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**SINGAPORE**

**Race and Romance in Singapore: Investigating the lived  
experiences of Singaporeans in interracial intimacies**

**MOHAMMAD HAZIM ZULFADHLI BIN ROHADI**

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial  
fulfilment of requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

**2021**

## Statement of Originality

I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

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Mohammad Hazim Zulfadhli Bin Rohadi



## Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis **does not** contain any materials from papers published in peer-reviewed journals or from papers accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author.

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*Hazim*

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## **Abstract**

The number of Singaporeans who enter into inter-ethnic unions have undergone a consistent increase over the past decades, highlighting a growing demographic. Previous research rarely investigated the lived experiences of these individuals and garnered little insight into the nuances present in their relationships. By using semi-structured in-depth interviews, this paper investigates the lived experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies to highlight three key thematic concerns present in their relationships. Firstly, I establish how the social networks of an individual often have a significant impact on the success and nature of their relationship, particularly if those sentiments come from the family unit. Next, I investigate the ways that these individuals learn to deal with problems within their relationship where race is perceived as a contentious issue. Finally, I explore how these individuals talk about the kinds of racism that they may experience, coming from the positionality of being in an interracial relationship. The data garnered from this research shows the significance of interracial intimacies as sites of investigation and highlights the complex issues and problems that individuals in interracial unions often deal with. This study hopes to contribute to the wider literature surrounding interracial intimacies by establishing the theoretical link between public narratives of race and romance and how those perceptions and attitudes can often find themselves inextricably linked to private romantic relationships.

## **Introduction**

The Singapore state has, since its independence, touted the principles of multiculturalism and multiracialism as a principal tenet of its founding. It often takes pride in its racially harmonious society as one of the foundations to its success as a nation-state. As the contact points between racial groups has grown increasingly intimate, the rates of inter-ethnic marriages have grown significantly, particularly within the past two decades. When looking into this particular issue, it came as a surprise to me that very little research had been previously conducted. In fact, previous major research (Hassan & Benjamin, 1973; Hassan, 1974; Lee et al, 1974; Kuo & Hassan, 1976) were primarily conducted in the 1970s where rates of inter-ethnic marriages remain relatively low, at between 4-6% of all total marriages. A major point of argument brought forth in said research argues that in a society that encourages and expects ethnic groups to maintain its boundaries such as in Singapore, inter-ethnic unions were seen as an anomaly. However, as of latest data available on the issue, inter-ethnic marriages in 2020 make up almost 1 in 5 of all total marriages, highlighting a significant shift in demographic trends since the time that major research on the issue has been conducted. By delving deeper into this growing demographic, I seek to understand how individuals in interracial intimacies often talk about and grapple with the issue of race in their relationships and further elucidate how those experiences highlights shifting attitudes on race in Singapore.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, I investigate the lived experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies and explore how they experience racialized dynamics. First, I look at the ways in which positive or negative affirmation from the social networks of individuals influence decision making in the relationship. I then explore the types of strategies that these individuals typically employ as a way to deal with situations where race is perceived to be problematic in the relationship. Finally, I investigate how these

individuals experience the issues of race and racism within their relationships and explore what those experiences tell us about the racial anxieties and tensions present in society.

This research highlights the significance of the experiences shared by individuals in interracial intimacies by drawing on their unique positionality whereby race is perceived as a contentious and problematic issue in those relationships. In doing so, this study hopes to contribute to the wider literature concerned with the lived experiences of those in interracial intimacies within a contemporary Singapore context as well as elucidate the ways in which individuals learn to respond and negotiate to situations in which boundaries between ethnic and racial groups are growing increasingly porous.

### **Background and history**

At the time of this writing, the Singapore public has had to grapple with several unpleasant incidents of overt racism in a relatively short span of time. In May of 2021, the Straits Times reported on an incident in which a woman of Indian ethnicity was the victim of physical and verbal abuse in which the accused shouted a racial slur at her (Menon, 2021). In June 2021, a viral video depicting a man of Chinese ethnicity confronting a mixed-race couple in the streets had made its rounds. In the video, the man was recorded berating the couple for dating across racial lines (Tan, 2021). Just a few days later, another viral video began making its round, this time of a woman of Chinese ethnicity purposely, loudly, and seemingly angrily hitting a gong in order to signal her displeasure at her neighbour of Indian ethnicity, who was performing a Hindu ritual involving bells (Ang, 2021). These spates of incidents have all since garnered the attention of the local authorities, prompting police investigations into them. Further still, local ministers have come forth expressing their views on the matter. Current Education Minister Chan Chun Sing said in a Facebook post that “Racial intolerance goes against our founding values as a nation and has no place in our

society” (Ganapathy, 2021). Current Home Affairs and Law Minister K Shanmugam stated in another Facebook post that “I used to believe that Singapore was moving in the right direction on racial tolerance and harmony. Based on recent events, I am not so sure anymore.” (Leo, 2021). Current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has also come forth stating that these incidents “goes against everything that our multiracial society stands for, and the mutual respect and racial harmony that we hold so dear.” Furthermore, on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) conducted a joint forum on race and racism in which Finance Minister Lawrence Wong spoke at length addressing these recent incidents. In a speech that he gave, he acknowledges that while not all racist incidents may go documented or viral, “racism still exists in Singapore ... in our streets, our neighbourhood and our workplaces”. He also makes a point to recognize how race-based policies such as the GRC system, the CMIO model, housing policies, and bilingualism have played a role in shaping Singaporean’s attitudes on race. (In full: Lawrence Wong’s speech at the IPS-RSIS forum, 2021). Various other ministers have also since spoken up such as Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu, and Minister for Transport Ong Ye Kung (Cheng, 2021). These incidents coupled with public statements from high profile figures in the government highlights a growing concern towards the state of racial relations in the country.

In a country that often prides itself as multiracial/multicultural upon which its society is built on a principle of racial harmony, these incidents were often painted as and perceived to be one-off events, incidents that some have argued were not representative nor indicative of the overall state of racial relations. An editorial published in the local Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao titled “Expanding public space to promote racial harmony” argues that these incidents were not indicative of the fault lines between racial groups in Singapore. Rather, the piece shifts the blame towards things such as the onset of

a new wave of Covid-19 infections, the growing advent of social media, and the influence of foreign ideologies. The article went so far as to dismiss ideas such as “Critical Race Theory” and “Chinese privilege”, arguing that these ideas were of foreign origins, and that their use creates a sense that we have bigger problems than we actually have. (Expanding public space to promote racial harmony, 2021). Indeed, when a country such as Singapore has gone through decades of perceived racial harmony, owing to the lack of overt racial riots and tensions, such incidents can often come as a shock and an affront to this perceived harmony.

