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BRAC$^2$eD model: An approach to de-bias decision-making in adoption assessments with prospective adopters from minoritised ethnic groups

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Abstract
Cultural misunderstandings, systemic barriers, restrictive policies, inconsistent and subjective views around standards and requirements have prevented families from minoritised ethnic backgrounds from successfully adopting. Such barriers have led to a reluctance to adopt and a lack of trust in the adoption system. In this article, the author argues that these barriers arise from cognitive bias which affects decision-making in adoption. The BRAC$^2$eD model for de-biasing is introduced to support adoption assessments of individuals and families from minoritised ethnic groups. It recognises that the process of assessing prospective adopters is complex and offers strategies to de-bias. In this model, social workers are encouraged to acknowledge the existence of bias, engage in de-biasing nudges, internal conversations and reflexive processes that support challenging bias, utilise cognitive resources towards de-biasing, and change and determine proportionate decisions. The contention for appropriate language around Black, Asian, Mixed ethnic and Other minoritised groups is acknowledged. The author uses ‘minoritised ethnic groups’ as a preferred term based on her own identity, however she appreciates that those referred to may have their own preferred terms. With that in mind, social workers must understand cultural and sub-cultural differences and preferences without homogenising the people they work with.

Keywords
Adoption assessments, bias, de-bias, adoption, Black, Asian, ethnic minority
Introduction
There continues 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 (Ali, 2014; Barn and Kirton, 2012). 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 Black and Asian children in particular. A recent Department for Education (DfE) evaluation of regional adoption agencies focusing on the recruitment of adopters identified that out of 471 prospective adopters, only 9% were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Specifically, two adopters identified themselves as Black, 23 Asian and 13 of Mixed ethnic backgrounds, with the remaining three unidentified (Burnley et al., 2021). Yet, according to government data, by March 2020 in England there were 80,080 looked after children (10% Mixed ethnic background, 7% Black, 4% Asian and 4% Other ethnicity), and 3,570 were adopted. Of the adoption figures, 10% were of a Mixed ethnic background, 2% Black, 1% Asian and another 1% Other ethnic groups (DfE, 2021).

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

To assume that every person from a minoritised 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 do know is that 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: 30). As such, secular, altruistic and rescue narratives are not uncommon reasons for adopting amongst not only the Somali population but also others in Black, Asian, Mixed ethnic and Other minoritised 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 being 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 goalposts on social workers’ decisions on what is expected of prospective adopters of ethnic minority backgrounds constantly
change, notably through endless requests to meet certain requirements, but when those are met, new requirements not previously highlighted are presented making the process a glass ceiling fraught with difficulties. Similarly, there are often misgivings among some social workers and potential adoptees around the types of occupations of the prospective adopters or health issues that are often misunderstood (e.g., HIV), intersectional identities and 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 and language barriers have been unstandardised and subjective, leading to people from minoritised ethnic groups feeling harshly treated, disrespected, suspicious of the decisions made and lacking trust that their norms, values and cultural beliefs will be respected (Chowdhury, 2021; Savage, 2011).

Wainwright and Ridley (2012) and Chowdhury (2021) have also found that prospective adopters from minoritised 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 practices that are not inclusive (McRoy, Oglesby and Grape, 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, the dearth of accurate information and absence of trust in the system are discouraging (Graham, 2007; Selwyn, Frazer and Fitzgerald, 2013; Sunmonu, 2000). Accordingly, in 2020 the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, criticised the adoption system for making ‘too many lifestyle judgements’ resulting in unfair and inaccurate judgements that limited adoption placements and led to children being ‘bounced around the system’ (Government Business, 2020). Yet identifying adopters from minoritised ethnic groups and faith groups, such as Muslims or Sikhs, is a challenge (Frazer and Selwyn, 2005).

