

Article

# We Are the Same, but Different: A Duoethnography of People of Colour Who Are Care Leavers

Ismail Karolia\* and John Wainwright 

School of Social Work, Care and Community, University of Central Lancashire, Preston PR1 2HE, UK;  
jpwainwright@uclan.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: ikarolia1@uclan.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** In this article, we use autoethnography to explore autobiographical narratives of being both people of colour and care leavers. The conversations were recorded (audio and transcription) and themes include identity, common emotional responses, perspectives, the challenges of being Asian and Black and in care, identifying as a care leaver in adulthood, race and racism. This article will explore the themes in detail while considering the differences in context of the lived experiences of the two authors, with one having been adopted by a white, British family and being of dual ethnicity, while the other being of South Asian ethnicity and having experienced foster care, including short-term foster placements. This article will explore not only experiences of childhood, but also of those faced in adulthood related to the two identifiers discussed. Although there will be some discussion on the outward, including society's response, challenges and outcomes, in particular regarding children in care and race, there will be a focus on the inward, the emotional and intellectual understanding of these issues.

**Keywords:** race; fostering and adoption; children in care; minorities in care; autoethnography; duoethnography

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*They are Us. We are they.*

(Sivanandan 2002)

## 1. Introduction

Part of the role of genealogy is to understand what makes us who we are. (Knauff 2017; Koopman 2013) Genealogy takes into account identity, heritage and our histories. For many who investigate their heritage, there is a positive personal and psychological effect of the sense of self achieved through understanding that which brings us here; the sense of connection with the past, along with the ability to tell stories connected to you and the enrichment that brings (Lima 2019). For people with care<sup>1</sup> experience, in our circumstances, including those who have been adopted, there can be a disconnect between your heritage and your 'family/ies', including those that we have been placed in. This lack of connection can be made more significant when identifying factors such as race<sup>2</sup> can indicate your difference within your environs and with those that support you. As authors, researchers and the

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<sup>1</sup> We are defining care as being separated from our birth families either permanently or for a significant period of time. Although it is acknowledged that adoptive placements are made with intention of permanence, this is often not the case for foster care.

<sup>2</sup> Race is used as a point of analysis to explore the racialisation of difference through power and discriminatory treatment. It is not suggested that it is satisfactory but is a term that is used in everyday language and, as such, as Gunaratnam (2003) states, is 'constantly under erasure'.

subjects of this study, we talked together on multiple occasions, recording discussions about our care experiences and thoughts on race. We both work in academia, are people of colour and have been in adoptive or foster care. Ismail was taken into care at the age of eight, with a short period in a residential children's home, followed by foster care provided by older siblings and then foster placements. John was adopted as an infant into a white family, as a dual-heritage (African/Caribbean—white) child in an area that, at that time, had few people of colour. John was brought up in an almost exclusively white town in the south of England in the 1970s, Ismail in a city in the north of England that had an established white community, but a growing and significant migrant population of south east Asian Muslim and African/Caribbean communities. In this article, we use autoethnography to consider what has made us who we are; and what makes us the same, but different.

## 2. Ethnicity, Race and Care

Our biographies are just two narratives of a much wider story of many children who have been placed in transracial, or more appropriately, transethnic foster, or adoptive care settings. We use the term transethnic rather than transracial, because the latter reifies the notion of race. Likewise, transethnic as a term to describe the placement of children of colour in white foster/adoptive families has its limitations. However, ethnicity is not a term that implies fixed and immutable characteristics but a fluidity regarding culture, religion, skin complexion and more.

This story has spanned at least sixty years and has mirrored the pulses of migration that have come to the UK from the new Commonwealth countries. The practice of transethnic adoption and fostering began in small numbers in the 1950s and increased significantly in the 1960s, involving the children of new migrants coming to the UK, initially from the Caribbean, then Africa and Asia (Gaber 1994). By the 1970s, transethnic adoption and fostering had become an established practice in the UK (Kirton 2000), which, according to Triseliotis et al. (1997), was due to both a lack of minority ethnic adopters and an over representation of Black and Asian children in care.

However, transethnic fostering and adoption has always been a controversial practice, with some arguing that placing children of Black or Asian heritage in white families could not provide children with the necessary resilience to cope with racism in society (Barn and Kirton 2012; Sissay 2012, 2020). It was also argued that transethnic placements had a detrimental effect on Black and Asian children's ethnic and cultural identity (Harris 2006, 2014; Samuels 2009). There was little recognition that children from Black and Asian backgrounds may have had different placement needs to their white majority ethnic peers (Kirton 2000).

