Race, adoption and tomorrow’s social workers

Derek Kirton summarises responses from student social workers to a questionnaire on attitudes to race and adoption. The respondents were mainly second-year Social Work (DipSW) students specialising in work with children and families. Two key findings emerged from the survey. Firstly, questions of race and adoption evoke very diverse responses, with an overall tendency towards ‘soft’ support for same-race adoption. Secondly, perspectives are significantly divided according to ethnicity, with minority ethnic social work students markedly more in favour of same-race adoption than their white counterparts. In conclusion, Kirton outlines the possible implications of these findings for adoption policy and practice.

The family placement of minority ethnic children has long been one of the most controversial issues in social work and, periodically at least, in the public arena. Within the latter, it is almost invariably social work support for ‘same-race’ placements which comes under critical fire. Such support is usually portrayed by politicians and media pundits alike as ‘political correctness’, with policies rooted in dogma and ideology rather than concern for the ‘best interests’ of the child(ren). During the halting progress of the Adoption Law Review, the last government’s attitudes towards the principles of same-race placement shifted significantly, from grudging endorsement to thinly veiled hostility. Common sense became the battlecry and the defeat of political correctness the crusade. It is not my purpose here to comment on the merits of these arguments which have been examined elsewhere (Kirton, 1992; 1995).

As a researcher with an interest in this area, I have long been struck with how little is actually known of social work attitudes. The study reported here represents a modest attempt to increase that knowledge, its aims being as follows:

- to broadly gauge the level of support among social work students for ‘same-race’ vis à vis transracial adoption;
- to explore this further by examining support for different propositions within the debate; and
- to gather certain biographical data which would facilitate explanation of any variations found between groups of respondents.

Research design

The quest for a broad view entailed a strong quantitative focus, seeking a large number of responses to a highly structured questionnaire. Mindful of the practical difficulties of securing completion, the latter was designed to be as straightforward and quick to complete as possible.
Social work students on qualifying programmes were chosen as the target respondents. This was again partly for practical reasons connected with likely completion of the questionnaires. It was also recognised that questions of race and adoption usually figure within the curriculum, whether as part of teaching on child care or on race/ethnicity. Numerous DipSW programmes were approached, seeking a fairly representative spread of programmes in terms of geography and type of student intake (post-, under- or non-graduate).

In negotiations with programme staff my preference was that the questionnaire should be completed shortly after the most closely relevant teaching input received by students. This was both so that views expressed would be as informed as possible and that students could be asked on the questionnaire whether teaching had influenced their views in any particular direction. In most cases this meant the questionnaire being completed by second-year students specialising in work with children and families. (Roughly two-thirds of respondents indicated an intention to work in child care on qualification.)

Following negotiations as to timing and numbers of students involved, appropriate batches of questionnaires were sent to the programmes. Unfortunately, given the many pressures on programmes, it was not possible to operate a completely uniform pattern of administration. On-site completion was encouraged to maximise returns and this proved the majority practice, but in some instances questionnaires were simply distributed to students, with return more optional (and with sometimes predictable results). The variations in mode of administration make the notion of a response rate somewhat problematic. For instance, even where completed on site, this would clearly only apply to those present on the day. In practice, response rates ranged from the very low to extremely high in different programmes, but averaging around 60 to 70 per cent.

The questionnaire

The core of the questionnaire comprised 16 statements with which respondents were invited to agree or disagree on a scale of one (indicating strong agreement) to five (strong disagreement). The statements were drawn from the debates surrounding race and adoption, aiming as far as possible to reflect the key issues. Statements were divided fairly evenly between those which might be taken as supportive of same-race placements and those in favour of transracial adoption (see below). For analysis scores for the latter group were reversed (five becoming one, four converting to two, etc.), so that each response could be scaled one to five according to support for same-race placements or transracial adoption. Aggregating the 16 scores allowed in theory scores to range from 16, indicating strongest support for same-race placements, to 80 for maximum advocacy of transracial adoption.

