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Best of Both Worlds:
Hybrid Identities of Mixed-race Individuals
in Singapore

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Abstract

This paper explores how mixed-race Singaporeans negotiate their racial identity within a society that regards “race” as static and unchanging—exemplified through state-sanctioned racial definitions and policies. The major themes of this study are (a) the centrality of race as part of their constructions of self-identity, (b) their constant need to take positions vis-à-vis inquiries about “what they are”, due to their ambiguous phenotype, (c) the cultural capital that mixed-race individuals construct to make choices when navigating various social situations, and (d) the strategies that these individuals employ to resist being placed in defined racial categories. By examining their lived experiences, this paper brings to light their negotiations of dominant discourses on race that exists in Singapore, and subsequently puts forth the claim that as the country moves away from the rhetoric of multiculturalism to one of cosmopolitanism, recognizing racial and cultural hybridity ought to be encouraged by the state.

Key Words: cultural capital, hybridity, identity, mixed-race, reflexivity

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Grandma, for devoting your life to the care of our family. For tirelessly taking care of me in spite of my occasional disobedience. Thank you for your sacrifices. I love you.

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My friends, who have touched my life in more ways than one. Thank you for being explorers on this adventure with me. Let us be friends for more than just a reason or a season. A lifetime’s what we’re worth.

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My Creator, from whom all life springs forth. Your love alone is sufficient. Thank you for being the only constant in my life. For the wonder of who I am, I praise You.
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Introduction

‘Race’ as a concept, is meaningless—“there is no genetic basis for any ethnic or racial classification” (Kristof 2003). It however continues to have a profound impact on the lives of individuals and collectivities. Experiences, interactions and relationships are fundamentally shaped by our perceptions of race. In Singapore, the government’s official race categorization encompasses the Chinese majority and, the Malay, Indian, and ‘Other’ minorities. Adopting the discourse of “multiculturalism” as its nation-building ideology, state policies reinforce the visibility and importance of racial classification in the country.

In reality, race is not an essentialized concept with fixed hierarchies, and not everyone falls neatly into a particular racial category—mixed-race individuals “reflect the arbitrary and contested logic of racial distinctions” (Song 2003:63). The trend for interracial marriage in Singapore (under the Women’s Charter) has seen a steady climb from 8.7 percent in 1998 to 15.7 percent in 2009 (Rocha 2011:114)—signaling the rise in mixed-race Singaporeans. It is problematic that these individuals who represent “the most obvious examples of cultural hybridity, do not fit into the official race categories” (Velayutham 2007:56).

As Singapore shifts its focus from “multiculturalism” and embraces the rhetoric of “cosmopolitanism” (Ho 2011), it is important for the country and its citizens to acknowledge the presence of cultural hybridity that exists within its boundaries. According to Song (2003:117), “hybridity suggests a positive outcome of (racial) mixing, which may increase people’s repertoire of identity choices, rather than dilute cultural content” of their constituent races. There is a need to understand how mixed-race individuals negotiate their lived experiences within a society that is race-centred, and in which their mixed-race status is not officially recognized.

This research will explore how mixed-race Singaporeans negotiate their racial identity—by studying the way they navigate social structures (i.e, family, friends, school, work, etc.)—within the context of a society that regards “race” as static and unchanging—exemplified through the static state-sanctioned racial definitions and policies. By examining their lived experiences through narratives about their lives, this paper brings to light mixed-race individuals’ negotiations of dominant discourses about race that exists in Singapore, and subsequently puts forth the claim that as the country moves away from the rhetoric of
“multiculturalism” to one of “cosmopolitanism”, recognizing cultural hybridity ought to be encouraged by the country.

This research will take an inductive approach by primarily focusing on what being mixed-race means to Singaporeans of mixed parentage, and the salience of racial identity in their lives. Through the retelling of their experiences, perceptions and opinions, I consider how these individuals construct their identity and perform different racial identities depending on social situations and contexts. The lived experiences of biracial individuals provide a unique position wherein race as an essentialized concept is destabilized.
Literature Review

This research seeks to fill the gap in the literature on mixed-race Singaporeans, as they are generally understudied. Research done on mixed-race individuals are largely quantitative (Herman 2004; Smith 2008). Scholars tend to compare private practice and public categorization of race through the use of surveys and longitudinal studies. This research will therefore complement the quantitative literature by taking a qualitative approach.

According to Parker & Song (2001:1), people of mixed heritage “reveal the arbitrary and contested logic of categorization underpinning racial divisions”. The experiences of those that lie outside the prevailing definitions for racialized identities represent the difficulties in the formation of identity in a multicultural society. Because mixed-race individuals occupy an “in-between” position spanning two or more race categories, and have an ambiguous (i.e, not fitting into one particular racial category) social position, they ought to be regarded as a distinct group.

My research seeks to raise awareness of the existence of this understudied group of people and the issues they experience. The findings of this research will be useful in providing insight into the lives of mixed-race individuals who do not fall into the fixed racial categories—that have been so widely accepted and internalized socially and politically, within Singapore. According to Gordon (1997), the recognition of mixed-race individuals serves as in “antiracist strategy”, as it undermines the conception that people should fall within fixed ‘pure’ categories.

Defining Race and Ethnicity

Scholars of race and ethnicity have long differentiated between the two terms. A general consensus of the definitions suggest that race is socially defined based on physical characteristics (i.e, skin color, etc.), while one’s ethnicity is defined socially based on cultural characteristics (i.e, language, cultural practices, etc.) (Song 2003).

Within the context of Singapore, race and ethnicity are used interchangeably, as with the terms ‘multiracialism’ and ‘multiculturalism’—one’s racial affiliation is seen to correspond with a particular set of fixed cultural characteristics. “People’s ethnic identities may be subsumed within broader racial identities which are imposed by others” (Song 2003:12). In Singapore, this includes the official race categories (Statistics Singapore 2010): Chinese,
Malays, Indians, Others (CMIO model), within which members of each racial group (except ‘Others’) are assumed to possess common cultural traits, and variations of race are not recognized.

It is difficult to unravel the two terms because they are undifferentiated in public discourses and the “meanings and images associated with each tend to bleed into the other” (Song 2003:11). Therefore, in this research, which is situated within the Singaporean context, the terms race and ethnicity will be used to refer to the intertwining meanings of the two terms—the interlacing of biological traits and assumed cultural characteristics.

