

Original research article

THE ROMANI ETHNICITY IN FOSTER CARE

Marek Medeiros ¹, Hana Hejná ², Alena Hricová ^{2 *}

¹ *Alternative Family Care Center, Association, Prague, Czech Republic*

² *Prague College of Psychosocial Studies, Prague, Czech Republic*

Abstract

Goals: This research examines how foreign foster parents perceive the ethnicity of children of Romani origin that they adopt, and how this influences their family and community relationships. It focuses on transracial adoption, the child's cultural identity, and inclusion within foster care. Particular attention is paid to how parents have implemented strategies for integrating the child into the new family and how they deal with possible prejudices from the surrounding environment.

Methods: The research is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with five foreign surrogate parents living in the Czech Republic. The respondents represent diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, providing deeper insight into different approaches to transracial adoption and the child's integration into both the family and broader society. The analysis focused on the individual experiences of the parents and their subjective perception of the ethnicity of the adopted children.

Results: We found that foster parents emphasise supporting the child's cultural identity and try to integrate this into family life. Some deliberately seek contact with the Roma community, while others face challenges associated with prejudice in their environment. Although their approach to adopting a child of another ethnic origin is conscious and responsible, concerns about discrimination and social stigma persist. We also noted differences in parents' strategies for raising children with Roma roots, especially when maintaining their contact with the culture.

Keywords: *Cultural competence; Cultural identity; Ethnic prejudice; Foster care; Intercountry adoption; Qualitative research; Romani children, Social work; Thematic analysis; Transracial adoption*

INTRODUCTION

Foster care (FC) is a significant area of social work and an essential element of the socio-legal protection of children. Its main goal is to enable children to grow up in a family environment that best meets their needs and interests. Among the factors influencing the process of placing children in FRC is their ethnic origin. Children from minority ethnic groups, especially Roma children, often face specific challenges and obstacles that stem from historical and current prejudices and discrimination. These facts influence the decisions of social workers and applicants for foster care,

who may have different attitudes towards accepting a child of a different ethnicity.

Using qualitative research and thematic analysis, this article focuses on the perceptions and experiences of foreign foster parents with the Roma ethnicity of the children they are applying for. The study aims to determine how this affects their family life and relationships in the broader community. The main research question is: How do foreign foster parents perceive the ethnic origin of the children they want to take into care? We focus on how they reflect ethnicity and how it affects their interpersonal relationships within the family circle and the broader social context.

Theoretical basis

Foster care (FC) provides a home for children who cannot be raised by their biological parents, placing them in the care of another family or individual. Its main goal is to provide the child with a stable and loving environment that is as close as possible to life in a regular family (Bubleová et al., 2018). Children grow up in FC due to the inability, unwillingness, or impossibility of their biological parents to care for them. The appropriate form of FC is chosen depending on the child's needs and situation, and can be temporary or permanent (Novotný et al., 2017).

According to the current legislation, FC always takes precedence over institutional care. The report on care status for children at risk in the Czech Republic (J&T Foundation, 2023) states that approximately 23,800 children grow up in state-funded FC. If children placed in the care of another person not funded by the state are included in this statistic, the total number of children in regulated care exceeds 28,300, representing more than 1.4% of the child population.

The possibility of mediation of adoption or foster care does not apply only to citizens of the Czech Republic. It is also accessible to foreigners who have permanent residence in the Czech Republic or meet the conditions set by special legal regulations or the Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council of the EU (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). If a suitable foster family cannot be found for a child in their home country, international adoption (one of the forms of FC) is offered as a solution. This process is governed by the Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Intercountry Adoption, adopted by the Hague Conference on Private International Law in 1993. The Czech Republic ratified this convention in 2000 and, in conjunction with the Act on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Intercountry Adoption, it allows the adoption of children abroad and from abroad (Bubleová et al., 2018).

The Hague Convention defines a clear framework for intercountry adoption, sets out the responsibilities and powers of the institutions involved, guarantees children the right to preferential adoption in their home country, and protects the anonymity of biological parents. It also strictly prohibits any financial benefit from adoptions. In addition, it obliges

signatory states to designate a single central authority responsible for managing intercountry adoptions. In the Czech Republic, this role is fulfilled by the Office for the International Protection of Children (UMPOD), which keeps records of applicants for the adoption of children from abroad and children for whom it was not possible to find suitable adoptive parents in the Czech Republic (Bubleová et al., 2018). The powers of the UMPOD are detailed in Section 35 of the Act on the Protection of Children (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.).