The use of such quantitative measures, of course, needs to be treated with some caution for several reasons. For instance, responses to statements are not necessarily linear in nature and are often contingent, i.e. ‘It depends upon . . .’. Similarly, quantification clearly imposes a uniformity on replies which will not always accord with subjective reality. Finally, the absence of stated reasons for replies limits the scope for analysis and interpretation.

If these limitations serve to warn against taking the scale and its scoring too precisely, they are offset by two important factors. First, being lengthy and based on 16 expressed verdicts, the scale seems well placed to ascertain major differences of view. Second, in a large-scale survey the undoubted idiosyncrasies involved in individual completions might be expected to ‘even themselves out’.

To aid quantitative analysis of responses, brief biographical data were also sought, concerning age, sex, ethnic background, levels of experience in social work (and in child care specifically), the ethnic make-up of area(s) where work experience had been gained and whether the respondent intended to work in child care subsequent to qualifying. Respondents were asked to comment on whether
relevant teaching had had any overall effect on their views.

Alongside individual biographical data, information about the social work education programmes was also utilised. This comprised the type of programme (see above), its regional location, and ethnic composition of the student group. The latter was judged from the responses received and may not therefore be strictly accurate, though to judge from responses within and between programmes there is no reason to believe they are significantly unrepresentative.

The 16 statements were as follows (those marked * being those for which scores were reversed):

1. Children should always be placed with a family of the same ethnic background.
2. * Transracial adoption is preferable to waiting months or even years for an ethnically matching placement.
3. Children of mixed parentage should be placed with black families if no matching (ie racially mixed) family is available.
4. * Race/colour should not play any part in the choice of adoptive parents.
5. Black families will be better placed to foster a black child’s sense of racial identity.
6. You need to experience racism yourself to help a child cope with it.
7. Access to one’s culture of origin is extremely important.
8. * Transracial adoption helps to promote racial integration and harmony in society, while same-race policies separate and divide people.
9. A residential placement in a multi-racial area and with black workers would be preferable to transracial adoption in an all-white area.
10. * For children of mixed parentage, issues of white identity and culture are just as important as black identity and culture.
11. * ‘Cultures’ and ‘racial identities’ are changing so fast, and so difficult to define, that it doesn’t make sense to give much weight to them in adoption.
12. * Same-race policies can lead to approving adopters just because they are black.
13. It is only same-race policies which make agencies work hard to recruit black and minority ethnic adopters.
14. Same-race placement policies counter negative views of black families and black communities and so strengthen them.
15. * Opposition to transracial adoption is mainly based on political correctness.
16. * Many white families are capable of effectively meeting the cultural needs of black children.

The statements deal with various sets of issues:
- general or overview propositions (Qs 1 and 4);
- identity and cultural needs, and the role of families in meeting them (Qs 5, 7, 11 and 16);
- helping children in coping with racism (Q 6);
- alternatives and consequences (Qs 2 and 9);
- the position of children of mixed parentage within debates on race and adoption (Qs 3 and 10);
- recruitment and approval of adopters (Qs 12 and 13);
- links to wider notions of community, society and politics (Qs 8, 14 and 15).

Characteristics of respondents
The results which follow are based on 360 returned questionnaires (357 coming from 19 DipSW programmes, the remaining three from ‘individual responses’). The sample comprised 250 women and 81 men (with a perhaps surprisingly high figure of 29 ‘missing values’). Age distribution revealed 153 respondents aged under 30; 147 aged 30–40; 58 over 40; (two missing values). In relation to ethnic background 234 respondents described themselves as white British; 23 white European; 18 as
black African; 36 as black Caribbean; 12 as Asian (Indian); nine Asian (Pakistani); four Asian (Bangladeshi); eight as mixed parentage; 12 as other; (four missing values). Among the others, it was sometimes possible from information given to link them to one of the major groupings, which raised the total of white students to 261 and the number of African-Caribbean students to 57. Eighty-four respondents were studying on graduate DipSW programmes, 26 on undergraduate, and 221 on non-graduate programmes. A further 29 were on programmes which crossed these boundaries. (It should also be remembered that there are often a small number of graduates on non-graduate programmes and vice versa). Perhaps predictably, there was a tendency for members of graduate and undergraduate programmes to be younger and less experienced than those on non-graduate programmes. White students comprised 77.3 per cent of graduate/undergraduate courses, but only 68.3 per cent of non-graduate courses. Although the figures are small and should be treated with caution, there was also a tendency for black African students and Asian (Indian) students to appear more frequently on graduate courses than their Caribbean, Pakistani or Bangladeshi counterparts. This would fit with wider patterns of representation in higher education (Skellington, 1996).

