BRAC²eD Model: an approach to de-bias decision-making in adoption assessments with prospective adopters from minoritized ethnic groups

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Abstract

Cultural misunderstanding, systemic barriers, restrictive policies, inconsistent and subjective views around standards and requirements have prevented families from a minoritized ethnic background from successfully adopting. Such barriers have led to reluctance and a lack of trust in the adoption system. In this paper, I argue that these barriers arise from cognitive bias that affects decision-making in adoption. The BRAC²eD model for debiasing is introduced to support adoption assessments of individuals and families from minoritized ethnic groups. BRAC²eD recognizes that the process of assessing prospective adopters is complex and offers strategies to debias. In this model, social workers are encouraged to acknowledge the existence of bias, engage in debiasing nudges, internal conversations and reflexive processes that support challenging bias, the utilization of cognitive resources towards debiasing, and change and determine proportionate decisions. The contention for appropriate language around Black, Asian, Mixed heritage and Other minoritized groups is acknowledged. The author uses ‘minoritized ethnic groups’ as a preferred term based on her own identity, however appreciates that those referred to may have their own preferred terms. With that in mind, social workers must understand the cultural and sub-cultural differences and preferences without homogenizing the people they work with.

Introduction

There has continued to be a shortage of Black and Asian minority adopters, particularly those of Black African and Caribbean heritage and this concern goes back to the 1960s (Barn and Kirton, 2012; Ali, 2014). It is not convincing that the amendment of section 1(5) of the Children Act 2002, removing the emphasis on race and ethnicity, truly addresses the problem of delay in the adoption of children of Black, Asian (in particular), and Other minoritized ethnic groups. A recent Department for Education (DfE) evaluation on regional adoption agencies, focusing on the recruitment of adopters, identified that out of 471 prospective adopters only 9 per cent were ethnic minorities. Specifically, two adopters identified themselves as Black, 23 Asian, 13 were of Mixed heritage with the remaining three unnamed (Burnley et al., 2021). Yet, according to Government data, by March 2020, there were 80,080 looked-after children (10% Mixed race, 7% Black, 4% Asian and 4% Other ethnicity) and 3,570
were adopted. Of the adoption figures, 10% were Mixed-race, 2% Black, 1% Asian and another 1% Other ethnic groups (DfE, 2021).

Several reasons account for the shortage of adopters from minoritized ethnic groups. Depending on cultural and religious norms and expectations, childbirth is/may be an expectation, thereby creating a barrier to formal adoption irrespective of their economic status (Nachinab et al., 2019). Sometimes these cultural expectations and stigma around the absence of biological children follow people in the diaspora. There can also be misconceptions about adoption (e.g. the type of person that can adopt, their social status or age); pressure from family members; the intrusive nature of the assessments, and the presence of procedural barriers that prevent ethnic minorities from adopting (Selwyn et al., 2013; Ali, 2014). Sometimes poverty or inadequate housing conditions that are also linked to economic racial inequalities. Intensifying this, minority ethnic groups of working age are often excluded from jobs regardless of their qualifications and geographical location (Howarth et al., 1999). However, some families (e.g. Bangladeshi/Pakistani) may have an average of four or five children and genuinely feel they may not always have the finances necessary for adequate care if they take on additional children, and prefer to look after their own (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005).

To assume that every person from a minoritized ethnic group is restricted or unwilling to adopt is a misunderstanding as most are deterred by circumstances or systemic barriers (Rule, 2006). There is very limited research looking at specific cultures and adoption. What we know is religious and cultural factors amongst the Somali population in the UK encourage them to consider fostering or adoption and doing so is not unusual (Chowdhury, 2021). It can be uncomfortable for Somali people to see ‘children from their own ethnic group placed in trans-religious/transracial placements’ (Chowdhury, 2021, p. 30). As such, secular, altruistic and such rescue narratives are not uncommon reasons for adopting amongst, not only the Somali population, but also others in the Black, Asian, Mixed heritage and Other minoritized groups.

Jawdah (2020) found that racism continues to affect outcomes of adoption assessments, explaining that local authorities can be inconsistent around assessment requirements – for example, bedroom-sharing policies, and understanding the cultural and religious nuances that have led to Muslim families unwilling to adopt. Such policies
are not inclusive to families that value instilling religious identity and understanding more than bedroom sizes (Chowdhury, 2021). Other narratives suggest that ‘the goalpost on what is expected constantly changes’, notably through endless requests to meet certain requirements, but when those are met, newer requirements not previously highlighted are presented making the process a glass ceiling, and difficult. Similarly, some misgivings around the types of occupations of the prospective adoptees, or health issues that are often misunderstood (HIV), intersectional identities, misunderstanding around resilience and capabilities, without looking into specific cultural contexts (Cane, 2020). Judgements around bedroom space, the number of children, average income, financial ability, language barriers, have been unstandardized and subjective, leading to people from minoritized ethnic groups feeling harshly treated, disrespected, suspicious of decisions made, and lacking trust that their norms, values and cultural beliefs will be respected (Savage, 2011; Chowdhury, 2021).

