

Dr Julie Selwyn

Pathways to Permanence

Julie Selwyn is the Director of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster care Studies in the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. Before joining the University Julie worked as a social worker and residential worker for 15 years. She has published widely on substitute care including studies of young people's view of foster care (2008) older children placed for adoption (2006), contact (2006) and the recruitment of minority ethnic adopters (2005).

Julie was responding to questions from Caroline Thomas, Academic Adviser to the ARi. They were talking about the study of *Pathways to Permanence for Black, Asian and Mixed Ethnicity Children*. This was a comparative study of planning and decision making by professionals as it affects the progress of black and minority ethnic children, and non-black and minority ethnic children. The outcomes of the placements for children were compared.

The report of *Pathways to Permanence for Black, Asian and Mixed Ethnicity Children* is written by Julie Selwyn, David Quinton, Perlita Harris, Dinithi Wijedasa, Shameem Nawaz and Marsha Wood. It has been published by BAAF.

Caroline: So, Julie, what for you was the most rewarding aspect of this particular research project?

Julie: One of the most rewarding aspects for me in this study was to have a large enough sample of minority ethnic children to be able to really examine whether there were differences in the response of services to the needs of minority ethnic children in comparison with white children. Before we began this study, there'd been a lot of strongly held views but very little evidence. This was partly because of the lack of research but it was also because it's only been since 2001 that children's services have collected data on the ethnicity of children. So having a large enough sample to really look at these questions was the most rewarding aspect for me

Caroline: And what would you say was the most challenging thing about it?

Julie: One of the most challenging things was as a team agreeing and conceptualising what we meant when we used these words such as ethnicity, culture and identity. In common speech, the words are often used interchangeably but there are disagreements in the literature about what each of them mean and they do mean slightly different things. There are also personal challenges along the way such as realising just how much a child's skin colour seemed to determine their pathway. The skin colour of children didn't just affect the action of social workers but it also influenced which adopters were interested and which adopters were interested in which children.

Caroline: Thinking about your key findings, what would you consider to be the most powerful finding from the research?

Julie: There were many powerful findings but I think one of the main ones was that the children entered care for different reasons and at different ages and that these two factors had an influence on whether they were likely to be adopted. White children and mixed ethnicity children tended to come into care younger and for reasons of abuse and neglect. The black children were older and they were often coming in at much older ages because they'd been in private foster care arrangements or that they'd been travelling between countries. And the Asian children came in often because their mothers felt unable to continue with the pregnancy because the pregnancy was outside marriage or was with the wrong kind of partner. Although the reasons and the ages had a big impact on whether children were adopted, we also found that the white and mixed ethnicity children had more efforts made for them for longer than did the Asian and black children. The majority of Asian children were never found an adoptive family.

Caroline: And, if you could choose just one key general message from the research, what would that be?

Julie: One key general message is that good placement decisions and the plans for adoption support depend on high quality assessments of children and it's important that the wish to match on ethnicity doesn't prevent a full assessment of all the child's needs.

Caroline: And can you highlight the main message for professionals working in the family justice system.

Julie: My message for the family justice system is that the repeated assessments requested often by the guardians and the courts led to delays. There were many assessments of relatives that we found on children's files, one after the other, they were sequential assessments which delays proceedings and ultimately affected the chances of a child being adopted. There were also a few cases where children were placed very quickly with kin who were complete strangers to the child and we thought that there should have been more safeguards when children don't have an established relationship with a relative. So courts need to be aware that the chances of finding an adoptive placement for a child can disappear in the delays that are incurred by the courts.

Caroline: And what about messages for those working in children and families social work?

Julie: We've talked about the importance of stability in children's lives in many previous studies but we also noticed in our research how often social workers were changing. Some of the workers we interviewed hardly knew the children at all and some had none or very little experience of adoption practice. To provide good adoption practice needs a stable, well trained and well supported workforce.

It was also surprising that so many children's social workers had a kind of idea of what would be perfect adopters and that their idea of perfect adopters was a married couple who were financially secure. But we know from research that neither of these characteristics are related to the quality of adoptive parenting. There are all kinds of assumptions made about what kind of family should be sought and even whether a family was likely to be found.

So some social workers were very pessimistic about the chances for children and where social workers were pessimistic there was less family finding activity, less effort and attempts were ended sooner than social workers who were optimistic and who were really proactive in family finding. So social workers' attitudes also affected children's chances.

Some of the mixed ethnicity children in our sample had been living with white foster carers for some time before an adoption recommendation was made. In the cases we read, it was decided by children's services that the foster carers were unsuitable just because of their ethnicity. However, after lengthy court cases, all the children that were involved in these conflictual cases were allowed to stay with the foster carers who later went on to become adopters.

So part of any social work assessment should be to consider children's current attachments and their need for stability. Children's ethnic heritages were often multiple and complex and the chances of finding an exact ethnic match was remote. It's important that children should not be denied a family because of a lack of an ethnic match and that adoption support plans need to include how adoptive families and children will be supported. There are many ways to do this through linking in with local groups, finding mentors or using adopters' own networks. So a key message to me for children's social workers is to consider a wider range of possible adopters, not to expect one family to be able to provide everything for children with multiple and complex needs and to plan adoption support before the child goes into placement.

Caroline: And is there a message you'd want to highlight for adoption professionals?

Julie: My message for adoption services is that some of the children's profiles were really badly written and were quite off-putting. Some services might need some advice and help in the use of media and in presenting children well. We also found practices in relation to searching for families that delayed things for children. Some agencies searched sequentially, first they would look in-house, then they would look to the consortium and as a last resort they'd contact voluntary adoption agencies. This really limited the choice of families for children, it incurred delay and of course it might not have resulted in the best match.

Caroline: Finally, in your view, what are the outstanding issues for further research in this particular area of children's services?

Julie: In relation to research, research is only really just beginning to look at the needs of minority ethnic children who need adoptive placement. We need to know much more about children and young people's views of growing up in adoptive families. I know I would be interested in hearing about how children feel their adopters have prepared them to deal with racism and whether the strategies suggested differed by the ethnicity of the adoptive family.

Another key area is the experience of mixed ethnicity children. Some are placed in white families, some go into black families and others into families where either the adopters are of mixed ethnicity themselves or they're in a mixed relationship. How do these children fair? How does the ethnicity of the parents, the adoptive parents, affect the development of the child's ethnic identity? We have much still to learn.

Caroline: Thank you.