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REFEREED ARTICLE

## Navigating Mixedness: The Information Behaviours and Experiences of Biracial Youth in Australia

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### Abstract

In the current racial climate of Australia, biracial Australians are left to choose between two or more identities on how to behave in attempts to fit binary racial groups and expectations. In an effort to understand the lived experience of biracial youth in Australia, this paper presents data from interviews with Asian biracial youth from across Sydney, all analysed through the lens of information behaviour theories, with the premise that information about themselves and their culture plays a key role in identity formation. The interviews explored how this group has confronted race while developing their own identities during adolescence, as well as how their understanding of being “mixed” has developed over time. In exploring their complicated racial identity, I draw on auto-ethnographic accounts from my own racialised experiences as a biracial youth to address emergent themes from my findings. I found that participant stories of isolation, belonging, and confusion towards their racial mixedness often led to information avoidance and also “satisficing” in school, family and social life. Such practices revealed how participants internalised their inherited intersection of racial persecution and privilege; their identity was in a continuous state of reconstruction in their struggle to find balance between the external validation of others and their driving agency to be themselves.

### Keywords

**Racial Identity; Mixed Race; Information Behaviours; Autoethnography**

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## **Introduction**

In a world of blending faces, the biracial adolescent is overloaded with culturally contextualised information from more than one world. Racial identity refers to a sense of belonging to a collective racial group, based on the perception of shared racial heritage (Helms in, Tatum, 1992, p. 9), but split between the two cultures of their parents, how does a person of mixed race heritage decide on their own hyphenated racial identity?

For the first time in Australia's history, the 2016 Census revealed that the country is home to more Asian migrants than those from Europe. China, India and the Philippines top the list of countries of birth for 5.1% of Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b). Intermarriages between White 'Anglo-Celtic/European' (Perkins, 2004, p.181) Australians and these migrants have produced children of mixed race, who are forced to situate themselves in the diasporic lifestyles of their migrant parent, whilst trying to comfortably maintain an Australian identity. As their families are an epicentre of clashing information about culture, food and language, this becomes even more difficult. It is up to the individual to choose what knowledge they take away from their mixed family in sustaining and curating a racial identity at school, university, workplace and even at home.

It is important to note how this study on racial mixedness advances discussions of cosmopolitanism. As described by Andrew Jakubowicz, cosmopolitanism refers to, 'a philosophical or ideological take on the form of social relations suited for a complex and culturally diverse society or world' (Jakubowicz, 2011, p.70). In this paper, I hope to portray the lived experiences of biracial Asian-Australians with their unique and complex racial identity to provide a unique perspective on how one navigates within a culturally contrasted body, persevering through instances of racial discrimination, confusion and displacement within a culturally diverse and cosmopolitan city such as Sydney.

This paper reports on an Honours research project that asked, 'What are the information behaviours of biracial Asian-Australian youth, and what role do they play in how they experience their racial identity?' The study was limited to Australian youth with a mixed Asian and white Australian background, one of the fastest growing demographic of racially mixed people in Australia.

## **Background**

I am biracial Australian, a product of my Anglo-Australian father and Indonesian mother. My two sisters and I were fortunate to take many vacations to Bali, Indonesia, where for two weeks each year we could cultivate meaningful relationships with my mother's side of the family. In reflection, I did not make the most of the limited time with my Indonesian family, as it was something I was not accustomed to back home in Australia. I was used to a small family of five, until the annual trip overseas where I was bombarded with the smiling faces of thirty to forty relatives.

In 2016, I decided to challenge myself and live in Bali for a month without the reassuring presence of my mother. She had always acted as a sort of bridge, transmitting

foreign information to her three young daughters. We were not completely Balinese and not entirely strangers either. No more asking Mum what this word meant, who this family member was; no more, ‘Mum, what are we doing today?’ or ‘Mum, have you asked *Tante Mang* (my Aunty Komang) if she is working today?’ I learnt to be confident in my ability to speak Bahasa Indonesian, engage with family members and decide how I wanted to spend my time on the beautiful island.

The time spent alone with the Asian side of my family encouraged in me a deeper connection to my Indonesian heritage, when I realised that perhaps half of my racial identity had been suppressed by my Australian upbringing. In Australia Mum encouraged my sisters and me to be Catholic, to me it felt like a forced practice, assimilating into the rituals of the White majority. But in Indonesia, I admired my family’s dedication to religious ceremonies such as daily *Sambayang*, which is performed in a small temple that is present in every Balinese home. In this stone sanctuary Balinese families give thanks to their Hindu gods as well to the spirits of our family ancestors. In Australia, I knew I was guaranteed a tertiary education if I kept up with my schoolwork, whereas for my cousins overseas, it was never a guaranteed option, but something attainable only by a few. This affected my attitudes towards school and work; my cousins did not need to work until they had graduated from university whereas I was used to working from when I was in a high school. Whilst my cousins lived in the family home till they married, I was free to live independently from a young age. The intense disparity between these two divergent realities makes racial identity even more complex for biracial youth like myself.