Wainwright and Ridley (2012) and Chowdhury (2021), also found that prospective adopters from minoritized ethnic groups are often denied assessments at the enquiry stage, preventing them from undergoing a full assessment due to restrictive procedures and a lack of representation, resulting in uninclusive practices (McRoy et al., 1997; Selwyn et al., 2010). Eurocentric approaches around recruitment procedures, institutional racism, unwelcoming attitudes, demographic factors, lack of respect to the contributions that ethnic minorities make, lack of accurate information, and lack of trust in the system are discouraging (Sunmonu, 2000; Graham, 2007; Selwyn et al., 2013). Accordingly, the then Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson, in 2020, criticised the adoption system for making ‘too many lifestyle judgements’ resulting in unfair and inaccurate judgements that limited adoption placements and children being ‘bounced around the system’ (Government Business, 2021). Yet identifying adopters from minoritized ethnic groups (Black), and faith groups such as Muslims, or Sikh, is a challenge (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005).

Remarkably, beyond the assessment stage, approved adopters from a minoritized ethnic group, waiting for a match, generally wait longer compared to white counterparts; others left without support in finding a match using Link Matcher (Lewis and Selwyn, 2021). As a consequence, there is a need to consider consistently unique and cross-cultural applicability across all stages of the adoption process and to
understand how parenting capabilities are influenced by cultural beliefs and norms, as opposed to simply applying universal parenting patterns.

**Decision-making**

Decision-making is a conscious process leading to the selection of a course of action amongst two or more alternatives in order to help make a professional judgement (Taylor, 2012). To aid professional judgement, social work broadly depends on analytic tools that rely on mathematical or statistical calculations, and intuitive or descriptive approaches, although they tend to rely on intuitive thinking more than analytical processes (Collins and Daly, 2011). In times of crisis or quick decision-making (intuitive-fast-effective-but-prone-to-error), social workers are ‘often unable to apply analysis in their decision-making’, at times shifting along a continuum between intuitive and analytic models (Hackett and Taylor, 2014). O’Sullivan (2011) suggests that social workers should not separate intuitive and analytical decision-making because these methods are all-important in day-to-day decision-making processes.

Dibben (2020), in the CoramBAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy Guide to Collecting and Analysing Information for the Prospective Adopter (2020), provides step-by-step and clear guidance on assessing prospective adopters, as well as some prompts on adoption-specific questions, and hypothetical questions, to help understand capabilities about future parenting, how past life events have been overcome, coping skills and present parenting capabilities. However, there is no one tool, framework, or perfect algorithm to help social workers ensure the right answer is reached in any given situation (Vibeke and Turney, 2017). It is for the social worker or their team/agency to ensure that they use a range of appropriate tools, that decisions are defensible and free from discrimination and unfair judgemental practices.

Acknowledging that social work is complex, non-linear and unpredictable, we can appreciate the dichotomy around transracial placements. There is not always an agreement on what is best to do when there is a shortage of adopters who match the child’s identity and cultural needs. There is also contradictory research regarding the long-term outcomes for those children. Nonetheless, the importance of matching identity and long-term benefits should not be undermined. The complexity of adoption assessments on the other hand, is increased by simplification of people’s individuality, assessment forms, reports that have a limited word count and reducing clients to a
tick-box format (Cousins, 2003). Social workers are constantly weighing-up the possible risk and protection factors that could hinder the stable development of the adoptive child. They are seeking to understand how prospective adopters deal with problems and tensions, including how they have coped with being childless, any special wishes regarding an adoptive child, expectations about their own child-raising capabilities and other particulars concerning the child (Noordegraaf et al., 2010). However, these matters are analysed in a Eurocentric approach that privilege whiteness and those who fit well within them.

Further misunderstandings occur when applicants may be expected to disclose or omit certain aspects about themselves to ensure relevance and demonstrate suitability (Lind and Lindgren, 2017). For example, Cane et al. (2018) found that although disclosing an HIV status implied openness, it also resulted in discrimination. Although the social worker sifts through information gathered by omitting unnecessary compromising information, the process is subjective and can be biased, tailored to suit a certain outcome or play the ‘panel game’ (e.g presenting applicants as acceptable) (Lind and Lindgren, 2017; Wilson, 2020). Regarding minoritized ethnic groups, the concern therefore is around how much of the assessments, clarity in that process, analysis, the process of sifting and presenting information, and the decision-making processes, are truly sensitive to race, ethnicity, cultural differences, inclusive and unbiased.