Producing Race: The Logic of Multiculturalism

In 1819, when Singapore was established as a trading port for the British East Indian Company, the British colony was made up predominantly of Chinese and Indian immigrants, and the indigenous Malays. This racial diversity was managed by the colonizers by instituting a “racialized socio-economic framework” (Rocha 2011:98). The population was divided along racial lines—Chinese, Malays, Indians, Others. These racial groups were separated spatially and classified by their occupation.

After its independence in 1965, Singapore retained the racial categories from its British colonial masters—the racial categories of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Others were thereby made official by the state—and embraced multiracialism as its nation-building discourse. Multiracialism, which is undifferentiated from multiculturalism in the nation state’s discourses, assumes that each racial group has a “distinctive and identifiable culture and language” (Lian 2006:229).

The reification and essentialization of race is exemplified through various race-based practices and policies. These include official ascription of racial-ethnic identity, Group Representative Constituencies (that require political parties to field minority race candidates to run for elections), ethnic self-help groups, public housing ethnic integration policy (that requires a quota of ethnic minorities in each block of flats to be met), etc.

One consequence when states adopt the multiculturalism approach is the essentialization of different cultures—“a process through which social reality is ignored in favor of the over-simplification of characteristics” (Lian 2006:7). These characteristics are considered to be a stable social reality that discounts variations within each ethnic category. The CMIO model in Singapore exemplifies essentialization as each “racial community’s ethnicity is not only
assumed to be unique and particularistic, but also serves an ascriptive function in Singapore society” (Pereira 2008:11).

Multiculturalism in Singapore promotes ascription—the “process through which identities are conferred onto individuals simply because of their perceived membership of the group” (Pereira 2008:8). Multiculturalism therefore negates the individual in favor of the community, which it does through the racial categorization system (CMIO model). In so doing, individuals are “induced to belong to one of the given categories, almost involuntarily” (Pereira 2008:8), and are categorized as possessing essential cultural differences.

This indicates that mixed-race individuals, who do not fall into any racial category neatly, must negotiate their ethnic identity, as their social reality might differ from the race category they are placed in. Although there has been an effort on the part of the government to recognize mixed-race individuals through the introduction of the “double-barrelled” racial identification in 2010, individuals are still asked to declare a dominant race. The rationale for this, as stated by the government, is that the state has “ethnic-linked policies… and these are key policies, so we do need to know which classification to put the child under” (Hoe 2010). Prior to the year 2010, children of mixed parentage were assigned the same race as that of the father. As such, mixed-race individuals are largely unaccounted for in national statistics.

The Concept of Hybridity

Hybridity is a useful concept to analyze the lived experiences of mixed-race individuals because of its broad-ranging definitions. Historically, it has been used to refer to the “mingling of biologically separate races” (Rocha 2011:96). However, the term has since been used to encompass ethnic and cultural mixing as well (Rocha 2011). As this paper seeks to move away from essentializing race, hybridity—which connotes a sense of fluidity, the possibility of diverse identities and blurring of boundaries—presents itself as an apt approach to conceptualize the ethnic identity of mixed-race Singaporeans. According to Smith (2008:3-4), “hybridity signifies the encounter, conflict and/or blending of two ethnic or cultural categories… which tend to be experienced as meaningful identity labels by members of these categories”.

In this research, mixed-race individuals are theorized as hybrid. This suggests that the cultures and races that constitute the individual are intrinsically different enough to be mixed, and yet at the same time are fluid and diverse. Within the framework of multiculturalism,
Hybridity is considered as a transgression as it destabilizes the essentialized notion of race. Hybridity thereby serves to highlight the in-between status of mixed-race individuals in terms of culture and the overlapping of race and ethnicity.

Bhabha (1990:211) exemplifies the complexity of hybridity by suggesting that the “process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.” He introduces the term ‘third space’—an “in-between and a newly crafted position” (Smith 2008:8) which is a product of interaction and negotiation across cultural boundaries. Hybridity provides a “conception of everyday fluidity and change, where cultures collide and collude” (Rocha 2011:96).

**Reflexivity**

Du Bois (1903) states that mixed-race individuals possess a “double consciousness”, in which he/she embodies two identities concurrently, instead of constantly shifting between multiple identities. He states that the person is simultaneously occupying an “in-between”—hybrid—space, as well as spaces within each of the two cultural groups. There is a sense of “two-ness” as “two identities try to exist within one person” (Smith 2008:7). Du Bois (1903) argues that attempting to negotiate this space might pose both a challenge and an advantage. Blau & Brown (2001) expand on this concept by acknowledging that it is possible for an individual to be reflexive in dealing with the “double consciousness”. Individuals possess “profound understanding of the cultural frameworks” (Smith 2008:45) they occupy and as such, have ability to navigate these frameworks however they deem fit.

In his work on the theory of the self, Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of “reflexivity”—the “self-defining process that depends upon monitoring of, and reflection upon psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life” (quoted in Elliot 2007:37). He states that in contrast to traditional societies, where responsibilities and codes of behavior are fixed, modern societies are characterized by expectations and roles that are more fluid and subject to negotiation (Giddens, 1991). Similarly, Cote (1996) suggests that modern social structures require individuals to manage their identities reflexively and actively by creating the ‘right impressions’ in the presence of others. The structure of one’s identity is therefore constantly in flux. Accordingly, the emergence of individuals that transcend fixed racial categories represent the fluidity of identity—which typifies modern society.
The “centrality of reflexivity within post-traditional societies results in individuals having to confront how they conceptualize their own identities” (Awan 2008:102). Self-identity in this sense does not constitute a set of characteristics, but an understanding of one’s own biography, which is reflexively created. This biography is “an ongoing narrative which aims to provide the social actor with a consistent sense of self” (Awan 2008:103) and at the same time, may be altered in response to different conditions and situations. Accordingly, mixed-race individuals have to reflexively construct a coherent identity amidst the need to occasionally adjust their self-identity due to the occupation of an in-between space that spans multiple racial categories.