## Literature Review

This literature review briefly outlines literature related to racial identity and also information behaviours and makes a case that one’s racial identity is formed through one’s interactions with information through childhood, youth, and through adulthood.

### *Information Behaviours and Lived Experience*

When a biracial individual is continually forced to identify through some form of racial categorisation, they curate their own definitions of race and consequent self-regulations. These are based on their everyday exposure to transient race-fuelled encounters, experiences that are immediately embodied. From our immediate surroundings, what information do we seek to make our own decisions about who we are and who we want to be? In short, what are our information behaviours? Information behaviour is the ‘totality of human behaviours with reference to information including unintentional or passive behaviours such as glimpsing or encountering information’ (Wilson, 2000, p.49) as well as ‘purposive behaviours that do not involve [information] seeking, such as actively avoiding information’ (Johnson & Case, 2012, p. 5) alongside serendipitous encounters of sharing and using information (Case, 2006).

For the purposes of understanding how information behaviours play a role in experiencing a mixed-race identity, I found it useful to examine the ‘lived experience’ of Asian-Australian biracial youth. ‘Lived experience’ is defined as ‘personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than

through representations constructed by other people' (Chandler & Munday, 2016, para. 1). Lived experience studies can contribute to our understanding of cosmopolitanism, for '[they] lead to a self-awareness that acknowledges the integrity of an individual life and how separate life experiences can resemble and respond to larger public and social themes, creating a space for storytelling, interpretation, and meaning-making (Boylorn, 2008, p.490).

### *Racial Categorisations*

Organising information (through classification, categorisation, taxonomies etc.) is a fundamental concept that makes information intelligible (Narayan, 2014), for the most strange and remarkable characteristic of information is that it can only be understood through the idea of organisation (Morin, 1992). For example, psychologists tell us that babies' brains organise images into categories such as faces or foods, and that small children do a lot of organising during play (Taylor, 2004). Given that categorisation and classification is a natural urge with human beings, it is imperative to acknowledge that terms used to categorise race such as White, Black, and Asian are simply attempts to categorise the world around us, to ascribe a "fixedness" to them that equally defies categorisation just as 'mixedness' does. That said, there is some difficulty in theorising the Asian-Australian identity, which when 'unlinked by a hyphen, attests to a separation of identities' (Chakraborty, 2012, p.5).

The term *race* is used for broader categorisation such as Asian, whereas *ethnicity* refers to the national 'origin or heritage groups within the pan-Asian label' (Johnston-Guerrero & Pizzolato, 2016, p.905). Additionally, race as a concept is difficult to place within an Asian context, as Asia covers several colourful and distinct countries with their own unique national identity (Teng, 2017, p. 83). Even more so, it is also difficult to establish which countries are considered Asian depending on the operating public discourse (Ang, 2001, p.113). For example, the Indian subcontinent is commonly neglected within Australian literature, whilst in a US or Canadian context the Indian subcontinent is essential to what is known as South Asian or East Indian (Chakraborty, 2012, p.1). In this paper, I identify the background of the parents of my subjects to provide some localised context behind their responses, so as to not subsume their cultural narrative under the umbrella of Asian unthinkingly.

Furthermore, it is even more difficult to ascribe the label of *Australian* to a distinct identity story. From the results of the most recent 2016 national census, the Australian government stated, '[a]ncestry represents the cultural or ethnic group that a person most closely identifies with, rather than just their place of birth' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a, para. 13). Whilst more than 300 ancestries were recognised, it was apparent that most Australians identified with White-majority Western countries. The most popular ancestries stemmed from Europe with British, Irish, Scottish and Italian at the top of the list. This is understandable given the nation's formation and migrant history. This only becomes a problem when 'the West' is, 'a name always associating itself with those regions, communities, and peoples that appear politically and economically superior to other regions, communities and peoples' (Sakai 1989 in, Ang, 2001, p. 4). As Australia has moved towards becoming a more multicultural and civil society, essences of Western arrogance endure. Countless expressions of racism towards non-White Australians are captured in literature,

news and social media. The responses from participants in this study also confirm this. Thus, a paradoxical experience arises from identifying oneself as a person of Eastern and Western descent.