Others have suggested that focusing on race, ethnicity and racism, whilst important, is not central to the success of a Black or Asian child thriving in a white family (Gill and Jackson 1983; Loughton 2011). These commentators argue that a loving and stable family, irrespective of the ethnicity of the foster or adoptive family, is the key to a successful placement (Hayes 1995; Cameron 2011). There is a significant amount of research that supports the argument that transethnic placements can produce positive outcomes, including rates of placement breakdown, psychosocial benefits (for instance, successful relationships in school), and in coping with racism (McRoy et al. 1997; Thoburn et al. 2000). However, some earlier studies reported that white parents of transethnically fostered and adopted children did not promote a positive sense of children's ethnic identity, with many Black, Asian and dual-heritage children viewing themselves as 'white', and they nonetheless concluded that transethnic placements were successful. Children in these placements scored as well, if not better, than children in ethnically matched placements, on various outcome indicators of placement success (Gill and Jackson 1983, p. 132; Bagley 1993, p. 294). Importantly though, there has been a consistent and constant lobby from children and adults that have been transethnically fostered and adopted that their experiences have been unhappy, traumatic and difficult. For them, being placed in a white foster, or adoptive family was one of isolation, at times humiliation, and, both within family and the wider whiter community, that of racism (Gaber 1994; Harris 2006; Sissay 2020).

As a consequence of transethnic fostered and adoptees' experiences, researchers, policy makers and practitioners in this field still recommend, wherever possible, that children should be placed with ethnically and culturally similar families (Gill and Jackson 1983; Thoburn et al. 2000; HMSO 2002).

In many ways, this discourse regarding the transethnic fostering and adoption will always divide opinion, because, as one commentator observes, the decision to promote policy and practice that places children in settings that do not reflect and promote their own ethnic, cultural and religious identity is a moral question (Quinton 2012). Although, as one transethnic adoptee adult has reflected on their biography, it can feel that they neither belonged in the white community, nor thlack community (Samuels 2009). This experience of solitariness, of not belonging, was echoed by other transethnic adoptees impacted by the isolation of experiencing everyday racism; of being the only Black or Asian child, the only person of colour, in a white setting, family or community. It also talks directly to our experience.

*Our life stories are at times painful and seemingly riddled with loss and grief. At other times they are filled with the wonders of family life and new friendships with cultural and geographical reconnection. They also reveal the damaging impact of racism, disappointments and frustration, and emotional distress (Harris 2006, p. 8)*

### 3. Children in Care

Whilst many children of Black and Asian heritage have experienced transethnic adoptive and foster care, there is a significant proportion of children of colour that have had the more transient and unsettling experience of being placed with foster carers and in residential care (Thoburn et al. 2000; Boddy 2013; Sissay 2020). Residential care for children (and their birth families) has often been a fallback position, or alternative option to foster and adoptive placements. At times, this has been a thought-through plan by social workers to provide respite for a family in crisis, but often it has been an option that children have had imposed on them with no control over their situation. This often has been because of poor planning by the local authority, or the social worker responsible for the children, a lack of resources and, importantly, an inability of child care authorities to provide as much love, thought and long-term planning into the care of children as they would with their own birth children (Thoburn et al. 2005; Boddy 2013).

The evidence, provided by many studies, suggests that the experiences of children in care have often been damaging, temporary and detrimental to their physical and psychosocial outcomes (Thoburn et al. 2000; Boddy 2013; Sissay 2020). Children in residential and foster care have often experienced poor educational, relationship, social and employment outcomes. The proportion of children that have been in care, which has led to a pathway of being criminalised, often resulting in custodial sentence, is well documented (Fitzpatrick 2016; Fitzpatrick et al. 2019). This is before consideration is made of the long list of (ongoing) sexual abuse scandals that children in foster and residential care have and continue to be subjected to when in the care of foster parents or residential establishments (Craven and Tooley 2016). For many, if not all, children (and their families), the experience of care has been, at best, that of constantly being moved and unsettled and, at worst, that of trauma and abuse (Thoburn et al. 2005; Boddy 2013).

This experience of uncertainty, of constant moves between birth family, residential and foster care, is one of our autoethnographic conversations/stories. It is also one of an adult male of Indian Muslim heritage that has grappled with the same challenges concerning race, ethnicity, culture and belonging.

### 4. Method

Autoethnography uses autobiography as data. The data is interpreted and filtered through our own lenses, informed by and connected to wider perspectives—our understanding of the micro (personal experiences) and macro (society and the wider community) and the relationship between the two. It provides the opportunity to connect the personal to wider cultural, theoretical, social and political perspectives. As Grant et al. state, “in this regard, autoethnography actively promotes

political inquiry” (Grant et al. 2013, p. 4). In it, researchers are left with findings that are their own stories in their own language. These stories help crystallise theory applied to life, but in a way that can lead to multiple interpretations and understandings (Douglas 2013) and, to complicate this further, “the light of human meaning is always refracted through the dark glass of language . . . and language is always unstable” (Grant et al. 2013). We talk about these findings in our ‘language’ and interpret it as thus, but others may interpret it differently. Duoethnography (a joint autoethnography conducted by two people) allows us to understand both our voices and stories and bring both of our understanding and reasoning to discuss what it tells us. “Duoethnographies, like reflexive autoethnographies, are disruptive, emergent, dialogic, transformative narratives” (Denzin 2014, p. 27). As a method, autoethnography allows us to consider wider social and societal issues and points to our experiences and challenges that people of colour who have been in care have faced. Our own experience of how these issues have been overcome, to some extent, may also inform discussions around resilience. It also allows us to compare our ‘cases’ and discuss the similarities and differences found within (Chang 2008; Church 1995; Zempi and Awan 2017).

