

Child protection and BME communities

A conference report
May 2011

brap

What do you want?

If you want to know why you should be concerned about this issue...

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If you want to learn more about the facts and figures relating to child protection and BME children...

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If you're wondering how equalities can be made to work for you, your colleagues, and your organisation...

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If you're wondering how we move forward on this agenda...

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Introduction

brap is a think fair tank, inspiring and leading change to make public, private, and voluntary sector organisations fit for the needs of a more diverse society.

brap works in a number of areas including education, health and social care, housing, and criminal justice to name a few.

As part of its services to professionals working in child welfare, brap organised a seminar in May 2011 to explore what best practice means in relation to child protection and families from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

This report provides a summary of the speeches and working group discussions delivered at the seminar.

Definitions

Throughout this report we use the term 'BME' as an abbreviation for 'Black and minority ethnic'. 'Black' refers to those non-White groups who have traditionally been discriminated against because of their ethnicity. 'Minority ethnic' refers to other groups who have traditionally been discriminated against because of their ethnicity or who represent a minority in society (e.g. White ethnic minorities).

A pressing issue

Joy Warmington, brap CEO

Joy opened the seminar by explaining why improving professional practice in relation to BME children is such a pressing issue.

Demographics

Young Britain is increasingly diverse. One in ten children in the UK now lives in a mixed-heritage family, and one in five children belongs to an ethnic minority – far higher than the adult population. More than that, though, new BME communities are emerging and not all of these communities are ‘disadvantaged’ or disadvantaged in the same way. For example, recent research by the National Equality Panel reveals that in some cases inequalities *within* ethnic groups are now greater than those *between* them.¹ ‘Ethnicity’, then, is becoming an increasingly crude indicator of people’s identities and there is a need to rethink equalities approaches which use it as a basis for designing services.

The absence of ‘race’

Recent high-profile safeguarding reports are curiously lacking in any analysis of the role that ‘race’ might have played in the interaction between parent, professional, and child. In fact, given the importance of the Victoria Climbié Inquiry in stimulating reform of the child welfare system, the lack of attention paid to ‘race’ in subsequent policies is surprising. This is an important point that is discussed in more detail in the next section.

¹ National Equality Panel (2010) *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality*. Government Equalities Office.
<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28344/1/CASereport60.pdf>

Professional, sectoral concerns

Between 2010-2011, brap worked with over 2,000 professionals who deliver frontline services to children and young people. The work ranged from training and development to policy and service design, and covered a range of organisations, from children’s centres to housing associations.

The sheer number of people requesting advice, help, and support suggests there is a growing recognition among management and leadership that we don’t deliver as effectively to some BME communities as we do when we work with white British communities. More pertinently – and perhaps more pressingly – many of the professionals themselves related problems and concerns they had that current equalities guidance does not adequately reflect the complexities of real-life situations. Traditional thinking on ‘race’ and ethnicity has encouraged only limited progress on narrowing inequalities in outcomes, and this is increasingly worrying people charged with the delivery of fairer and more effective services. As such a key aim of the seminar was to identify precisely what changes can be made in relation to implementation and practice to ensure the next generation of BME children can live in a society that is safer, fairer, and more nurturing.

Getting the fundamentals rights

Dr Ashok Chand, Head of Strategy and Development, NSPCC

Ash explained that his talk would explore the contribution of recent child welfare reforms to improving services for BME children.

Context

The publication of Lord Laming's report into the death of Victoria Climbié motivated to a very large degree the development of the Every Child Matters agenda, which in turn resulted in the publication of numerous strategies, reports, and guidance documents. However, within all these publications, references to ethnicity remain few and far between. Indeed, it was as recently as 2009 that the first comprehensive scoping of ethnicity and child welfare was undertaken by central government.²

'Race', then, has a slightly paradoxical role within public policy reform. On the one hand, it was a powerful driver for the reshaping of children's services started under the previous government. On the other, specific issues and concerns related to its role in influencing practice have never been explored, identified, or examined in any serious or systematic way. Explaining how this contradiction plays out in practice is the focus of much of what follows.

Disproportionality in child welfare

Exploring the under- and over-representation of BME children within

particular datasets is a powerful way of demonstrating the impact ethnicity can have on receipt of care. The 2009 DCSF research report mentioned above did just that, looking at the prevalence of BME children within or on:

- the Child Protection Register in England (a list of children who have a Child Protection Plan and are therefore considered to be in need of protection from physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and neglect)
- the Children in Need Census (how many people come through the 'front door' of children's services)
- annual 'looked after' statistical returns (the number of children provided with care and accommodation by children's services)

As can be seen in the summary table below the representation of White children within the figures is as would be expected given the demographic make-up of the country as a whole. However, Black children are disproportionately more likely to appear within the 'looked after' and Children in Need populations. Asian children are disproportionately less likely to be on Child Protection Registers or Plans.