The idea of racial categorisation is so heavily integrated into our communities that within those communities, to live 'without racial identity is to be in danger of having no identity' (Luke & Luke, 1999, p. 237). As scholars have aspired to ascribe ideas of racial fluidity (Nagel, 1994, pp. 154-7), hybridity (Ang, 2001, p.3) and dynamic forms of race identity (Hall, 1996. p.2), it seems that discourses of racial categorisation are inescapable to this day.

### *Navigating Identity*

Emerging from the literature is the theme of negotiation, which extends from Hall's conceptualisation of identity as a continuous 'process of articulation' (Hall, 1996, p.2). As biracial youth react to social, cultural and political events we need to consider their personal agency in materialising a biracial identity that supports their values and encourages a positive sense of self. Nagel introduces the concept of racial negotiation through the metaphor, 'a portfolio of ethnic identities' (1994, p. 154) available to the mixed race person; this 'perceived strategic utility and symbolic appropriateness' (p. 155) influences their material and performative exhibitions of racial identity. Matthew's analogy of identity credentials (2007, p.42) fits well within the subjective interpretations of racial identity, where like any other form of ID, race determines what you get access to. A biracial or multiracial person may voluntarily assume a monoracial identity for whatever purpose, although not everyone has the means, resources, or sometimes the skin colour, to do so.

Matthews (2007) describes the Eurasian persona as *cosmopolitan chic*; 'ever smiling, she is biculturally competent, benign and tolerant. Neither Black or white, Asian nor Caucasian, she is ambiguous, intriguing, exotic and exciting' (Matthews, 2007, p. 49). Because the basis of being Eurasian is being mixed, Eurasians are subject to a mix of racial experiences, including on the one hand oppression and exclusion and on the other, a reinforced chicness. Matthews's study reiterates that different contexts play a part in how this Eurasian chic is perceived. As I have found, a person's understanding of their mixed race identity is informed by *contextualised* information from others and their environment.

### **Methodology**

Sections of reflexive autoethnographic writing have been woven into this paper where it resonates with my own lived experience as a biracial Asian-Australian. The research project described in this paper was inspired by my own sense of identity, as well as my determination to validate this label by talking to others similarly categorised. Triangulation of autoethnographic writing with the theories of human information behaviours, as applied to the findings from my interviews with other biracial youth, offers a holistic understanding of what it means to live with a complex mixed identity.

### *Autoethnography*

Reflexive autoethnography as a method ‘primarily focus[es] on a culture or subculture, [where] authors use their own experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions’ (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740).

Autoethnography is a method of investigation where the researcher is a member of the social reality being studied (Adler & Adler, 1987; Anderson, 2006); it can extend sociological understanding through highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). Swan (2008) critiques such methodological practice in social science literature, saying ‘it leads to narcissistic obsession with the self; second, it imagines the self to be the source of social problems and solutions; and finally, it individualises social and collective problems’ (Swan, 2008, p. 386). In response, as Ellis and Bochner stress, autoethnographic writing is meant to expose the writer in a vulnerable state, through the intersection of the ‘personal to the cultural’ and the writer may, ‘move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations’ (2000, p. 739). Hence, my experience, just as my participants’ experiences, is socially and culturally produced within a context, and hence not just my *special knowledge*, for ‘it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience’ (Butler & Scott, 1992, p.25-6). As such, portions of my own ethnographical writing are woven into the discussion of this paper. These highly personal entries stem from both positive and negative experiences as a biracial Asian-Australian.

### *Interviews*

For my data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews, one-on-one, on experiences of racial mixedness with six young adults aged between 18 and 25. Participants included people of mixed Asian and white Australian heritage, decent or ancestry, who identified as being Asian-Australian. Implied in this is that the participants have a separate and distinct racial identity from either of their parents. Lacking a sense of ownership of one parent’s homeland, they nevertheless inherit a subdued sense of belonging to this parent’s traditions and cultures. As the children of a diasporic generation, like Ang’s *diasporic intellectuals*, my subjects and I, ‘may in fact be especially well placed to analyse this complicated entanglement because it is embodied in [their] own life trajectory’ (Ang, 2001, p.3). These individuals are not first-generation Australians but rather the generations that follow. Ommundsen (2011, p.507) described a *generational difference* where second and beyond generation Australians may not necessarily share the same perspectives on cultural identity with their migrant parent or their Australian parent.

