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Authors(s)	Ní Raghallaigh, Muireann; Sirriyeh, Ala
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The negotiation of culture in foster care placements for separated refugee and asylum seeking young people in Ireland and England

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Muireann Ní Raghallaigh

University College Dublin, Ireland

Ala Sirriyeh

Keele University, UK

Abstract

Little is known about separated asylum seeking young people in foster care. This article addresses this gap by drawing together findings from qualitative research conducted with separated refugee and asylum seeking young people in two studies – one in England and one in Ireland. Focusing on the role of culture, the authors examine similar findings from the two studies on the significance of culture in young people's experiences of foster care. Culturally 'matched' placements are often assumed to provide continuity in relation to cultural identity. This article draws on young people's accounts of 'matched' and 'non-matched' placements to examine the extent to which this may be the case for separated young people. It was found that young people regarded it as important to maintain continuity in relation to their cultures of origin, but that cultural 'matching' with foster carers according to country of origin and/or religion was not the only means for achieving this. The authors suggest that practitioners need to adopt an individualised approach in determining whether a 'matched' or a cross-cultural placement best meets the various needs of separated young people, including their identity development needs.

Keywords

Asylum, culture, foster care, refugee, separated children, unaccompanied minors

This article draws on findings from two studies on the experiences of separated refugee and asylum seeking young people in foster care – one in England (Study A) and one in the Republic of Ireland (Study B). Young people, foster carers and social

Corresponding author:

Ala Sirriyeh, School of Sociology and Criminology, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire, ST5 5BG, UK.
Email: a.sirriyeh@keele.ac.uk

workers participated in both studies. In the context of limited existing research on this topic, the studies aimed to: describe the fostering experiences of young people and foster carers; identify factors that facilitated or constrained placements; and identify specific features of the fostering task that helped to meet the resettlement needs of young people.

Here we focus on selected findings from Studies A and B rather than on the studies in their entirety. Specifically, the article examines similar findings from both studies on the significance of culture in young people's experiences in foster care placements, drawing on the perspectives of the young people. In each study 'culture' was frequently raised as an important theme by participants. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2001: 12) defines culture as 'distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group' encompassing 'in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs'. We found that social workers, young people and foster carers used the term 'culture' to refer to practices associated with a particular country of origin or religion. Where they recognised culturally 'matched' placements had been made, these were where young people were 'matched' with foster carers from the same country of origin and/or where young people and foster carers shared the same religion.

Culturally 'matched' placements are often assumed to provide for continuity in minority ethnic young people's cultural identities. This article draws on refugee and asylum seeking young people's accounts of their placements to examine the extent to which this was found to be the case for these young people. It was found that, young people regarded it as important to maintain continuity in relation to their culture of origin,¹ but that 'matching' according to country of origin and/or religion was not the only means for achieving this. Indeed, it was not necessarily the desired outcome. This is illustrated using examples from two domains – communication and food. We argue that cultural identities and practices are processes of becoming which are produced through interactional episodes that take place in particular historical and social contexts (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2008). Therefore, these are not essential, 'natural' or fixed qualities or behaviours of either young people or foster carers. Cultural practices develop and are experienced and understood in a manner which is fluid and negotiated, thus leading to varied pathways for different young people. Meanwhile, although nationality and religion were often important aspects of young people's identities, these also intersected with other significant aspects of identity. Finally, skills and needs cross a range of domains, including, but not limited to, culture. It is unlikely that one family will meet all of the needs of any individual young person. Thus, some foster carers draw on other resources within local communities and beyond, in addition to their own skills set. Therefore we suggest that practitioners need to adopt an individualised approach in determining whether a 'matched' or a 'cross-cultural' placement best meets the needs of separated young people, including their identity development needs.

In this article we examine experiences of young people placed with at least one foster carer from the same country of origin and/or religion as well as those placed 'cross-culturally'. While we recognise that asylum seeking young people face the onerous task of negotiating their identity based on both 'host' cultures and their cultures of origin, our focus here is on the importance of the latter as they adjust to life in England/Ireland.