Remarkably, even beyond the assessment stage, approved adopters from a minoritised ethnic group who are waiting for a match generally wait longer compared to their White counterparts; others require more support using Link Maker (software used to match prospective adopters in England, Scotland and Wales), better communication and quicker responses from social workers around a child’s profile or after expressing an interest in a child’s profile (Lewis and Selwyn, 2021). As a consequence, there is a need to consider the inclusivity and cross-cultural applicability of 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 in reality they tend to rely on intuitive thinking more than analytical processes (Collins and Daly, 2011). In times of crisis or quick decision-making, social workers are ‘often unable to apply analysis in their decision-making’ – decision making is intuitive, fast and effective, yet prone to error – while at other times they shift 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.
In the CoramBAAF Good Practice Guide, *Undertaking an Adoption Assessment* (2020), Dibben provides step-by-step and clear guidance on assessing prospective adopters, as well as some prompts on adoption-specific and hypothetical questions, to help understand their present and future parenting capabilities, how past life events have been overcome and their coping skills. 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 and 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 quandary 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 these children. For example, Butler-Sweet (2011) denies that transracial adoptees struggle with racial identity but that they are slower to develop racial awareness. Yet others including Alvarado, Rho and Lambert (2014) and Gordon, Green and Ramsey (2014) report on struggles around finding a sense of self without understanding genetic history and conflicts in developing a secure identity where there are incompatibilities with loyalty in terms of racial similarities and discuss how that contributes to a personal racial identity.

Nonetheless, the importance of matching identity and the long-term benefits of doing so should not be undermined. Paradoxically, the complexity of adoption assessments is increased by the simplification of 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 protective 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, van Nijnatten and Elbers, 2010). However, these matters are analysed in a Eurocentric approach that privileges Whiteness and those who conform to the expectations of this existing system.

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, Vydellingum and Knibb (2018) found that although disclosing an HIV status implied openness, it also resulted in discrimination. Although a social worker sifts through the information gathered on potential adopters by omitting any unnecessary compromising details, this 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 minoritised ethnic groups, there is a real concern as to whether the assessments, analysis, the sifting and presenting of information and the decision-making processes are sensitive to race, ethnicity and cultural differences, and whether they can be said to be truly inclusive and unbiased.

**Cognitive bias in decision-making**

Cognitive biases are a systematic deviation from the rules of logic and probability and from the insights and perceptions that are generally accepted as the foundation of rational thinking (Phillips-Wren, Power and Mora, 2019; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). 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 or decision-making process or when an intervention is delivered as a result of choosing one preferred outcome over another without careful analysis. Under pressure, social workers tend to take cognitive shortcuts (defined as ‘heuristics’) by relying on information that is readily available in their minds to reduce cognitive overload because relying on the minimum of information saves time, although in complex situations this leads to inaccuracy and systematic and predictable errors in reasoning (Nyathi, 2018).

As much as social work decision-making involves individual and team/group biases through processes of intuitive or analytic reasoning, there can be a tendency for humans to base decisions on recent experiences when predicting future events (known as ‘recency bias’). At times, people reach decisions that 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, over-representation 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 minoritised ethnic groups (Barn and Kirton, 2012; Bell et al., 2021).

**The BRAC²eD model**

The BRAC²eD model is a new framework 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, Vydellingum and Knibb, 2018). It is presented as a tool that can be used to support social workers’ decision-making processes when working with prospective adopters from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. BRAC²eD is interactive, encouraging reflection and reflexivity with a view to facilitating transformation. The bottom line is to improve the experiences of people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in the adoption system, but the model is relevant to others who are marginalised due to bias. It involves the process of working from a decision-making approach that is influenced by bias to a staged de-biasing, as shown below:

- **Step 1:** Become aware of bias (B).
- **Step 2:** engage and Review internal conversations (R).
- **Step 3:** consider the need to deal with Ambiguity in decision-making (A).
- **Step 4:** have an 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 assessments, social workers should examine 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 (i.e., whether they are 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 and collective level). The overall organisational approach to race and racism should also be evaluated, with the responsibility to de-bias not simply left to individuals or teams. The argument here is that everyone attending to the needs of minoritised ethnic groups should engage in self-evaluation and de-biasing 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 de-biasing 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 ethnic minorities. 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 and a lack of 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 not only with 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 own power and privilege (Bernard, 2021; Tedam, 2020).