In the short span of time in which these incidents have occurred, many more articles have been published in local media outlets discussing and debating the issues of race and racism in Singapore. This paper seeks to contribute to this growing debate through its study and subsequent discussion of interracial intimacies in Singapore. Studying and recording the lived experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies can contribute towards a deeper understanding of minority experiences by the majority.

By the term interracial intimacies, I refer to the growing number of individuals who are involved in an intimate romantic relationship with another person of a different ethnic and racial background. Indeed, what has become apparent is the increasing number of Singaporeans who have chosen to date and marry across racial lines. While the phenomenon of interracial intimacies in Singapore has been previously researched, studies on this issue have grown increasingly dated with the bulk of it written in the 70s (Hassan & Benjamin, 1973; Hassan, 1974; Lee et al, 1974; Kuo & Hassan, 1976). These studies were conducted in a time in which rates of interethnic marriages remained consistently low, making up just 4-6% of total marriages. Those numbers have since quintupled in the decades that followed. In July of 2018, The Straits Times published an article titled “More mixed marriages in Singapore” in which it

highlights the growing trend of marriages between people of different races (Tan, 2018). It finds that in 2017, marriages between people of different races was at 22.1%, an increase from 16.4% just ten years ago. This corroborates with data published by the Singapore Department of Statistics in which, as of 2019, the share of inter-ethnic marriages was at 22.9%, yet another increase. The Department of Statistics defines “Inter-ethnic” marriages as marriages where both the groom and bride are of different ethnicity. This is as opposed to transnational marriages that refer to marriages involving one citizen and one non-citizen. This upward trend of inter-ethnic marriages between Singaporeans highlights a constantly growing demographic within Singapore society, one that deserves closer examination.

### **Research Objectives**

As such, this study seeks to take an exploratory approach into the issue of interracial intimacies in Singapore. In order to do so, I aim to make sense of the lived experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies in Singapore by using their experiences as sites of investigation. I look to Given (2008), who finds that lived experiences as a method of investigation can garner unique perspectives that can reveal larger social themes. A lived experience of an individual speaks to the ways in which those experiences are shaped by factors external to their own lives. The studying of lived experiences can thus 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” (Given, 2008:2). I will first examine how positive and negative social forces external to the individual can heavily influence the decision-making process within the relationship. Doing so can highlight the ways in which individuals are often constrained by social forces, even within the bounds of a seemingly private, romantic relationship. Then, I will look at the various strategies in which individuals often deal with the difficulties that are unique to being in an

interracial relationship. Exploring the strategies that these individuals employ can reveal to us a novel perspective in overcoming relationship difficulties that may otherwise not be present in a non-Inter-ethnic relationship. Lastly, I look into how these individuals talk about and respond to the issues of race and racism that they may experience within their relationship. Individuals in interracial intimacies are uniquely positioned to straddle the boundaries between racial groups. Consequently, they are privy to the racial anxieties and tensions that may exist between these groups. By examining these ideas together, I hope to elucidate the extent in which the experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies might shed light on Singapore's attitudes towards race.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter deals with the literature surrounding interracial intimacies and the key concepts that go towards explaining and understanding the lived experiences of those that engage in such romances. I will first look into the theoretical frameworks that have been used to explain the phenomena of interracial intimacies. Next, I will look at literature of interracial intimacies in Singapore to find out what can be done to further the scholarship on the nature of interracial intimacies in a contemporary setting. I will then look into how interracial intimacies are often located within specific racialized environments and how interracial couples often have to contend with social forces, primarily the family and society at large. Finally, I will look at the ways in which individuals in interracial intimacies employ certain strategies to cope with the unique set of difficulties and challenges that they may face in their relationships. Through this review, I am better able to contribute towards the literature on interracial intimacies in Singapore with my subsequent discussion.

### **Theories on interracial intimacies**

Merton's (1941) social exchange theory is often cited as one of the earliest classical works that have attempted to theoretically explain the growing phenomena of intermarriage rates. He finds that educated ethnic minorities who married into White families often did so to achieve a higher social status. The argument here is that they were able to gain the most out of their economic status through their education by also attaining a higher social status. Gordon's (1964) theories of assimilation have also been cited often as another theoretical framing to explain the growing rates of intermarriage. For Gordon, his argument lies in the belief that as majority-minority group interaction increases, minority groups tend to change their own cultural patterns and adopt the cultural patterns of the majority group. Through a seven-stage process, minority groups will find

themselves increasingly integrated into the majority group society positing that the final stage of Civic Assimilation will find the minority group fully integrated into majority society, a stage that is defined by a lack of power conflict between the two. Gordon's third stage of assimilation - Marital Assimilation - is of particular interest to scholars of interracial intimacies. He defines Marital Assimilation as the incidence when "the acceptance of the minority group has grown to the point that widespread intermarriage is acceptable", arguing that intermarriage between groups is a necessary step for full assimilation to occur within society.

Within a contemporary understanding, however, these classical theories have become increasingly dated and scholars remain divided on their relevance today. As Song (2009) points out, there is an assumption in Merton's (1941) exchange theory that intermarriage is motivated primarily around education and class. But findings by Jacobs and Labov (2002), and Qian (2005) finds that couples that intermarry tended to occupy a similar educational and class background, counter to Merton's assumptions. Classical assimilation theory has also undergone several critiques, putting into question its relevance within a contemporary setting. Critiques on the matter found classical assimilation theory problematic as it implied a degree of ubiquity and inevitability. But as Glazer (1993) argues, the effect of assimilation tends to be felt disproportionately across various racial groups, stating that "if intermarriage is taken as key evidence for powerful assimilatory forces, then blacks are not subject to these forces to the same degree as others" (p.135). Further still, Alba & Nee (1997) falls in line with said argument and states that while classical definitions of assimilation theory remain problematic, its effect as a social process can be evidently seen in the American public, although unevenly. Lewis & Ford-Robertson (2010) seeks to address this by forwarding a theory of differential assimilation to explain the disparity of interracial marriage rates between different racial groups. They found that the assimilation process is heavily influenced by a form of colour grading

that finds lighter skinned ethnic groups more easily able to assimilate (p.418). Another criticism from Qian and Lichter (2007) notes that classical assimilation theory may not be as useful in understanding contemporary interracial relations as it implies that “out-groups” and minorities are somehow naturally inclined towards adopting the mainstream/majority way of life (p.70). Instead, they look towards Alba & Nee (2009) as a way to re-examine assimilation theory and argue that “the erosion of social distance between racial/ethnic groups, which culminates in intermarriage, is a two-way, rather than an asymmetric, process involving majority and minority population” (p.70). Indeed, recognizing interracial relationships as consisting of shared experiences from both parties allows for a more sophisticated analysis on said intimacies.