Care of separated children

Separated refugee and asylum seeking children are under the age of 18, outside their country of origin and are not accompanied by a parent or guardian. In 2012, 1168 separated minors applied for asylum in England (Refugee Council, 2013). In Ireland, in the same year, a total of 23 asylum applications were received from separated children (Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, 2013).

In England young people are supported by Children's Services in the local authority where they present (Wade et al., 2005). A range of placement options are used including residential care, but more commonly shared housing with floating support for those who arrive aged 16–17; or foster care for those under the age of 16 or those deemed particularly vulnerable. In the four local authorities who took part in Study A, 31% of separated minors were in foster care.

In Ireland, until the end of 2010, the majority of separated children lived in largely unsupervised hostels. This system received much criticism with critics pointing to the inequitable system, whereby Irish children lived in foster care and in approved residential centres staffed with qualified personnel, while asylum seeking children lived in hostels, with no qualified care staff on site. Over a period of time, hostels were closed and separated children, including 16- and 17-year-olds, were placed in residential centres for several months upon arrival in Ireland, before being transferred to foster care and supported lodgings.²

There is some discussion of foster care within research on separated minors (Chase et al., 2008; Luster et al., 2010; Wade et al., 2005). However, Study A (Wade et al., 2012) and Study B (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013a) are the first in-depth studies in England and Ireland which respectively focus specifically on foster care for this group of young people. In pre-existing literature attention has been drawn to advantages and disadvantages of foster care for these young people. Within this debate there is some focus on the role of culture as studies note that young people placed in foster care can experience a faster adjustment to a new language and culture (Hek, 2007). In addition, the broader literature on foster care and adoption for ethnic minority children is of relevance. It has been argued that ethnically matched placements support the development of children's identity and are beneficial for their mental health (Maxime, 1993; Small, 2000). In contrast, others have suggested that making placements according to ethnicity takes an essentialist view of ethnicity, is not supported by research evidence and can be divisive (Gilroy, 1990; Macey, 1995). Selwyn and Wijedasa (2009) found no difference in outcomes between placements that were ethnically matched or not matched with regard to the numbers of children who experienced difficulties in adjustment and levels of self-esteem. However, children in placements with foster carers of a different ethnicity, while proud of their heritage, were less likely to identify with that heritage and culture.

The studies

While foster carers, young people and social workers participated in both studies, in this article we focus on the young people's perspectives. Recently, there has been a growing tendency to see children as agents rather than passive objects. Therefore children's and

young people's perspectives are increasingly sought within academic research. While it can be challenging for adult researchers to understand the experiences of children or young people (Greene and Hill, 2005), we found that the inherent flexibility of a qualitative approach facilitated this endeavour. We spoke with young people about preparations for transitions into foster care, experiences within the foster care household, social networks and experiences beyond the household and leaving foster care.

Study A

Study A was conducted in four Local Authorities in England between 2009 and 2011 and was a partnership between the University of York, University of Bedfordshire and the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). This mixed methods study incorporated a census profile of all 2113 separated minors looked after by the local authorities; a postal survey of 133 foster carers, case studies with 23 foster carers and 21 young people in their care (two young people declined to be interviewed); four social worker focus groups; and four interviews with children's asylum team managers. We recognised that young people in foster placements may be wary of expressing criticism. Where this was their only placement, they lack alternatives to compare it with. In order to balance these effects, three focus groups were held with 19 young people (two male groups and one female group) who had previously lived in foster placements.

This study focuses on findings from the interviews and focus groups with young people. The young people we interviewed were 13–18 years old and had been in England between 10 months and five years. Eighty-eight per cent of separated minors at that time were male (Wade et al., 2012). All participants we interviewed were male as no females agreed to be interviewed. The focus group participants comprised of a mixture of males and females aged between 15 and 19. The young people originated from seven countries (14 interviewees and 12 focus group participants were Afghan). Four young people had refugee status and the others had 'Discretionary Leave to Remain' (temporary leave to remain usually until the age of 18).

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by Sirriyeh (who is from a mixed ethnic background and in her thirties) and two other white female interviewers, Margaret Grant (BAAF) and Jennifer Cousins (BAAF). The two all male focus groups were conducted by Sirriyeh and a British Asian male colleague (Professor Ravi Kohli, University of Bedfordshire). All young people were offered an interpreter. Only one young person chose this option; the remaining interviews were conducted in English. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using the software package MAXQDA.