Asking my participants to retell moments from their everyday life and what information they used in the process of constructing their own identity will highlight specific instances that the participant feels contributed significantly to the development of their racial identity. As I lay out a non-linear narrative of my participants’ and my own experiences, Luke & Luke’s evaluation of interview as a methodology for describing encounters of racialised misplacement, resilience and making sense of information has had a strong influence on this study: ‘people’s narrativisation in the interview context of their histories, experiences, and interpretations – are the only texts available to us with people’s sense-making and blending of

cultural values and practices, and how racialising practices are experienced, reinterpreted, and retold, sometimes played up and sometimes played down' (Luke & Luke, 1999, p.246).

### Findings and Discussion

In this section, each participant has been anonymised, and given a pseudonym, rather than referring to them as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. This practice means that their last name as a racial identifier was lost in this study although it may be inferred to some extent from Table 1. The interviews were analysed, using a coding frame incorporating the various types of information behaviours such as information seeking, information searching, information sharing, information use, serendipitous information encounters, and information avoidance.

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Mother</i>
<i>Naomi</i>	F	Filipino	Australian
<i>Valerie</i>	F	Australian	Filipino
<i>Samantha</i>	F	Australian	Thai
<i>Jacob</i>	M	Chinese	Australian
<i>Harry</i>	M	Australian	Vietnamese
<i>Seth</i>	M	Nepalese	Australian

**Table 1: Ethnic origins of participants**

#### *Meet Indra*

During my high school years, I approached my social landscape with a heightened awareness of race. Subtle association of the social groups that formed, and the shared characteristics of the people in their groups led me to believe that people generally liked to hang out with those who looked and acted like them. My best friend throughout high school was another biracial Asian-Australian girl. Perhaps my instant bond with another mixed Asian-Australian reinforced my view of racialised cliques at school. I fitted so comfortably in her house, which closely resembled my own, with Asian-inspired art untastefully scattered across her walls, the familiar set up of the kitchen, where all the sauces and utensils were on display, and the drifting aroma of my favourite foods. An array of thongs and shoes lay haphazardly around the front door. We used to say jokingly that she was half Filipino, and I was half Indonesian, but together we made one White girl. We were attracted to the same type of guys who never did well at school because their parents were not as strict as our mums were. Her mum loved having me around and her father notoriously absent, a mirror to my own state at home.

Then my parents split up and I moved further out West. Between us was a forty-minute drive. At my new school, there was no other half Asian child, no person to validate my half Asian-Australian existence. On my very first day, two Pacific-Islanders approached me. After the general round of personal introductions, they ask if I am one of *them*. I say 'no, I am half Balinese, half Australian', my standard response to this question. Now that I think about it, it wouldn't matter what country I told them – I was brown enough to be one of *them*.

From then on, they were whom I associated with for the next two years. After their acceptance, the rest of the school felt that it was finally safe to approach me. Associating with other brown skinned people potentially obscured any assumptions that my father is White, but this seemed unimportant to my classmates. I have always wondered if my school experience would be any different if I was a fraction less brown and more Asian looking.

As we were part of a small handful of brown people in a predominantly White school, my group was known to everyone. If anything, my association with this group helped me meet a lot of people and allowed me to participate in things I thought I would never do. I performed a traditional Samoan dance at multicultural day, I spent weeks learning a Tahitian dance routine on another occasion. I was asked to learn the New Zealand National Anthem instead of another White male singer, because it would sit better with the audience. At the same time, my classmates criticised the squint of my eyes and rallied together in a car park trying to one-up each other with their Asian insults. I felt compelled to take a Math class that I knew was too difficult for me, just so I wouldn't be too much of a disgrace to my mum.

These key moments in my own reflection resonated throughout the responses of my participants; a heightened awareness of racial groups and subsequent social boundaries, the affirmation of a having best friend/s who were similar in racial composition and the embodiment of a mixed identity that flipped between contrasting racial expectations. To investigate the prejudices and racism affiliated with race-specific experiences, I consider how people are informed by information from others and their environment, for 'a person is likely to come across a great deal of useful information just in the process of interacting socially and physically within the relevant milieu' (Bates, 2002, p. 5).