### **Interracial intimacies in Singapore**

As previously mentioned, the Singapore Department of Statistics has found that there has been a steady increase of inter-ethnic marriages over the past 20 years. The latest data available indicate that almost 1 in 5 marriages are inter-ethnic (Statistics on Marriages and Divorces, 2021). However, studies on interracial intimacies in Singapore remains limited and dated and little has been done to examine the lived experiences of individuals in inter-ethnic relationships in a contemporary setting. Nevertheless, studies that have been done can provide some insight into the matter. As Lee (1988) puts it, “intermarriage occupies a special position in most models of race and ethnic relations because marital assimilation is seen as signalling the final breakdown of social barriers (p.255). However, in her own research, Lee finds that intermarriage rates then remained relatively low at between 5-6%, arguing that modernization “is not a sufficient condition for increased intermarriage” (p.262). Chung (1990), on the other hand, argues that modernization and urbanization are one of two major factors influencing ethnic integration in Singapore - the other being strategies by the government (p.48). In his study of intermarriage, he also acknowledges that factors such as the family support network and the socio-economic status of

marriage partners have a greater degree of influence in the long-term success of the relationship. Factors such as age at marriage, sex, religion, and ethnicity were rarely causes of problems in interracial marriages (1990). Rahman (2009) also finds that in the specific case of Muslim-non-Muslim marriages in Singapore, governing institutions such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the law, and the state are often implicated in the complex problem such unions hold. The state often has to strike a balance between establishing a secular right of the individual against the traditionalist approach of Muslim law. What remains clear here is that research into the area of interracial intimacies in Singapore remains sparse and dated. Little research has been done to understand the lived experiences of individuals in such unions. Further still, research that has been conducted rarely looks into the ways such relationships exist within the specific racialized nature of Singapore society. By examining these intimacies against the backdrop of contemporary Singapore, the experiences of individuals in interracial intimacies may reveal novel and shifting attitudes towards race.

### **Social forces**

When looking into interracial intimacies, scholars have paid attention to the social forces that surround these individuals. These studies often examine how the social realities have a significant bearing on the decision-making process within these interracial intimacies. The motivations and decision to enter into a relationship by an individual does not exist within a vacuum. Instead, that decision tends to be influenced by a variety of factors external to the individual. Clark-Ibanez & Felmler (2004) argue that social networks of an individual can have a strong effect on their intimate relationships and those that have an ethnically diverse social network are more inclined to date across racial lines (p.293). In fact, Childs (2006) furthers this, positing that families are typically the greatest source of animosity where interracial dating is concerned. And in cases where family may not necessarily have the power to stop or end a relationship, Rosenblatt (2009) states that families “may feel that a social contract

has been violated by the marriage” (p.8). Yancey & Lewis (2009) finds that the support network provided by families tends to reflect a racialized hierarchical system. And beyond the family, the community at large, through their support or opposition, can also be seen as a point of influence to the interracial pair (Zebroski, 1999). It is also through this lens that we can identify how familial and societal pressures can often result in tensions within interracial intimacies. In a study of inter-ethnic marriages in Malaysia by Pue & Sulaiman (2013), they found that difficulties experienced between spouses operated primarily on three levels - 1) the family, 2) mainstream society, and 3) state level actors. In a study of Black-White couples in America by Killian (2001), he also finds that on top of family and mainstream society, the realities of a racially tinged history was also a source of tension within the relationship (p.18-19). Taking these studies together, it is clear that intimate relationships between two people, particularly interracial ones, are often shaped both positively and negatively by the external forces that are outside the control of the individuals. By recognizing the context that is external to the individual, we can understand how “differences between persons may both originate and manifest themselves at a variety of systemic levels, and it is important that the interaction of these different levels be considered and understood” (Killian, 2001:3).

### **Coping mechanisms**

Finally, studies have been devoted towards understanding how individuals and couples deal with the unique challenges that they may face within interracial intimacies. A common approach by interracial couples is the use of ‘colour-blindness’ as a way to downplay and normalize their status as an interracial couple. This approach is typically done to remove themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with being an interracial couple (Killian, 2001). In her study on Black-White couples in America, Karis (2009) finds that some couples may altogether reject terms such as cross-cultural and interracial. These couples argue that such categorization fails to recognize them as individuals beyond their racial category. Colour blindness is also typically followed with an

emphasis of being in love with the person, rather than the category that they belong to, believing that “the containers of race and culture may be particularly irksome” (p.102-103). Yancey & Lewis (2009) also finds that colour blindness is a typical approach when raising biracial children and “involves deemphasizing race as a facet of identity and focusing the child on being part of the human race” (p.72). Steinbugler (2012) uses the term “strategic avoidance” to describe how interracial couples manage the difficulties that they may face. The principle of strategic avoidance is to simply not address racial difference within their relationships (p.96). Foeman & Nance (1999) finds that couples will often remove themselves “when possible from people and situations that are potentially harmful” as a way to avoid difficult conversations. Killian (2012) believes that such an approach of avoidance is a way for the couple to preserve the long-term health of their own relationship. Steinbugler (2012) also proposes an idea of boundary work in which “social actors draw symbolic boundaries to categorize people, relationships, social practices, and objects” (p.106). Through boundary work, individuals can negotiate and reshape the symbolic meanings associated with any aspect of their relationship. Leeds- Hurwitz finds that “by taking advantage of this ability of symbols to be polysemic (to convey multiple meanings simultaneously) (p.28)” couples are able to use its ambiguity as a kind of boundary work. Further still, some individuals may use boundary work as a way to offset negative stereotyping surrounding race. Karis (2003) finds that when white women were confronted with their black partner’s infidelity, “each woman explicitly made a point of saying that she did not think of her partner as disloyal or disrespectful, yet as a means of protecting them both from others’ stereotyping” (p.31).