Study B

Study B was conducted in the Republic of Ireland using qualitative face-to-face and telephone interviews and a focus group. Participants included separated asylum seeking young people, foster carers and stakeholders (social workers, representatives of advocacy organisations). Sixty-nine people took part in total, including 21 young people.

The focus of this study is on data gathered through the face-to-face interviews with the 21 young people. All interviews were undertaken by Ní Raghallaigh, a white Irish female in her thirties. Only one young person wanted an interpreter present at his interview. The other interviews were conducted through English. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically using the NVivo software package.

Eight of the young people were female and 13 were male. The average age of the young people was 15.8 years, with the youngest aged 11 and the eldest aged 19. Eighteen young people were currently living in foster care and had been in their current placements between four months and six years. The remaining three young people had previously lived in foster care and reflected back on their experiences.

While 10 young people were Nigerian, the remaining 11 young people came from nine other countries. In order to protect the identity of the young people, regions, rather than countries, of origin are provided. Six participants were from Eastern Africa, two were from Middle Africa, two were from Central Asia and one was from Southern Africa. Fifteen were Christian and six were Muslim. All had been living in Ireland for six months or longer at the time of interview. Two young people had been granted refugee status at the time of interview; the remainder were at various stages of the asylum determination procedure.

Ethical considerations

In both studies ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutions. Throughout the studies, the researchers were cognisant of the sensitive nature of research with separated young people (Hopkins, 2008) and this was taken into consideration. For example, given the often traumatic experiences of separated minors prior to arrival in Europe, researchers did not ask young people about their reasons for coming to England or Ireland as this was not the focus of either study. In addition, given the potential power imbalance between young people and researchers, the process of obtaining informed consent was considered an ongoing one: for example, in circumstances where the young person's interest in the interview seemed to wane, researchers asked if he or she would like to stop. The confidentiality of each research participant was always maintained. Young people were reassured that what they said would not be passed on to their carers or social workers except if the researcher was concerned about their safety or about someone else's safety. This was considered particularly important given that separated young people often find it difficult to trust (Ní Raghallaigh 2013b). In both studies, interviews were conducted by individuals who had extensive experience of interviewing separated young people. This experience helped in building rapport and establishing trust.

The young people's placements

We met young people who were placed in a range of contexts; from placements with foster carers from the same country of origin and religion to those with white British or Irish foster carers or British or Irish carers from other minority ethnic backgrounds who were also of a different religion to the young person. There were also cases where young

people were placed with foster carers of the same religion but a different country of origin and vice versa. In addition, there were placements where one partner in a fostering couple was from the same country of origin but the other partner was not. Coincidentally in both Study A and Study B, four young people were from the same country of origin as one or both foster carers. However, in both studies, even when young people were from the same country of origin as their carers, they were often not from the same ethnic group or religion.

Findings

Young people's perceptions on the importance of culture

In both studies, it was evident that young people attached great importance to their culture. When speaking about foster placements, they referred to culture as a significant aspect. They observed that culture could provide a sense of continuity in a context where, as Summerfield (1998: 16) has stated, they were experiencing a 'rupture in the narrative threads running through their lives'. Young people spoke of how moving from their countries of origin meant considerable change including loss of family, friends, food, familiar smells, clothing and climate. Thus, it was deemed beneficial to have some similarities available. As one young person in study B stated:

We have different culture when we come here. It's really difficult to adapt with the new culture ... So ... if we are treated maybe in a kind of way that it's similar to our culture because the way we are living in our culture and the way we face things here are different ...

Participants valued placements where this sense of continuity was facilitated, at least to some extent. In some instances continuity was made possible by carers who were from the same cultural background as young people. However, in other instances, carers of a different background made concerted efforts to meet young people's cultural needs. Both situations were valued by young people.

Cultural continuity came in many forms. Different young people highlighted different aspects of culture as being important. Some emphasised food or language, others talked about religion or values, amongst other aspects. One Nigerian young person in Study A spoke about his experience of living with a Nigerian carer:

I think it was all right because she [my foster carer], she's Nigerian and I'm Nigerian as well ... we kind of have the same values and norms so.

