than stay in the system.
>
> *Greek Orthodox Adopter*

When questioned about how she would ensure that the children's faith needs would be maintained, this adopter suggested that she would take the child to the mosque once a week. It is worth noting that the prospective adopter had limited knowledge of Islamic faith. In her interview she suggested that social workers involved in her case felt that if placed with her, the child's exposure to faith would be insufficient and superficial, such as supposing halal food would singularly equate to faith directives on what is permissible.

In another case involving a young female child, social workers described looking for an adoptive family for the mixed ethnicity and mixed religion child whose biological mother is White non-religious and the biological father is an Asian Muslim. Given the local authority's geographical location, they were able to find several Muslim-heritage families who would be able to cater for the Muslim aspect of the child's heritage. However, they felt they had not been able to find a family that would also accommodate its non-religious heritage. At the time of recording this evidence, the child had already waited over nine months. We contrast this young female child's story with other research evidence of a number of Muslim-heritage or minoritised ethnic children who are placed in adoptive homes that are not Muslim or of minoritised ethnicity. This is usually due to a shortage of Muslim-

heritage adopters (or those from minoritised backgrounds) who can meet these children's needs. In these latter cases, social workers suggest that life-story work is sufficient to make the child aware of their faith identity. Juxtaposing these research narratives suggests the possibility of structural inequalities and subtle prejudices that perhaps privilege the preservation of certain identity traits over others in making adoptive matches. The social dynamics that minoritise certain groups in British society, seem to be replicated in the children's social care system. We do not have sufficient evidence to confirm to what degree this supposition is meritorious but contend this is an area for urgent future research.

Based on the qualitative evidence we gathered, it appears that, at times, practice is not always following guidance on matching by still waiting for homes that can provide for all aspects of a child's identity. Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence suggesting the significance of ethnic and religious matching in supporting attachments between the child and its adoptive family (see Barn and Kirton 2012 for a critical summary of the evidence). Indeed, within reason and resources permitting, social workers have stated that they would wait to find a 'perfect' match for each child in their care. This observation is further supported by the following extract from a Muslim adopter:

> I think if it were me, I would prioritise their religion because they would be brought up with the right principles and the foundations because I think that helps a child grow to be a strong, resilient person. […] What I would like is the repealing of the clause, the Children Act, I think it's section 22 as section 22 is regarding due consideration for a child's religion. Since 2014 it has meant a lot of children, not just Muslim children, black ethnic children, putting them at a disadvantage by being placed in transracial families, and they grow up forgetting their religion and know less about their identity. I think those children are deprived of their religious beliefs, and I think the effect is they will be very confused about their identity.
> *Prospective Muslim Adopter, British Pakistani*

Barn and Kirton (2012: 11) critique the policy emphasis on transracial placements as simplistic and misguided and that it distracts from finding other solutions to reduce the delays in children's journeys. Almost a decade on, this research project reinforces Barn and Kirton's critique. While the change in law aimed to increase the chances of adoption for black and minority ethnic children, this has not been its impact in practice.

Towards a Solution: Recruiting Diverse Adopters

Previous studies have shown a consistent lack of adopters from a Muslim background consequentially limit placement choices for children with similar religious and cultural heritage (Owen and Statham, 2009; Newbigging and Thomas, 2011; Huggins, 2012). Indeed, recruitment of Muslim adopters continues to be problematic raising concerns about the extent to which existing policies and practices are 'culturally competent' (Miller and Butt, 2019: 9). In this section, we interrogate what motivates and/or hinders Muslim-heritage families from adopting.

The reasons for adoption are diverse and influenced by several factors. This study reveals that involuntary childlessness and religion are among key motivators for adoption among Muslim families (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2018). For example, almost all the adopters in this research had chosen to adopt after encountering infertility and being unable to conceive a child. Additionally, other adopters who described themselves as being highly committed to their faith indicated religiosity as a motivating factor, as demonstrated in the interview extract below:

> We wanted a child in our family, but we didn't necessarily need a biological child, so adoption seemed the right option for us […] we were very lucky to have close [Muslim] friends who adopted themselves and they were very happy, so we decided to decline the fertility treatment and go down the adoption route instead. […] We are both intensely aware of our faith. [...] That reflection [on faith] helped us understand adoption was a good thing because you're taking a child who is vulnerable, taking them into our home. The Qur'an talks

about orphans, we recognise that we were not going to get an orphan, but in a similar sense they are orphans because they don't have a home to live in.

Muslim Adopters, British Indian

For this family, their faith shaped their identity and their desire to adopt. One crucial influence on the decision to adopt was Muslim friends had adopted before them, which helped consolidate their thinking around the compatibility of Islam and adoption. Adoption can sometimes be misunderstood in Muslim contexts, however, for this family, their friends had already negotiated the religious texts and theological misinterpretations, presenting a paradigm that informed their negotiations of faith and adopting. Another couple presented a similar narrative:

. That's when we started thinking about adopting. [...][…] I think it's about giving; our intention is to give a child a good upbringing that they may not have had, but we are not doing for any ulterior motive, we are trying to do a good thing. To look after a child, an orphan, we consider that a child in care is the same because they don't have someone to look after them is a great Islamic reward, that also helps with the decision. It seems that they (Muslim community) don't understand that; it does romanticise biological parents, and they don't understand adoptive parents that they are not different

Prospective Muslim Adopters, Muslim-heritage

The extracts above demonstrate the salience of faith in the identity of the couple and in their motivation to adopt. Both cases show that faith can motivate people to adopt through religious texts and through the faith networks formed around people of similar faith. Faith and family networks are a critical source of encouragement for adoption in parents from a Muslim background.