We recorded three conversations with each other, each being approximately forty minutes in length. The conversations were unstructured to allow for free-flowing discussion. This developed a free narrative, built on by the associations we individually made from each other’s stories, experiences and contributions. There is much discussion about the creativity that is in use in autoethnography and the challenge in drawing meaningful, reliable conclusions from the data (Ellis 2004; Chang 2008). It was important for us here to not be burdened by a criteria or fixed method in our conversations and our analysis.

The conversations were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed by identifying themes to provide insight into wider societal issues and challenges people with care experience face. From an ethical point of view, we are discussing experiences that hinge on other people’s experiences and our relationships with other people in our lives. For this, we have excluded parts of the data that might identify or negatively impact on other people (Chang 2008).

## 5. Findings: We Are the Same but Different

### 5.1. Multiple Identities, White, Asian, Muslim or Black?

The central theme drawn out of the conversations was the feeling of a lack of clear identity, which consequently led to feelings of often not belonging. There were clear examples of insecurity in our identities, in knowledge of the self, and the identity of ‘care leaver’ and ‘adopted’ being at the core of our uncertainty. There was a distance between us and our ‘own’ communities, the communities of our heritage. There was an acknowledgement that many of the institutions and professionals involved with us were white and much of our trauma related to being in care was delivered by people from our heritage communities, leading us, at the time, to question the value of our ethnic and cultural heritage.

JW: So, I’m a lad of African Caribbean heritage, white heritage, possibly Irish. I’m not sure. I was brought up in a white family and still see them as my family, for all of the tensions there. I still go home even though we are as different as the sun is to rain or something. That’s what I wanted to say, that’s me. With all the contradictions, insecurities and, indeed, benefits.

IK: . . . One of the important things about my identity; I was a Bradford boy. I was born and raised in the inner cities of Bradford. It has its own cultural way and things that . . . that space is always home even though actually it’s quite different to . . . the culture of that place is quite different to now, twenty years later, having not lived there for quite some time, but that’s where’s home. I am a Muslim; that’s central to my identity, but when I was growing up that was probably the furthest away. I wasn’t interested in it and, if anything, I was . . . militant against it, you know? I was kind of against the idea of religion, so yeah.

JW: See, I don't think those people involved, Black social workers, whatever, really got it. The idea that you never really felt Black, whatever that is, nor white. That you did not belong to either community, you were nowhere. They got you know Black communities, and indeed Asian, cos you know all that stuff, the cobbled on at the end, Black first whatever; all that stuff about race. And they're good people and we had some good times. But I don't think they got it, you know the African, Caribbean and Asian, who were in care or fostered or adopted and or in care, and we would meet in like youth centres in Toxteth, but I don't think they really got it, does that make sense? And I wanted to belong to it. I was one of the early members of it, but I don't think they got it, besides the race bit, besides the racism bit. Am I making sense?

IK: [ ... ] What about you? I've always thought the adoption experience, particularly long-term adoption into adulthood, that's not something I know much about. I can imagine there're still a lot of the same questions about identity, about who you are and about belonging. Firstly, does what I say resonate with your experience and your feelings or is it different?

JW: The irony is some people can see you from a mile off, they can see that you just, culturally ... you come from somewhere else, and are threatened by it. I don't know about you, but they're threatened by it [ ... ] in their view, middle class boy, got all this ... silver-tongued words.

JW: I remember hearing something about string theory [ ... ] about a space in between a space. There're lots of dimensions. I remember thinking that's ... that's how I feel.

IK: ... Being a care leaver is as much a part of your identity as anything else; your race, your sexuality, your religion. Anything about you that you think is central to you. Being a care leaver is a central part of who you are. I suppose that's the thing about these conversations, is that we're talking about that part of our identity; the fact that we're from ethnic minority communities and that's the interesting part. It's not intersectionality, but it almost is. That sense that different elements of ourselves, which are similar but equally different.

JW: ... sometimes I felt different that I was adopted, you with me? Like extra special. But other times I felt outside. It just felt like it was always an issue; not being adopted, but being the only Black kid around, mixed race kid around. So, there were a lot of fights. I used to fight a lot. Not through necessity, but you just had to fight. Someone called you the N word

IK: The institutions and everything around you are white.

IK: I mean, they [friends in Bradford] are primarily Pakistani, and I'm Indian and there's always been that difference. But I suppose in a sense, when I was growing up, my Indianness, there wasn't that separation there, because I didn't really have a strong, Indian, Gujerati foundational base. I didn't necessarily see myself as that. I just saw myself as Asian.

IK: One of my younger sister's school teachers really took a liking to her and as a family they kind of took us to places. We went camping and so we had this, these were all middle class, white people, very different to us, but we had these experiences, these middle-class experiences and surrounded by middle class people, but we came, very much, from this other world.