The most dramatic, though arguably predictable, data related to the correlation between ethnic background and ethnic composition of area(s) within which students had worked; whereas 70.5 per cent of white students said they had worked in white or mainly white areas, the comparable figure for minority ethnic students was only 25.6 per cent.

**Results**

**Overall perspectives**

As noted earlier, responses to the questionnaire could in principle be scored on a scale from 16, representing maximum support for same-race placements, to 80 signifying higher support for transracial adoption respectively. From 360 responses, individual scores ranged from 18 to 64 with an average of 41.3. Collectively, the range of scores can be expressed as follows in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score range</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16–28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>(7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29–41</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>(43.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>42–54</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>(46.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(3.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68–80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(0.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In broad terms, these figures can be taken to indicate, first, that there is a very wide range of views on race/ethnicity and adoption, with a small tendency towards favouring the thinking behind same-race policies (the average score being below the theoretical mid-point score of 48). Overall, however, the small number of scores in the lowest range offers negligible support for critics’ view of a pervasive political correctness among social workers. Scores showed no association with either sex or type of course attended. They tended to be slightly lower for younger respondents, but the difference fell marginally short of statistical significance. The same applied to association with levels of previous child care experience. For white students, this took the form of scores being higher in cases where there was no experience or when it was over four years, with lower scores in between. For minority ethnic students, however, scores fell slightly but steadily with greater experience. By far the strongest association was with the ethnic background of students. This is set out in Table 2.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic background</th>
<th>Average score</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White British/European</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African-Caribbean</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of mean scores for white and all minority ethnic respondents reveals a probability factor of $p < 0.001$. The
figures amply demonstrate that attitudes towards race and adoption were divided to an appreciable degree according to ethnic background, with white social workers on balance markedly more sympathetic to transracial adoption than their minority ethnic colleagues. It is, however, important to recognise that a wide range of views occurred in all groups, creating substantial overlap alongside the pattern of ethnic division. The relevant figures are shown in Table 3.

The general association of scores with ethnic background can be further examined in two ways, utilising data on areas of work experience and the ethnic make-up of DipSW programmes. In relation to the former, experience gained in multi-racial areas was associated with scores a little more favourable to same-race placements for both white students and minority ethnic students. For white students, mean scores were 42 with experience of work in multi-racial areas compared with 44.2 in mainly white areas (p = 0.03). The corresponding scores for minority ethnic students were 34.6 and 37.7 (p = 0.07). It is worth noting here the recent finding that transracial adoption is more common in shire counties than in metropolitan areas (Dance, 1997), although the relationship between attitudes and practices is certain to be highly complex. Scores within particular DipSW programmes are discussed further below, but it was interesting to hypothesise whether the ethnic make-up of programmes would be associated with responses. The most marked effect related to white students based on programmes with over 40 per cent minority ethnic students. Their average score was 38.3 as compared with 44.3 for other white students (p < 0.001). It was on such programmes that the gap between white and minority ethnic students was smallest.

Terms of debate

Beyond examining broad levels of support for same-race or transracial adoption, the 16 questionnaire statements were intended to facilitate further exploration of the reasoning behind them. Results are examined here in two ways: first, for what they indicate about support for one proposition or another; and second, for the degree of relative consensus or conflict they generated among respondents. With the first aim in mind, responses to statements can be arranged hierarchically (with larger scores indicating stronger support for transracial adoption), as indicated in Table 4 overleaf. In terms of relative support for transracial adoption two issues stand out, namely the position of children of mixed parentage and the question of delays. The equal importance of white identity and culture for children of mixed parentage (Q 10), and the lukewarm support for placing those children in black families (Q 3) both signified considerable opposition to any straightforward identification of children of mixed parentage as black. Transracial adoption as a preferable alternative to long delays (Q 2) emerged as the former’s other major plank of support.