In general, in both studies, those living with carers of a different cultural background expressed satisfaction with this arrangement, reflecting findings from Chase et al. (2008: 69) that most young people who participated in their study had 'very positive experiences of cross-cultural placements'. They felt it was not necessary to be with a family of their own nationality in order for their cultural needs to be met. Similarly, social workers in both studies observed that cross-cultural placements could work very well when carers were open to diversity and willing to facilitate the development of a young person's cultural identity. Repeatedly, young people made reference to the fact that what was most

important was the personality of the carer. In particular, young people wanted carers who respected their cultural background.

It doesn't matter to me. ... For me, actually, I can live with anybody. I can live with any culture. ... The only thing about it is, like, ... once they respect me for my own belief and whatever I do. ... So, the only thing is if actually I can get on with the person and they can get on with me and, like, they respect me for what, respect what I believe or whatever. (Young person, Study B)

In both studies it was evident that cross-cultural carers responded to the cultural needs of the young people to different degrees. Some paid little or no attention to culture whereas others placed particular emphasis on it. In cases where little or no attention was paid, carers sometimes believed that the young person was disinterested and culture was not of particular importance. The carers believed young people had adjusted to their new society and, hence, cultural practices linked to their country of origin were not of much significance. In one case, in Study B, the carer described the young person being 'really integrated into the Irish way of life before he came [to live with me]' and stated that 'culture wasn't a big issue'. In contrast, while the young person appeared very happy in his placement, when asked about his culture he expressed a desire to learn more about it:

YP: Yes. I would love to learn a wee [little] bit more about Nigeria. Like, I only know a few things – that's about it. Yes.

I: So you would like to have the opportunity to learn.

YP: Just a wee bit. Yes.

In general, though, most young people felt that carers attempted to help them hold onto their cultures in different ways. They appreciated this. For example, one young person in Study B stated:

What I like from my last foster mother, she always asked me what kind of food I eat, what kind of music I like, so, and she sometimes takes me to a place where, where there is a cultural programme [from my country], she would take me there, so because ... I always miss something about my own culture ... so she used to do that and I really liked that about them.

Yet, while it was acknowledged that carers and social workers could play an important role in facilitating cultural continuity and helping promote cultural identity, some young people felt that it was up to themselves to maintain a connection to their cultural 'roots'. One young person in Study B stated:

I think they can help to a certain extent or because it's really up to you I think. Your culture is in you, its you and where you go, like where I go I keep it to myself that you know what this is who I am, this is where I come from, and you know this is me. ... They can help you by like you know um like, um I don't know, getting you to join things like I don't know, like do things that involve your cultural stuff or something. ... They can do that but at the end of the day it's really up to you, it's up to you how you want to keep your culture yeah.

Overall, for the majority of participants, foster care and relationships established within it allowed them to maintain their culture and to develop their sense of cultural identity.

Communication and language

For many young people, communication was challenging at the beginning, especially if English was not their first language. While in Ireland young people usually lived in residential care upon arrival and were linked with specialist English language support, in England most young people went straight to foster placements. This often meant that challenges in adjusting to foster care were compounded by communication difficulties as explained by this young person in Study A:

It was hard, because if you can't speak someone's language and you're, like, you're like blind, you know? Like, you can't talk their language. You don't know what they're saying. And I remember always talked to me and I didn't understand what she say, but I'd be saying, 'Okay, okay', like that [laughter]. I didn't know what she say, good or bad or, I don't know, but I know she don't say a bad word to me. She's a nice lady.

However, young people recognised foster carers' efforts to adapt in order to communicate with them. One young person in Study A recalled how he was welcomed to the foster family.

At first they was really welcoming, 'cause they had, Louise,³ she's 13 now and she [had] drawn a welcome in Albanian ... [laughs] ... in, on a piece of paper. It was really good. It felt, I felt really, you know, welcomed.