**Cognitive bias in decision-making**

Cognitive biases are a systematic deviation from the rules of logic and probability, as well as insights and perceptions generally accepted as the foundation of rational thinking (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974, Phillips-Wren et al., 2019). They are flawed or defective patterns of making judgements and professional decisions when people learn and develop predictable thinking patterns. Bias may occur when practitioners rely on cognitive resources that affect the ways in which information is attended, processed, stored and retrieved (Featherston et al., 2019). We see this when systematic faults are presented into an assessment, a decision-making process, or when delivering an intervention as a result of choosing one preferred outcome over another without careful analysis. Under pressure, social workers tend to take cognitive shortcuts (heuristics) by relying on information that is readily available in their minds.
to reduce cognitive overload because relying on minimum information saves time, though in complex situations this leads to inaccuracy, systematic and predictable errors in reasoning (Nyathi, 2018).

As much as social work decision-making involves individual, team/group biases through a process of intuitive or analytic reasoning, there can be a tendency for humans to base decisions on recent experiences when predicting future events (recency bias). At times, decisions conform to pre-existing beliefs, without necessarily using the full range of information and evidence available, resulting in confirmation bias (Blumenthal-Barby and Krieger, 2015). Bias can be innate or learned through social and cultural biases, however anchoring to stereotypes, holding onto generic views, overrepresentation and misinterpreting research or people’s narratives, can hinder reflection. Engaging in these examples of bias results in excluding potential adoptive parents – particularly those from minoritized ethnic groups (Barn and Kirton, 2012; Bell et al., 2021).

The BRAC²eD model

The BRAC²eD model is a new model proposed following some reflections on this author’s own work around anti-racist practice, HIV and adoption, direct practice and social work education (Cane, 2020; Cane et al., 2018). The BRAC²eD model is presented as a tool to support social workers’ decision-making processes when working with prospective adopters from minoritized ethnic backgrounds. BRAC²eD is interactive, through reflection and reflexivity, with the view to facilitate transformation – the bottom line being improving experiences for minoritized ethnic people in the adoption system – and indeed relevant to others who are marginalized, due to bias. It involves the process of working from a decision-making approach that is influenced by bias to a staged debiasing, as shown below:

Step 1: **Become aware of bias (B)**

Step 2: engage and **Review internal conversations (R)**

Step 3: consideration of the need to deal with **Ambiguity in decision-making (A)**

Step 4: appreciation of **Cognitive resources as helpful aids to evidence-based decision-making (C)**
Step 5: Change perspectives (C)

Step 6: Education (E)

Step 7: Deliberate and disconfirm bias and automatic responses (D)

**Step 1: Become aware of bias**

To become aware of some of the biases that influence decision-making in adoption assessment and decision-making, social workers should auscultate their cognitive processes and appreciate how they individually contribute to bias. They should also be aware of their own personality traits and their approach to risk (risk-taking/risk-averse/risk-avoidant).

Social workers in adoption should be encouraged to undertake self-assessments of both the individual and their team's cultural competency and racial literacy, then act to reduce prejudice (both at an individual level and collectively). The overall organizational approach to race and racism should also be evaluated, with the responsibility to debias not simply left to individuals or teams. The argument here is that everyone attending to the needs of minoritized ethnic groups should engage in self-evaluation and debiasing exercises, given that concerns about racism in adoption go back to the 1960s, with the British Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (BSWAP) arguing that ‘institutional and individual racism permeates all aspects of services offered to black communities by statutory and voluntary agencies alike’ (James, 1986).

Understanding our cognitive biases is therefore an important first step towards debiasing decision-making and preventing decision-making errors; providing more genuine professional judgements and outcomes to those interested in adoption; and improving how we work with the ethnic minority. No one is merely their race; people impacted by racism are also simultaneously affected by other forms of inequality and oppression, making their narratives complex. It is possible that applicants or prospective adoptive parents will present with factors such as age, health issues, sexuality, class, or lack or limited social networks while in the diaspora and these require understanding with a culturally sensitive lens. Hence, consideration of simultaneous and/or multiple disadvantages and struggles should be looked at with, not only an anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory lens but also from an intersectional
anti-racism perspective. It is also necessary to consider experiences of discrimination or disadvantage arising from a range of overlapping and interdependent systems while examining one’s power and privilege (Tedam, 2020; Bernard, 2022).

While it is acknowledged that the process of debiasing is not linear or straightforward, and can be complex due to a range of issues (perhaps upbringing, white fragility or use of less-effective tools or interventions), the lack of attention to racial bias and resistance to the acknowledgement of race itself as a legitimate topic will lead to colour-blindness and dilute recognition of racial discrimination, as well as other areas of identity, such as sex, gender, and/or social class concerns. Care should be taken here as placing these factors in a hierarchy will result in race being overlooked and repeatedly viewed as frivolous. In acknowledging potential biases that may exist, social workers will need to be more cognizant of the discretion that is applied to both procedural and non-written rules that particularly lead to disproportionality in outcomes.