As Ash explained, the underrepresentation of particular ethnic groups is just as pressing an issue as overrepresentation. For example, the underrepresentation of

² Owen, C. and Statham, J. (2009) *Disproportionality in Child Welfare*. Department for Children, Schools, and Families. www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderin gDownload/DCSF-RR124.pdf

Asian children within the Children in Need Census may be the result of language, cultural, or institutional

barriers which prevent potential at risk children from coming into contact with the system.

	White	Mixed	Asian	Black
Children in Need Census	As expected	Over	Under	A lot over
Child Protection Register	As expected	Over	A lot under	As expected
Children Looked After	As expected	A lot over	Under	A lot over

Table: Over and under representation of ethnic groups in child welfare compared to in the population (from *Disproportionality in Child Welfare*)

Currently, however, the evidence relating to these factors is just too limited to draw any meaningful conclusions. In large part this is because there is no obligation on professionals to collect the kind of information which may be relevant (the age of parents, for example, or their own history of care, whether they have drug or alcohol problems, and so on). As anyone who has tried to explore these issues further will know, organisations either don't collect data or, if they do, the information is so widely dispersed across departments and teams that it is difficult for any one individual to consolidate it in any meaningful way. As such data collection needs to be much more robust and much more consistent across the range of organisations concerned with child welfare.

Of course, this does not mean that attempts to improve the system should stagnate. Rather, the question facing those interested in child protection is: in the absence of systematic and robust evidence, what is known that can account for the over- and

underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in child welfare statistics?

A fundamental issue

A variety of factors are often posited, ranging from different conceptualisations of normalcy within particular communities to the behaviour of social workers (if professionals anticipate more problems for particular children, people may begin to behave in line with those expectations). For reasons of time, Ash chose to focus on one particularly pressing issue: how language can present a barrier to effective delivery.

Considerations in this area focused on four key concerns:

1. **the availability of interpreters**
provision of good-quality interpreters has always been and continues to be patchy across many local authority areas. Nationally, we cannot be confident that we have systems and processes in place that allow people to express concerns about at risk children in a language other than

English. A number of studies have made the case for more visible, strategically placed interpreters to encourage referrals and ensure that investigations, if necessary, can be conducted on the basis of open and fluent dialogue between families and professionals.

2. the role of interpreters in shaping discussions

interpreters are rarely neutral participants in a discussion or passive conduits of information between two parties. The relationship between family, professional, and interpreter is dynamic, with interpreters often 'attaching' themselves to one side or the other.

3. attitudes to linguistic proficiency

within society, attitudes towards other languages are often 'suffused' with assumptions of superiority. In particular, migrants from Africa and the Asian subcontinent who are not fluent in English can face negative and hostile assumptions about their capacity to understand child welfare systems.

4. translatability

a wealth of evidence suggests that a lexical gap may hinder the frank and open discussion of welfare issues. Owen and Farmer, for example, report that 'in some Asian languages the words necessary for the description of sexual abuse do not exist, or are so rarely used that people would be shocked by their usage'.³ However, this issue is rarely explored in any great depth in training.

Ash was at pains to point out that none of the issues described above

are new or unfamiliar to professionals in the field. In fact, one of the reasons for focusing on this topic is to highlight our comparative lack of progress on developing solutions to key, fundamental issues in relation to the welfare of BME children. This is not to say that the issues are easy – far from it. However, given the number of years these issues have been known about and discussed, our lack of progress in finding solutions represents a failure on the part of decision makers to properly understand issues relating to ethnicity.

So, what next?

Ash concluded his talk by reviewing what current research says about the possibility of developing good frontline practice.

Firstly, he warned against the introduction of further legislation, policies, and guidance. To take one example, the current assessment framework is sufficiently sophisticated and comprehensive to uncover early signs of vulnerability. Our focus should not be on revising it, but on enabling practitioners and managers to use it in such a way that it can be applied to *all* children from *all* backgrounds. Often, with issues of child protection and ethnicity, the challenge is not that we don't have the right tools necessarily, but that we don't always use them in the right way.

Secondly, one area within the field of child protection and 'race' that has been systematically researched is that of parental satisfaction. All the evidence shows that, irrespective of the broad approach or specific methods used, it is the relationship between the family members and the worker, and the personal and

³ Owen, M. and Farmer, E. (1996) 'Child protection in a multi-racial context', *Policy and Politics*, 24(3)

professional qualities of the worker, that make the major contribution to parental satisfaction.