While it is acknowledged that the process of de-biasing is neither linear nor 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 unimportant. In acknowledging potential biases that may exist, social workers will need to be more cognisant of the discretion that is applied to both procedural and unwritten 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 organisations should be doing more to address the 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 worldview by their organisation’s positionality, policies, procedures, legislation and the 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. As part of this reflection, the social worker should be able to embrace new knowledge, to review prejudice, stereotypes, first impressions and judgements and to come to new conclusions. But if this de-biasing is to be effective, it will 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 social workers involved in adoption 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, Ford and Gadsden, 2016). However, this process requires the skills to understand, at a cultural level, what are/are not risk factors or acceptable behaviours when aligned to rights and the principles of best interests.

For example, a reflexive practitioner should be aware of their potential to misunderstand the impact of migration and how this has fragmented families seeking to adopt. 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, and 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. Just as knowledge of human development across the lifespan considers human interactions and dynamics over time, there should be an equal acknowledgement that when it comes to race, people move and adapt through time, space, community and different circumstances.

Skills such as tolerant social attitudes need to be assessed carefully to understand their complex aspects, such as how they apply to 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 safe, supportive and containing environment without repugnance or judgement but also an enquiring approach towards understanding any of the gaps and anxieties that may affect the assessment and decision-making processes (Taylor, 2017).

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

Of course, adoption assessments involve undertaking interviews with prospective adopters, collecting/gathering information from a range of sources and analysing and interpreting this information. However, Kiima’s (2021) research found that White social workers working with ethnic minorities often made judgements about the home environment and what constituted ‘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, it will inevitably impact...
the most on those who are already disproportionately represented in the system and 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 home 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 mono-cultural focus that may undermine the value of the ethnic minority’s parenting norms or the 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 my own bias?

Step 3: Deal with ambiguity in decision-making

The majority of the time, social workers are making decisions from a snapshot or sometimes incomplete information and knowledge. As a result, dealing with ambiguity should be an applicable concern in decision-making when 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 the concern of public opprobrium, social workers may be fearful of making false-positive decisions, inflating their forecast of risk/harm and leading them to reject 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 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 an acknowledgement that ambiguity exists or missing 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 without careful consideration carries 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 capability. It is important to understand applicants and prospective adopters’ way of life, culture, religion and lifestyle, to speak and write clearly in simple English or in their preferred language and to reference and clarify technical terms. 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 minoritised groups, but that does not mean the applicants are not able to nurture, love, protect or guide a child.

Other sensitive aspects of an adoption assessment include parenting history, childhood experiences that are associated with specific cultures and/or religion and what they mean to the applicant’s worldview. But these factors need to be understood alongside their parenting capability, long-term commitment and psychological attributes. There may be some doubt around housing, income, relationship stability and health (e.g., HIV). However it is important for social workers to be confident that they have assessed all requirements in line with the guidelines and to avoid developing further subjective unwritten rules and creating barriers that are biased, not aligned to proportionate decisions or to 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, Vydellingum and Knibb, 2018).

In general, the ambiguity effect will lead to rejecting an assessment because a social worker may feel it is too risky to approve a prospective adopter (or adopters) due to 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 is it about that assessment, individual, couple or family that is ambiguous?
- What is it about their lifestyle, culture or presentation that is unclear and 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, beliefs, 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 de-biasing processes?
- Do I have sufficient cognitive resources?
- Am I making a decision based on fear, lack of awareness, knowledge, stereotypes, race/culture/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 rights?

**Step 4: Cognitive resources**

This step 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 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 disentangle information. As an example, checklists have been used in social work to ensure the social worker does not overlook any important factors. However, as an intervention for de-biasing, Wilkins and Meindl (2021) found that checklist interventions do not make a significant difference for either forecasting accuracy or cognitive bias. Culturagrams, culture maps and nomograms, for example, can be used to understand people’s cultures, to facilitate decision-making and to reduce bias. If you assume that you can reach an understanding of someone’s culture once you reach their doorstep, it is already too late. 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 and not developing or enhancing preparatory bias will enable de-biasing. Kirkman and Melrose (2014) recommend 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 to consider bias.