**Situational Ethnicity**

As mentioned, this research will regard identity as fluid and situational. Williams’ (1997) theory of “passing” is in line with this approach, and can provide an explanation of how mixed-race individuals negotiate their identity. Within a highly racialized society, “passing” in the context of a biracial individual, can be loosely defined as the ability of the individual to “assume the cultural characteristics of various socially defined racial groups” (Williams 1997:61). Such individuals switch between these racial groups to inflate their status and engage in “racial opportunism”, depending on situation. “Passing” can be done through cultural display, exterior appearance, or both.

Khanna (2011), in her study of biracial black/white individuals in America, finds out that the performance of ethnicity is contextual and situational. Her findings suggest that depending on with whom and where they were, biracial individuals either played up commonalities (to make the people around them feel comfortable), expressed differences (to feel unique), or embraced their identities as biracial. To accomplish their desired outcome, mixed-race individuals draw on their cultural capital (refer to proceeding section) discerningly.

**Capital—Mobilization of Resources**

Cultural capital is the signaling of cultural characteristics that are needed to be allowed membership in a particular social network (Bourdieu 1986). It manifests itself in elements such as tastes, knowledge, language, accents and dressing (Bourdieu 1986)). Due to their hybrid position, mixed-race individuals benefit from the knowledge and understanding of their constituent cultures. Possessing a hybrid identity is an asset as it gives them the “ability to negotiate across barriers—language, culture, race and biology” (Smith 2008:4). Theoretically, since mixed-race individuals are exposed to the different cultures of both
parents’ families, they might possess a larger pool of cultural resources, and are able to mobilize these resources selectively to construct their ethnic identity. Swidler (1986) suggests that cultural practices are likened to a toolkit of rituals, stories and symbols, which are constructed to form “strategies of action”. The cultural capital possessed by mixed-race individuals can thus be employed in a variety of ways, in varying situations.

In his study of Jews and Irish Catholics in America, Gans (1979) suggests that third and subsequent generations of migrants tended to employ easy ways of expressing their ethnic identity that did not cause undue interference in their everyday lives. There is a movement away from membership in ethnic organizations, or activities that require strong commitment and time. Gans (1979:9) notes the use of “symbols—which are visible and clear in meaning to large numbers... and easily expressed and felt”—to express ethnic belonging and affiliation. Such “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1979) takes the form of surface activities such as dress, speaking style, ethnic foods, celebration of ethnic holidays, etc. As such, the variety and combinations of expressing one’s ethnic identity is boundless.

Similar to Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital, Cote (1996) discusses the concept of “identity capital”, which provides the resources to deploy one’s social identity discerningly. Individuals draw on “tangible assets” such as dress, speech patterns, culture-specific behaviors and social skills to manage their identity. In the case of mixed-race individuals, we can examine how they employ personal deportments to negotiate and construct their identity.
Methodology

Qualitative methods provide the ability for researchers to understand the complex experiences of multiracial individuals (Root 1992). Accordingly, semistandardized interviews (Berg 2009) were administered to 12 respondents (Appendix A) of mixed parentage, where interviewees were asked a list of questions (Appendix B) pertaining to experiences wherein they felt their racial/ethnic identity was salient. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour, and were recorded using a sound-recorder. This study involves the retelling of experience of someone “who is identified as having some knowledge or expertise with the topic at-hand” (Jackson 2012:46). The interviews were constructed to examine the ways in which respondents interpreted and constituted their self-identity vis-à-vis fixed racial categories.

Sampling Decisions

My research focuses on biracial individuals whose parents each belong to one of the three main races—Chinese, Malays, and Indians—in Singapore. To narrow down the scope of my research, I exclude individuals whose parents were both Muslims before marriage to each other. According to Lee (1988:258), even as early as 1984, “about half of all interethnic marriages occur among Muslims (i.e, Malay-Muslim, Indian-Muslim), even though Muslim marriages comprise less than one-fifth of all marriages” in Singapore. Since religion is an overriding factor, studying the individuals that are result of such unions might skew my findings more towards the role Islam plays in the negotiation of identity(s).

Since my research focuses on hybrid identities of mixed-race individuals and the negotiation of that identity, it targets young adults (as opposed to children), aged 21-30, as they are better able to articulate their experiences, perceptions and reasons for making specific choices in different contexts. This target group is also selected because how this group of people negotiate their identity(s) will have ramifications for the future—how they raise their children—and can have public policy implications for the future of mixed-race Singaporeans.

For this research, I used snowball sampling to locate respondents from the interviewees I had already interviewed through personal contacts. Due to the small percentage of mixed-race individuals that fall within my target group, snowball sampling is the best way to locate “difficult-to-reach populations and subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in the study” (Berg 2009:51).
My interview sample takes into consideration the above-mentioned racial combinations of parents (of the interviewees), which will allow the findings to be more generalizable to mixed-race individuals in Singapore. To account for gender differences, I ensured that half my sample consisted of females, and the other half males. Table 1 in Appendix A summarizes the parentage of the interviewees.

**Gaining Access**

After obtaining the contact information of potential respondents through snowball sampling, I sent them an email stating my intention of interviewing them, and an information sheet outlining the summary of the project. I assured them that their identities will be kept confidential—pseudonyms will be used in place of their real names, and personal identifiable particularities that could possibly undermine their anonymity will be omitted.

After agreeing to let me do the interview, I followed-up with a phone call to set an appropriate time and location for the interview. To ensure the comfort level of the interviewee so as to elicit more uninhibited responses, interviews were conducted at sufficiently conducive locations that respondents were familiar with (i.e, school, home, cafes, etc.) so as to prevent unnecessary distractions.

**Data Collection**

In-depth interviews are the principal method in the gathering of research data since my research seeks to understand the lived experiences—perceptions, strategies employed, opportunities and difficulties they face in the negotiation of their self-identity—of mixed-race individuals through the narration of experiences at different points in their lives (see interview questions in Appendix B). According to Ritchie & Lewis (2003:36), interviews “provide an opportunity for detailed investigation of people’s personal perspectives for in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomena is located, and for very detailed subject coverage”.

This research uses semistandardised interviews in which “questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order, but the interviewee is allowed the freedom to digress” (Berg 2009:107). Depending on the information respondents provide, probes are used to allow interviewees to elaborate upon their experiences. As an interviewer,
it is important to “achieve a balance between hearing the participant’s story and probing for processes” (Holstein & Gubrium 2003:314). I allow the responses of the interviewee to lead the direction of the interview and digress from the interview schedule—allowing him/her to elaborate on experiences—to obtain more information. Also, engaging in semistandardized interviews allows me the flexibility to venture into topics that are of importance to the respondents, which I might have overlooked in the review of prior research done.