Between 2019 and 2023, 94 international adoptions were arranged from the Czech Republic to other countries. As Kučerová (2015) points out, international adoptions of Czech children almost exclusively concern children of Romani origin. Cantwell (2014) emphasises that the ethnic and racial origin of the child is an important aspect that should be considered during adoption. While most discussions focus on domestic adoptions, "transracial" adoption is more complex because it is related to the separation of the child from their cultural background. However, according to Cantwell (2014), a blanket ban on international transracial adoptions is not justified, and each adoption should be assessed individually, considering the specific circumstances.

Vančáková (2011) points out determining the ethnicity of children in foster care, especially the question of who is authorised to determine a child's ethnicity and how precisely the boundaries between individual ethnicities can be defined. In social work, the term "half-origin" is often encountered, and it is used in cases where a child has one parent from the majority ethnic group and the other from the minority ethnic group. Most often, these are situations where the child's father is unknown and is not listed on the birth certificate, which makes their ethnic origin undetermined. If, in such cases, the child's mother is a member of a minority ethnic group, workers refer to the child as, for example, "half-Romani". Estimates indicate that, among children waiting for a foster family for more than three months, approximately two-thirds are children of Romani origin.

The Czech Republic's commitment to supporting the development of children's ethnic awareness is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In article 20, this stipulates that when providing FC, "the desirable

continuity in the child's upbringing and their ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background shall be considered" (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016, p. 7). Considering the child's interests means that the child should be allowed to maintain contact with the culture of their country of origin, including the language, and have access to information about their biological family following applicable legal and professional standards. Vančáková and Gelbart (2022) point out that a child from a different ethnic background who grows up in a Czech foster family from the majority society finds themselves between two worlds – the culture of their foster parents and their original ethnic identity. While the adoptive family passes on its values, the child also encounters the prejudices and attitudes of the majority towards minorities. Surrogate parents are faced with the challenging task of helping the child to create a positive identity, which can be particularly difficult if the child has experienced the loss of biological parents, emotional deprivation, or inappropriate care in the past. According to Barvíková and Paloncyová (2022), in 2020, children of Romani origin made up approximately two-fifths of all children registered by regional authorities who were waiting for the mediation of the FC. Vančáková (2011) then points out that the Czech Republic, unlike many other European countries, has long lived in relative cultural isolation with limited contacts with diverse ethnicities. At the turn of the millennium, less than 10% of adoptive parents were willing to adopt a child of a minority ethnic group, which has also been confirmed by research by Barvíková and Paloncyová (2022).

Šanderová (2011) identified certain tendencies in adopters' preferences for children with different appearances. The most significant interest is in white children, and children of black origin or children with physical disabilities are in second place. While Romani children are often stigmatised, black children are paradoxically the second most preferred group. According to the author, adopting a Romani child can lead to a decrease in the social status of the family, while adopting a black child can, on the contrary, increase it – since adopters are perceived by society as "saviours". Romani children are generally evaluated the most negatively, which is based on the persistent belief in innate characteris-

tics that are not in line with the values of the majority society. Applicants for FC often have stereotypical ideas about Romani children – they perceive them as temperamental, musically and physically talented, but difficult to motivate. According to Vančáková (2011), differences in the children's behaviour in FC are not primarily related to their ethnic origin but to the conditions in which they grew up and the course of the pregnancy. Surrogate families often face adverse reactions from their environment, which can influence their decision to adopt a child from a minority ethnic group. Another concern of applicants is the possibility that the adopted child will establish contact with the original family and take over their lifestyle, which can be perceived as problematic (Vančáková, 2011). The author also mentions inappropriate motivations for adopting a child of another race, culture, or ethnic group. Such cases occur when applicants "settle" for a child of another ethnic origin because they would have to wait too long for a preferred child from the majority society.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We used a qualitative research strategy that aims to understand how people in a specific context and situation interpret the events they experience; including their reactions and behaviour, and how they structure their daily activities and interactions (Hendl, 2023). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data obtained, allowing for detailed examination and interpretation of the key meanings and themes for the research participants. Identifying and analysing thematic categories contributes to a deeper understanding of their attitudes, experiences, and opinions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The research examined five semi-structured interviews with respondents who have permanent residence in the Czech Republic but come from different countries. The research sample included participants from India, Great Britain, Italy, and the USA who had adopted a child in the Czech Republic. Two women and three men participated in the research. The overview of the experiences of foster parents of adopted children was of a mapping nature. The results were initially presented in the form of case studies. Still, for the purposes of this article, a summary analy-

sis of the main similarities in the participants' individual experiences was prepared. All participants signed informed consent, and their anonymity was maintained. Data collection took place in July 2024. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti software.

