LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND ANTI-RACIST PRACTICE IN ADOPTION

Abstract:
Guidance to accompany the National Commitment on Transracial Adoption and the Anti-racist Framework for Decision-making and Transitioning Children from Minoritised Racial and Ethnic Groups into Transracial Adoptive Families (AFDiT)

Adoption England
regional adoption agencies working together

Foreword

Language matters.

The words used by adoption professionals shape how children are understood, how families are supported and how identity, belonging and lived experience are recognised within adoption practice. Language influences assessment, recording, life-story work, decision-making and adoption support. It can support inclusion, belonging and positive identity development, or it can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, assumptions and oversimplified understandings of children's experiences.

AFDiT recognises that children's racial, ethnic, cultural and heritage identities require intentional consideration, protection and support. It also recognises that racism, discrimination and exclusion can significantly affect children's sense of self, belonging and wellbeing. The way professionals discuss identity is therefore an important aspect of anti-racist practice.

This guidance supports Regional Adoption Agencies in using language that is respectful, accurate, reflective, child-centred and anti-racist. It should be read alongside the National Commitment on Transracial Adoption and the AFDiT Framework.

The purpose of this document is not to prescribe how individuals should identify themselves. Rather, it seeks to support thoughtful, consistent and informed discussions about identity whilst acknowledging the complexity and diversity of children's lived experiences.

1. Introduction

Identity is an important part of every child's development, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

Children develop an understanding of who they are through their relationships, experiences, communities, histories and social environments. Their identities may be shaped by race, ethnicity, culture, heritage, religion, language, family history and many other factors.

Within adoption practice, language plays a critical role in how these identities are understood and represented. The words used by professionals can influence how children see themselves, how others understand them and how services respond to their needs.

AFDiT emphasises the importance of understanding and protecting the identity needs of children from racialised and minoritised ethnic groups. This requires professionals to engage confidently with discussions about race, racism, identity and belonging.

Good practice therefore requires more than accurate terminology. It requires language that supports understanding, reflection, anti-racist practice and positive identity development.

2. Why Language Matters

Language is not neutral.

The terminology used in assessments, reports, life-story work and professional discussions shapes understanding and influences practice. The language used within adoption records may remain part of a child's story for many years and may influence how they understand themselves and their experiences.

Historically, broad collective terms have often been used to describe individuals and groups. Whilst such terms may have value for policy and reporting purposes, they can obscure the complexity of children's individual identities and experiences.

For example, describing a child simply as "Asian" provides limited information about their ethnicity, heritage, language, religion, culture, family history or lived experience. Similarly, describing a child as "mixed" without further explanation may fail to capture the richness and complexity of their identity.

Good adoption practice therefore requires professionals to move beyond broad labels where appropriate and develop a fuller understanding of the child.

The purpose of discussing identity is not to categorise children. It is to understand them.

3. Language, Identity and Data

Language relating to race, ethnicity and identity is socially constructed and continually evolving. Different organisations, communities and individuals may use different terminology to describe similar experiences.

Some people may identify themselves through ethnicity, nationality, race, culture, faith, heritage or a combination of these. Professionals should respect and reflect how children, young people and families describe themselves wherever possible.

However, discussions about terminology should not detract from the purpose of collecting ethnicity and identity data.

The purpose of data collection is to:

- Understand experiences.
- Identify disparities.
- Monitor outcomes.
- Improve services.
- Inform policy and practice.
- Address inequalities.

Without robust and consistent data, inequalities affecting children and families can become less visible and more difficult to address.

3.1 Consistent Data Collection

Regional Adoption Agencies should record ethnicity in a manner consistent with classifications used by the governmental organisation such as Department for Education or the Office for National Statistics wherever possible.

Consistent recording supports:

- National comparison.
- Outcome monitoring.
- Research and evaluation.
- Service improvement.
- Identification of racial and ethnic disparities.

3.2 Recording Identity

Alongside standardised ethnicity categories, professionals should also record relevant information about identity, including how children, young people and families describe themselves.

Example

Ethnicity Category: Bangladeshi

Additional Identity Information: British Bangladeshi Muslim

Both pieces of information are important. The ethnicity category supports consistency in monitoring and reporting. The identity description supports a richer understanding of the child's lived experience, identity, belonging and support needs.

The key principle, to work to is allowing individuals define their own identities and acknowledging services require consistent data for monitoring. Good practice involves using the category and the additional identity information.

4. Understanding Identity

Identity is complex, personal and dynamic. Different aspects of identity may become more or less significant at different stages of life.

The following terms are often used within adoption practice but should not be treated as interchangeable.

4.1 Race

Race is a social construct that relates to how individuals and groups are perceived, racialised and treated within society. Whilst race has no biological basis, racialisation and racism have real and enduring consequences.