The process of becoming aware of any differences and potential oppression, or any unconscious and implicit biases, should lead to the action of addressing these issues in order to be an anti-oppressive practitioner. If there are issues around race plus socio-economic factors and gender, for example, then organizations should be doing more to address underlying factors that contribute to racial disparities in adoption processes.

It is important to become aware of other biases that may be brought to an individual social worker’s own worldview by the organization’s own positionality, policies, procedures, legislation, senior managers or teams that help with decision-making, as their potentially biased input may increase the likelihood of a biased outcome. Hereafter, bias awareness should be a continuous process that is awarded constant attention, not just at an individual level, or during an assessment but throughout all forms of processes, procedures, policy and structures that inform and contribute to a social worker’s decision-making.

**Step 2: Review internal conversations**

Archer (2007), suggests that reflexivity enables individuals to adopt certain ‘stances’ towards society which constitute the micro–macro link and produce the ‘active agent’. Reflexivity is part of an inner dialogue within an individual social worker; it can allow
individuals to deliberate on their future actions. In this the social worker should be able to embrace new knowledge, review prejudice, and stereotypes, first impressions and judgements, and come to new conclusions. Bias in decision-making, in that way debiasing, depend on the quality of the social worker’s reflexive skills.

When analysing the influence of culture or ethnicity on parenting and family dynamics, or assessing the capacity to provide long-term stability and competent parenting, it is vital for adoptive social workers to distinguish between influences that are due to cultural experiences, those which may be due to contextual factors, and influences connected to experiences of discrimination and economic disadvantage (Breiner et al., 2016). This process, however, requires the skills to understand, culturally, what are/are not risk factors or acceptable behaviours, when aligned to rights and the best interests principles.

A reflexive practitioner should be aware of their potential to misunderstand the impact of migration and how this has fragmented families seeking to adopt, for example. Migration means that they may have a limited number of extended family networks to support them. Particular sorts of skills – such as the ability to make and sustain close relationships; capacity for emotional openness; reflectiveness or ‘psychological mindedness’; successful resolution of earlier losses or traumatic experiences; stability and permanence of the adopter’s lifestyle and relationships, including their support networks – can all be assessed with a cultural lens and a reflexive stance. While human development across lifespan considers human interaction and dynamics overtime, it should act as an alternative to race, appreciating how people move with time, space, community and new circumstances.

Skills such as tolerant social attitudes need to be assessed carefully understanding their complex aspects, for example extreme social and religious behaviours and views. The social worker needs to be knowledgeable and skilled enough to be able to offer not only a containing environment without repugnance, but also an enquiry approach towards understanding gaps and anxieties that may affect assessment and decision-making (Taylor, 2017).

Therefore, those internal conversations should appreciate the need to scrutinize applicants’ suitability around their knowledge and awareness of parenting issues, and the need to offer prospective adoptive parents the opportunity to develop a certain
awareness of parental skills and the specificities of adoption (Wirzén and Ėčkaitė, 2021).

Of course, adoption assessments involve undertaking interviews with prospective adopters, collecting/gathering information from a range of sources, and analysing and interpreting information. However, Kiima’s (2021) work found white social workers working with ethnic minorities often made judgements about the environment and ‘good enough’ parenting, based on how they were themselves parented and their own individual or family beliefs and values. When social workers are biased towards making overcautious predictions and risk-averse decisions, or demonstrate inadequacies caused by bias or the inability to truly learn about other cultures in parenting, this will inevitably impact most of those who are already disproportionately represented in the system and already discriminated against.

Some helpful reflexive questions may include:

- How do I know what I know now about this individual/family?
- Why do I feel how I feel? What is this about?
- What has caught my attention in this assessment or environment? Why and what might be the meaning? Be courageous to ask more questions sensitively, avoid assumptions and do not fear ‘being called a racist’ (bring to mind your approach to questioning and curiosity).
- What has led me to this opinion or viewpoint – is it influenced by my upbringing, values and beliefs?
- Where have I heard this before, am I anchoring to a previous assessment, what ideas can I build on or not?
- Now that I know how I have come to this perception, what will I do about it.
- Am I expressing myself appropriately?
- What mistakes can I learn from, what is new from this assessment that I can learn from in regards to my personal and professional development?
- Am I judging this individual/family based on a monocultural focus that may undermine the value of the ethnic minority’s parenting norms or practices that they value as a family?
- If there are allegations of abuse, or if there are questions relating to historical neglect or adverse childhood experiences, is my analysis supported by a sound
definition of post-traumatic growth, is it ambiguous or problematic, and if anything is ambiguous, am I being risk averse, or is it an indicator of bias?