RESULTS

Identity colours as a consideration factor

Although two participants were initially surprised to be asked to specify the preferred ethnicity of the child (as such a question would be considered racist in their home country), they eventually accepted it as part of the process. One of them expressed his surprise by saying: *"I was surprised that it was even a question because I think that when I look at it purely from a British perspective, I know that this question is not there and must not be there."* On the other hand, another participant, Emma, showed understanding for those who do not feel comfortable raising a child from a different ethnic background – as according to her such a situation requires certain personality traits and the ability to cope with specific challenges. Meera, an Indian participant, entered the process with the belief that the ethnicity of the child would play no role for her. However, she later adjusted her preference and explicitly wanted a child of Romani origin. She justified her decision by saying that the physical resemblance between her and the child could facilitate the formation of an emotional bond while minimising the attention of others: *"I thought it would be an advantage for me and the child... because they are more or less a little dark-skinned."*

Multiculturalism unites

All the research participants have personal experience of living in different cultural and ethnic environments, which is evidenced by the fact that they chose to live in the Czech Republic. This long-term contact with different cultures apparently influenced their openness to adopt a child of another ethnicity. Emma reflects that the more she travelled and got to know different parts of the world, the more she began to notice similarities between people across cultures: *"You know, for me, when you see so many different cultures, you start*

to realise that we are all the same." John attributes his openness to other ethnicities to his family background and friendships with people from different countries. Mike had already encountered ethnic and cultural diversity in his family in the United States. Francesco and Meera agree that the more often a person is exposed to contact with different cultures, the more benefits it brings and enriches one's view of the world.

Concerns about prejudice and discrimination

All participants expressed concern about the discrimination their child might face in Czech society. They emphasised prejudice against the Romani ethnic group. These concerns indicate their awareness of social inequalities in the Czech Republic and the fact that adopting a child of a different ethnic origin was a deliberate decision for them.

Meera hoped that her daughter would avoid discrimination if the public perceived her as Indian, just like she did: *"Well, the concern is that she would be discriminated against in one way or another, but the obvious advantage is that she has Indian parents and could pass herself off as Indian, so she wouldn't have to be discriminated against, especially if she lives in Prague."* Emma, who has personal experience of living in the Romani community, was aware of prejudice and discrimination against Romani even before becoming the mother of a Romani daughter. Thanks to this experience, she already understood how Romani were perceived in Czech society and the impact that prejudice has on their lives. John expressed concerns about his ability to support his child in discriminatory situations; as a "white man" he cannot fully understand what his child might be going through. Francesco, on the other hand, worried about whether he would have the strength to protect a child of another ethnicity – especially a child of Romani origin – from potential discrimination. Mike pointed out the increased need for child protection and the importance of monitoring whether people in different institutions treated her fairly: *"If she goes to the city hall to register something, will they treat her differently? Those are things that I would probably want to be around for, at least in the first few meetings, just to observe whether they are treating her fairly or not."*

A responsible approach to building a child's identity

All participants repeatedly mentioned an active approach to building their child's identity, even though they were not directly asked about this topic. Adoptive parents approach their role with a high degree of responsibility and strive to make their child feel loved and entirely accepted by the family. Meera spoke about trying to introduce her daughter to her Romani origins and culture, and she considers her first step to obtaining sufficient information that she could pass on to her. Emma is looking forward to when her daughter grows up, when they will discover the richness of Romani culture together – because her previous experiences with the Romani community are mainly associated with its problematic side. John finds the search for his son's roots difficult because the child was taken into care from a baby box, and neither he nor his wife have any information about his biological parents. Nevertheless, it was crucial for him that the entire family unconditionally accepted his son as a fully-fledged member of the family, which, according to him, was successfully fulfilled. Francesco and his wife are foster parents, which allows them to learn about their daughter's biological family and maintain contact with them. They believe this relationship will benefit their daughter and hope her biological relatives will continue to be a part of her life. Mike repeatedly emphasised his commitment to standing by his daughter as a protector and supporter. His goal is to help her overcome obstacles and reach her full potential.