Additionally, topics such as instances of racial discrimination (see Appendix B) are sensitive in nature and interviewing the subjects face-to-face allows me to build rapport with the interviewees in the hope of eliciting more uninhibited responses. The issue of racism is “entirely absent from official discourse and public debate in Singapore” (Velayutham 2007:1), and as such, admitting upfront that one’s family and friends are racist is generally unheard of—thus stressing the importance of anonymity of my respondents’ identity.

Before the commencement of the interview, I chatted with my respondents to build rapport and to “set the subjects at ease” (Berg 2009:143). Also, each interviewee was given an informed consent form that stated briefly how the interview would progress (i.e, presence of sound recorder), assurance that all information would be kept strictly confidential, and the option of pulling-out from the interview at any point during the process. I also furnished the respondents with my contact number and that of the ethics department at the university and stated that if at any time, if he/she did not feel comfortable with the information provided, he/she has the choice of retracting the entire interview.

The interview schedule (Appendix B) starts off with demographic questions, which are non-threatening and simple to answer (Berg 2009). Next, questions pertaining directly to how respondents negotiate their identity in various situations are categorized based on social institutions (i.e, family, friends, school/work). Recollection of their biographies, starting from when they were growing up, to family and then school/work help give the interview a logical and coherent flow that will allow respondents to organize their thoughts and hopefully give more thorough responses.

A sound recorder was used during the interviews. After which, all 12 interviews were transcribed verbatim. In the interview transcripts and final paper, pseudonyms are used in place of real names. Certain particularities and identifiers (i.e, the institution one is studying or working in) that might possibly reveal the identity of the interviewees are also removed.
Only basic demographic information such as age, the race of their parents, and sex are revealed.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using a qualitative grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This approach “leads the researcher from studying concrete realities to rendering a conceptual understanding of them” (Holstein & Gubrium 2003:311). After the interviews were transcribed, the qualitative data was analyzed systematically.

Firstly, initial coding was used to “begin making analytic decisions about the data” (Holstein & Gubrium 2003:320). I started off categorizing the interview data broadly based on respondents’ experiences of being biracial within the different social institutions (i.e, family, school/work, friends)—as exemplified in the interview schedule (Appendix B). From these broad categories, I sorted the data and picked out codes that were related to my research interest (i.e, negotiation of hybrid identities). Examples of these include Singapore’s multicultural framework, perceptions of being mixed-race, resources used to express ethnic identity, expression of ethnic identity in various situations, inquiries on race and ambiguous phenotype.

Following this, I proceeded to consult the scholarly literature on identity and lived experiences of multiracial individuals, and the possible theoretical frameworks that could provide an overarching structure to understand the negotiation of multiracial identities. Going through the interview transcripts over again, I carried out focused coding (Glaser & Strauss 1967), wherein I gave attention to the codes that were picked out during initial coding, and teased out those that appeared most frequently.

According to Holstein & Gubrium (2003:321) “focused codes are more abstract, general and analytically incisive than many of the initial codes that they subsume”. From the review of the relevant literature, the following focused codes were singled out: ethnic self-identity, ambiguous phenotype, the choices mixed-race individuals possess, and the strategies they employ to resist being placed in a single racial category.

After focused coding was completed, I continued to review the scholarly literature with reference to the focus codes, and the concept of hybridity emerged as an overarching
theoretical framework that represented a “fit with the empirical realities present in multiple
interviews” (Holstein & Gubrium 2003:322). Within this research, the specific theories that
fell under the purview of the concept of hybridity include reflexivity of ethnic self-identity
(Du Bois 1903; Giddens 1991), situational ethnicity and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Cote
1996; Gans 1979). In essence, after these core concepts were identified, effort was made to
relate the concepts together thematically to form a cohesive and integrated exposition of the
phenomenon of hybridity in Singapore.
Data Analysis

Through the grounded theory approach, a few themes emerged strongly in the interviews. Firstly, even though some interviewees asserted that Singapore ought to move towards a raceless society, race continues to constitute a central part of their self-identity. Secondly, due to their ambiguous phenotype, respondents constantly face inquiries about “what they are”. This has led to the emergence of ‘scripts’ they employ in response to such inquiries. Next, I consider the cultural capital that mixed-race individuals possess, which allow them to make certain choices when navigating various social situations. Finally, the strategies that these individuals employ to resist being placed in discrete racial categories are examined.

Centrality of Race in Self-Identity

Race is a central feature in the self-identity of all the interviewees. Even respondents who espoused the ideal of a raceless society expressed the salience of race in their lives. The prominence of their racial identity is constantly being reified through the inquiries they face from everyday interactions with people. When asked if race was important, and what the notion of race meant to them, respondents gave a plethora of perspectives.

**Chelsea**: It’s something people pick out from the start—first impressions. When I introduce myself, they ask me what race I am. So it’s important... it defines who I am.

**John Paul**: I think race matters, but not majorly. People ask me what race I am all the time. They can’t figure me out. It’s usually at the initial stages, thereafter, I don’t think it matters that much.

**Fatin**: To be honest, I’ve never really thought much about it. But I think race is important because it defines the traditions and cultures in our lives.

**Andrea**: I was first aware of it when people asked many questions or stared when I went out with my mum. We are of different color, so people always stare.

**Marcus**: I am indifferent to whether race is important or not but I am certain that I am constantly being made aware that race is a means for our society to classify, to separate and to group individuals.

Respondents were asked to state if they preferred to be mixed-race or of a single race and all the respondents stated that they were proud to be mixed-race. For the interviewees, their articulation of what it means to be mixed-race tended to be how they identified with each constituent race.
Chelsea: I feel like it’s really the best of both worlds. I know details and information about both races—things that other Chinese wouldn’t know about Indian culture and vice versa.

Hakim: Being mixed is to be unique and special. It’s a combination of my Malay and Indian roots.

John Paul: I would want both my races to be reflected on my identification card, because having roots from both sides is important. My identity is both as an Indian and as a Chinese, and in my name, I have an English and a Chinese name, so it brings a greater need to reflect both races.