JW: I remember this lad in school. He was a fifth year and had appointed himself as the person who controlled the division and dispensing of food for our school dinner table. They used to have trays which weren't big enough to feed you, and there was chocolate cake,

and he said to me, little first year, you've got too much chocolate so you can't have any of that. This was in my first year. Then, when I was 16, there was this fella . . . and we were supposedly friends since third year and hung out together, and used to go to his house in the fifth year, and it soon became apparent that his dad was a racist and I was not welcome there. The N was used all the time, all the time.

JW: I remember reading something, a common thing for Black people, African, Caribbean, mixed heritage, where they wandered into the Black community and somebody spoken to them and they've been petrified and run away, and this woman, I forget her name, she must be about my age, and she did a thing about transracial adoption on TV. Did a programme, written some stuff as well, and she said she's never forgets the first time a Dread just spoke to her, yeah, and she thought 'why on earth are you speaking to me for? Why would a man with dreadlocks want to speak with me?' Same complexion, same whatever, and I could chime with that. I remember being in Bristol Bus Station, coming home from school, whatever, obviously played footy somewhere and this dark-skinned fella turned to me and, Jamaican guy, asked me whatever, obviously because I'm Black. But you got to ask me, and I was thinking what's going on here? Completely not identifying.

JW: When I first tipped up in Liverpool 8, Toxteth in old money, but its Liverpool 8, I naively wanted to be . . . I was more worried about my identity, I threw myself in all of the social and political organisations, which was extremely naïve, because Scousers are parochial as it is, let alone the whole Blackness thing. And so, at first, I was embraced and then, a year later, it became more difficult being accepted as part of the community. I was criticised for being middle class, which I suppose. relatively, compared to other people. We came from a quite humble, working-class family. White, frankly, and that evokes a lot of loneliness.

IK: I get that completely, that sense that you're . . . I mean we used to visit family, extended family when we were young, and I just felt completely out of place. These are people who are linked to my . . . and funnily enough I'm from Bradford originally, and I live in Blackburn now, and many of my extended family live in Blackburn. So, when we used to go on family trips we used to go to Blackburn and we used to go to meet people and I've always felt out of place, I've always felt different. Even though, we talked earlier, about the fact that I've got a beard, I look like the archetypal Muslim, an Asian man, so look like I fit in. But culturally there are a lot of cues that I miss. I'm not able to just be myself. I think there's some of that; I don't think I'm ever able to be myself. This is the odd thing, so like you were saying, I feel very comfortable in white company, not that I was, very differently from you, I wasn't brought up in a white community or a white household, but we had, when I was in the children's home, we had mainly white workers who worked with us and social workers, and I always felt comfortable at school, with the teachers and they were mainly white as well. So, I was more comfortable, but not completely because I am different and I think that retains to this day. And that sense that I don't know where I belong, sometimes.

IK: It [living in a children's home] was only for, I remember it being six months, maybe longer, I remember it being around six months . . . We were the only kids of colour in the home, but there was a group of us and the rest were white kids, and completely culturally different. So, straight away, we were trying to, we were almost balancing that and we were, as a family, and, I wonder about this, as a family we were I think at a stage where collectively we were rejecting our culture and therefore we wanted to be more like them, to kind of, not to fit in, but also to reject the fact that we'd come from such a terrible background. Our culture, our perception of our culture or our relationship with our culture was traumatic, really. We could associate some of the things with cultural ideas and cultural concepts in the same way now as when people talk about Pakistani men and grooming of white girls and that's

almost a cultural thing, perceived as and reported as, which is a big debate. But it's in that space where I think we were purposely rejecting our cultural experience, our cultural identity to try and be more ...

### 5.2. *Uncomfortable Relationships with the Truth: Am I Pretending?*

There are challenges for people with care experience in acknowledging the truth of their heritage as well as being able to accept and talk about that heritage and their circumstances of being in care. Being in denial of care experience can be rooted in being ashamed, but also from a reluctance of having to discuss personal experiences again and again. It also relates to the stigma of being in care and perceived negativities about it, as well as that stigma being mirrored in young people.

JW: ... When I did the adoption project, the Black families project down in Brixton, it evoked, uncovered, you know, stirred a lot of flames, ash, coal in me, because for years, publicly, here, friends may have known but I kind of kept it quiet other than with my wife, that I was adopted ... And one of the things that came up, because it's almost denial in lots of ways, for me. Without a doubt, it's denial. One of the things it threw up, when I did the thing, because it's actually paradoxical; The project was in Lambeth and on my passport, you know you look at something and think, who is this person; a picture of me and my birth place was Lambeth. And that's weird, does that make sense.

IK: ... so I went to have a chat with this councillor and he was really interested to have a ... you know 'this was my experience in care' and there were young people that attended the Corporate Parenting Board alongside professionals and councillors and he thought it would be interesting to have a 'this is my experience in care'. The first time I really spoke about being in care in any kind of public forum or even directly to somebody was in front of, like, 40 people. And it was only when I started, I realised this is a pretty bad decision. It was almost trying to share ... You know still, even to this day, 20 years later, it has an emotional impact and I have an emotional response to thinking about and talking about growing up in care, and the reasons why and the family situation ...