Other young people spoke about carers who used dictionaries, the internet, interpreters and local networks to communicate, and carers who helped them with their English or organised English teachers for them. In Study B, one participant stated:

Well everybody was new to me and um I had no English and I remember Kate and Frank trying to tell me something but I couldn't understand. It was really good like they helped me a lot for my English so I owe them one [laughs]. So that's how I learned English so they used to help me, talk to me every day.

While some young people considered their native language to be of great importance, this was not always the case. Many young people highlighted the benefit of being in an English speaking household where English could be learnt more quickly.

I don't like to speak it, Tigrinya. It's not helpful for jobs. ... That's why I like to speak English. (Young person, Study A)

In contrast, some young people in cross-cultural placements craved opportunities to speak their native language. A participant in Study B, living with an Irish family, stated:

I'd love to meet people like who could speak my language really like that. 'Cause like, 'cause like I don't know like, its different like from English, like when you speak your own language you could say certain things like you know funny things that you can't say in English like you know. ... You can say silly things and like all that but in English when you are trying to say something silly you have to think of how you put it like you can't just say anything yeah if you are used to the language then you can say anything so.

When young people were placed with carers of the same nationality who spoke the same language, they highlighted benefits in terms of language continuity. For one young person in Study B, the common language meant she could trust her carer to a greater extent as communication was more open and transparent than it would be if the languages were different. This is a particularly salient point given the challenges that separated children often have in developing trusting relationships (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013b):

YP: We speak the same language [*laughs*]

I: Ok ... and is that important?

YP: Yeah, um, sometimes she might be saying some stuff and then if I don't understand her I just feel like she might be talking about me ... let's say I go to someone's house and they're like Indian or something and they're speaking another language and then ... you would feel like an outsider or something.

Continuity of language also meant they did not forget their native language. Indeed, in Study B, several young people who had lived in residential care or in placements with Irish families said they were no longer able to speak their native languages (cf. McWilliams, 2012). This highlights the important role that can be played by placements with families from within the same cultural group. Language is an important part of cultural identity (Goldstein and Spencer, 2000) and therefore efforts must be made to ensure young people can maintain their mother tongue.

Communication went beyond language, however. Participants also spoke about the need for carers to understand diverse ways of communicating in their interactions with the young people. McWilliams (2012) suggests that some cultures emphasise direct and authoritative communication while others emphasise a more indirect and hesitant style. In both studies, participants talked about cultural differences as regards eye contact. For example a young person in Study A spoke about an interaction with his foster carer. The foster carer had asked:

'When you're talking to me, why are you not like just exactly looking in my eyes? You should be looking.' I said, like, '... I don't know, just I'm not really comfortable with it. ... And just stick my eyes into yours, you know, it's just like it doesn't happen that way.

A young person in Study B talked about the need for carers to understand difference and gave an example of how communication or behaviour can be deemed 'rude' or not in different cultural contexts:

Like, when I came new, ... to give me something, I didn't even say 'thank you'; I didn't even say 'please'. ... You know? Because I'm not used to it. ... So, they can have the misunderstanding. Maybe they might think you are rude or something like that, but you are not.

Food

Food and food practices hold symbolic significance and can be tools and measurements of inclusion and feelings of belonging. Kohli et al. (2010: 233) suggest that 'food is related to many aspects of finding sanctuary, negotiating belonging within the foster family, and can powerfully evoke being at "home" in a new land'. In both Studies A and B young people indicated that food was very important in creating a sense of welcome within foster placements. For example, a young person in Study B compared two cross-cultural foster placements and the attitude of his carers towards his food. In one placement, his carers encouraged him to cook and they tried food that he made, leading him to 'feel really relaxed and stuff'. In contrast, in the other placement, the carers often complained about the smell of the food, leading the young person to 'feel not really welcome to the house'.

Choice and control are also significant, whether in choosing food from countries of origin or new kinds of 'comfort' food and can indicate the extent to which young people feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in the household (Sirriyeh, 2013a). In both studies, there were examples of many successful food experiences in cross-cultural placements. Many carers made concerted efforts to provide food the young people liked and encouraged them to become involved in food choices and preparation.