The form of hybridity evident in the respondents I spoke to can be conceptualized as the possession of two sets of cultural capital that will allow them to navigate different situations, with different groups of people. This is in line with Du Bois’ (1903) concept of “two-ness”, as respondents embody two racial identities simultaneously—respondents suggest that the combination of the two racial identities and the occupation of an in-between space that spans both racial categories characterize their conception of a hybrid identity.

Dealwis & David (2010) suggest that the self is reflexive—can look upon itself as an object—and categorizes itself in certain ways in relation to other social categories and classifications. Through this process, one’s identity is formed. Race is central to the self-identity of mixed-race Singaporeans because they are situated in a society that places emphasis on defined racial categories (i.e, CMIO), and therefore have the added task of actively positioning their ambiguous racial identity vis-à-vis these fixed categories.

Due to the occupation of an in-between space, expectations and codes of behavior of mixed-race individuals are not fixed, but instead, fluid and negotiable. There is a heightened need to reflexively negotiate their self-identity. In line with Giddens (1991), self-reflexivity is undertaken to provide the individual with a consistent sense of self, in this case, what it means to be mixed-race—which is an overlap of two racial categories. This self-understanding however, is fluid (i.e, situational)—individuals attempt to establish a consistent understanding of their self-identity and, concurrently tweak and alter their response to suit different conditions and situations (refer to Making a Choice, pp. 19).

According to Song (2003:41), an individual’s ethnic identity is a product of a dialectical process involving the individual’s self-identification and the ethnic label that outsiders assign. One’s ethnic identity is therefore not simply what the individual thinks his/her ethnicity is,
but is also governed and shaped by the designation and perception others have of him/her. This brings me to the theme on how the ambiguous phenotypical characteristics of mixed-race individuals bring with them the added task of navigating the perceptions of others.

“*What are you?*”: *Ambiguity of Phenotype*

In Singapore, the different racial categories are assumed to embody common traits, both cultural and phenotypical characteristics. The CMIO framework is so entrenched in the public sphere and private lives that for mixed-race individuals, ‘what are you?’ is a recurrent question in everyday life. For mixed-race individuals, phenotype functions as a visible signifier that destabilizes assumptions about essentialized notions of race, as it is not clear which race they belong to. This ambiguity brings with it a whole host of privileges as well as tensions.

When asked about their earliest memory when race was made salient to them, respondents gave instances wherein the people around them either probed about which race they belonged to, or made comments about their ambiguous phenotype.

*Andrea*: *The first time race became apparent to me was when I was in primary school. My PE (physical education) teacher said that I was Rojak (colloquial expression denoting a cultural mix). I didn’t know what it meant. So I went home to ask my parents. What she said wasn’t very nice.*

*John Paul*: *People always ask me what race I am. I think because I look ‘neither-here-nor-there’. I get it all the time. I think once in two days. When I buy food from stalls, meet strangers, etc.*

Six respondents added that they were often mistaken for belonging to another race. Respondents related both unpleasant and pleasant experiences with regard to the ‘case of mistaken identity’. As evident in the quotes below, this ambiguity “might lead to misrecognition and thus a potential disjuncture between how someone perceives his/her own ethnic identity and his/her identity as seen by others” (Song 2007:69). Respondents experience a tension between public perception of their race and their personal identity, and discontinuity in their perceptions of self (Giddens 1991).

*Marcus*: *Because I’m a Chindian (Chinese-Indian), I’m brown. So people think that I’m Malay. During the fasting period for Muslims, I get stares from people when I’m eating out. Maybe they think I’m Malay. Sometimes, I don’t even want to eat out during the fasting month.*
Andrea: Sometimes it's hard because the Chinese don’t see me as 'Chinese' and same with not being fully Indian. I used to try to fit in but not anymore. I don't think it's that important especially since now racial combinations are more interesting and different.

Nadia: I speak Chinese (Mandarin) to the stall owners, and they get a shock. They ask me why I can speak Chinese (because I’m half Malay). I get it all the time. I’m half Chinese, so of course I can speak Chinese.

Similar to how it might be unsettling for many when an individual’s gender is unclear, many are perturbed when they encounter an individual of mixed descent, and are unable to pin point what race they belong to. Ambiguous phenotype, within the context of Singapore is unsettling to the dominant discourse of distinct racial boundaries and racial categories that assumes the possession of common traits. This discourse pervades both the public sphere and everyday lives of Singaporeans. This is evident in the frequency that these individuals face inquiries about their race. Additionally, the experiences of the individuals bring to light how Singapore society categorizes the various races based on skin color.

Solomon: Singaporeans have stereotypes of the races. We classify based on skin color. Chinese are the fairest, Indians are dark. Malays are somewhere in the middle—brown. I would think that a Chinese-Indian gets mistaken for a Malay. Being Chinese-Malay, some people think I’m a tanned Chinese or a fair Malay.

All the respondents had a ‘script’ they repeated when posed with questions about their race. Some mentioned that they have been so accustomed to answering such questions that they run on ‘autopilot mode’ and provide the inquirer with information about the race of their parents. Four respondents such as Daniel mentioned that their parents taught them the best way of responding to such queries about their race.

Solomon: I always answer in the same way. Last time, it was harder to tell people ‘what I was’ because I didn’t know what I was. But now, it’s easy. I tell them I’m half Malay, half Chinese. I don’t see a need to explain further unless they probe.

Daniel: When I was little, my parents taught me what to say: if people ask, tell them your mum is Chinese and your dad is Indian. So I stuck to it. I think it really helped that they taught me what to say. If not, I wouldn’t know how to reply.

Due to the ambiguity of their phenotype, friends often forget the interviewees are mixed-race. They are therefore faced with the task of having to deal with racially insensitive remarks. Sara stated that her Chinese friends often forget that she has dietary restrictions due to her religion
All the interviewees mentioned that they have had instances where racist jokes about either of their constituent races were made in their presence. Respondents generally had two reactions: (a) Ignore and laugh it off or, (b) remind their friends that they are mixed-race. These can be seen as ways in which mixed-race individuals either attempt to resist or subvert instances of racism.