## **Research Rationale**

In examining the literature thus far, I have found that little has been said about interracial intimacies between Singaporeans within a contemporary setting. The existing literature on the matter acknowledges the complex nature of such intimacies and recognizes how those intimacies are influenced by factors external to the relationship itself. However, limited empirical research has been done to explore and examine those factors within the lives of such individuals. Instead, I

look towards scholarship of other national contexts to plug this gap. I seek to synthesize the various literature on this issue as a way to develop a repertoire in which I am better able to examine the experiences of Singaporeans in interracial intimacies within a Singaporean context. As mentioned in previous sections, Singapore often presents itself as a multiracial/multicultural state that takes pride in its long-standing commitment towards ensuring equality between races. Should this be ‘successful,’ theories of assimilation posits that such a society would be experiencing an uptick of intermarriages between individuals from different racial backgrounds. Current trends and data presented by the state do indeed confirm this assertion. In recent decades, particularly following the turn of the century, there has been a consistent upward trend of intermarriages between Singaporeans. The combination of this upward trend against the backdrop of a racialized society like Singapore presents a productive site of inquiry in which one can better understand *how* public narratives surrounding race often finds itself intertwined within the private spheres of interracial intimacies. Individuals who engage in such intimacies are often at the forefront of having to constantly challenge and negotiate the racial boundaries that are presented to them, especially within their romantic relationships. By focusing and centering on the experiences and personal narratives of these individuals, one can reveal the nuances and contradictions present within the public narratives surrounding race in Singapore. Through this, I hope to elucidate how interracial intimacies, as sites of investigation, can reveal to us a deeper understanding of race and romance in Singapore.

## **Methodology**

### **Qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews**

This research paper utilizes the qualitative method of semi-structured in-depth interviews as a form of data collection. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who identified as having been or are currently in an interracial relationship. I used the method of in-depth interviews as a way to draw out an elaborate and more complete picture of their experiences that may not be easily gathered through a simple questionnaire or survey. The use of in-depth interviews also allowed me to capture more detailed and nuanced data (Boyce & Neale, 2006) that draws on the specific and unique experiences of my participants. The use of semi-structured interviews can also allow me to establish a purposeful conversation with the participant regarding their experiences while still affording me and the participant the flexibility to respond to one another in an effective manner (Duane, 2005). Rubin & Rubin (2012) finds that the use of this method can glean “rich and detailed information”. By having a meaningful conversation around their relationships and being able to speak frankly about it, I am better able to draw upon the specific experiences that may be present within their relationship in order to address the thematic concern of race and romance in Singapore.

### **Sampling**

In order to explore the nature of interracial intimacies within the specific racialized context of Singapore, participants were selected based on two criteria.

1. Singapore citizens of any race who,
2. are currently or have previously been in an intimate relationship with another Singaporean from a different race.

By narrowing and limiting the selection of participants to Singaporeans specifically, the research distinguishes itself from other works that pertain to international marriages/relationships. Further still, by focusing on

Singaporeans, the research can also shed some light on what it means for the participants on growing up within the racialized context of Singapore.

The use of snowball sampling was utilized in order to reach out to potential participants. Snowball sampling allows access to a group that may otherwise be difficult to locate (Babbie, 2007). Initially, the first few respondents were obtained through personal networks and social media. Following that, respondents were asked for further potential participants within their own social networks. A total of 17 interviews were conducted, with participants ranging from the ages of 21 to 40. A majority of 14 of them were between the ages of 25-30. 12 of my 17 participants were university-educated, three of whom had higher graduate degrees. Of the 17 participants, nine were male while eight were female. The male participants consisted of two Chinese, six Malays, and one Indian while the female participants consisted of seven Chinese, and one Indian. With regards to the relationship status of my participants at the time of the interviews, three of the 17 were already married, four were engaged looking to get married, eight were in a committed relationship, and the remaining two were single.

As my research operates from identifying an upward trend of inter-ethnic marriages in Singapore, I focused primarily on individuals for whom the issue of moving forward with marriage was particularly salient. My participants were either currently or had previously been in a serious, long-term interracial relationship in which marriage was the next logical step. Focusing on the issue of marriage allows me to draw upon the decision-making process with regards to big life decisions within their relationship and how they seek to navigate the challenges in doing so. I also made a point to not just interview those that were already married as I wanted my sample to be reflective of the more recent upward trend of inter-ethnic marriages. While the experiences of individuals who have been in an inter-ethnic marriage for decades may indeed provide valuable insights, those experiences may not be as insightful towards explaining this more recent upward trend.

## **Data Collection**

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, initial interviews were primarily conducted online via the computer application, Zoom. As Covid restrictions in Singapore began to ease up, some interviews were conducted in person, typically at a food and drinks establishment. For online interviews conducted over Zoom, both audio and video recordings were captured. However, the video recording was deleted immediately after the interview and only the audio recording was retained for transcription purposes. For in-person interviews, only audio recordings were retained. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim following the interviews. Any information that could lead to the identification of the participant was removed. I explained the process and sought consent to record interviews. Participants were given a consent form to sign prior to the interview. The interviews lasted from 1 hour to 2.5 hours. The interview began with questions establishing the participants' racial background. Questions regarding their family and ethnic heritage were asked as a way to understand the participant's experiences with their own race and to understand how race has operated within their lives. Following that, participants were asked questions surrounding their experiences with being in an interracial relationship and the unique challenges that they face. They were also asked questions on how they have coped with such challenges. On this matter, participants were asked to speak frankly on their experiences. These set of questions seeks to explicitly address the research goal at hand and to examine closely the lived experiences of their relationship. Finally, participants were asked questions regarding their views on race in Singapore more generally. In doing so, I hoped to examine the experiences within their relationships and placing them within a context of how they viewed race in Singapore. Overall, the structure of the interview process painted a more complete picture of how race operates within these relationships.

## **Coding and data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted of interview transcripts. The use of coding was an essential part of the data analysis as it highlighted recurring themes and patterns between the participant's responses. Coding was done by reading through the transcripts and organizing the codes and analysis through a Microsoft Excel document. For this research, I utilized two forms of coding to build my data analysis – descriptive coding first, followed by In-Vivo coding. Descriptive coding (Saldana, 2009) was used initially in order to group participants' responses into broader, easily identifiable categories such as "Marriage", "Family", "Racism", etc. Upon sub-dividing responses into larger categories, In-Vivo coding (Saldana, 2009) was then used to highlight and draw out the specific responses and phrases from participants for analysis. In-Vivo coding refers to coding based on my participants' choice of words and phrases. Upon completion of coding and data analysis, several key thematic concerns emerged that will be discussed in the following section.