A child's experiences may be shaped not only by how they identify themselves, but also by how they are perceived by others.

Example: A child may identify as Black British and experience racism because of how others perceive them. These experiences may influence their sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to shared ancestry, origins, language, traditions and history. Everyone has an ethnicity. Ethnicity may influence family traditions, values, language, cultural practices and community connections.

Example: Two children may both be described as Asian but identify as Pakistani and Bangladeshi respectively. Their histories, traditions, languages and family experiences may differ significantly.

4.2 Culture

Culture refers to shared values, customs, traditions, beliefs and practices. Culture is influenced by family, community, religion, geography and lived experience.

Example: Two children of Pakistani heritage may have very different cultural identities depending on their upbringing, faith, language, community and family traditions.

4.3 Heritage

Heritage relates to ancestry, roots and family history. Heritage often helps children understand where they come from and how they connect to previous generations.

Example: A child with Jamaican heritage may wish to learn about Jamaican history, cultural traditions, community connections and family origins as part of understanding their identity.

4.4 Religion and Belief

Religion or belief may form an important part of a child's identity and sense of belonging. Religious identity should not be assumed based on race or ethnicity.

Example: Two children of Bangladeshi heritage may have very different relationships with faith. One may identify strongly as Muslim while another may identify as having no religious affiliation.

5. Identity, Belonging and Lived Experience

AFDiT recognises that identity is closely connected to belonging. Children develop their sense of self through relationships, representation, community connections and lived experience. Identity is not simply about heritage or background; it is also about whether children feel recognised, valued, understood and included.

Language used by professionals should support children's understanding of:

- Who they are.
- Where they come from.
- How they belong within their family.
- How they belong within their community.
- How they belong within wider society.

Discussions about race, ethnicity, culture and heritage should move beyond description alone and seek to understand how children experience identity in their everyday lives.

6. Mixed and Multiple Heritage Identities

Many children have identities that span multiple racial, ethnic, cultural or heritage backgrounds.

Professionals should avoid language that divides identity into fractions or implies that one aspect of a child's identity is more authentic than another.

Avoid: Half Indian and Half White

Consider: Child of Indian and White British heritage

or

Child who identifies as being of mixed Indian and White British heritage

Children of mixed and multiple heritage should not be viewed as requiring less identity support. Their identities may be fluid, contextual and influenced both by how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Example: A child of Indian and White British heritage may identify as British Indian, mixed heritage, Indian, British or a combination of these identities at different stages of their life.

7. Racism, Inequality and Identity-Related Harm

It is widely recognised that racism operates at individual, institutional and systemic levels. Children from racially minoritised groups may experience racism, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination and other forms of identity-related harm. These experiences can affect self-esteem, sense of belonging, identity development, wellbeing and relationships. Experiences of racism should never be minimised or dismissed as unrelated to a child's development. Repeated experiences of exclusion, discrimination or identity invalidation may have cumulative and lasting impacts. Good practice requires awareness of these realities and a commitment to supporting positive identity development throughout childhood and beyond.

8. Racial Literacy and Anti-Racist Practice

Racial literacy is a central component of anti-racist practice. Racial literacy is the ability to recognise, understand and respond to race and racism in ways that actively support children's identity development, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

It includes:

- Understanding racism and its impact.
- Recognising stereotypes and bias.
- Using appropriate and respectful language.
- Reflecting on assumptions and privilege.
- Supporting positive identity development.
- Engaging confidently in conversations about race and racism.

Racial literacy does not require professionals to have all the answers. It requires curiosity, openness, reflection and a willingness to learn.

Example

Less helpful: "I don't see colour."

More helpful: "I recognise that race can shape people's experiences and it's important that we can talk openly about it."

Example

Less helpful: "I'm sure they didn't mean it."

More helpful: "What happened wasn't okay. Let's talk about how it affected you and what support you need."

9. Terminology in Practice

No single term will always be appropriate. Context, audience and purpose should inform language choices.

When discussing individual children, professionals should generally prioritise specific descriptions over broad umbrella terms.

Less helpful: Child from a minority ethnic background

More helpful: Child of Somali heritage or Child who identifies as Black British

Collective terms may be useful when discussing populations, services, research findings or inequalities. However, they are often less useful when discussing an individual child's identity.

Whenever possible, professionals should be guided by children's and families' preferred terminology.

10. Writing About Identity in Reports

Language used in reports, assessments and records should support understanding rather than categorisation. Descriptions should demonstrate thoughtful consideration of identity, belonging, lived experience and support needs.

Less helpful: the child comes from a BAME background.

Better: the child is of Black Caribbean heritage.

Less helpful: The child's ethnicity is not significant.

Better: The child's racial, ethnic, cultural and heritage identity has been explored as part of understanding their experiences, identity and support needs.