**Step 3: Deal with ambiguity in decision-making**

Most times social workers are making decisions from a snapshot, or sometimes from incomplete information and knowledge. As a result, dealing with ambiguity should be an applicable concern in decision-making where ethnic minorities are applying to become adoptive parents.

Undoubtedly, ambiguity produces uncertainty over outcomes because it affects professional judgement and the proclivity to choose more radical alternatives. Sometimes, decisions are likely to result in duality of error (with neither decision being accurate) (Baumann et al., 2013). However, due to public opprobrium, social workers may be fearful of making false-positive decisions, inflating their forecast of risk/harm and disapproving adopters as unsafe or incapable – no one wants to see further abuse towards an adoptive child or adoption breakdowns. As there is no prescription for dealing with ambiguity, reflection and reflexivity are vital when assessing ethnic minorities who are often at risk or have experienced discrimination, and to ensure anti-racism and anti-discrimination (Wilkins and Meindl, 2021).

Without careful consideration and appreciation of ambiguity and its potential impact on decision-making, avoiding acknowledging that ambiguity exists, or to miss information by making a judgement or decision that provides a favourable outcome or an outcome that is known based on a previous case or circumstance, carries with it great risk. Some factors that may cause the ambiguity effect include language barriers, for example, misunderstanding or misinterpreting racial narratives, the language around cultural distinctions, linguistic nuances, or the message that is conveyed. The issue of language is one that can easily produce bias, especially in relation to accents or low English proficiency. It is inaccurate to assume that a foreign accent and speaking with a naturally loud/firm tone (not referring to aggression or hostility), or a lack of the English language, alters an individual’s parenting capacity. It is important to understand people’s way of life, culture, religion, and lifestyle; to speak and write clearly with simple English or in the preferred language; and to reference and clarify technical language. Likewise, consider how some groups follow a communal way of eating; not everyone sits and eats together, using a knife and fork. This is not a
common practice in some African and other minoritized groups, but that does not mean the applicant/s are not able to nurture, love, protect or guide a child.

Other sensitive aspects of an adoption assessment involve parenting history, childhood experiences that are associated with specific cultures and/or religion, and what they mean to the applicant's worldview, but they need to be understood in line with parenting capability, long-term commitment and their psychological attributes. There may be some doubt around housing, income, relationship stability, health (e.g. HIV), however it is important for social workers to be confident that they have assessed all requirements in line with guidelines and to avoid developing further subjective unwritten rules and creating barriers that are biased, not aligned to proportionate decisions, or the best outcomes for children needing permanency. It is possible that there may be personality clashes and social workers may feel threatened by the social status of the people they are assessing; in many ways, this may result in over-scrutiny, unreasonable interfering, skewed judgements and possible punitive decisions (Cane et al., 2018).

Generally, the ambiguity effect will lead to rejecting an assessment because a social worker may feel it is too risky to approve a prospective adopter/s, because there is a divergence in values and beliefs. The ambiguity effect can result in an adoption team or agency remaining committed to discriminatory practices, instead of introducing new inclusive approaches and policies.

Consider understanding:

- What it is about that assessment, individual, couple, or family that is ambiguous?
- What is it about their lifestyle, culture or presentation that is unclear, that is making me uneasy/uncomfortable?
- What is my point of reference and what am I missing – why do I think something is missing?
- Is a colleague, supervisor or manager's practice wisdom-biased – what are their values, belief morals and models of decision-making?
- Have I checked my power and privilege and how have I levelled these up in the decision-making or debiasing process?
- Do I have sufficient cognitive resources?
• Am I making a decision based on fear, lack of awareness, knowledge, stereotypes, race/cultural/gender/sexuality/number of children/proposed bedroom’s paint colour and how it is decorated at this point of the assessment, or biased views? Do I really need to add more requirements than what is already desirable and at a late stage in the assessment process? Why was this not identified at the beginning and where is my subjectivity stemming from?

• Is my view of what should be deemed a clean house, an appropriately decorated spare bedroom and loving stable home accurate? Or am I biased to expect more than what is required and is my decision prolonging the assessment?

• Have I made these decisions on racial grounds implicating fundamental values, principles, and right?

Step 4: Cognitive resources

This framework argues that, information and cognitive resources should not be seen as a burden but as an aid to formulate a decision or professional judgement. The social worker is encouraged to appreciate cognitive overload and cognitive resources as an evidence base to deal with ambiguity. One needs to seek cognitive resources and alternatives with an open mind.