## **Themes**

The discussion of the study's findings is organized and presented through three observable themes that emerged through the data collected during the study. They are as follows: (1) The weight of social forces, (2) Labour and strategies in interracial intimacies, (3) Experiences of race and racism. In the first theme – the weight of social forces – I explore how an individual's social networks - made up of primarily their family and friends often have a significant bearing on their experiences within the relationship. The positive or negative affirmation towards their relationship from those close to them often influence decisions made in the relationship. In the second theme – labour and strategies in interracial intimacies – I look into the specific actions and strategies individuals often employ to alleviate some of the burdens they experience in their interracial relationships. The types of strategies that they employed were often similar in nature to one another and primarily dealt with answering and responding to situations where the issue of race was perceived to be problematic with regards to moving forward

in their relationship. Finally, in the third theme – experiences of race and racism – I investigate how these individuals, coming from the positionality of being in an interracial relationship, grapple with and talk about issues of race and racism that they experience during their relationship. Being in a unique position of occupying the space between racial groups allows them to shed certain insights on the everyday instances of race and racism.

## **The weight of social forces**

In the literature review, I have highlighted how social forces external to the individual plays a significant role in shaping one's experiences in an interracial relationship. This was something that became particularly salient within my own research. During conversations with my participants, many often brought up the impact that their social networks had on their relationship. As Harris and Kalbfleisch (2000) pointed out through their study of interracial dating, a disinclination of dating across racial lines often comes from various sources external to the individual. These includes the "fear of upsetting or being disowned by parents", and "fear of what friends will think, and the negative reactions they will receive in public from strangers" (p.62-63). Participants often cited how a significant amount of their decision-making process within the relationships came from external forces. These forces originated from multiple avenues but were particularly significant when it came from the family unit. When asked about the motivations on certain decisions made in the relationship, participants would often make references to their own family or that of their partner's family. Typically, these responses came about when participants were asked either of two questions: "Could you talk a little bit about your experiences of being in an interracial relationship?" and "Did you encounter any difficulties or obstacles that you think is unique to being in an interracial relationship?" Participants would bring up family as a source of anxiety, often without prompt. For some participants, they were able to articulate the anxieties their parents had with regards to their choice of partner:

Zac<sup>1</sup>, Malay male, 28: "I would guess that [my parent's] preference would be to marry a person of the same race and same

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<sup>1</sup> All stated names are pseudonyms given to participants to protect their identities and allow them to remain anonymous.

religion la. Same religion is a must. Same race, uh, I would guess so la.”

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: “So for my mom, when she knew that I was with a non-Chinese, she was not like, accepting at all. So, she was reluctant, so she – I was texting my boyfriend, then, my mom, she suspected something, so she kept saying that y’know, you better don’t find, like, non-Chinese, that kind.”

Mel, Chinese female, 26: “My mom did say that, try not to date other races before. Yah, so, I guess that’s the reason why I try not to tell in case she go crazy or something la.”

Participants were very much able to identify and recognize how their own parents would react to their choice of partner outside their race. They understood that crossing the racial line when it comes to dating was something that would be a difficult point of contention with their parents. These anxieties are often implicitly perceived by my participants, in the case of Zac, or explicitly expressed, such as with Sarah and Mel. For Zac, understanding his parent’s expectations also meant that he would go on to hide that relationship from his parents completely during its duration. Further still, aside from their own family, participants were also able to articulate the anxieties that their partner’s family had on the matter:

Gerald, Chinese male, 29: “And on her [parent’s] side, as well, [they] were thinking like, wa how is this going to work out right, like a Chinese guy, why not date a Malay guy, right?”

Andy, Malay male, 28: “But for her family, yeah, I think, they become more racist ah.”

Anthony, Malay male, 27: “Her mom is a Malaysian, so, I don’t know, I consider it as if she didn’t have a good experience with the native Malays in Malaysia la. Which might form her perception.”

For Andy and Anthony, they often described the difficulties with dealing with their partner’s parents which they perceived as racist. For the most part, they felt that their partner’s parents were completely disapproving of their relationships, and they felt that they could not reason with this perception. For Anthony, this meant that they could no longer carry on with the relationship, stating that the end of the relationship was largely due to the issue of race. For Andy, this meant keeping their relationship of 5 years a secret from them:

Andy, Malay male, 28: “So, her family is quite racist. And then for me, my family is religion. So, we don’t tell our parents about the relationship. Which, is difficult la, because you sort of have to keep it a secret.”

When it comes to dating and even potentially marrying across racial lines, these responses have highlighted the social pressures associated with that decision. The family unit is often the most important aspect of life in Singapore, as many Singaporeans live with their family right up to marriage. Some continue to do so even beyond marriage. As such, a social contract is made, implicit or otherwise, in which children are often strongly influenced by their parents’ choices and decisions. The choice to date outside of one’s racial group was acknowledged by some participants as going against their parents’ wishes, and with it the associated negative repercussions. The notion of preservation of tradition was also a contentious point when those pressures came from parents. Some parents felt that their child dating across racial lines meant that certain ethnic and cultural traditions were being violated.

Gerald, Chinese male, 29: “I think at the start it was pretty difficult, because as I mentioned before, my mum has this thing against, oh you’re going to like give your surname away if you get married.”

Valerie, Chinese female, 25: “but we eventually broke up because his parents said, the reason his dad gave, I don’t know how legit, was that I want pure Chinese. They just wanted him to be with a pure Chinese girl.”

Sona, Indian female, 27: “A: Conventional, they think they should get their kids to married off to an Indian Muslim, and then like, that’s what my siblings did also, except one, so, I think the more priority is the religion, but I am not sure about the race, but I don’t think they will be accepting of that, because they are very old fashioned.

Q: Okay, but you mentioned that the religion part is probably more important to them right. So, would they not be okay with your partner, despite the fact that he’s Muslim?

A: Because, for them, a marriage is like, between families, so if I get married to someone, they will also be related to the family. So they will want to be in a family where they can speak Tamil, because my parents are not well versed in English or Malay, so they would want to join a family who also speaks Tamil, so that they will be a big happy family I guess? So, yeah, so that’s why I think they won’t be happy with it.”