IK: ... one of the big things was making sure I'm not vulnerable. Really being careful of who I'm vulnerable with and my talking about and acknowledging my being in care ... it does make you vulnerable, unless you can talk about it confidently and you can articulate what that experience was and you can, if someone was to say something offensive, or belittling and you can deal with that. Maybe there's an age thing, in that it's harder when you're younger, maybe easier when you're older.

JW: Sort of early mid 90s I started to keep it secret [adoption]. Now why that is, I don't know. Now why, why did you keep it?

IK: [ ... ] So I remember when I was about 13, maybe 14, I was moved to a different foster home, near where many of my schoolmates lived and, suddenly, I started showing up at the bus stop, to get the same bus as them to school and they were kind of "oh, what are you doing here?" "Oh, I've moved local over here", you know. "Where?" And I'd tell them where the house was and they'd say, "oh there? Oh, there was a nice couple who used to live there and they used to foster." And then suddenly they kind of got what was going on. So, it became obvious. So, there were points in the journey; or when my social worker, he was 6ft tall, Black guy, big dreadlocks and everything. He was an amazing guy, really good social worker, and he dropped me off in his BMW. And he very purposely said I'm going to drive you into the school in a BMW, so that kids see you getting out of a BMW, kind of thing. But they knew that there were these other people in my life who were not the same as what they had. So, there was ... I knew that people knew and I knew that there was an

awareness of it. Not everyone, but some people, but I think there were two things. One was this idea of the emotion behind it, I never unpacked it, never been to therapy or something like that, so therefore because of that the talking about it, there was a lot of vulnerability about talking about my experiences in care and why I was in care. And then, as you said, as you become more professional and get into the world of work and this might be one of the things that's on my mind; that as, particularly as a minority, particularly as someone from inner city Bradford who straight away would be seen as, you know, there would be some pre judgement you know, prejudice, in terms of who I was and what I could do. To add the label of care leaver on to that, or child in care, that seems like it might be another thing to have to prove people wrong about.

IK: I do wonder how much of my life is keeping a mask on, and this is not only just with work colleagues or in those environments but at home ... How much of it is just putting a mask on to try to fit within a space.

IK: It's funny when I'm at the mosque and I'm surrounded by the Muslim community and they'll look at me and they'll assume. They'll look at me and assume I'm Indian or Pakistani heritage. They'll assume that I speak one of the languages; Urdu, Gujarati ... I don't. so as soon as that comes up, it requires an explanation and then I have to be careful. What do I say? Is this the space for me to be vulnerable and say, this is why ... ? There's always that, little hidden things like that, that will come about where you're not quite ... and the assumption will be that I went to madrasah from 5 years of age. I probably learned most of the Quran and went through that whole Islamic education; I didn't. I had none of that, or very little of that. So, therefore, there's an immediate difference, which then requires explanation, and what do I say.

JW: And is that difference mediated, manifested through hostility, suspicion or curiosity; how?

IK: Interesting. Sometimes, yes, quite often yes, particularly around the language, and also around the fact that I have a beard so I look like someone who should know the Quran very well and therefore am I pretending, you know, am I pretending to be faithful?

JW: Yeah, yeah. Imposter.

IK: So, I choose what I say and I give as much of the story as I feel is necessary or decide not to. It's just one of those things ... second generation (laugh); go with that narrative instead. And they're the spaces in between, that bit of you that you're hiding, or that you're not really, wholly there and with the dimensions. I think that's such a great metaphor ... And I'm sure we'll talk about this in time about what we share with our children and what we don't. And how we want them to understand 'the stuff', to empathise with 'the stuff', but we don't want them to experience 'the stuff'. You're negotiating at all spaces, at all times and I'm not sure how much of that is just the human experience, the human condition, and how much is about being particularly from a care background and being different, racially, culturally etc, from people around you.

### 5.3. Family Trauma and Moving on

Children with care experience are exposed to moments of trauma. This can often be punctuated by moving accommodation, whether the moving itself is traumatic or due to something that is. Trauma and being moved can be interlinked and can impact on responses to trauma in later life. However, within our stories, we noted moments which highlighted resilience. Being able to reframe the narrative of our lives in a positive way and keep ourselves stable. Movement also refers here to being able to move on from trauma, deal with it, be resilient and cope through life. Some of the following

contributions have been edited due to the sensitivity of the information. Many examples of trauma faced were excluded from the write up, again due to the sensitivity of the information.

IK: I think it was worse for the generations previous to us. I was probably of the generation where things were getting a lot better. Not perfect by any means, but better. But very brutalising. It's that sense of not belonging anywhere, of being moved rather than moving. It's always the being moved, the whole power of that situation, which one can't escape, and that's not to say that's not necessary, because clearly it is and was.