Czech system of preparing future surrogate parents

Most participants perceived the training and preparatory courses as beneficial, especially concerning setting realistic expectations regarding adoption. During the preparation, Meera learned that most Czech applicants refuse to adopt a Romani child, which led her to adjust her preference and make a deliberate decision to adopt a child of Romani origin. On the other hand, she felt that she had learned little about the possible challenges she might face as a parent of a child of a different ethnic origin during the courses and, therefore, had to find out more information on her own. Emma rated the adoption process as rather stressful

and did not like being constantly asked if she was sure about her decision. She wished the assessment phase had been as quick as possible. She also believes that adoptive parents are generally better educated than those with biological children. John remembered the practical advice from the preparatory courses: being open to adopting a child of any ethnicity can speed up the adoption process. On the contrary, he considered some areas to be insufficiently developed, such as specific ways to tell a child their own story. Francesco focused on the benefits of the foster care preparatory courses. Thanks to these, he developed a realistic idea of the everyday aspects of foster care and understood the importance of maintaining the child's ties with their biological family. Mike assessed the preparation as very useful, as they provided him with valuable information about the key stages of child development, including the specifics associated with raising a Romani child.

DISCUSSION

Based on the main research question, it can be stated that foreign foster parents approach the ethnicity of the children they look after with a high degree of responsibility and sensitivity. The research results showed that they emphasise supporting the child's identity and actively convey information about their cultural and ethnic background. For example, a study by Lee (2003) indicates that supporting cultural identity in adopted children is crucial for their overall development. Similarly, research by Baden et al. (2012) points out that ignoring a child's ethnic background can lead to identity problems in adulthood. This approach corresponds to the conclusions of the professional literature, which emphasises the importance of a positive identity and self-esteem for the child's psychological and emotional development, which is also confirmed by Ben-Zion (2014) and Vančáková and Gelbart (2022). Parents try to incorporate elements of the child's cultural traditions into family life, strengthening their sense of belonging and self-esteem – key factors for successful integration into a new family.

One of the key findings of the research is that the child's ethnic origin plays a vital role in the initial phase of applying for FC. The

results showed that the participants were already aware of the prejudice and discrimination the child might encounter in Czech society at this stage. This led to thoroughly considering their ability and readiness to provide appropriate care. These findings correspond with the findings of Cantwell (2014), who deals with the complexity of transracial adoption, as well as with the findings of Sweeney et al. (2018), who emphasises that potential adoptive parents often consider social acceptance and possible prejudice against a child of a different ethnic origin. In our research, adoptive parents considered ethnic identity crucial. Their concerns were primarily related to potential forms of discrimination, especially against the Romani ethnic group, as also stated by Kučerová (2015). This phenomenon is firmly rooted in the Czech environment, with Barvíková and Paloncyová (2022) stating that Romani children make up a significant proportion of children in FC. Similarly, Henry and Pollack (2009) emphasise the need to carefully consider the parents' abilities and resources before adoption, which also proved relevant in our research.

Overall, the results of this study confirm and extend the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction. They highlight the need for a sensitive and informed approach to ethnicity within FC, support the importance of inclusive strategies, and point to cultural competence and a coordinated support network for adoptive parents. Further research and practice should focus on strengthening these aspects to create an inclusive, fair, and effective FC system for all children regardless of their ethnic background. Research by Barn (2013) highlights the importance of cultural competence for social workers when working with adoptive families. A study by Quiroz (2007) suggests that promoting inclusive strategies can better integrate adopted children into society. Practical recommendations for the future include increased support

and preparation for foster parents and social workers, a greater emphasis on cultural competence and inclusion within FC, and the creation of strong support communities that can offer practical help and share experiences. In this way, the goal of providing children with a safe, loving, and inclusive environment, which is the basis for their healthy and complete development, can be achieved.

CONCLUSION

The analysis revealed that adopting a child from an ethnic minority brought up reflections on deep-rooted social prejudices, the personal resilience of the foster parents, and the importance of a support network. Each participant approached the FC mediation process with a unique personal experience, cultural understanding, and awareness of the issues they might face. Their narratives show that while initial considerations of ethnicity may raise significant concerns, the experience often highlighted the universal aspects of parenting – love, protection, and the desire to provide a stable and accepting environment. Although initial concerns about adopting a child of another ethnicity were justified, they were often alleviated by positive experiences and strengthened support networks of the families. The varying responses of the social and professional environment also highlighted the different levels of social integration and acceptance of ethnically diverse families. The findings further highlight the importance of individual preparation, preparatory courses, and community support in creating a healthy environment for the adoption of a child, especially if it is a child of a different ethnicity.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

REFERENCES

1. Act No. 359/1999 Coll., o sociálně-právní ochraně dětí. In: Sbírka zákonů České republiky, částka 111/1999.
2. Baden AL, Treweeke LM, Ahluwalia MK (2012). Reclaiming culture: Reculturation of transracial and international adoptees. *J Couns Dev* 90(4): 387–399. DOI: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.2012.00049.x.