Paradoxically, both extracts also begin to hint at specific socio-cultural and religious barriers, which can hinder adoption, adding another layer in compounding adoption decisions. There is limited recognition within diverse Muslim communities in Britain that there are vulnerable children in the

community who need permanent homes. Adoption (and the linked issue of infertility) remain taboo subjects within these communities (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2018). Finally, theological misinterpretations have led some individuals within Muslim communities to consider that adoption is not compatible with their belief (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* 2018). As noted by this Muslim social worker, this leads to inadequate numbers of prospective adoptive parents coming forward from Muslim communities:

> I do believe there is an element of lack of education and ignorance in our community; for example, it is coming to the end of Ramadan, and there has been a lot of work during Ramadan to raise awareness of children in local authorities, […] that there are children who are in care in non-Muslim homes. They [the community] say it's unacceptable that children should be in care, they should be with their family members, with their siblings……... they don't see what I see, that children are taken from homes and unaccompanied asylum seekers, they don't have anyone else, they have to be in local authority care. It is our responsibility as a community to provide potential adopters and foster carers who should be willing to look after these children. But that's not what's happening at all, they are saying all these Muslim children in care, but they don't want to see beyond the in-care part, that actually the community needs to take responsibility for it.
> *Muslim Social Worker, Midlands*.

Apart from faith, an ascribed religious affiliation can be 'associational', which allows for the acquisition of social and political capital in certain communities (Modood, 2010) or cultural habit (Yilmaz 2014). Reproducing Muslim culture and social capital was highlighted as a significant determining factor that influences adoption in Muslim families. For instance, adopters who were not practising Muslims indicated that faith was not significant in their decision to adopt. They observed that culturally they would be best placed to look after a Muslim-heritage child as they considered their understanding of Muslim normative values and morals would coalesce with their perceived values that Muslim-heritage children may have acquired from their biological families. In addition to the socio-cultural barriers, Muslim participants, both adopters and social workers, expressed the existence

within Muslim communities of a residual distrust and stigma attached to those involved in social care, with one participant noting:

> I'm doing my masters in social work at the moment, and my partner, who is a Pakistani Muslim man, he is very vocal about it. He didn't want me to go into child protection and doesn't want me to go into the field of adoption or fostering. His reasons behind that is child protection is seen as a child snatcher, someone who breaks up families.
>
> *Muslim Social Worker, Midlands*

A final consideration is the levels of religious literacy among social workers in relation to Islam and Muslims. Research participants, particularly those of Muslim-heritage, considered only few social workers would have nuanced knowledge of Islam in the UK. Therefore, participants emphasised the need for social workers to understand Islam not just theologically but also as contextually located and as diverse 'lived' religion. The following extract from a research participant highlights the necessity of such qualities in social work and adoption processes:

> We had a very good social worker, she was very engaged […] Our social worker was not from the same background as us […] Cultural differences did come up, but it didn't come up as offensive but more as how it would be a barrier and so we were very careful to explain things, and our social worker was very prepared to understand the differences. Social workers need to understand Muslim communities, and Muslim communities need to understand fostering and adoption law. If we all understand one another, the children can have the best outcomes.
>
> *Muslim Adopters, British Indian*

It is important that social work practitioners and policymakers acknowledge the salience of religion *and* culture throughout the adoption process. Our findings show that religious belief and culture can serve to both encourage and or hinder Muslim families from starting the adoption process and this is mirrored in research about Christian families who adopt (Gerand and Nkomo 2021, Charlton 2009). Within British Muslim communities, lack of awareness of the needs of vulnerable children, religious misunderstandings and a 'fear' of social work practices are among the reasons discouraging Muslim

families from applying to adopt. One adoptive mother told this research how she was discouraged by her wider family from adopting – she was sat down and was told that one of her siblings would have a child that she could adopt. She declined this offer.

These socio-cultural reasons are specific to British Muslim communities, but if the adoption process for Muslim-heritage children is to be made more efficient, then adopter recruitment plans that address these specific socio-cultural issues need to be developed and rolled out. In line with the recommendations of this research, the Department for Education (DFE) announced an initial investment of £1million to 'run recruitment campaigns in 2020 aimed at finding adoptive families for BAME children' (HM Gov, 2019, DFE 2021). Notwithstanding, more needs to be done to ensure that messages are consistent and use the language and cultural 'hooks' that talk to the desired demography. While this article focuses on issues relevant to British Muslims around adoption, a similar culturally nuanced approach may be undertaken for other ethnicities and religious minorities. Within this discourse, there is also a need to manage adopter expectations; however, all children's social work is predicated on foregrounding the child's needs, not the adopters.

Conclusion

In this article, drawing upon evidence from our research on the experiences of Muslim-heritage children in the UK care system, we evaluate the significance of this change in law. As demonstrated by the evidence presented in the sections above, we show that driven both by adopter preference and precedents of good practice, social work practitioners continue to look for 'perfect' matches. As noted previously in this article, recent statistics show that children, particularly from minoritised ethnicities, continue to have long waits to find permanent homes This study raises questions about the efficacy of the change in law and policy guidance around adoption. Further research is needed to understand the impact of the change in law on adoption practice in the UK.

We have also identified the gap in data on Muslim-heritage children in care, which limits understanding of the scale of the provision. To overcome the existing status quo, our research suggests that recruiting a larger pool of adopters from diverse backgrounds may be the best approach towards reducing the length of time minoritised children, including those of religious heritage, spend in looked after care. Where transracial placements are inevitable and indeed important for a child's future, investment is required to develop necessary religious and cultural knowledge among prospective adoptive parents and social workers. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the entire sector needs to reflect on the impact of wider politics and dynamics of societal minoritisation on vulnerable children's journeys through care.

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