Research into what 'personal' or 'professional' qualities workers need to develop suggests the following:

- empathy
- warmth and genuineness
- reliability
- honesty and accuracy in providing full information about services available and agency processes
- availability at times of stress

In response to a question from the floor, Ash concluded by noting that the rapidly changing, dynamic demographic structure of society meant issues and concerns relating to BME communities are constantly in flux. For this reason, he was reluctant to prescribe a skills or competencies set for professionals dealing with BME children, as any such list could not hope to be definitive.

Managing equalities change

Billy Foreman, brap Associate and former manager of children's services

Billy explained that his talk would focus on exploring why past equalities approaches have not sparked serious, substantial change in the child protection system.

First things first

Echoing earlier speakers, Billy began by noting that problems with the child welfare system are well-documented and familiar to most practitioners working in the field. Despite numerous attempts at reform, however, there are still huge inequalities in the experiences and outcomes afforded to families from different ethnic groups.⁴ It's worthwhile, then, to explore what features of the system prevent remedial action from taking effect. The following, Billy argued, are important influences on the development of good frontline services.

- **Environment**

The environment in which staff operate relates not only to the organisation itself, but more generally to its values, principles, and how leaders capture and retain a sense of purpose. While many people working with children do experience a sense a purpose, it is difficult to discern across the system as a whole a sense of *common* purpose in the way we might wish.

- **System and functionality**

The capacity of organisations to understand what it is they can do – both operationally in terms of their roles and functions, and aspirationally

in terms of driving improvements in outcomes – is critical to the development of better practice. Inspection has an obvious and important role here; but, Billy argued, it is often difficult to see the relationship between the process of inspection, its outcomes for a statutory body, and what that organisation should do next.

- **Learning opportunities**

A key feature of successful organisations is the development of people, teams, and management and supervisory systems that are capable of learning while moving. It is important to consider what kind of learning is available, what opportunities are available to learn, and how those opportunities can be increased. The extent to which this occurs in the child welfare system is questionable.

- **Relationships**

The relationships between professionals engaged in child protection and those with whom they work are not always clear or driven by quality as they could be. This is an important point which is discussed in more depth below.

Challenges...

Having laid out, broadly speaking, the key influences on frontline delivery, Billy moved on to explore some specific challenges to the implementation of good equalities

⁴ See the previous chapter 'Getting the Fundamentals Right' for further discussion of these disparities.

practice. He noted that after many high-profile system failures – the Baby P case being a good example⁵ – attention has tended to focus on the behaviours of individual social workers, the assumption being that contravention of policy and procedure is the result of incompetence, laziness, or malice. A perhaps more insightful approach is to examine how organisational cultures contribute to the outcomes being attained. To borrow an analogy from William Tate, the workplace can be likened to a fish tank in which the quality of the water determines the health and energy of the fish.⁶ In the context of social work, we too often focus on the fish and ignore the water they're swimming in.

- **Procedural determinism**

The social work system is bound by an enormous number of rules and attendant guidance. *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, for example, the core guidance for multi-agency working, is now 55 times longer than it was 35 years ago.⁷

There is a wealth of evidence that suggests the introduction of excessive procedural requirements demotivates people to act in a positive, constructive way, since the requirement to 'get the job done' is given a higher priority than

⁵ The challenges listed below relate specifically to social work. Colleagues in other areas of child protection can assess their relevance to their particular field of work.

⁶ Tate, W. (2009) 'Sometimes it's the workplace that's stupid, not the staff', *The Guardian* (11 Nov 2009).

www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/11/systems-procedures-management-child-protection

⁷ Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Interim Report*.

www.education.gov.uk/munroreview/downloads/Munrointerimreport.pdf

getting the job done properly. Fear of doing the wrong thing often means people opt to do nothing at all. As such, approaches to improving quality and equality should be 'permissive'; that is, they should not unduly create additional risks for staff to negotiate.

- **Leadership and line of sight**

Across the sector, Billy argued, there is a widespread failure of leadership to put into practice the foundational values of public organisations: fairness, equality, and human rights being just three. As creators of organisational cultures, leaders must demonstrate the behaviours they expect their staff to exhibit if strategies for changes are to have any credibility or value at all. Too often, approaches to equalities failure focus on the understanding and expertise of staff, and ignore the failure of managers to provide leadership in those areas of practice in which staff are expected to excel.