In both studies, food was often a first refuge for young people at a time of uncertainty and transition (Kohli et al., 2010). Providing young people with a familiar environment enabled them to feel safe and secure and created a stable base from which to deal with transitions into aspects of life in England or Ireland which may be less familiar. For example, when asked what helped him to settle in his foster placement, one young person in Study B stated the following:

I think it was like um, like, eat the same food that we eat in Nigeria. That was very nice. It made me think back about Nigeria.

Those young people living with foster carers from the same countries of origin or neighbouring countries with some cultural similarities described the advantage of having some shared cultural knowledge and, in particular, focused on food. As a young person in Study A explained:

I think 'cause we've got the same cultural background it made it easier, and probably like have the same kind of food and stuff, you know, yeah, and. There's nothing really major, there's nothing like making it hard really, everything is easy.

In cross-cultural placements communication difficulties early on in placements sometimes created challenges in negotiating food arrangements, but various methods were used to overcome these. Carers encouraged young people to cook with them. Young

people were often included in family food shopping trips and were asked to choose food they liked. This also helped to clarify anxieties and answer questions, as a young person in Study A illustrated:

The first time I eat just I eat take out bread. She [foster carer] ask me what you like? ... She ask me why you not eating? I say no Halal. She don't know Halal. ... After I didn't know if she could do Halal shop. ... She took me to [shops] and she buying food from here. She took me to see. ... I could see she is buying Halal. Everytime I go with her shopping. (Young person, Study A)

In Study A, in which there were larger numbers of Muslim young people, the holy month of Ramadan was raised as a point of adjustment for foster carers attempting to provide support for young people while they were fasting. During Ramadan those young people who were fasting needed to eat early in the morning which had an impact on family food routines. This was also evident in Study B, although there were fewer Muslim young people in this study.

However, although foster carers mentioned that accommodating young people's food needs during Ramadan could be challenging, most foster carers and young people overcame challenges involved. In both studies some foster carers and/or young people prepared food in advance for young people to heat up when required. In Study A some Afghan young people were placed together in foster care placements or nearby other Afghan young people. Some prepared and ate food together during Ramadan, enabling them to maintain communal aspects of their religious practices:

We can all cook ... For all month ... And our mum love it, she's love it, yeah ... And then, when I go to friend house, he – we're talking, we're cooking food, Afghan food always, like curry, rice and yeah, we just – I'm always going and every night I going to – not every night, but every Sunday, I'm going to my friend house and I stay there and we have, like six, seven friend talking to each other, then yeah, we're cooking and eating. (Young person, Study A)

Discussion and conclusion

The two studies provide important insights into experiences of asylum seeking young people in foster care. In particular, the young people's narratives shed light on issues relating to culture and suggest ways in which carers and stakeholders might best respond to the needs of diverse young people. Importantly, these studies point to the fact that young people have various perspectives about culture and its place within foster care. These diverse views emerged from their contrasting experiences, whereby some were placed in cross-cultural placements while others were placed in placements with foster carers from the same country of origin and/or religion. To a large extent their opinions were shaped and formed by these placement experiences and by how culture was negotiated within their care arrangements.

As is evident from the UNESCO (2001) definition, culture is a wide ranging concept which includes multiple different aspects. We focused on two particular domains of culture – communication and food. It was evident that, broadly speaking, young people perceived it to be important to maintain links to their cultures of origin and as such sought cultural continuity both at a general level and in relation to the two

specific domains. Elsewhere, maintaining continuity has been identified as a coping strategy used by separated children as they make efforts to deal with the multiple changes they face upon arrival in a new country (Ni Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010). Holding onto elements of their old lives can mean that losses are partial rather than absolute, and that change is less daunting. More generally, continuity has also been identified as an important aspect of identity (Hartar, 1990) and indeed, identity development is viewed as a crucial feature of adolescence. Separated minors face particular challenges in maintaining a sense of continuity of self, given the predominance of change in their lives. They face the challenge of developing an identity based on aspects of culture from both their country of origin and their country of reception. Given that most are surrounded by the culture of the new society – in schooling and in peer interactions – the challenge of developing an identity based on their cultures of origin is probably most demanding for them and for care providers. Given our critique of essentialist understandings of culture and identity (detailed earlier) we would argue that continuity does not necessarily imply fixity or simply more of the same. Continuity can also incorporate change as practices endure into the present, yet alter through new experiences. Enduring things ‘diverge’ and ‘transform’, yet flow through time and are connected to the past (Sirriyeh, 2013b). As Coleman (2008: 93) states: ‘Enduring things are not the linear progression of past events which survive into the present and future but rather are the ways in which certain things transform and become, that is move from “the past” and are re-experienced.’