Average scores for 14 of the 16 statements fell below three, and can therefore broadly be taken as leaning towards support for same-race policies and their logic. In a few cases the leaning was fairly slight. This applied, for example, to the necessity of adopters experiencing racism themselves in order to help children cope with it (Q 6), and belief in the capacities of white families to meet the cultural needs of black children (Q 16).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score range</th>
<th>16–28</th>
<th>29–41</th>
<th>42–54</th>
<th>55–67</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background (per cent in brackets)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White British European</td>
<td>6 (2.2)</td>
<td>96 (36.8)</td>
<td>146 (55.9)</td>
<td>13 (5.0)</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black African-Caribbean</td>
<td>14 (24.6)</td>
<td>33 (57.9)</td>
<td>10 (17.5)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3 (12.0)</td>
<td>17 (68.0)</td>
<td>5 (20.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (17.6)</td>
<td>9 (52.9)</td>
<td>5 (29.4)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
<td>17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Given these relatively small numbers, percentage figures should be treated with care.
On recruitment, there was relatively mild support for the necessity of same-race policies in order to ensure agency effort in recruiting black families (Q 13), and only a modest rejection of the notion that such policies may lead to approval of adopters ‘just because they are black’ (Q 12). If there was limited support for the idea of same-race policies strengthening black families and communities (Q 14), there was a stronger rejection for that of transracial adoption promoting racial integration and harmony (Q 8). There was almost as strong a dismissal of the notion that opposition to transracial adoption rested primarily on political correctness (Q 15). The score indicating modest support for residential placement in a multi-racial area vis-à-vis transracial adoption in an all-white area (Q 9) was perhaps rather surprising, not least alongside answers to Q 2 on delays, with their seemingly strong emphasis on parental attachment. Respondents may of course have had children of rather different ages in mind.

Within areas of stronger support for same-race policies could be found responses to perhaps the most basic issue, namely the importance of ethnic matching (Q 1). There was also strong support for the idea that black families would be better placed to foster a black child’s sense of racial identity (Q 5). A colour-blind approach to adoption was overwhelmingly rejected (Q 4), along with the notion that ‘culture’ and ‘racial identities’ were changing so fast as to limit their importance in adoption decisions (Q 11). Finally, the crucial importance of access to ‘cultures of origin’ was affirmed (Q 7).

In view of the generally greater support given to same-race adoption by minority ethnic students compared with their white counterparts, it is pertinent to ask whether this differential was fairly constant or varied according to the proposition concerned. Table 5 shows the degree of difference in ascending order and hence the relative extent of conflict over each proposition.

The data in Table 5 indicate wide variation in the degree of consensus on particular aspects of the debate. Overall differences in scores would suggest an average difference of around 0.5 for each statement. Those areas which consequently appeared as relatively consensual included the questions on the importance of white identity and culture for children of mixed parentage (Q 10), the effects of policy on agency recruitment (Q 13), rejection of colour-blind approaches (Q 4), the importance of culture (Q 7), whether opposition to transracial adoption rests on political correctness (Q 15), policies serving to strengthen black families and communities (Q 14) and the significance of changing cultures and identities (Q 11).

By contrast, the issues which were most disputed were those related to the need for adopters to experience racism themselves (Q 6), the suitability of white families to meet the cultural needs of black children (Q 16), preference for residential placement in a multi-racial area over transracial adoption in an all-white area (Q 9) and the placement of children of mixed parentage in black families (Q 3). What is striking about these findings is that it is precisely in the
The placement of children of mixed parentage has long been a particularly controversial issue (Small, 1986), while the setting of a residential placement (with all its presumed deficiencies) against the social geographic benefits of multi-racial community strikes at the heart of debate on the needs of children. (Note also the slightly higher than average difference over the importance of delay (Q 2).) That both issues tend to produce relatively polarised responses according to ethnic background sends a powerful message. Arguably even stronger messages emanate from the substantial differences on key questions such as the need for adopters to experience racism themselves (Q 6), and the capacities of families in relation to culture and identity (Qs 16 and 5). These three issues are customarily taken as the most important facets of race/ethnicity affecting individual children and the most ‘personalised’ in relation to adopters. Thus it could be argued that the differences of view indicated earlier underestimate the degree of polarisation between social work students according to ethnic background. The significance of this is discussed further below.