**Zakir:** Racist jokes are very common. I don’t consider myself exclusively Malay, so I don’t really take what they say to heart. They would say that Malays are very slack and lazy. My friends don’t mean it. I would be such a wet blanket if I took it too seriously.

**Andrea:** I don’t like people to talk bad about Indians. My friends sometimes forget that I’m Chindian (Chinese-Indian). So when they make racist remarks about Indians, I remind them that I’m half Indian. But I don’t do it seriously. I tell them jokingly. But I mean it.

As evident in the experiences the respondents related, their ambiguous phenotype “means that they may be subject to both implicit and explicit expectations of others to justify and explain their very existence—what are you?” (Song 2007:64). These individuals have to constantly navigate others’ perceptions of the specific races.

**Making a Choice**

When asked if they noted any changes in behavior when interacting with groups of people belonging to different races, most respondents stated that they stood by their biracial identity, and did not alter the way they behaved. However, when posed with questions regarding how they acted around friends and family, there were inconsistencies—respondents tended to ‘adjust’ themselves accordingly based on whom they were interacting with.

Interviewees gave instances in which they ‘played up’ a particular racial identity more than the other when interacting with people belonging to that race. For example, Sara stated that her usual group of friends is Chinese, but mentioned that during the fasting month of Ramadan, she would be in the company of her Muslim friends during lunch breaks.

**Sara:** Ramadan is probably the only time I hang out with my Malay friends. I speak Malay around them, and ‘act’ more Malay. But usually, I hang out with Chinese people more. With them [Chinese friends], I’m more relaxed about my dietary restrictions, and I usually speak a mixture of English and Mandarin. I also don’t mind going to non-halal restaurants with them. I just don’t eat pork. But with my
Malay friends, I always eat from the Malay stall. They’ll probably judge me if I ate non-halal food.

Respondents expressed their varying opinions about what it means to ‘act’ a certain race. These ranged from language choice, engagement in certain activities, conversation topics, dress, types of food, etc. These represent the range of cultural capital that is specific to a particular race. These cultural resources are essential for one to be accepted into particular social groups (i.e., racial groups). Accordingly, since mixed-race individuals possess two sets of cultural capital (from each constituent race), they have the potential to draw on these stocks of knowledge to navigate different cultures and assert their identity in various situations.

Zakir: With a group of Chinese, I identify more with being Chinese. I listen and watch the same programmes. And we mainly speak Mandarin. With a group of Malay friends, I have to eat at Halal stalls. And the things we talk about are just different.

John Paul: Around my Chinese friends, I find it more comfortable to converse in Mandarin. I “act” more Chinese in this instance. I think the only way I could say I “act” more Indian is in relation to Indian food (in describing or eating it with friends.) Malayalam (language of the Indian state of Kerela) and traditional dresses are aspects I hope to discover more to enrich my Indian identity.

A common consensus regarding what ‘acting’ a certain race means is the type of food one consumes, and the festivals one celebrate. For example, Nadia mentioned that during occasions such as Hari Raya (Malay festival), she felt exceptionally ‘Malay’ because of the food she consumed and the ethnic costume she would don. Marcus also suggested that he felt most ‘Indian’ when he had Indian food at home or when celebrating certain ethnic festivals.

Nadia: I feel the most Malay during Muslim festivals like Hari Raya. We eat Malay food—Rendang, Sayur Lodeh, Ayam Goreng—the typical Malay foods. My sister and I wear the Baju Kurung (traditional Malay costume). And we’re surrounded by Malay relatives. I don’t think I can get any more Malay than that.

Solomon specified that Chinese and Malays generally spoke about different things. He gave an insightful comment, stating that the Chinese do not like to talk about issues regarding racism. On the other hand, issues about race relations and racism are common topics amongst his Malay friends.

Solomon: Chinese don’t like talking about racial issues. With my Chinese friends, I don’t even mention racial problems in Singapore because they would say that I’m over-thinking things. Being the majority, I guess they don’t see things the way I see it. With my Malay friends, race issues are a major topic we talk about. To them, racism is very real.
Solomon’s understanding of both the Malay and Chinese races can be seen as a translation of Du Bois’ (1903) notion of a “double consciousness”, which allows individuals to view things from both perspectives—in this case, a racial majority and minority position. Being mixed-race accords one the advantage of being able to take a reflexive position to view his/her self from another’s perspective (i.e. different racial position).

Some respondents suggested that they ‘code switch’ depending on who they were interacting with. Marcus and Andrea stated that they feel more comfortable conversing in Mandarin with their Chinese friends, rather than English. Zarifah also mentioned that while in the company of her Malay friends or family, she usually speaks Malay since everyone in that setting was doing so.

**Marcus**: When I’m with my Chinese friends, I speak Chinese. Because all of them speak Chinese too. So it’s only natural. It makes me feel more included. Because I look different to start with, so speaking Chinese would help me to fit in better. Now it’s just a habit.

**Andrea**: My Chinese friends like to listen to Chinese songs. I like Jay Chou. We speak Chinese because we’re very cheena (a term to mean ‘acting very Chinese’). We watch Chinese dramas and shows.

**Zarifah**: All my Malay friends speak Malay. So although I’m more comfortable speaking in English, I just follow them.

The mixed-race individuals being interviewed were aware that asserting different ethnic affiliations would shape their interactions with others. Culture, in this case, likened to language, is a code, and individuals utilize it selectively in a given context. However, as the “context changes, those with the requisite competence simply code switch” (Song 2003:107). Mixed-race individuals constantly fashion their affiliations to the different races—constructing identities that suit them, and which “enables them to belong in both worlds” (Song 2003:107).

From the responses, it is evident that the interviewees engage in “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1979) to express their ethnic identity. Surface activities such as consuming ethnic food, celebrating ethnic festivals, and language choice pose itself as “easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity that do not conflict with other ways of life” (Gans 1979:8). This is in contrary to time-consuming commitments such as membership in ethnic organizations. The
range of resources gives mixed-race individuals the breadth to customize the manner in which they manage their expression of ethnic identity to others.

In addition to using their cultural capital for the purpose of fitting-in, mixed-race individuals possess the option of choosing to distance themselves from stereotypes of their constituent races. It is interesting to note that some of the respondents interviewed were aware of stereotypes that ‘plagued’ certain races, and even went so far as to verify that these negative stereotypes were evident in certain people. As such, it is important for them distance themselves from these stereotypes.