Leaders are visible and must use this visibility to demonstrate the importance of equality, be it through their day-to-day interaction with staff or the setting of strategic priorities.

- **Communities of interest**

In contrast to other areas of work involving children and young people, it is difficult in social work to create a 'community of interest' around equalities and human rights, Billy argued. For example, those working in children's centres have a clearly identifiable constituency – based on location – and work with that group on specific issues (improving parenting skills, providing guidance on health, etc) to achieve specific goals (reducing health inequalities, say). It is much easier for children's centre staff,

then, to make sense of equalities strategies: they can see what it means in terms of improving educational attainment or reducing poverty, and because they have a sustained relationship with a community they can see how strategic priorities may work out in practical terms.

- **The accretion of risk**

There has been a tendency in the past to see practitioners from BME backgrounds as ‘experts’ on equality and diversity issues. It’s not unfamiliar within the child protection system for Black practitioners in particular to be handed cases involving BME children. This approach is based on the assumption such individuals will have a better understanding of the religious and cultural issues involved, ignoring, of course, the importance of understanding fundamental equalities issues (the capacity to negotiate relationships, say, or the ability to challenge cultural norms in a sensitive and constructive manner).

...and opportunities

Billy concluded by looking at some of the opportunities that present themselves for furthering equality and human rights in light of current policy and thinking.

Firstly, he noted that previous attempts to reduce inequalities in outcomes have assumed that service delivery is effective for the general population. In reality, the extent to which service provision protects ordinary people’s rights is debatable. As such, an approach is needed that drives up standards for everyone, regardless of the particular equality group they happen to belong to.

Increasingly, people are seeing the benefits of equality approaches that draw upon human rights. This approach attempts to identify the basic entitlements we all have as individuals and that many of us will share with other members of society. A key feature of this approach is that it uses human rights to provide a standard against which service provision can be judged.

For such an approach to be meaningful, it’s important human rights are shown to have relevance to the everyday operations of an organisation. This means translating particular rights – the right to dignity, say, or the right to privacy – into practical actions staff can perform on a day-to-day basis. An attractive element of this way of thinking is that, in choosing which rights to focus on, organisations can consult with their client base, and so provide a service which upholds those things that are actually important to people.

In this respect, there are two aspects of current thinking that are particularly relevant:

- firstly, there is a trend in public policy towards greater involvement of citizens and service users in the design and delivery of services. The Munro Report, for example, calls for greater involvement of children and families in the decisions made about them, so there may be opportunities for people to get involved with setting the standards they expect public services to provide.
- secondly, the focus on the child’s ‘journey’ contained in the Munro Report may make it easier to map the child’s interaction with the welfare

system, allowing the identification of key moments when the protection of values and rights is particularly important. This in turn will allow the development of guidance and support

on equalities issues that relate specifically to situations in which people's rights are most at risk.

Forwarding the agenda

In addition to the keynote speeches, there were two professional workshops looking at:

- how issues of 'race', ethnicity and culture can impact on cases of sexual exploitation (facilitated by Simon Cottingham, Programme Manager at the Children's Society)
- the skills professionals need to apply around equality in their day to day practice (facilitated by Joy Warmington and Diane Rutherford, brap)

The following is a summary of five key points arising from the discussions.

1. I know a short cut...

We don't appear to have a clear barometer which helps us to assess when ethnicity matters and when it doesn't. One participant recounted that, when some of his colleagues conducted assessments, they thought they were able to assume information about the child and family based simply on their ethnicity. While this example might be extreme, it is clear that 'ethnicity' is often used inappropriately as part of judgements we make about people, despite the fact that most people would state that 'race' is an increasingly crude indicator of someone's identity. Discernable patterns of disadvantage based on ethnicity would suggest our unwillingness to break with this practice. As such, there is an urgent need to understand precisely how 'ethnicity', culture, and religion factor into or out of child protection scenarios.

2. Policy failures

National policy is similarly lacking any thorough appreciation of the importance of race, ethnicity, or religion. As such, practitioners receive 'unhelpful' messages about the need to balance legitimate cultural and religious practices against the need to provide a safe environment in which basic common values are upheld. How is this done in practice? There is little or no guidance on the balancing act that professionals are asked to employ – however, there is lots of evidence to suggest that deploying judgements incorrectly can disadvantage groups of children.

3. Risky business

Unfortunately, this agenda is not a new one. Mounting evidence on either the under- or over-representation of particular ethnic groups in child protection interventions indicates that we are often prepared to accept this pattern as the norm. Historic trends are taken to indicate something about ethnic cultures – some predisposition to behaviours that make child protection necessary – rather than being seen as failures on the part of the system and individuals to deliver more responsive services.