Responses from different programmes
Average scores from programmes varied extremely widely, from 49.7 to 31.3. The over-riding link was with the ethnic composition of programmes. The two highest average scores belonged to programmes all of whose students were white, the four lowest to those with fewer than 60 per cent white students. This very strong association is, of course, entirely congruent with the patterns noted earlier, for programmes in multi-ethnic areas to have more multi-ethnic student groups, with greater experience of working in multi-ethnic areas, factors which would tend to reinforce differences at the level of programmes.

Effects of teaching
Respondents were asked whether any relevant teaching had made them more in favour of transracial adoption or of same-race adoption, or had made no overall difference to their views. Of 286 students who indicated having received relevant teaching, replies were as follows:

- More in favour of transracial adoption = 42 (14.7 per cent);
- More in favour of same-race placements = 135 (47.2 per cent); and
- No difference = 109 (38.1 per cent).

Replies to this question need to be treated with caution, as some respondents may have indicated a ‘more in favour of . . .’ as a way of underlining their basic stance rather than reflecting the influence of teaching. The overall tendency, however, is clear. Protagonists in the debate will no

### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question No.</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Minority ethnic+</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>0.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>0.55**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>0.58**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.68**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>0.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.95**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>1.02**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05  
**p<0.01

+ The bringing together of all minority students does mask some differences between different groups. As noted earlier, there was a slight tendency for African-Caribbean students to be more strongly in favour of same-race policies. Though care must be taken because of the relatively small numbers involved, their response scores seemed to be significantly lower than those indicated above on Questions 5, 15, 16, 9 and 3.
doubt interpret it as evidence either of greater understanding of the issues or the result of political correctness brainwashing. The balance of influence towards same-race placements was slightly higher for younger students than older, for women than men, for those with experience in multi-racial than (mainly) white areas, and for those with ‘medium’ levels of experience in child care than those with none or over four years. None of these associations, however, reached statistical significance. The only association attaining the 95 per cent level of significance was that with ethnicity, where only 7.2 per cent of minority ethnic students declared themselves more in favour of transracial adoption compared with 39 per cent more in favour of same-race policies. The corresponding figures for white students were 17.7 per cent and 42.4 per cent respectively. Any explanation of these findings would clearly require a much more extensive examination, with before and after measures, consideration of teaching content, group dynamics and so on.

Conclusions
The starting point for this survey was the gap in existing knowledge regarding the views held by social workers on race/ethnicity and adoption. It was conceived as an initial attempt to address this gap by charting such views in a fairly ‘broad brush’ manner. Discussion at this point is mainly intended to summarise results and to draw out particular questions which seem to flow from them. The findings will of course offer no magical resolution of conflict over the desirability of same-race vis à vis transracial adoption, much of which rests on value differences. However, it is hoped that they will give a firmer foundation for debates, especially where claims are made regarding the perspectives and propensities of social workers.

The most noteworthy aspects of the survey relate to the range of views expressed and their associations with particular background factors. In overall terms, it can be seen that while (qualifying) social workers hold widely varying views on race/ethnicity and adoption, the major concentration rests with what might be termed fairly ‘soft’ support for same-race adoption. Both the wide range and an average score of over 40 do little to suggest a pervasive political correctness among social workers. Indeed, adherents of same-race adoption might view this level of support with some concern.

Yet it is also evident that opinion is divided according to ethnic background, with minority ethnic social workers much stronger in their support for same-race placements than white colleagues. Like the glass which is half full or half empty, the significance of division is open to differing interpretations. It should be remembered, however, that differences tended to be greatest on questions widely taken as most germane to the debate, notably those relating to meeting identity and cultural needs, and experiences of racism. On the latter for instance, white respondents took a markedly more sanguine view of the power of empathy, 41.7 per cent disagreeing with ‘the need to experience racism oneself . . .’ (Q 6), while only 18.2 per cent of minority ethnic students did so. The pattern found here fits closely with that described by Small (1994), namely the tendency for black respondents to attribute greater weight to racism than their white counterparts.