### *Meet the interviewees*

You might have experienced it yourself, navigating your way through different groups congregating across a school playground. What kind of unspoken structures determined your participation with different groups during recess and lunch? From my own experience, high school groups were arranged by taxonomy of race. Meet my participant Seth, his grandfather migrated from Nepal to Australia in the late 1940s. Now, 25 years of age, Seth's insights on the implications of being mixed race are heavily based on his experiences of school and growing up. His recollection of the evolution of his schoolyards over the years illustrates the visibility of racial divides:

*I'd probably say when I was about 13/14, prior to that there were no racial conversations. Up until [school] Year 6, it wasn't even on anyone's agenda, well for me anyway. It was more like who's wearing the best shoes at school. But high school, that's when people really start to draw the lines with ethnicity, well that's what I found. Asians hanging out together, Middle Easterners, so on... Seth, European Australian/Nepalese*

Undoubtedly for most, the confines of school serve as the first location where children are forced to engage with others outside of their home/family circle. The congregation of racial groups are not simply serendipitous encounters, but rather the result of physical or

electronic proximity. Moving across a shared space such as the school playground, people continually monitor their environment for clues and signs that direct them to people with similar values and interests, undirectedly browsing the landscape, zooming in to focus on bites of information that interest them after their initial glimpse (Kwasnik, 1992). Meet Samantha, half Thai and half white European Australian, now 20 years old, who remembers her forced friendship with the only other Asian girl in her class. Below is her reasoning of why this occurred in her preschool class:

*I remember sitting in class, and the only person that wanted to sit next to me was a Chinese girl... the other kids had some sort of unspoken ritual, where they wouldn't want to share with my friend and I. We were best friends all of primary school because of that, it's weird. Samantha, European Australian /Thai*

Nagel (1994) explored the importance of external validation in the construction of ethnic identities, arguing that our understanding of identity is built upon the external motivations and definitions of others. Meet 21-year-old Naomi, also half Filipino and half European Australian, whose experience supports Samantha's response to the impact of racialised groups on the biracial adolescent. In a release of bottled-up frustration, Naomi confesses that she felt dehumanised due to the constant labelling by other students:

*Just because you have a different ethnic background to someone, or you don't fit into one particular group, doesn't mean that you're any less of a person, or don't deserve anything.*

Naomi's eyes brim with tears and her voice chokes up as she continues...

*I'm sorry, I'm like, it wasn't that I didn't deserve anything. I felt like they deserved more than me - or that I didn't really fit in with them, so I didn't deserve to be their friend. Naomi, European Australian/Filipino*

Reinforcement of external validation means living up to the expectations of others who do not necessarily understand the complexities of being mixed race.

### *Complications of Categorisation*

Luke and Luke (1999) define 'othering' as a dangerous practice that places binary boundaries onto real-world experiences. The infinite textures of reality are consequently tied up in classifications as society attempts to *know* one another, rather than how one might *relate* to each other (Law, 2004). The constant labelling of White, Black, Asian etc. further propels the materialisation of racial divides to the point where Luke and Luke argue that the discourse of 'White is a colour too', has emerged as a product of White invisibility in White hegemonic societies (1999, pp. 247, 8). This is an important point when theorising the lived experiences of Asian-Australian biracial youth, as their White characteristics are often downplayed by extrinsic audiences, thus undermining one half of their racial identity, minimising their access to their white privilege and containing their narrative to one set of racial boundary.

Being denied access to their White privilege was socially enforced for most of my subjects, as constant racial labelling saturated their childhood, and continued into their

adolescence. ‘Chingaling’, ‘Ling-ling’, assumed to be blind on account of the shape of their eyes; these insults are nothing new to the Asian-Australian biracial person. My participants spoke about the exhausting friction brought upon by their resistance to these remarks, as well as their determination to prove to others that they were half White, and shouldn’t be exclusively labelled and limited to otherness (Luke and Luke, 1999).

*I was always labelled. I was always at the brunt of the Asian comments, like “she’s Chinese” or something, even though I wasn’t - even though I knew I was half white.* Valerie, European Australian/Filipino

However, as I speak to them today as young adults, they are noticeably more passive towards such discrimination.

*Sometimes, people ask me if I’m Chinese. And I would be like, sure, why not. Just because I don’t feel like explaining myself anymore.* Naomi, European Australian/Filipino

This passive acceptance is the result of society’s tolerance of racial discrimination as a tool for racial disparity, enforcing a dichotomy of *us* and *them*. Consequently encouraging the invisible powers of White privilege in majority White countries such as Australia. Young adults such as my participants have now moved past the initial confrontations of school and are now free to structure their lives around people who support and empower their identity rather than feel embattled every time someone tries to categorise them.

### *Dealing with racism*

Naomi’s painful experience of racism within her immediate family is something that she discussed during the interviews. Amid the discussion about her relationships with different members of her family, Naomi described the hostility she had received from some of her white cousins.