Cognitive resources can be used with other tools to untangle information. Checklists, as an example, have been used in social work to ensure the social worker does not overlook any important factors. However, as an intervention for debiasing, Wilkins and Meindl (2021) found that checklist interventions do not make a significant difference for either forecasting accuracy or cognitive bias. Culturagrams, culturemaps and nomograms, for example, can be used to understand people’s cultures, to facilitate decision-making and reduce bias. Assuming that there is an understanding of someone’s culture once you reach the doorstep is too-late and unproductive. Efforts must be made to seek understanding from those with skilled and unbiased knowledge before engaging with prospective adopters to remove stereotypes and preconceived judgements. Openness to learning, debias and not developing or enhancing preparatory bias will enable debiasing. Fast and frugal decision trees that enable the social worker to gradually think about how information is searched for, processed, and
included in decision-making, and thinking about bias, are recommended by Kirkman and Melrose (2014).

Since bias in decision-making can be affected by internal, external, organizational and case factors if they are not carefully considered and accounted for in the decision-making process, it is possible to reach a biased decision (Baumann et al., 2013). Hence, it is important to evaluate whether or not one is using the right tools, and whether or not they have been easily accessible, validated or utilized at the right stage of the assessment or decision-making stage. Some points to consider here include:

- Do I know enough about the case – the family, the child, their culture etc.?
- Have I enhanced preparatory bias and have I sought information about this specific culture from a skilled, expert or authentic source that has helped dispel prejudice and negative pre-conceptions?
- Have I used the right tools or do I need complementary tools?
- What are the methods and models of social work that I have applied to help me with the decision-making?
- What research or evidence base informed my thinking? Should I consider further research to support meaning making, analysis or decision-making?
- Am I being objective, listening and understanding correctly? Caution needs to be taken, as asking if one is being fair can lead to a false conviction that one is unbiased.
- What is my level of competence in decision-making or processing competence, and do I need support or more time to process information and utilize decision-making strategies?
- Do I require additional training to support or improve my working memory? Is the training sufficient, robust enough and am I paying enough and constant attention to racial bias?
- Has the training as a debiasing intervention ‘reached the core’ and ‘touched a chord’? If not then, what other effective training or interventions can I access?

**Step 5: Change perspectives**

According to Croskerry et al. (2013), changing one’s perspective may arise through a sequence of stages from unawareness of bias, becoming aware of the bias, taking time to consider or contemplate change, deciding to change, and initiating,
accomplishing and maintaining the change. To change one’s perspective, one needs cognitive resources, motivation, a clear direction for change without resistance and self-efficacy (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2021). Avoiding bolstering existing biases, and beliefs and being prepared to search for new approaches demonstrates willingness to move away from the status quo. This confronts unconscious mechanisms that often lead to biased decisions, then a change, or questioning the bias in question.

One way to do this is to consider the opposite mode of thinking and engaging in counter-factual thinking, that is, considering the reasons why any initial thinking might be wrong or harmful, particularly when one does not know enough about the particular cultural background of the individuals assessed (Maule and Maule, 2016). It is important to question whether a decision is being made to fit a socially accepted/desirable decision, or virtue signalling. Accordingly, change and transform implies being open to overriding initial instincts that seek to avoid ambiguous options and situations. In the process, judgements and decisions must be balanced, supported by evidence, consideration of the value and likelihood of the possible benefits of a particular decision against the seriousness and likelihood of the possible harms (Munro, 2019).

Social and political views have increased suspicion, fear and assumptions that all Muslims and or Islamists are the same. Notably, political leaders and the media have presented Muslims ‘as a group that places itself and others in jeopardy … a source of sympathy for terror and the nation’s enemies (Feldman, 2017 in Elahi and Khan, 2017 p. 79). Fixating to such generalizations to any ethnic/religious group lead to risk-averse practice, anti-multiculturalism, a struggle for recognition and institutional accommodation for Black, Asian, Mixed heritage and Other minoritized groups (risk bias). Moreover, fear used as a survival instinct in decision-making prevents change in perspectives (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2021). Changing perspective does not mean those genuinely presenting risk/possible future harm, deemed unsafe to a child, unable to offer security and permanence should be approved (uncertainty bias). To make fair and rational decisions, it is important to put in the effort to change one’s perspective on existing prejudices, appreciate the hyperreality in the media and how it is powerful in creating anxiety and moral panic, and understand how people’s narratives and cultural practices shape their worldview and attitudes (e.g. slavery, white supremacy and historical racist events). Regrettably, when people of minoritized
ethnic groups present these experiences, they are often labelled as ‘unreasonably angry or bitter’ (Cane and Tedam, 2022). Change in perspective means awarding space to air concerns, listening, understanding and moving away from such unwarranted labels.