The point of keeping the Chinese family surname came up when Gerald’s choice to date a Malay girl came up in conversations with his family. Similarly,

the notion of keeping the racial line 'pure' as in Valerie's case follows a parallel logic. For Sona, she acknowledges how marrying into a non-Tamil speaking family was against tradition in her own family and acknowledges how her family would prefer for her to marry within the same racial group. As Yahya and Boag (2014) states, "the more important it was perceived for a parent to continue their cultural and religious traditions then the greater the perception of social pressure" (p.764). The experience of Gerald with his family and Valerie with her former partner's family highlights a desire for families to keep certain strongly held ethnic traditions within the family. Families often see their children's decision to date and marry outside their own race as incompatible with holding on to these beliefs. This point is further exemplified when two Chinese participants experienced similar problems dating an Indian partner:

Valerie, Chinese female, 25: "His mum would sort of hint him to mix around more within their own racial community, and to try to find a partner that's like within that community la. Probably said without knowing, you know, the implications, or without like thinking it was possible that he could be dating someone not of the Indian race."

Joan, Chinese female, 25: "But, ultimately, it ended because we just, there's a lot pressure for him to marry within his race, racial community, cos I think he's like Punjabi, so they were very focused on marrying within the Punjabi community. He talked about how in his previous relationship, when he was also dating another Chinese girl, and he received a lot of crap from his family, and he didn't think that he wanted to go through that again. So, yeah. It was ultimately why it ended."

Kalmjin (1998) posits that these behaviours from the family are ways in which families prevent marriages outside an 'approved' in-group. In both cases, Valerie and Joan were able to identify the social pressures exerted on their partner with regards to dating an Indian girl within their small community. They recognized that their partners belonged to the smaller, non-Tamil speaking Indian diaspora and understood the pressure for their partner to remain within that in-group. This pressure to date and marry within their in-group from the family is what Kalmjin (1998) identifies as both 'group identification' and group sanctions' (p.400-401). Within 'group identification', it would be common to see parents instil in their children a greater emphasis on their cultural heritage as a way to extend feelings of homogeneity of their cultural group. Within 'group sanctions', parents may play an active role in the dating lives of their children, such as to "set up meetings with potential spouses, they play the role of matchmaker, they give advice and opinions about the candidates, and they may withdraw support in the early years of the child's marriage" (p.401). These behaviours are evident when looking into how Valerie and Joan talked about their relationships with their Indian partners. They both recognized the efforts made by their partner's parents to ensure that their partner would seek out suitable partners within their own racial community. Along similar lines, this meant that Valerie has had to keep the relationship a secret from his parents and for Joan, this perceived irreconcilable facet ultimately resulted in the end of their relationship.

What is clear thus far is that a negative or a lack of support for the relationship from the family can often exact a heavy toll on the individual in which they are forced to make difficult decisions with regards to their relationships. One might argue that these are difficult decisions that would have been avoided completely if they were to have dated within their own race. When asked whether they believed that being in a same-race relationship was very

different from being in a mixed-race relationship, these were some of the responses that some participants were able to articulate:

Anthony, Malay male, 27 “you’re starting on an uphill battle la if you’re with a person outside your race. Which is like, an added thing that you need to resolve. So, if you consider that to a controlled scenario, where you only have, where you’re just with another person of the same race, the only factors you need to consider is the compatibility between both of y’all. Yah, so that’s just easier la.”

Andy, Malay male, 28 “Yeah, because, like I said, you don’t have to keep it a secret, you don’t have to always like, be on your guard whenever you are out with your girlfriend. Like I would scan around, see anybody you know first before you enter the restaurant or whatever. And, like, I think, also like just being able to be open with your family, like just tell them about your relationship. Maybe even like, bring your partner to your house.”

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “Yah, being in the same race is way less tiring. I mean, uh, okay, I think, okay, uh, I mean, it’s my assumption of like, being in a Chinese with Chinese relationship la. When you are like Chinese with Chinese right, there’s a lot more focus on like, economic status, your family background, my family background, y’know, like how well to do are you.”

This recognition that being in a romantic relationship with a partner from a different race is harder than with someone from the same race is congruent with the findings of Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008). In this study, they were able to highlight various factors that impeded the success of the relationship

between mixed race partners. These factors included aspects such as differing socioeconomic backgrounds, differences in shared attitudes and values, and the social support that they receive from their families with regards to their relationship. Andy, Anthony, and Sally were able to articulate that when race is a factor, the relationship is starting from an ‘uphill battle’. The association of race comes with it certain assumptions, such as the person’s socioeconomic history and their presumed cultural values. These assumptions are often the sore spots with which their families had an issue. Sally’s assumption that being with a same race partner as being ‘less tiring’ implies the emotional toll and labour involved when they find themselves in such a position. Once again, when it comes to the relationship Hohmann-Marriot and Amato (2008) finds in their study that a lack of social support from the parents and in-laws can reduce the quality of the relationship, making it harder to sustain (p.848). Participants that reported a failure in their relationship due to a lack or perceived lack of approval from the parental side is evidence of this.

In some extreme cases, parents direct verbal threats and harassment towards the couple. In the case of Michael, the disapproval of his relationship from his parents has had a significant emotional toll:

Michael, Malay male, 30: “Q: What else have they said about, in a way, to kind of like, tell you not to be in this relationship?”

A: Mmm, they keep going back to religion, they keep saying that, this is not the right way, that it’s wrong to do this, that you’ll be damned to hell if you do this. It’s not, uh, it will affect everybody else in the family. Yeah, pretty much a lot of stabbing in the back, kind of words.

Q: Right, so these are, strong negative words, and how have you kind of dealt with it? Has it affected you in any way?

A: Yeah, actually, uh, it affected me quite a lot more than I would care to admit. Because I started to, I started to feel, what do you call this, like very monotonous at a lot of the times, like when I just come home, I'm just like, straight to my room, and then just do my own things, and then, even my interactions with my family is super limited now, it's like, whenever they ask me, it's like, I just give a straight answer. I don't even bother to like, chit-chat. And the only times I felt sort of alive, is just playing my games, or talking to my girlfriend. Just being with her just makes me feel better. But, whenever I'm back home, it's like a, it's a totally different atmosphere altogether. There's always tension in the air for some reason. Yeah. So, and I started to stress eat quite a bit. I gained quite a few kilos. (chuckles)"

Michael's situation highlights an extreme scenario when the parents and the individual are unable to reconcile their differing attitudes towards the nature of his interracial relationship. He has gone on record to say that his parents have grown increasingly hostile towards his relationship even stating that his mother has threatened to make their lives "very very miserable". When probed further on this matter, he further states that he does not believe these to be empty threats. Thus fearing for their safety, Michael and his partner have begun looking towards seeking protection from his family under the Protection from Harassment Act.