While the placement of separated young people in hostels or residential centres specifically for this client group can provide a peer group setting with some other young people from similar cultural backgrounds, this is not necessarily the case in foster care. This leaves policy makers and practitioners with the question of how best to meet the cultural needs of these young people. In both studies there were examples of young people placed with families from the same country of origin and/or religion and examples of young people placed cross-culturally. Within the former it was evident that young people had access to adults and peers from their own national or religious communities, providing continuity of communication, of food and of other domains, in a very natural way. Thus, as has been identified in the literature, such placements had the potential to be beneficial in terms of the development of young people’s ethnic identity and in terms of their mental health (Maxime, 1993; Small, 2000). Yet, the findings of our studies suggest that from the perspectives of young people their identity development could be facilitated within cross-cultural placements too, albeit in different ways. In general young people expressed satisfaction with care provided in cross-cultural families who often made concerted efforts to promote and facilitate the cultural and ethnic identities of young people, which was appreciated and valued.

Yet there are also limitations with both placement types. There is a temptation to assume that it is best for minority ethnic children to be placed with families from the same ethnic, religious or national backgrounds in order to facilitate identity development. However, as mentioned earlier, ‘matching’ placements in this manner can take an essentialist view of ‘race’ and culture (Gilroy, 1990). Equally, while the findings suggest that cultural continuity was frequently well facilitated within cross-cultural placements,

it is imperative that placement providers do not become complacent about the extent to which this can be done. Foster carers can, at times, have good intentions but lack the skills and experience to appropriately meet these needs. Hence, it is vital that a large pool of foster carers is available and social workers and placement providers ensure they are adequately trained and are provided with in-depth support to meet the needs of those for whom they are caring.

Overall, within placement making ‘matching’ is a complex endeavour and multiple elements need to be considered in order to identify the best possible ‘match’ between the young person and carer. Nationality or religion are just two components of this matching process, albeit important ones. As such, placing a particular emphasis on them can pose the danger of neglecting other important considerations, such as the personalities of those involved, the location of placements, family composition, carers’ links to local communities and the wishes of the young person (Ní Raghallaigh, 2013a). In both studies young people ultimately placed most emphasis on the importance of the relationships they developed with carers. Culture and identity can be nurtured and developed within these relationships, whether in cross-cultural or matched placements. There cannot be a fixed view of whether matched or cross-cultural placements are ultimately better. The specific skills of individual carers and the particular needs of individual young people must be assessed, with recognition that skills and needs cross a range of domains, not just those related to culture. It is unlikely that one family will meet all the needs of a specific young person. Therefore, there is a need to tap into other resources within local communities and beyond. Also, it is important to note that while placement types will have an impact on identity development, the young person him or herself has a very important part to play. Although influenced by contextual factors including their foster families, young people are actively involved in negotiating their own sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, it can be expected that separated minors ‘are not simply pawns of their circumstances’ (Phinney et al., 2006:214). Instead, they seek out and create their own ways of dealing with the complexity of living in different cultural contexts. Whilst acknowledging separated minors may not always have the freedom of choosing (Berry, 2001), in general they will make decisions about how they negotiate their cultural identity. It is essential, therefore, that their perspectives and views are continuously sought and taken into account by practitioners and researchers.

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Notes

1. While referring to ‘cultures in countries of origin’, we recognise these cultures are not static and enclosed, particularly in an era of globalisation (Ritzer, 2010).

2. Supported lodgings are a family placement which provide a less intensive form of foster care to young people, with less emphasis on creating attachments with carers and more emphasis on preparing young people for independent living at age 18. In this article, 'foster care' is used to include both foster care and supported lodgings placements.
3. Foster carers' daughter. Names have been changed.

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