*Maybe... jokes that are meant to be funny, but they’re not. You can tell that they are targeted and meant to hurt you, and I’m very sensitive and don’t like to be around that. Growing up you realise that getting older, things that you do say, or things that you are doing - you shouldn’t be around people that are perpetuating the kind of stance that where there’s and “us” and there’s a “them” and not a “together”.*

Thrown off by the racial tormenting from her own family, my initial shock was countered by Naomi’s liberal approach to the situation:

*... they’re just so much older than me. So, they have that ingrained mindset that’s very traditional, there’s no excuse for that obviously. But it’s going to take me time to converse with them and tell them, “maybe if you looked at it this way you might not have that opinion”.* Naomi, European Australian/Filipino

Naomi’s determination to initiate change through meaningful conversation, rather than distancing herself from some of her family, offers an enlightening solution for dealing with racism. Naomi has a greater chance of filling any information gaps for her cousins that led

them to make such racially discriminating jokes. In other words, individuals ‘tend to seek information that is easily accessible, preferably from interpersonal sources such as friends, relatives or co-workers rather than from institutions or organisations, unless there is a particular reason for avoiding interpersonal sources’ (Hakim, 2006, p. 265).

As effective as these conversations might be, there are many affective and cognitive components that need to be addressed before an individual can process information, ‘affective aspects, such as attitude, stance, and motivation, may influence specificity, capability, and relevance judgements as much as cognitive aspects, such as personal knowledge, and information content’ (Kuhlthau, 1991, p. 363). Naomi's cousins may or may not be empathetically inclined to attune their assertions of racial ‘norms’ just because they are family members. But perhaps, frequent exposure to information about the experiences of individuals of a mixed race might be enough to initiate the development of better personal constructs (Savolainen, 2015) focused towards inclusion and equality.

### *Coming to terms with biracial identity*

So far, I have critically examined the impact of external forces such as othering, and the social privileges or disadvantages implicated in being half Asian in Australia through the accounts of navigating between categories of race. As described by many identity theorists (Amdahl, 2004; Bonovitz, 2009; Hall, 1997), identity is a by-product of the combinations of external validation and internal agency. Everyone has the opportunity to manufacture a presentation of themselves to be digested by the public gaze, ‘the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designations – i.e., what *you* think your ethnicity is, versus what *they* think your ethnicity is’ (Nagel, 1994, p. 154). Ethnic identity, then, is the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, where ‘racial features function as important identity markers around which people organise their social interactions, and which do not necessarily match the identity or “self-conceptualisation” of a person of visible racial/ethnic difference’ (Luke & Luke, 1999, p. 233).

With a few simple makeup touches, I can slip into the features that I want to embrace on any particular day. The moment my bottle of foundation runs out, I am forced to contemplate how I wish to be viewed and perceived. Negotiating between the two points on the spectrum of colour I inherited from my parents, sometimes I use a whitening cream, or some days I choose to lie on the beach and erase my previous attempts to be whiter. I get to select my skin colour, often the deciding factor in how I think other people decode my skin tone, and where I am from. With powders, pigments and technical skill I can make my nose look smaller, my face less round.

After puberty, I have always had issues about my weight as Asians are expected to be thin and fragile looking. Some mornings I struggle to get dressed because the shape of my body doesn’t match the clothes that were designed for the average Australian woman and buying clothes in Indonesia is an impossible task. Growing into my womanly curves, I have grown accustomed to my mother’s constant comments about my body; it is still emotionally stressful, but it is okay, because I believe that I am not completely Asian.

Within the conceptual frame of human information behaviours, the concept of satisficing helps explain motivations behind the manipulation of information in constructing racial identity. As discussed, individuals are empowered in adopting certain racial characteristics to into their appearance in order to provide informational clues to others on who they want to be perceived as. This validates the outcomes of their everyday experiences, and how they internalise their perception of self-worth and self-esteem. Satisficing is the process in which, ‘an individual decides when an alternative approach or solution is sufficient to meet the individuals’ desired goals rather than pursue the perfect approach’ (Simon, 1971, p. 71). For my participants, a holistic image of an Asian-Australian biracial does not yet exist in Australia. Thus, satisficing caters to the fulfilment of information gaps in the construction of a positive identity.

Fashion, makeup, weight, hair colour, and even facial hair, are historically recognised markers of race. Attached to these markers are assumptions and expectations of racial identities in conjunction with other social identities relating to class, sexuality etc. Daily changes to these features (Sims, 2016) only add to the complexity of the ambiguous biological phenotypes of the Asian-Australian biracial. Meet participant Samantha, who tells me that she identifies as a chunky Asian, and doesn’t mind being mistaken as Colombian when she hits the town:

*...when I go out I like to wear fitted skirts and no one associates my chunkiness with Asianness... Samantha, European Australian/Thai*

Flitting into the accepted appearance of a South American woman, even just for moments at a time, allows room for Samantha to reevaluate her attitudes towards her body. If it is socially recognised that women from another racial group are allowed attractive thicker, curvier bodies, why not someone who is considered Asian? Nagel wrote about the authority of external influences of culture that determine the ‘options, feasibility, and attractiveness of various ethnicities’ (Nagel, 1994, p. 161). Favourable characteristics of different racial identities are eroticised and preferred, depicting socially accepted images of race, in turn demonising characteristics that do not fit these images. So, if Samantha can feel better about her appearance by embracing the social connotations of being South American, who is to stop her?