Since bias in decision-making can be affected by internal, external, organisational and case-specific factors, it is possible to reach a biased decision if they are not carefully considered and accounted for in the decision-making process (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 utilised at the right stage of the assessment or decision-making process. 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 to dispel prejudice and negative pre-conceptions?
• Have I used the right tools or do I need complementary ones?
• 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 has 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 here, 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 utilise 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 de-biasing 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, Singhal and Mamede (2013), changing one’s perspective may arise through a sequence of stages from unawareness of bias, becoming aware of it, 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 and 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 the unconscious mechanisms that often lead to biased decisions, and then precipitates a change or a challenge of the bias in question.

One way to do this is to consider the opposite mode of thinking and to engage in counterfactual thinking, that is, to consider 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 under assessment (Maule and Maule, 2016). It is important to question whether a decision is being made to fit a socially accepted/desirable decision or because of virtue signalling. Accordingly, change and transformation require being open to overriding the initial instincts that seek to avoid ambiguous options and situations. In the process, judgements and decisions must be balanced and supported by evidence, with 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 often increase suspicion and fear. An example is the assumption that all Muslims and 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: 79). Fixing such generalisations to any ethnic/religious group leads to risk-averse practice, anti-multiculturalism and a struggle for recognition and institutional accommodation for Black, Asian, Mixed ethnic and Other minorised groups (this is known as ‘risk bias’). Moreover, the use of fear as a survival instinct in decision-making prevents changes in perspectives (Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2021). Changing perspective does not mean that those genuinely presenting risk/possible future harm, deemed unsafe to a child or unable to offer security and permanence should be approved (this would amount to ‘uncertainty bias’). To make fair and rational decisions, it is important to put in the effort to change one’s perspective on existing prejudices, to appreciate the hyper-reality presented in the media and its power in creating anxiety and moral panic and to understand how people’s narratives and cultural practices shape their worldviews and attitudes (e.g., slavery, White supremacy and historical racist events). Regrettably, when people of minoritised 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 unwarranted labels.
Sometimes people of minoritised ethnic groups may lack close social networks in the diaspora, locally or nationally (e.g., if their mother, father, sister and cousins are back in their homeland). Reluctance to appreciate this conundrum and proposed alternatives that frame this situation negatively demonstrates a lack of insight. Others may shy away from seeking statutory help for cultural reasons and/or due to fear or lack of trust and then be characterised as unwilling to seek support. It would be tempting to analyse this negatively as a lack of integration and self-segregation/isolationism. From a diasporic perspective, support networks are socially constructed depending on time, place, social context and social change. Changing perspective means understanding the determinants, underlying beliefs, target groups, behaviour and biases that need to change and the ‘ethnic penalties’ that may arise as a result of the bias and behaviour change techniques. The following reflective points may be helpful:

- Am I motivated, do I have the courage and can I confront any fear to change without worrying about status and relatedness to others?
- Am I autonomous in this process and will I sustain this change, evaluate progress, continue to change and seek out 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 organisation created a safe assessment environment?
- Is this environment now free from bias, discrimination and prejudice? Is ‘zero tolerance’ actually normalising racial bias? Am I or we (the team/organisation), prompting others to remain consistent in this ‘zero tolerance’ approach in the provision or access to training?
- In evaluating performance, was I effective (e.g., was the need to de-bias race matters sabotaged by other factors, such as gender or class)? How? And why and how can I avoid this?
- Did I utilise the self appropriately and regulate my emotions adequately to suppress negative and unfair judgements about this individual/family’s 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 minoritised ethnic groups – what strategies can be put in place to make changes and become 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 de-biasing. 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 de-biasing, a virtue signal or when it activates stereotypes (Featherston et al., 2019). Social work degree courses should prepare future social workers to work with minoritised 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 de-biasing education 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, and how to overcome bias and achieve the best outcomes (Sukhera and Watling, 2018).