**Zarifah:** I don’t hang out with all kinds of Malays. You know the typical Malays, the Muts (term that has derogatory connotations aimed at Malays)? I don’t particularly like them. I never want to be seen around them. They’re wannabes. I would never get a boyfriend who’s a Mut. It’s just impossible to clique with them.

**Chelsea:** People have this idea that typical Indians are quite smelly. They put coconut oil in their hair, eat a lot of curry. But I’m not that kind. They are the traditional kinds. I don’t eat so much curry. And I definitely won’t put coconut oil in my hair. I don’t even speak Tamil or whatever Indian languages. I guess I’m more modern?

It is noteworthy to point out that in both examples above, the respondents mentioned that it were the ‘typical’ Malays and Indians that tended to fit the stereotypes. The use of the word ‘typical’ indicates an implicit assumption that they were not ‘typical’, and therefore stood apart from these negative stereotypes. Through justifying how they were different from a regular Malay or Indian, Zarifah and Chelsea unintentionally subscribed and contributed to the perpetuation of such stereotypes. In essence, they took part in ethnic disidentification to distance themselves from such stereotypes.

However, three respondents I spoke to chose to take the active stance of contesting negative stereotypes of their constituent race. Specifically, Solomon who is Malay-Chinese, was aware of stereotypes about Malays. Instead of stating how he did not fit into such stereotypes, he attempted to contest such stereotypes, using himself as an example.

**Solomon:** I guess you know the typical stereotypes of Malays as lazy, cannot go to university, school dropout. The usual, you know? Well, sometimes I feel the need to prove to everyone that Malays aren’t good-for-nothing. Now, I’m the chief-editor of the school newspaper, so it’s like I’m making the Malay community proud. Telling the world that I’m Malay and successful. I guess I play up my identity as a Malay when I gain success in whatever area it may be.
In essence, Solomon engaged in “disidentifying strategies to disrupt stereotypical assumptions” (Song 2003:21) people have of Malays. In choosing to take the stance of the minority race and using his success to exult the Malay community, he “actively participates in efforts to counter and reshape the meanings and images associated with their ethnic identities” (Song 2003:21).

From the above examples, it is revealed that despite having a consistent self-identity as being mixed-race, one’s ethnic identity is altered in different situations. Individuals possess a portfolio of ethnic identities that are “more or less salient in various situations and vis-à-vis various audiences. As audiences change, the socially-defined array of ethnic choices open to the individual changes” (Song 2003:17). “Ethnicity can be activated in particular times and situations by material and other interests; people can use their ethnic affiliations and ties as resources in a variety of contexts, in response to current needs” (Song 2003:7). This situational ethnicity reveals how dominant racial norms that reiterate discrete racial categories, can be destabilized by mixed-race individuals that transgress racial boundaries.

This finding is contrary to Williams’ (1997) theory of “passing”, which states that biracial individuals have the ability to switch between two racial groups to engage in racial opportunism. The respondents maintained their hybrid identity while simultaneously drawing on the cultural capital of a particular race to ‘play up’ or distance themselves from a specific racial identity.

There is an emergence of ‘biracial cultural capital’, which enables mixed-race individuals to fit into two cultures. Due to the need for the constant construction of their cultural identity (because of their ambiguous position), mixed-race individuals possess a diverse stock of “cultural toolkits” (Smith 2008:344) as compared to monoracial individuals. This involves an entire host of cultural capital ranging “practices, preferences, ideologies, consumption, linguistic styles, clothing, music tastes, etc.” (Smith 2003:344).

In line with Blau & Brown (2001), mixed-race individuals are able to exercise reflexivity with reference to their “two-ness”. Since these individuals have understandings about the culture of two racial groups, there is some leeway within which they alter their identities depending on situation. Mixed-race individuals possess stocks of knowledge about their constituent cultures, which they either ‘play up’ or ‘downplay’ depending on their intentions.
As in the case of Marcus, Andrea and Zarifah, possessing this biracial cultural capital meant that they were able make the choice to either become more included within a particular racial group, or distance themselves from certain racial groups.

Gans (1979) suggested that there are limitless ways in which individuals can draw on their cultural resources to express their ethnic identity. It is therefore impossible to formulate an exhaustive framework that can encompass the range of choices that biracial individuals possess. This research, nonetheless, identifies common resources that mixed-race individuals draw upon to assert their ethnic identity (i.e, food, language, conversation topics, etc.) What is of importance is less so about the ways in which mixed-race individuals lay claim to specific identities, but more the “dance of identities they perform as they pick their choices of cultural identification according to the occasion” (Ho 2011:742).

**Strategies of Resistance**

Individuals of mixed-race constantly face a disjuncture between their personal ethnic identity and placement into official race categories. Within the CMIO framework (mixed-race individuals born before 2010 were officially categorized under the race of the father), mixed-race individuals must navigate being raced by a bureaucratic system, and align this administrative process to their personal experience and construction of identity. Individuals of mixed descent are particularly affected by this misalignment, often unable to identify with their allocated label, or being arbitrarily defined by phenotype.

There are various strategies that respondents employ to resist being placed into a single race category—as espoused by the Singapore government. Respondents were asked which of these best represented them: (a) Chinese/Malay/Indian—Chinese/Malay/Indian (depending on their parentage), (b) Chinese/Malay/Indian, (c) Singaporean or (d) Others. This question was posed to tease out how the interviewees would want others to see them, as well as how they choose to see themselves. Eight interviewees picked option (c), two picked option (d), and the remaining five picked option (a).

*Sara:* *I would pick Singaporean. Putting a single race is definitely out of the question— although it is reflected in my identification card—because I’m not just Indian. I am also Chinese. I am both.*
**Hakim**: Singaporean. Why not hyphenated? Because I still have to pick a dominant race even if I were to be hyphenated. I chose Singaporean because the rest just wouldn’t do it for me.

**Zakir**: Every time people ask me ‘what are you?’, I tell them that I am human. People need to learn that race should not be a deciding factor for anything. We all belong to the human race don’t we?