#### *Inheriting information from cultural gatekeepers*

As I mentioned earlier, I had never completely embraced my Asian heritage until I spent time alone in my mother’s home country. Over the period of my lifetime, my connection to my Asianness stemmed from my gradual increase in linguistic capability, as well as propinquity to my Asian relatives and my interest in studying Indonesian history in my spare time. One could deduce that my interest in learning Indonesian Bahasa was determined by my intimacy with the cultural gatekeepers within my family and community. In the study of human information behaviours, gatekeepers, ‘interact and network within their reference group and with clusters of other gatekeepers for purposes of sharing information and maintaining linkages outside their immediate sphere of influence’ (Liu, 1995, p. 129).

It can be difficult for the Asian-Australian biracial young person to access the ideologies and histories that these cultural gatekeepers share when their language capacities are underdeveloped and/or they are limited in physical/electronic proximity to these people. For example, Samantha reflects on how she learnt about parts of her Thai heritage:

*Mum used to make me go to the temple. I didn't really understand what it was for, because she couldn't really explain it to me, even in Thai, because it's different, the words that apply to it. They don't apply to anything else, so I'm not going to use them all the time, so I don't know what they mean. So, I guess at school, when I studied it, I kind of understood what my Mother meant, like I needed to actually read it in English...* Samantha, European Australian/Thai

Unfortunately, Samantha felt that her deficiency in conversing in Thai impacted her relationship with her mum. Language barriers exemplify the potency of relationships with gatekeepers, and consequently, one's accessibility to information in another language strongly impacts how one experiences race:

*As I grew older I realised that my mom is so important to me, so I wanted to speak to her in Thai, and now it's just a habit.* Samantha, European Australian/Thai

Now that Samantha has improved her linguistic capabilities, she has greater access to English and Thai sources. From there Samantha is able to make justified choices about the information provided to her.

The biracial Asian-Australian is prone to feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction when their access to language and culture is denied by their cultural gatekeepers. An example of this imbalance was observed when Naomi told me how she confronted her father after realising she had been missing out on aspects of her Filipino culture. Naomi's father had abstained from teaching her Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines, as he felt that knowing the language wouldn't be of any benefit to her life in Australia:

*You're in Australia, speaking English, and I didn't want to make you feel more different...* Naomi, European Australian/Filipino

Naomi recalls how her father's heavy accent and poor English provoked many instances of belittlement and judgement from others. His experiences have left Naomi's father to doubt his own identity as it was continuously dismissed and discriminated against due to the hostile prejudice that exists towards immigrants in Australia. By denying her access to aspects of her Filipino heritage, he has consequently created a barrier in accessing the information essential to developing Naomi's racial identity.

Twenty-five-year-old participant Jacob, with a Chinese father and an Anglo Australian mother, made the deliberate decision not to learn his father's native language. Jacob's family in China speak Cantonese; however, Jacob is convinced that learning Mandarin would be a more practical and valued language to learn to complement his career in finance. Jacob described this feeling of potential betrayal in our interview,

*But I don't feel right learning Mandarin for the sake of it being practical because it's kind of like a spit in the face to my heritage... Jacob, European Australian/Chinese*

His lack of contact with his father's side of the family in China had previously led him to believe that learning Cantonese would be a waste of his time. To understand this component of Jacob's lived experience the concept of information avoidance can be applied to Jacob's dismissal of learning either language. As Narayan, Case and Edwards have described, 'sometimes people avoid information, if paying attention to it will cause mental discomfort and cognitive dissonance, or increase uncertainty, irrespective of the utility of the information' (2011, p. 1). For Jacob, the uncertainty of knowing which language would complement his Asian-Australian identity as it stands, means that he is left to endure feelings of missing out, and hence avoids learning his father's language.