IK: I used to work around drug and alcohol services and one of the things I used to have conversations with people about was this idea of recovery . . . We know that people who have had addiction or had criminal records or a bunch of other things going on in their lives, and when they go for jobs that's held against them. And I said earlier about narratives and I think it was probably this point that I realised that I had to talk about my care experience differently, because when I talked to them about their experiences, we talked about how they talked about that in interviews and potential employers. They used to talk about it apologetically, from a point of inadequacy, and I said what if we switched that, what if we said it in a way that 'this was the world I came from, this is what I was involved in, and wow, look, I've been able to step away from that and get myself back on track. That has taken resilience. That has taken intelligence that has taken hard work. That has taken determination. That has taken all of those things to enable me to do that.' They really enjoyed that thinking about themselves like that, so we started talking about deconstructing the narrative and reconstructing it in a more positive way and that got me thinking then around my narrative about being in care of being a fault and a problem, and as you said deterministically inadequate, to something that was 'I was in care, and that's something I should be proud of'. And having seen that part of life that so few children and people do see and having been able to then, you know, take life by the horns basically and get on with living and being able to have my own family and making sure they didn't go through the same things, and not being limited by that factor, and talk about it in a celebratory way. There's definitely an age thing. When I was young, I could only see it as a problem and I was inadequate.

IK: . . . I think one of the things about being in care is that I think I'm quite skilled at that, that I liken it to how you can tell the difference between a boxer who's boxed since he was four years old and a boxer who started late in life. I was thinking recently about small boxers, like [Mike] Tyson or [Alexander] Povetkin. They know how to fight with the bigger guy, they've always fought with the bigger guy, so they know how to fight a bigger guy. They're used to that scenario; they duck and weave. Similarly, because we've always had to deal with all those things in our lives, we've always been able to, kids in care, we've had that all along, therefore it's something we're quite skilled at. I think, myself, I'm able to process that, to find that time to just think through things, and either bury it, which is probably not the best thing, or deal with it in a more productive way. But whatever it takes to kind of move forward and carry on in the game.

#### 5.4. Hostile Racism

Like many people of colour, the discussions showed examples of aggressive and overt racism outside of the home.

JW: Honest to god, the racism at university, horrible, horrible, and he [friend] used to talk . . . , his Ma worked in sewing in the mill and I forget what his dad did, but they'd have excrement through the door, bricks through the window . . .

IK: I suppose there are generational differences. When I was growing up, I was catching the back end of the NF. I remember a white guy setting his dog loose to chase me and erm,

chase me home and I was terrified, and I was probably only, this was when I was living with my mum, so I was definitely under eight, probably about five or six or something, and I remember this image, I didn't realise then what it was or understand that this was clearly someone of that persuasion who was just doing it to terrify a kid because of his race. Compared to you guys, compared to that level of racism, because my brothers of a similar age to you and he tells me how hard it was growing up in Bradford in the 70s.

JW: I kid you not Ismail, from the moment I got there I had to be involved in, not as in fight to the death scraps, but showing my physical prowess all the time because I used to be quite wiry, because I was called names all the time. So there was a grassy dell, glen, and I was wrestling and fighting, Clevedon cubs, 6 or 7 a side. I kid you not, the monkey noises were so bad so this must have been 1974, it was so bad they had to stop the game. So, imagine the unenlightened scout leaders had to stop the game to tell the kids to stop and it must have got to me because we lost the match.

### 5.5. Loneliness and Belonging

With identities being questioned and explored and in the places of difference, there are periods where people with a background in care experience a lack of belonging and feelings of loneliness—the notion of where we belong, and with whom, alongside the need to retract ourselves from social situations to not become vulnerable. Having that care background can lead to loneliness even when you are with others.

IK: I think there's parts of me that feel belonging at times. But there is always in most instances, whether its most relationships I have, whether its immediate family, to in terms of my personal relationships, professional relationships, even my spiritual relationships in terms of with people through my faith that I come across. I think there's a sense of I know that they would never truly understand my experience and I can never really truly understand their experience as well. But there's something of me that they can never really understand or appreciate, and I talk about it with them but I think to some extent no, to a large extent no, in a lot of cases, I do feel different in a lot of instances.

IK: Last time, we started talking about a sense of loneliness and connection, or lack of connection sometimes, erm, and that's something I empathise with, something I very much recognise, and sometimes I wonder whether it's from this sense that I would say, particularly in my youth, it was punctuated with losing people . . . And so that sense of losing people was a regular occurrence and it felt like the theme of my childhood and developmental years and so I wonder sometimes as well if you enforce that, encourage myself to be lonely to not have those relationships to go through the loss but I'm not sure. But also, I do know that there's the point at which I need to retract myself from the living and just be alone and spend time on my own. I was listening to Kris Akabusi and he was saying something similar for someone who's from a care background that although he's this vibrant, seemingly extraverted character, he needs that time, he needs to, kind of, remove himself from those social situations at times and just go into himself. So, I don't know if it is symptomatic of care leavers, it's definitely something that clicked with me.