Education should improve self-awareness, empathy and an appreciation of the emotional context around prejudice and discrimination that is entrenched in implicit bias. However, self-deploying, de-biasing educational strategies can be associated with predispositions that result in attentional limits, an inability to generate conceivable alternatives or that 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/organisational approaches and processes. Essentially, failing to incorporate feedback from people with lived experience results in overconfidence in decision-making processes, which reinforces bias (Croskerry, Singhal and Mamede, 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 that of the self and colleagues). As an example, deliberating on a scenario from this author’s work, a colleague deemed to have practice wisdom previously concluded that a prospective adopter from an African country, brought up by grandparents, had not accepted the loss of their birth parents or engaged in a mourning process (yet in fact, the parents were alive, lived in the same compound just doors away, had a secure attachment and had daily contact with the prospective adopter). It was assumed that this was an unresolved emotional issue without learning about the vital role grandparents play in certain cultures, clans, villages or compounds. In African thinking, a child is viewed and raised collectively and within a concept commonly known as ubuntu, which suggests a person is born individually but becomes who they are through collective upbringing. It was therefore normal for that applicant to have multiple caregivers thereby developing multiple attachments – a standard and normal way of life in that specific cultural/family context in the scenario above. In adoption, it is important to remember that traditional Western models of attachment and trauma do not account for the lived experiences of minoritised groups and fail to understand their unique experiences (Andermahar, 2015). Stern, Barbarin and Cassidy (2022) suggest the importance of questioning who serves as a secure base/safe haven to a Black child, for example, and in what situations and encourage consideration of how racialised experiences affect attachment behaviours. They argue that recognising and measuring the multiple sources of secure base support in a culturally specific way allows us to appreciate the different forms of secure base provision that serve to equip Black children to regulate their emotions (Stern, Barbarin and Cassidy, 2022: 396).

In an assessment, there can also be cultural misunderstandings around issues including food, dressing, body language, posture, movement, ambient environment, 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 [the
social worker’s] thinking’ to alleviate assessment, fact-finding and decision-making errors (Croskerry, Singhal and Mamede, 2013: 6).

Kenyon and Beaulac 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. (2014: 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 de-bias, 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).

De-biasing nudges (frameworks for education/training and change) should be shared as an organisational and team process. However, when de-biasing is not owned by an individual, the team, the organisation or as a collective, then there is a risk of 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:

- Can I learn to appreciate that simply attending training or meetings on de-biasing strategies does not mean I have de-biased?
- What reminders can I use to recall the need to de-bias at each stage of the assessment/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 process – including the analytical, 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 and the proposed action (i.e., to approve or reject an application) and consider whether or not to implement an intervention (e.g., 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. After training, they can appreciate that being HIV+ does not equate to promiscuity and is not a death sentence.
and that the individual is resilient, healthy, virally suppressed, stable, lives a normal life and is able to parent/adopt (Ludolph and Schulz, 2018).

Therefore, social workers should deliberate on their intuition and the evidence available, trust that the evidence and its source(s) are robust 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 these biases by suppressing the automatic responses that exist in the intuitive decision-making mode by overriding them (Croskerry, Singhal and Mamede, 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 minoritised ethnic groups who are 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 shortcuts or generalise;
- 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;
- minimise group-think pressure, avoid conforming to group or team biases, and be fair.

**Conclusion**

This article has presented a new model for decision-making, intended to support those working with minoritised ethnic groups in adoption. It 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 to justify decisions made from a place of bias, particularly when working with Black, Asian, Mixed ethnic and Other minoritised groups. BRAC2eD encourages social workers to carefully employ culturally sensitive approaches and reflexivity and to use a range of tools, cognitive resources and methods, such as decision-mapping trees, which can help to 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, in teams and in the use of organisational structures) and to be very clear about what has happened to those biases (of the self or others) and how and why certain conclusions have been reached.

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