The importance of passing on the native language of the Asian parent is present in Seth's consideration of being a cultural gatekeeper for his future children:

*I have thought about it for the benefit of my own kid in the future. You know like this is where you come from, this is the language you speak. In an ideal world, my grandfather would have passed on one of his languages, that would have been nice, so I at least I could pass it on...Seth, European Australian/Nepalese*

For Seth, he feels that his limited knowledge of the language and culture of Nepal will impact on his ability to act as an authoritative gatekeeper to Nepalese culture. His reflection highlights the potency of information gatekeepers in affirming connections to racial groups as well as in constructing a positive Asian-Australian identity.

#### *Family funerals as information grounds*

Building on the potent influence of gatekeepers on Asian-Australian biracial youth, another theme that emerged in the interviews is the recurring setting of the funeral. For Seth and Harry, it was the death of their grandfathers that instigated an emotionally loaded discovery of information. The nature of information seeking is described as episodic (Prabha et al., 2007), where stimuli drives the individual to search, seek and browse for information in order to satisfy their information needs. In the case of my participants, the setting of a family funeral acted as Information Grounds, where the excessive cultural stimuli and the congregation of gatekeepers from collective racial groups sparks an episode of information sharing, separate from the original purpose of the funeral. In 1999 Pettigrew coined the term, defining an information ground as an, 'environment temporarily created by the behaviour of people who have come together to perform a given task, but from which emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information' (Pettigrew, 1999, p. 811). This is an important space for the Asian-Australian biracial person in constructing experiences of race, as funerals are saturated in the culture and traditions of the deceased's own cultural identity.

I distinctly remember my first Balinese *Ngaben* (cremation ceremony), and how completely different it was compared to my idea of traditional Christian Australian funerals.

Dressed in a traditional *kebaya* and *kamen*, I was met with smiling family members that I had never met before. Instant membership into this group via my mother was refreshing, but as the fair skinned foreigner, there was always an awkward stare or two, but it did not matter, as I was learning so much about my Balinese culture in the space of three hours. Loud rhythmic music from the *gamelan* played as the parade of gatherers made their way from the family's home to the cemetery. For the Balinese, *Ngaben* is treated as a celebration of the deceased's life and the day is filled with feasts, dancing and singing. The way different cultures treat their dead encapsulates essences of their religion, ceremonies and history. Saddened though that I was at the price of someone else's life, I nevertheless got the opportunity to experience what it meant to be Balinese. Before entering this ephemeral information ground I had felt uninspired to investigate my Balinese heritage. The instant transference of knowledge through simple observation and listening surpassed anything I had learnt from reading the limited English texts on authentic Balinese culture.

For Harry, watching his Vietnamese grandfather being lowered into his grave, buried in full military honours, sparked an episode of information seeking. For Seth, mourning his Nepalese grandfather, he met for the first time the Nepalese side of the family. Over the course of the funeral he could converse with cultural gatekeepers whom he never normally had access to. Information grounds are context rich, ephemeral settings that may inspire associations of engagement and belonging to a community based outside of ordinary places of home, work or school – family funerals certainly function as one. Allyson Hobbs, author of the book *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (2014) frames the story of biracial Americans who pass (for White) as a story of loss, for 'the family jokes, the oral history every family has, and repeats and passes down, those things are lost to people who pass' (Bates, 2014).

It makes me wonder how my own descendants will learn about my struggles with identity, and how they will deal with their own.

## Conclusion

In 2012, Chakraborty asked what may *they* be? 'If Asian Australian is a category that offers completely new, perhaps contrary, ways of configuring Asianness ... what might they be?' (p.9). This examination of Asian-Australian youth was an effort towards understanding an identity that is formed through *navigating mixedness*. The lived experiences of this group foreshadow the lives of future generations, born into an exponentially multiracial cosmopolitan society. Different manifestations of Asian-Australian emerge as the traditional categories of Asian and white Australian become increasingly complex. Critically engaging with the information behaviours of this group can identify how young people harness information from their racialised environments. Behaviours such as avoidance, seeking, and satisficing were observed within their daily experiences of school, family and social life. From this study, the Asian-Australian identity is the experiences of these people – stories of isolation and resentment towards their mixedness, as well positive experiences with ambiguous appearances and increased opportunities.

Apart from future research in Australia with various such mixed race youth, research is also needed to investigate the experiences of mixed Asian-Australian youth who have been raised in an Asian country, for it is sure to produce an even more racially nuanced understanding of this identity. Location will also influence whether their Asianness or their Whiteness is perceived as the majority or the minority. Different geographical contexts will have their own set of social, cultural and economic expectations that the Asian-Australian youth will need to navigate through. Nonetheless, information behaviours can apply an analytic lens to any context, helping to unpack the Asian-Australian identity. That said, perhaps we can apply the same information framework towards anyone who does not identify within the racialised categories that are offered in the civil societies of today.

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