Less helpful: the adopters are open to diversity.

Better: the adopters have demonstrated racial literacy, identity awareness and an understanding of the importance of supporting the child's racial, ethnic, cultural and heritage identity.

Less helpful: the family is a good cultural match.

Better: the family has demonstrated an understanding of the child's identity and has identified practical ways to support their cultural, heritage and community connections.

11. Reflective Questions for Professionals

Professionals should consider:

- Am I using language the child or family would recognise and feel comfortable with?
- Have I used broad labels where greater specificity would be more helpful?
- Am I making assumptions about culture, faith, language or identity?
- Have I considered the child's lived experiences?
- Does my language acknowledge identity, belonging and potential experiences of racism?
- Would the child recognise themselves in this description?
- Am I using language that supports understanding rather than categorisation?

12. Conclusion

Language alone will not address inequality.

However, language shapes understanding, influences practice and affects how children and families experience adoption services.

Good adoption practice requires a balance between consistency and individuality, between data and lived experience, and between evolving terminology and enduring principles of respect, inclusion and anti-racist practice.

The purpose of this guidance is not to prescribe a single set of terms. Rather, it is to promote language that helps professionals understand children more fully, recognise inequalities, support belonging and uphold children's identities.

By combining consistent data collection with a nuanced understanding of identity, adoption services can strengthen practice, support positive identity development and help children feel seen, valued, respected and understood.

Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Anti-racist Practice
Active and intentional action to recognise, challenge and address racism, discrimination and inequality.

Belonging
A sense of being accepted, valued, connected and recognised within family, community and society.

Culture
Shared values, beliefs, customs, traditions and ways of life.

Cultural Identity
How an individual relates to cultural traditions, values, communities and practices.

Ethnic Minority
A group that differs from the majority ethnic population within a particular context or society.

Ethnicity
Shared ancestry, origins, language, traditions and history.

Global Majority
A term used by some organisations to describe Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage and other racialised groups who collectively represent the majority of the world's population.

Heritage
Family roots, ancestry and history.

Heritage Identity
A person's connection to their ancestry, family history and origins.

Identity
A person's understanding and experience of who they are.

Identity-Related Harm
Negative impacts on wellbeing or identity development arising from exclusion, discrimination, racism, stereotyping or identity invalidation.

Mixed Heritage
A person with connections to more than one racial, ethnic or heritage background.

Race
A social construct relating to how individuals and groups are perceived and racialised within society.

Racial Identity
How an individual understands and experiences race as part of their identity.

Racial Literacy
The ability to recognise, understand and respond to race and racism in ways that support identity development and wellbeing.

Racialised
The process through which racial meaning is assigned to individuals or groups.

Racially Minoritised
A term recognising that minority status is created through social and structural processes rather than being inherent.

Religion or Belief
Religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs that may contribute to identity and belonging.

Self-Identification
An individual's right to describe and define their own identity.

Appendix B: Ethnicity and Identity Recording

Purpose

Accurate recording of ethnicity and identity information helps Regional Adoption Agencies understand children's experiences, identify disparities, monitor outcomes and support positive identity development.

Standardised ethnicity categories support consistency in data collection and reporting. The monitoring of this will help us understand patterns, disparities and outcomes across the adoption system. Additional identity information helps professionals understand the individual child and their lived experience. The government source is here: List of ethnic groups - GOV.UK

Recording Ethnicity

Regional Adoption Agencies should record ethnicity using the national classifications adopted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Department for Education (DfE), wherever possible.

Alongside standardised ethnicity recording, professionals should record information about how children, young people and families describe their own identity, where known and appropriate.

Ethnicity Categories

White

- English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- Irish

- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Any other White background

Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background

Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- African
- Caribbean
- Any other Black, Black British, Caribbean or African background

Other Ethnic Group

- Arab
- Any other ethnic group

Not Obtained

To be used only where ethnicity information is genuinely unavailable despite reasonable efforts to obtain it.

Recording Identity Information

Ethnicity categories alone do not fully reflect a child's identity, heritage or lived experience.

Where known and appropriate, professionals should record information that contributes to the child's sense of identity, including:

- Ethnic, racial and cultural identity
- Heritage and family background
- Religion or belief
- Language(s) spoken
- Nationality
- Community and family connections
- Self-described identity

The level of information available will vary depending on the child's age, circumstances and the information known about their family history.

Examples

Example 1

Ethnicity Category: Pakistani

Identity Information: British Pakistani Muslim.

Example 2

Ethnicity Category: White and Black Caribbean

Identity Information: Child identifies as Black British and has strong connections to their Jamaican heritage.

Example 3

Ethnicity Category: African

Identity Information: Child is of Nigerian heritage and has important family and community connections through Yoruba culture.

References

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