Once identified, such differences raise crucial questions of consensus, conflict and voice within adoption policy and practice. For instance, it might reasonably be asked whether a greater consensus on the placement of minority ethnic children is either feasible or desirable. While a survey such as this can readily demonstrate the wide range of views extant, it can offer only limited and fairly generalised insights into what lies behind them. Broadly, it can be seen that for white and minority ethnic students alike, greater support for same-race policies is associated with multi-racial influences in various guises, such as experience of social work in multi-racial areas or participation in ethnically mixed DipSW programmes. The prevailing influence of teaching was also seen to strengthen such support. As was noted earlier, this pattern
is open to benign or malign interpretation, as the product of enlightenment or indoctrination. Those who favour the former view might argue that a higher level of consensus can be reached with more (multi-racial) dialogue, but it is likely that differences would remain. Even taken collectively, the above influences fall considerably short of accounting for the degree of difference found. It must therefore be assumed that views expressed substantially reflected life experiences gained prior to and/or outside the realm of social work.

As to the desirability of consensus, there is obviously a need to chart a path between an imposed uniformity of thought and variations which would approach diametric opposition. The dangers of divergence clearly mount the more racialised their form; the prospect of widely differing service depending upon the ethnic background of the worker(s) is not an appealing one. Findings here suggest a mixed picture. On the one hand, heterogeneity characterises perspectives from all ethnic backgrounds, yet taken on balance the stronger support for same-race policies among minority ethnic students is unmistakeable. It is difficult to speculate how far debate within and between ethnic groups would lead to greater consensus, but there is also value in clarifying differences.

To the extent that differences remain, the question of voice arises and in particular whether any leading role should be bestowed upon minority ethnic social workers in relation to adoption of children from similar ethnic backgrounds. There is, of course, no easy way of gauging the accuracy of perceptions. Are minority ethnic social workers being unduly sceptical or mistrustful? Are white social workers being naive or complacent? What is clear is that common sense, oft proclaimed as the basis for salvation, appears to take on distinctly racialised manifestations.

The case for a leading role rests primarily on the notion that similarities of experience based on race or ethnicity are likely to generate a fuller awareness of the situations (potentially) faced by minority ethnic children. In relation to the differences of view found in this study, it should be remembered that in the long history of race surveys the victims of racism have rarely been found to overestimate its scope and extent (see, for example, Smith, 1977; Brown, 1984). Moreover, aside from any questions of accuracy and the difficulties of future-gazing, it might reasonably be argued that current minority ethnic perceptions nonetheless offer the best available guide to those of the next generation. If less than 20 per cent questioned believe that ‘personal experience of racism is unnecessary’, this does not seem to augur well for the assumptions upon which transracial adoption rests.

Against such a position it has sometimes been argued that minority ethnic social workers and their views are not ‘representative’ of their respective communities (Gilroy, 1992; Bartholet, 1994). However, such claims are both largely impressionistic and perhaps fuelled by media-led imagery of social workers. Similarly, while accountability is important, there is also a danger of denying the value of professional knowledge and experience. Whatever the merits of arguments on community and representation, it seems highly fanciful, not to say conspiratorial, to suggest that they could account for the differences identified in this study.

However, any leading role must be rooted in inclusive dialogue rather than exclusive imposition. It should incorporate both greater exchange of views within and beyond social work and seek to further increase awareness of minority ethnic experiences on the part of white social workers. Such a process offers the best prospect for improved understanding of the complex needs of children and high quality services to minority ethnic children and families.

No research is complete without a call for more research. In this instance, the most obvious needs are to complement the quantitative, broad brush approach with more in-depth qualitative exploration, to examine the views of qualified social workers in the light of their experiences and to set views in the
context of agency policies and practice, warts and all.

References
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