While the lack of support or negative reactions from family has shown to be a point of contention within interracial intimacies, conversely, gaining positive support from the family allowed for participants to move forward with what they felt was the next logical step in their relationship. For some participants, gaining the approval of their relationship from their parents and their partner's parents meant that they could move forward with things such as purchasing a house or

planning for marriage. This positive affirmation would sometimes come from their own family:

Ned, Malay male, 27 “But then it was funny because my mom said go and apply for the BTO, and her parents were like ya, why not try, just go ahead la. So, we were taken aback by that. And I think after we applied, that’s when my mom also was saying, oh, ya, I said before, you want to marry her, civil [marriage], fine, go ahead.”

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “because I’m very close to my parents, so I said, no matter what we do, whatever next step in life we want to take, we must talk to my parents. So we actually sat down and told my parents, we are gonna BTO, and we want your permission. I mean now that we are okay.”

And in instances where their own family did not approve, or were unaware of their relationship, some participants such as Sarah and Sona were able to find comfort in the approval of their partner’s family:

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: [On her partner’s family] “They were very supportive. Ya, they were very supportive. Like, when I converted, they really got me – so they bought me a lot of things also, like, when I go to *ta’lim*<sup>2</sup> I will wear hijab la, just that now, I wouldn’t wear, especially at home. It doesn’t make sense for me to wear, when I didn’t tell my mother yet cause they will probably throw me out of the house. ... They bought for me, they also bought me the hijab, and then they got me a lot of pins, they taught me how to do it as well.”

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<sup>2</sup> Arabic word meaning ‘education’. In this instance it refers to Islamic religious classes.

Sona, Indian female, 27: “Q: Would you say that having the approval of his family was quite an important thing?

A: It is! At least one obstacle down, that kind of thing.”

When it comes to big decisions in the relationship, such as putting down an offer for a flat and eventually marrying, or religious conversion in Sarah’s case, getting approval from the family unit was often the catalyst that allowed them to move forward. In previous cases in which a disapproval from the family can sometimes lead to the complete breakdown of a relationship, it stands to reason that the inverse would hold true in which gaining approval from the family can greatly sustain those relationships. Findings from Killian (2001) also finds this to be true showing that engaging in interracial dating is more likely to occur if it is “not viewed as problematic by themselves, family, and/or friends” (p.17). Nevertheless, while positive affirmation was present in some of my participant’s relationships, those tended to be the exception and there was a greater tendency for families to react negatively to the interracial relationships of my participants.

The data presented thus far has highlighted the various ways in which the support or lack thereof from the family unit can determine the health and longevity of my participants’ interracial intimacies. Within the context of Singapore, the family unit is often perceived to be a core determinant factor in the decision-making process of the individual, even beyond intimate relationships. This in part due to the state being responsible in promoting the family unit as a fundamental building block with regards to the country’s nation-building process. In turn, the priority afforded to the family unit tends to take precedence before the priorities of the individual. Some of my participants have clearly expressed this sentiment within their responses, recognizing that some of the biggest challenges that they face in their own relationships comes from the underlying tensions that come from the family unit. Under this banner of the family unit being the priority, individuals in Singapore must often act and behave with the consideration of what is best for the family, even if they themselves must

sacrifice their own personal freedoms and happiness. They recognize their duty of ‘keeping it within the family’ as a core component of social reproduction within the family unit. In turn, when the family unit provides or retracts their support for the individuals to engage in these interracial intimacies, they too engage in social reproduction by laying bare the boundaries of what is deemed permissible or otherwise. It is within these tensions that the boundaries of race, intimacy, and the family are constantly in flux. These tensions lay the groundwork upon which those boundaries are constantly negotiated and contested between the individual and the family. In such instances, the burden often falls on the individual to confront and deconstruct the negative racial perceptions and attitudes that their family members may hold towards their partner. In instances where the individual finds their efforts to be somewhat successful, it almost certainly translates into the long-term success of their own relationship, whereby the boundaries of race and the family are redrawn. Should those efforts fall short, as is the case for most of my participants, the individual will likely have to forego either their relationship with their partner or – more rarely – their relationship with their family, highlighting the enduring nature of those boundaries.

Besides the family, social circles in the form of close friends and acquaintances also had a significant impact on their relationship. For many of my participants, they recognized how their social networks was an added factor in the choice of partner of their relationship. They were able to acknowledge how the nature of their friend groups played a role in their dating preferences and choices:

Joan, Chinese female, 25: “Ya, in general, I guess, because I hang out with more people from other races. I mean, that’s what other people comment. Then, uh, the people that I would potentially date, would also be more diverse just because of who I’m

introduced to, etc. And like, who I get to meet, because of my more interracial friend group.”

Andy, Malay male, 28: “Um, I think generally because I’ve never like, only hang out with my race? Like, I mean, I do have Malay friends, it’s just that I hang out with every, I think, I never like choose to define my social circle by my race.”

Both Joan and Andy have explicitly highlighted how their social circle extends beyond their racial groups. This choice or behaviour to do so is often positively related to the decision of dating across racial lines. As the contact points between racial groups increases within society, the propensity of those relationships to turn romantic in nature also increases. Further still, being exposed to a social circle of different ethnic and racial backgrounds allows for prejudice and bias to be confronted head on. The assumption here is that when faced with negative observations of someone from a particular race, they avoid the mistake of translating those observations to speak for an entire racial group.

Inversely as well, when friend groups tend to be racially homogenous, the choice to date across racial lines is often also met with disapproval:

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: “Like, they still think that I don’t know what I want in life, or I don’t know what am I doing, so in a sense, I think they are worried about me, worried that I don’t know what I want, and then some more because we only got together for 3 years, and then we want to get married, that kind, so they think that I’m rushing into things. Yah, so, I wouldn’t say they are very (pause), excited, or give their whole well wishes to us? But it’s something that, okay, maybe they don’t agree with me, but they’ll

then tell me that, no you shouldn't be doing it, but they won't be outrightly telling me to like break up with my boyfriend.”