4. Let's negotiate

The concepts of cultural need and entitlement are often misused or misinterpreted. In part, this is due to the failure of policy mentioned above. It is clear, however, that many practitioners in the field have never received training that allows them to interrogate situations in which common values or human rights conflict with cultural

'wants'. Professionals need to develop the capacity to challenge unacceptable behaviour – even if it's associated with particular cultural or religious customs – and interrogate information in a fair and objective manner. This requires an understanding of how to interpret information about race and ethnicity; how to interrogate and question whilst protecting people's human rights; and how and when to challenge and take action against behaviour which threatens the enjoyment of basic rights.

5. [My door is always open](#)

Due to the complexity of assessment and judgement, procedures are often deficient as an aid to practice in this area. If practitioners had more opportunities to raise and discuss concerns (without fear of blame or judgement) there might be more opportunities to get things right. In many high-profile cases where children have not been protected adequately it appears that if the practitioners involved had had a better relationship with their supervisors, problems would have been identified earlier and the practitioners would have created an additional avenue of support for themselves. Often, problems arise because people don't feel able to elevate concerns and issues.

Speaker biographies

Dr. Ashok Chand

Ash is Head of Strategy and Development with the NSPCC focusing on services for BME children and families. Prior to this post, Ash was an academic in social work for over ten years and his most recent position until December 2008 was at the University of Warwick as an Associate Professor. His specialist area was the welfare and protection of children from minority ethnic backgrounds and he taught, researched, and published extensively in this area. His publications include 'Every Child Matters? A Critical Review of Child Welfare Reforms in the Context of Minority Ethnic Children and Families'; 'Do You Speak English? Language Barriers in Childcare Social Work with Minority Ethnic Families'; and Child Welfare Services for Minority Ethnic Families (with June Thoburn and Joanne Procter). Ash began his career as a children's social worker working for Warwickshire County Council in 1994 and mainly worked in frontline child protection teams.

Simon Cottingham

Currently Programme Manager at the Children's Society, Simon trained as a youth and community worker and has worked in the voluntary sector all his life. He is an experienced manager and has worked nationally on volunteering issues; regionally for a voluntary sector infrastructure agency and as a Regional Manager for a volunteering charity. He is national speaker on a variety of child-related issues, with particular expertise in children and young people who run away from home and care; advocacy; sexual exploitation and child trafficking; youth work; and safeguarding.

Billy Foreman

Billy has worked in Children's Services in roles ranging from Residential and Social Worker to Strategic and Partnership lead for Health Authorities, Community Trusts, PCTs and most things in between. He currently works as an independent contractor and is working with local authorities on the support services required to achieve effective implementation of the outcomes from the Munro Enquiry. He has worked for many years as a Trustee and or Director of a number of children's charities and social enterprises.

Diane Rutherford

Holding a Masters in Equalities, Diane is an experienced facilitator, researcher, coach, mentor, and mediator. She worked as a lecturer in early years and social care for over 10 years, teaching social science and research aspects of the level 3 and 4 courses. Diane is currently delivering bespoke training and development sessions to professionals in early years and social care.

Joy Warmington

Joy has been CEO of brap since 2001. During that time she has worked with a range of organisations including the Department for Communities and Local Government, NCVO, Macmillan Cancer Support, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission to promote equality. Joy is an author of over 20 books, reports, and articles as well as being a broadcaster and international speaker.

About brap

brap is a think fair tank, inspiring and leading change to make public, private and voluntary sector organisations fit for the needs of a more diverse society. brap offers tailored, progressive and common sense approaches to equalities training, consultancy and community engagement issues.

We come up with ideas to make society fairer and more equitable. To help us achieve this we have developed a portfolio of services and activities that cover four broad areas:

Learning

For society to be fairer people have to be enthused and motivated to make the right equality choices in their day-to-day roles. We work with professionals to help them identify what equality means for them practically and – hopefully – make the right choices for everyone.

Research

In a fair society, decisions, policies, and strategies will be based on sound evidence and an understanding of the issues that perpetuate disadvantage. We undertake research that helps people develop new thinking and new approaches to addressing unfairness and inequality.

Communities and enterprise

For society to be fairer people have to be empowered to create change for themselves. We give individuals, charities, and social businesses the tools to deliver fairer services, get involved in decision making, and change their communities for the better.

Service design

In a fairer society, organisations would understand how to build the entitlements we all have as individuals into the way they design and deliver services. We help organisations improve performance and deliver better outcomes for everyone in light of these considerations.



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