3. Barn R (2013). 'Doing the right thing': Transracial adoption in the USA. *Ethn Racial Stud* 36(8): 1273–1291. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2013.770538.
4. Barvíková J, Palonciová J (2022). Zprostředkování náhradní rodinné péče u dětí romského etnika. Praha: Výzkumný ústav práce a sociálních věcí, 102 p.
5. Ben-Zion S (2014). Constructing Transnational and transracial identity: Adoption and belonging in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 281 p.
6. Braun V, Clarke, V (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol* 3(2): 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp0630a.
7. Bubleová V, Vávrová A, Vyskočil F, Pokorná P, Landová T, Fišerová V (2018). Základní informace o osvojení (adopci). 4th ed. Praha: Středisko náhradní rodinné péče, 60 p.
8. Cantwell N (2014). The Best Interests of the Child in Intercountry Adoption. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research, 87 p.
9. Hendl J (2023). Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. 5th rev. ed. Praha: Portál, 496 p.
10. Henry MJ, Pollack D (2009). Adoption in the United States: A Reference for Families, Professionals, and Students. Chicago: Lyceum Books, Inc., 256 p.
11. J&T Foundation (2023). Zpráva o stavu péče o ohrožené děti v ČR v roce 2023. [online] [cit. 2024-10-16]. Available from: https://assets-global.website-files.com/60116766a467a421c24db1fc/6475e2248fb600ae1ec41a04_II_material_zprava_pece_ohrozene_deti2023.pdf
12. Kučerová Z (2015). Sociální konstrukce mezinárodní adopce romských dětí z České republiky do zahraničí. Bakalářská práce. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, katedra sociální politiky a sociální práce [online] [cit. 2024-10-16]. Available from: https://is.muni.cz/th/s4d4n/Zita_Kucerova_bakalarska_prace.pdf
13. Lee RM (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: History, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. *Couns Psychol* 31(6): 711–744. DOI: 10.1177/0011000003258087.
14. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2016). Úmluva o právech dítěte a související dokumenty, 156 p. [online] [cit. 2024-10-16]. Available from: <https://vlada.gov.cz/assets/ppov/rlp/vybory/pro-prava-ditete/Preklady-dokumentu-OSN.pdf>
15. Novotný P, Ivičičová J, Syrůčková I, Vondráčková P (2017). Nový občanský zákoník – Rodinné právo. (2nd updated ed.) Praha: Grada Publishing, 208 p.
16. Quiroz PA (2007). Adoption in a color-blind society. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 144 p.
17. Šanderová P (2011). Tělesnost jako významný faktor procesu adopce: kulturně antropologický problém. Praha: SLON, 162 p.
18. Sweeney E, Grant, DB, Mangan DJ (2018). Strategic adoption of logistics and supply chain management. *Int J Oper Prod Manag* 38(3): 852–873. DOI: 10.1108/IJOPM-05-2016-0258.
19. Vančáková M (2011). Dítě jiného etnika v náhradní rodinné péči. Praha: Středisko náhradní rodinné péče, 36 p.
20. Vančáková M, Gelbart P (2022). Amaro drom – metodika projektu. Praha: Centrum pěstounských rodin, 65 p.

* **Corresponding author:** Alena Hricová, Prague College of Psychosocial Studies, s.r.o., Hekrova 805, 149 00 Prague 11, Czech Republic; e-mail: ali.kajanova@email.cz
<http://doi.org/10.32725/jnss.2025.001>

Submitted: 2025-02-06 • Accepted: 2025-03-28 • Prepublished online: 2025-03-31

J Nurs Soc Stud Public Health Rehabil 16/1–2: 31–37 • EISSN 1804-7181 • ISSN 1804-1868

© 2025; The Authors. Published by University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Czech Republic and International Society of Applied Preventive Medicine, Vienna, Austria
This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.