As expressed by Sara, mixed-race individuals experience a tension between how the state classifies them and how they identify themselves. As such, choosing to identify as a Singaporean or in the case of Zakir who chose to identify himself as “human”, rather than their racial affiliation, can be seen as a strategy to resist the logic of multiculturalism, as well as “overcoming the rigid and fixed idealization of race” (Velayathum 2007:4).

When probed further about why they chose to identify as such, the respondents who picked “Singaporean” noted that it was not because they felt nationalistic, but because they could not fit neatly into one particular race category. Identifying as Singaporean was therefore a default as it could best encapsulate their mixed identity.

**Daniel**: I don’t like the idea of race. One thing the Singapore government can do for me is to remove the whole idea of race. First of all, I don’t even fit into any of these categories. You might say putting both my races might be a good option. But there’s this entire preoccupation with race. We are all Singaporeans; we shouldn’t be classified based on our race. Chinese, Indian, Malay, we’re all the same. Isn’t that what racial harmony day encourages?

Even though a majority of the respondents noted that cultural practices and traditions of one race was more dominant (i.e, more familiar and comfortable) than the other, it is noteworthy that when asked to state explicitly what their dominant race was, all of the interviewees refused to indicate a single race. In this way, they resist being placed into a single racial category, even if they tended to conform to one race more than the other.

The interviewees defiantly resist being placed into a fixed racial category through asserting their desired identity. In essence, mixed-race individuals possess the agency to make a choice regarding their identities and racial affiliations. However, this assertion is only exercised within the confines of the interactions in their everyday lives. Individuals resolved the disjuncture between their personal identity and public perception of their racial identity by allowing for public and private differences—creating their own category of mixed, which they used in informal and interpersonal settings.
**Conclusion**

Race is an irreducible and immutable fact in Singapore that mixed-race individuals must come to grips with. Multiculturalism, the discourse on which Singapore’s nation building endeavor is founded on, continues to “constrain and conceal the complexity of everyday life identities for Singaporeans” (Rocha 2011:106). The constant reiteration of discrete racial categories by the government, and its insistence that everyone subscribes to a particular race has obscured the recognition of hybrid identities.

This research sought to explore how mixed-race individuals—who epitomize cultural hybridity—negotiate their identity within a society that places emphasis on distinct racial classifications. From in-depth interviews conducted, it is apparent that race identity is salient to them, although many attempt to subvert the notion of race. Through a reflexive understanding of their self-identity vis-à-vis the expectation of essential cultural characteristics of each racial group, the respondents created a coherent sense of what it means to possess a hybrid identity—combination of two racial identities. Although they had a consistent self-identity, they still had the flexibility to alter their responses in various situations and with different groups of people.

The notion of fixed racial categories is so ingrained in both the public and private spheres that any individual falling outside this norm is constantly being scrutinized. The ambivalent phenotypical characteristics give mixed-race individuals the added task of having to situate their ethnicity vis-à-vis the perceptions of others—constructing their identity based on what they think their personal ethnic identity is, and what others think their ethnic identity is. Negotiation of their racial identity is therefore done on an everyday level as they interact with people.

Mixed-race individuals possess hybrid cultural capital that stems from the multiplicity of heritages they have. Instead of being a member of an ethnic organization, respondents made use of “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1979) to establish their ethnic identity depending on whom they were with. Occupying a hybrid position, mixed-race individuals have the choice to either ‘play up’ similarities to feel included, or understate them to distance themselves from negative stereotypes. The choice they have represents the fluid nature of ethnic identities and
the “processes through which racialization takes place both discursively and through the material embodiment of race” (Ho 2011:732).

One limitation of this study is the limited number of respondents being interviewed. As such, it is not possible to generalize the results to represent the sentiments of all mixed-race Singaporeans. This research made use of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by sampling a relevant range of people (i.e, mixed-race individuals), with the intention of commenting on the wider societal implications without directly representing it. The findings provide an insight into the construction of meanings and lived experiences of these individuals and in so doing, give this understudied group an avenue to voice their opinions and difficulties. Additionally, this research can provide an impetus for more studies on hybrid identities in Singapore, and subsequently urge the government to take an active effort in recognizing mixed-race individuals.

Historically, mixed-race individuals are compelled to fit themselves into one of the established racial categories—like those defined in definitions of multiculturalism. Instead of “recognizing or legitimating the multiplicity of heritages, the politicized discourse around racial identity tends to be exclusive in nature” (Song 2003:63). Falling outside the prevailing set of racial classifications, the recognition of the presence of the “third space of hybridity” (Song 2003) can have liberating effects for mixed-race individuals who constantly have to navigate perceptions and negotiate their racial identity.

Attempting to stay competitive in an increasingly globalized world, Singapore has started to shift its focus to cosmopolitanism—characterized by experiences of meeting, mixing and juxtaposition of different cultures (Ho 2011). Mixed-race individuals who represent the subversion of essentialized notions of race have to be recognized before Singapore is ready to embrace the ideals of cosmopolitanism and the diversity it brings. In light of the movement from multiculturalism to cosmopolitanism, mixed-race individuals represent the face of our future as they personify the ability to “freely flit across racial borders, and as a birthright to interact with assorted people and provide the seed for the destruction of race as a stratifying concept” (Song 2003:83).
## Appendix A: Table of Interviewees

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race of Father</th>
<th>Race of Mother</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Malay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hakim</td>
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<td>Indian</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Paul</td>
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<td>Chinese</td>
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**Table 1:** Interviewees sorted by gender and race of parents
Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Personal

What’s your official race?
Is race important to you?
Have you felt pressure to identify yourself as belonging to one race?
Do you consider yourself more of a [Chinese/Malay/Indian]?
Have you encountered any forms of racial discrimination?

Family

Do you celebrate ethnic festivals?
What kinds of food do you usually have at home?
What languages do you speak at home?
Do you subscribe to a religion?
Would you consider your family to be more of one race?

School

Official mother tongue? How comfortable are you speaking it?
Do you have more friends of a certain race?
Do people of different races cluster together?

Friends

Do you face inquiries about your race? How do you respond?
With a group of [Chinese/Malay/Indian], do you identify more with [Chinese/Malay/Indian]?
What does it mean to be/act [Chinese/Malay/Indian]?

Which best describes you?

I consider myself:
   a. Exclusively biracial
   b. Exclusively [Chinese/Malay/Indian]
   c. Singaporean
   d. Others
References