JW: And that is a loneliness really, because you're not the same, they don't see you, you/I as the same. So, we may feel we're all buddies together, indeed sitting in a pub or whatever the social setting, we're all together, but actually not, because you look profoundly different.

IK: I have thought about moving out to different foster homes and the children's homes and thinking just being a different person to fit and then the environments like going to school, just being a different person to fit, to move forward and make the best of that situation.

You almost feel the need to retract yourself from that and just not have to be anything really. Maybe that's where that sense of loneliness, or sense of purposeful isolation comes from.

JW: I like the idea of a mask, I really do. Its multi-identities, isn't it? And yet they're all false, and you have all the social etiquette, enough cultural etiquette that you've learnt, skills one's learned, that is considered but not natural. Yeah.

IK: Hugely, yeah, you've learned the rules of the game and apply them when you need to.

JW: ... They talk about once you've been in care, or adopted, it's a lifelong journey, because that's what it is, isn't it? It's a lifelong journey. It frames everything you feel, sense, touch, experience. And you're half-way through your journey, and I'm probably two thirds of the way through my journey, if that makes sense, and you think [ ... ] in terms of loneliness, met a lot of people, made a lot of noise, got a lot of 'friends', in inverted commas.

### 5.6. *Same but Different*

We have very different biographies and experiences, but there were many points at which there was a mutual understanding of the situations, a shared emotional response and commonality in how this impacts on us now. There was also a sense that some of the things we shared had commonality with wider experiences of trauma.

JW: There's been stuff I've done around the criminal justice system. They've either been adopted or in care, or both, you with me, and have struggled with a difficult life. And you think, what, that's me, you're me. Sivanandan said something, I used it in an article because I was really struck by it. He was talking about refugees and asylum seekers and those coming from Syria and from, you know, the sub-continent, from Pakistan and Afghanistan. I then put it back to people in care, people in care or adopted. You are them and they are you. They are you; I am you; you are me. You know, just from my generation, 50 years ago people coming over, Windrush, and then 10–20 years later those from the sub-continent started to come, but the mosaic, or the spin of fate of being in foster care, or adopted, and then you see people incarcerated. I am them, you are me. You see what I'm saying. It brings a level of humility.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. *Colour in Whiteness*

The narratives of Ismail and John also span a period of forty years and provide testimony to the racism and isolation over time, space and different communities of both north and south of England. For Ismail, this talked to a childhood in care in Bradford, and John one of adoption near to Bristol. Although, the time and context of their difficult experiences were very different, they had a similarity that resonated with each other as is often the case with people of colour (Wainwright and Mckeown 2019). For both of our experiences, although very different at times, there has seemed to be an overwhelming sense of whiteness. The whiteness of the cultural majority that we see, feel and experience all around us has very much shaped our lives (Frankenberg 1993). For Ismail, this was not as pronounced. Primarily having Asian carers and growing up in Asian communities, the whiteness came through the institutions that supported him. This has involved being moved, 'saved' and educated by white people, sometimes with siblings and sometimes not. Services and carers made efforts to allow him to understand his cultural heritage but even this was an experience of ethnic and cultural awkwardness (Twine and Gallagher 2008). To Ismail, this was a world experience that racialized him and his siblings, and slowly, bit by bit, imbued in a them a culture that was *normal* to being white, but alien to being Indian and Muslim. Whiteness, for Ismail, provided a form of care, some protection at times, while other times not, but changing how he felt and saw himself. It was at times helpful and sometimes hostile. A slow-seeping, undermining of his self, his sense of being, his identity; not in any deliberate

way to remove his identity, his Indianness, his lack of understanding or knowledge of his faith, language and culture, but just by surrounding him with everything that was ‘white’ because that is what white does (Sissay 2012; Samuels 2009). It becomes the norm. Except it is not. There is a convenient amnesia about Empire, colonialism, the exploitation of Ismail’s parents, grandparents and forebears. The denigration of everything that is from the Indian subcontinent and Asia that manifested itself by placing those of colour as being of less worth and significance. John, too, was brought up in a family, in a town, in a country where whiteness was normal, where Black people were either figures of fun to be laughed at, as long as they laughed at themselves or were in denial; where the *Black and White Minstrels Show* and *Love Thy Neighbour* were regular television fare. Entertainment to laugh at Black people, those of colour, so that whiteness was in no doubt that it was better, superior, normal. Whiteness too surrounded him within his adoptive family, whilst not hostile—indeed the opposite, being very loving. Outside of this, it was overwhelmingly hostile—racist—where derogatory language toward people of colour was the parlance of the day. The everyday, matter-of-fact way Black people, those of colour, were perceived and treated in the 1970s and 1980s was not helped by the very unfunny ‘cultural’ contributions from TV shows. Whiteness for John, outside of the immediate adoptive home, was racism, belittling, othering—exhausting racism that manifested in derogatory name calling on an everyday basis. In school, playing football, out and about with his ‘mates’, whiteness was everything and being on the receiving end of name calling, racialising and Othering what was not white was just a way of life for him. These experiences of course could be identified by anyone from wider Black and Asian communities who had been trying to settle in cities all over the UK. However, it was the isolation, the loneliness of being Black, of being in a boat of colour buffeted around in a metaphorical sea of whiteness that affected him then, as it does today. Same experience, different settings. Childhood to adulthood. School playground to ‘professional’ playground. White (Twine 1999).