Sometimes people of minoritized ethnic groups may lack close social networks in the diaspora locally or nationally (e.g. mother, father, sister, cousins are back in the homeland). Reluctance to appreciate this conundrum, and proposed alternatives framing this, negatively demonstrates lack of insight. Others may shy away from seeking statutory help due to cultural reasons, fear, or lack of trust, and are then characterized as unwilling to seek support. It would be tempting to analyse this negatively as a lack of integration and self-segregation/isolationism. From a diaspora perspective, support networks are socially constructed depending on time, place, social context and social change. Changing perspective means understanding determinants, underlying beliefs, target groups, behaviour and biases that need change, ‘ethnic penalties’ that may arise as a result of the bias and behaviours change techniques (Kok et al. 2017). The following reflective points may be helpful:

- Am I motivated, have the courage, can confront any fear to change without worrying about status, and relatedness to others?
- Am I autonomous in this process and will sustain this change, evaluate progress, continue to change and seek training or relevant interventions?
- Have I made a conscious effort to negate the harm that could be caused by prejudice and made an objective decision?
- Have I established new approaches of working without bias?
- Have I (the individual), the team or the organization created a safe assessment environment?
- Is this environment ‘now’ free from bias, discrimination and prejudice? Is ‘Zero’ tolerance normalizing racial bias? Am I, we (team/organization), triggering others to remain consistent in this ‘zero tolerance’ approach, provision or access to training?
- In evaluating performance, was I effective (was the need to debias race matters sabotaged by other factors, e.g. gender or class)? How? And why and how can I avoid this?
• Did I utilize the self appropriately, regulate my emotions adequately to suppress negative and unfair judgements about this individual/families lifestyle or experiences, including discrimination in other support systems?
• Is this a priority demanding action? If not, there needs to be a sense of urgency around the assessment and recruitment of prospective adopters from minoritized ethnic groups – so what strategies can be put in place to make changes and be action-driven?
• Is there uncertainty and ambiguity about my/our change in perspective?
• Have I exercised compassion, kindness and empathy around previous complex racial narratives, and non-Eurocentric life experiences, or have I used these experiences to enhance bias and overlook resilience/potential capability to offer permanency to a child who requires it?

**Step 6: Education**

Education has been identified in other studies as a method for debiasing. However, research suggests that training is not always effective, particularly if it is a tick-box exercise, mandatory, short, not repeated, and does not offer resources to support debiasing, a virtue signal, or when it activates stereotypes (Featherston et al., 2019). Social work degree courses should prepare future social workers to work with minoritized ethnic groups in an anti-racist way. However, a recent study by Cane and Tedam (2022) found that social work students and newly qualified social workers often complete their training ill-equipped to deal with matters of race and racism. For debiasing education so as to be meaningful (on training courses and in practice), it should incorporate neurobiological and psychological frameworks that help individuals to appreciate relevance, the root of bias, what may restrict people from taking alternative perspectives, how to overcome it and achieve best outcomes (Sukhera and Watling, 2018).

Education should improve self-awareness, empathy and appreciation of the emotional context around prejudice and discrimination that is entrenched in implicit bias. However, self-deploying, debiasing educational strategies can be associated with predispositions that result in attentional limits, inability to generate conceivable alternatives or constrain judgements (Kenyon and Beaulac, 2014). It is impactful to engage in counterfactual or opposite-scenario considerations, role play, participatory
theatre, listening to real-life narratives/experiences, and co-production. Feedback from people with lived experience will not only influence the individual’s intuition and analytical skills, but also team/organizational approaches and processes. Essentially, failing to incorporate feedback from people with lived experience results in overconfidence in decision-making processes that reinforces bias (Croskerry et al., 2013).

Yet, some biased ‘practice experiences’ are often considered practice wisdom and points of reference Nye (2012). Caution must be taken around bias rooted in practice wisdom (both self and colleagues). Deliberating on a practice scenario, a colleague deemed to have practice wisdom previously concluded a prospective adopter from an African country, brought up by their grandparents, had not accepted the loss of their parents, (in fact parents were alive, lived in the same community, doors away, had a secure attachment, contact was daily) or engaged in a mourning process. They assumed this to be an unresolved emotional issue without educating themselves about the vital role grandparents play in certain culture, clans, villages, or compounds (e.g *ubuntu and multiple attachments*)– a standard and normal way of life in that specific cultural/family context. Traditional models of attachment and trauma do not account for lived experiences of minoritized group and fail to understand their unique experiences (Andermahr 2015).

In a home study, there can also be cultural misunderstandings around food, dressing, body language, posture, movement, ambient environment, client factors, resources, personality, intelligence and knowledge, or expectations that these should meet Eurocentric socio-cultural-political legitimacy (Allen-Meares and DeRoos, 1994). Change is required here; being present in the cultural space brings about learning and hopefully an ability to ‘be informed and recognise the need for constant vigilance and surveillance of their [social worker’s] thinking’ to alleviate assessment, fact-finding and decision-making errors (Croskerry et al., 2013, p. 6).

Kenyon and Beaulac (2014) advocate for ‘teaching and ingraining the habits, skills and dispositions that facilitate adopting general reasoning and decision-making principles, which nudges practitioners away from biased reasoning and filters its effects out of their actions’ (p. 349). Changing the way in which information is presented, shared or portrayed should be reflected in how narratives are presented in
assessments and panels as a true representation of what was said, its meaning and context. To debias, decision makers need to reach a disequilibrium state – a point where they have gained new knowledge through a range of training and educational resources, critical thinking, challenging previously established beliefs, thought processes and points of reference for decision-making, understanding causes and the adverse impact of their biases, and considering how to change (Bazerman and Moore, 2012).

Debiasing nudges (frameworks for education/training and change) should be shared as an organizational and team process; however, when debiasing is not owned by an individual, the team, the organization, or as a collective, then there is a risk for ongoing bias in whatever role they take in the adoption system. Therefore, there is a need to accept, construct nudges and apply contextual engineering of one’s biases. The following reflective points may be considered:

- Appreciate that simply attending debiasing strategies does not mean I have debiased.
- What reminders can I use to recall the need to debias at each stage of the assessment(s)/process, including decision-making and report-writing, and including the use of language and the working environment?
- What examples can I use to appreciate implicit bias when working in this racial and cultural context?
- Have I received extensive practical guidance? How was it delivered? Have they educated me adequately?
- Is the working environment prejudice-fixated and will it help regulate thoughts and behaviours to ensure good reasoning? If not, what nudges can be put in place to address this?

**Step 7: Deliberate and disconfirm**

Overall, in social work, decision-making involves the analysis of evidence where the decision-making process – including analysis, reflective and deliberation stages of decision-making – should either confirm or disconfirm the decision makers’ pre-
existing misconceptions, stereotypical views, subjective beliefs, and preferences. Should the decision be confirmatory, then decision makers can move forward with confirming their professional judgement, the proposed action (i.e., approve or reject an application), and consider whether or not to implement an intervention (post-adoption support). Evidence gathered may also disconfirm the social worker’s original subjective decision, for example that an HIV+ black, homosexual applicant is ‘promiscuous’ and unlikely to provide long-term stability. However, after training, they appreciate that HIV+ is not promiscuity, HIV is not a death sentence, the individual is resilient, healthy, virally suppressed, stable and lives a normal life, able to parent/adopt (Ludolph and Schulz, 2018).

Therefore, social workers should deliberate on their intuition, the evidence available, and trust that the evidence and its source are trustworthy, and remain objective without favouring decisions that follow the rule of thumb or cognitive shortcuts. Once an individual is able to detect the need to override their biases and decisions that can be compromising, they can cognitively move away from their biases by suppressing the automatic responses, which exist in the intuitive decision-making mode, by overriding them (Croskerry et al., 2013). Crucially, it is important to be fully knowledgeable about the benefits and risks of the alternative decisions, solutions and triggers that may result in reverting to old habits or previous biases, consequently excluding people of minoritized ethnic groups likely to contribute meaningfully to the adoption system.

This final stage in this model calls upon social workers to:

- Be accountable and to learn from previous decisions that were made from a position of bias and the mistakes that arose from them.
- Develop strategies to avoid reverting back to a position of bias or to an approach that tends to take short cuts or generalize.
- Have an open mind and professional curiosity: what else might there be? has all evidence been considered? what is missing?
- Be aware of your own practice and decision flaws.
- Step back, think, and reflect.
- Minimize group-think pressure, conform to group or team biases, and be fair.
Conclusion
This paper has presented a new model for decision-making, intended to support those working with minoritized ethnic groups in adoption. The paper has intentionally side-stepped the use of terms such as unconscious bias or implicit bias as these are contested terms that, unfortunately, can be used sometimes to justify decisions made from a place of bias, particularly when working with Black, Asian, Mixed heritage and Other minoritized groups. BRAC²eD encourages social workers to carefully employ cultural sensitivity approaches and reflexivity, to use a range of tools, cognitive resources, and decision-mapping trees that help eliminate bias. Practitioners are encouraged to take conscious charge of a range of steps towards acknowledging and reducing bias, including at an individual level, in decision-making panels, teams and the use of organizational structures, and be very clear about what has happened to those biases (from self or others), and how and why certain conclusions have been reached.
References


Lewis, S. and Selwyn, J. (2021) *The views and experiences of approved adopters in five regional adoption agencies*. DfE. Available at: publishing.service.gov.uk.