However, the whiteness that we both experienced in our respective care and adoptive experiences, inadvertently managed to have the insidious effect of confusing, muddling and undermining our identities and sense of self. Of being Asian (Indian and Muslim), being Black (of dual heritage), but feeling, in many emotional and cultural ways, white. Of looking one way to where our own people had cultural and religious homes, and yet drawn the other way to that of being in the everywhere majority, at least in the society around us. The white majority. The same majority that on an everyday basis re-affirmed a hegemonic, white world that suggested Asian people and Black people, people of colour, were of less worth, of little value, of no significance. The whiteness that we experienced as children in foster and adoptive homes was that of creating a tension, a contradiction, a lifelong ambivalence and ambiguity about our identities (Twine and Gallagher 2008). An ambiguity that haunts our adult lives today.

## 6.2. Spaces Inside Spaces

It is this feeling of ambivalence, ambiguity and uncertainty that in different ways has been shaped by the spaces that we have lived in as children and adults. There are the physical spaces that Ismail (and his siblings) had to inhabit—sometimes in foster homes, other times children homes and back at ‘home’ with some of his family. Yet, the spaces that he found himself in, like all of us, had a profound effect on shaping his psychosocial feelings of dissonance between himself and others. In many ways, John can identify with those same spaces, or spacelessness. When first stumbling across string theory, where some scientists suggested that it is possible for different people to occupy the same space in a different time, and/or the same people experiencing the same space at the same time, but experiencing it differently, the idea chimed with our experiences of being in care, whether fostered, adopted or in residential care, creating this metaphor of being in between spaces—there but not there.

The experience of living in a different space, or the same space at the same time, was and is one of not belonging, of being detached, of being there in the moment, but being different and disengaged. For Ismail, it was the anxiety of wondering where he would be living, of observing, of being done to and being no part of decision making—the scene in the play continues all around him but he does not

feel he is in it, that he is participating. Likewise, John was in an adoptive home, where he experienced everything as did the rest of his adoptive family, but always felt a sense of detachedness, of difference. Yet, the idea of string theory, of being in the space, but not at the same time, of seeing all that is going on around, is that of feeling other worldly—not being from or part of the experience that is all around you and that everyone else seems to be having.

Both of us, through our similar but different childhoods, have a sense of being in a space within a space. Being there, but not being there—having been in the moment, yet somehow not. It is, quite simply, a feeling of loneliness, of not belonging, of never belonging—the mirror image distorted. This is the space within the space. The never belonging space.

### 6.3. *We Are Them*

As an adult who has been in care, Ismail reflects on his childhood and remembers the trauma of uncertainty, the threat of emotional pain, of never belonging. He sees the similarity of those he has worked with who have recovered from alcohol and substance misuse and have the resilience to rebuild their lives. Ismail identifies with their resilience and capacity to focus on the future and the need for this to be recognised, acknowledged and celebrated. This is talking to the sense of commonality in struggles within differences of experience. John reflects on the sense of loneliness in childhood, of being Black and not belonging and the connection to those who have very different and often more traumatic experiences.

Sivanandan (1982, 1991, 2002) talked of people of colour who have established themselves in well-paid jobs as ‘professionals’. He reminds us, ‘*They are Us, We are They*’. In this context, he is talking about us being direct beneficiaries of the struggles that our parents and grandparents made to migrate to the UK from the Caribbean, from Asia, particularly the post-partition subcontinent; from the East, and subsequently, the whole of, Africa., He talks of a postcolonial experience that our forebears had to endure to establish much better lives for us all as Black and Asian professionals and within the wider Black or Asian community, who had to, as Hall puts it, ‘draw a line in the sand and out stare, repel and fight the challenge of a hostile and racist, white community (BBC 2003).

We see in our uncertainty, ambiguity, experience of hostility and lack of belonging, the commonality with other peoples’ struggles—other people who are othered. For us, as adults of colour who have been in different kinds of alternative care, We are Them. We are those who struggle to escape terror, trauma and death as refugees, those who pay smugglers, alias gangsters, to travel in the back of lorries, with little air to breath, and no hope to survive to find a sense of place. We are those who never belong.

Closer to home, we are those in prison, those suffering mental distress, those who are homeless and/or unemployed, and those who like Us were in care, fostered or adopted. We are lucky, in many ways, because we are here to narrate Our story. We would though but for a twist of fate be in the same place as them. This is the story of people of colour. This is the experience of adults who have been in foster, adoptive and residential care. This lack of belongingness, this ‘other’ space, and this liminal reality that gives rise to this uncertainty. We cannot claim to have suffered the same as them, but we know some small thing of which they speak. They are Us. We are Them.

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