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “I think family aside, like when I first told my friends, I think out of the 8, 9 of them, cos I mean, naturally being in a relationship, you'll tell your closest friends right? Out of the 8 or 9, only 1 reacted positively. The rest of them just like, are you sure you want to date a Malay-Muslim and then like, I think it was – uh I always explain to my partner like, if not for him, I wouldn't like, really see the Chinese privilege, like, so real. Like, the type of comments that people give, without knowing him, and just knowing that he's Malay.”

The friends of Sarah and Sally that came to know of their relationship with their partners did not immediately respond positively. Instead, they were bombarded with questions as to whether they were making the right decision. When probed further on the issue, both Sarah and Sally acknowledged how their friend groups often existed only within a small racial group, isolated from individuals from other races:

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: “So, for them, this group of friends right, they are the kind that would want to like, work hard, get married later, much later, and they look for more, like, their definition of success is on how much you earn, what's your role that kind. And my other group of friends is more of the neighbourhood secondary schools. So, very Chinese speaking. And then one of them, in the group, is also from Nan Hua. So, Chinese friends la. And then, I'm also thinking that my other friends, their surrounding friends are Chinese la. And they are free thinkers. So, for them, I would say, ultimately, it's still the same

thinking la, it's 2 group of JC friends that, they feel that this kind of connotation still persist even until today. ... And like their friends they interacted with are mostly Chinese, or their partners are also Chinese. Ya. For my university friends, I will also say that I also keep in contact with a lot of Chinese friends in university.”

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “But for my Malay friends, of course they all responded like, quite well la. They just said, like, oh, any question you can always ask us, like if you feel in terms of, you want to learn more, you want to learn Malay, you can always approach us because it's just normal, there's nothing wrong with it. All the negativity came from my Chinese friends, except for 1 girl, whom I expected the result to be opposite. I thought there was only 1 person who reacted negatively, then everyone positive, but it was not. Then, I think the sad thing was seeing how his friends and family reacted. Or at least he only told me the positive one la, I don't know. But I felt that I was super welcomed, and I never once felt any negative reaction.”

Their responses highlighted the realities of being within a racially isolated social circle. Both Sarah and Sally have further highlighted how the racialized nature of a friend group can often play a significant role in the support network of interracial intimacies. They both recognized how hailing from a friend group that was predominantly Chinese affected the reactions they received with regards to their relationship. They described their friends, who were primarily from the majority race, tended to view their partners from the minority race through stereotypes rather than seeing them as a person. There was also an assumption held by their friends that the relationship would eventually not succeed. This was in contrast to how Sally acknowledged the positive reactions that her partner's

friends had about their relationship, again owing to a more racially diverse friend group.

My participants' experiences with their interracial intimacies thus far has highlighted how those experiences are rarely isolated from external forces. For the most part, there exists a great deal of pressure for them or their partner to date and marry within their racial groups. This clash is often the primary source of tensions within the relationships and tends to stick a wedge between them and their families. As shown, families are often the primary source of these tensions. Felmler (2013) does well to highlight how the well-being of a couple in their relationship and the stability of said relationship is greatly influenced by their social networks. She finds that positive reactions to a couple's relationship from their social network greatly increased the couple's satisfaction towards the relationship and prolonged its success. She also highlights how "a social network that is approving is likely to provide both emotional support during stressful periods and practical help, such as childcare". She also finds that the likelihood of a couple ending their relationship significantly decreased when they perceived their social networks to be supportive of their relationships. This extends well into marital life where she further argues that a stronger support network decreased the intention to divorce or separate (p.401). It is thus evident that acceptance of a couple's relationship, or lack thereof, from family and friends can often have long-term consequences for the couple's wellbeing. Felmler's (2013) findings are congruent with the data that my participants have reported. They would often state how family as a support network, or lack thereof, was a hindrance towards moving forward in their relationship. For some, it meant the complete dissolution of said relationship. For others that were more fortunate, they were able to find a compromise with their social networks and gain the approval of their relationships from their family and friends, allowing them to move forward in their relationship.

### **Coping mechanisms in interracial intimacies**

Another recurring theme that I found in my conversations with participants is that of the employment of unique coping mechanisms to overcome some of the burdens of being in an interracial relationship. These coping mechanisms were similar in nature to those found in the literature. Participants often reported employing them as a way for them to navigate certain difficulties within their relationships. As Foeman & Nance (1999) states, these coping mechanisms are often reactionary in nature and part of a broad scope of learning to cope with the difficulties in their interracial intimacies. As highlighted in the previous section, participants in interracial relationships often have to deal with problems and difficulties stemming from disapproval from their social networks. The points in the following section highlights the ways in which some of my participants have gone about trying to alleviate some of these tensions and disapprovals. For the most part, the quotes provided are responses to the question “How did you deal with the difficulties in your relationship?”. What was striking was the degree to which participants employed very similar approaches towards these issues. One of the more common strategies was the use of colour-blind or race-blind language in describing their relationship.

Gerald, Chinese male, 29: [On whether it was more normal to be with someone from the same race than a different race] “I would think in today’s society, there’s no normal ah, right? Nowadays, everybody is with everyone else, so, I don’t think race matters anymore.”

Clarice, Chinese female, 25: “I went in with an open mind, seeing where this would lead, but, I actually realised that being with a person who is mixed did not hinder me thinking about a future

with this person. I think it would be the same if it was someone who was exactly the same race as I am.”

Ned, Malay male, 27: [On his partner] “so she’s quite blind to race as well. To her, it’s not the colour of the skin that matters, it’s the person inside. So that helped.”

Joan, Chinese female, 25: “And me, I thought that our similarities, outside of race, were more significant than whatever our racial differences were, so it didn’t really affect me.”

In the literature of interracial intimacies, colour-blindness is a common coping mechanism used by individuals as a way to downplay race in their relationship. Individuals who employ colour-blind language often defended this decision stating that they were in love with the person, not the race of their partner. Colour-blindness as a coping mechanism in interracial relationships is a form of boundary work (Steinbugler, 2012) in which couples avoid viewing their partner’s race as a significant aspect of their relationship. Boundary work allows individuals to draw symbolic boundaries to categorize things, such as people, relationships, practices, etc. (p.106). For some, deemphasizing their partner’s race is done as way to draw focus towards their partner’s character as a person. The use of colour-blind language within the context of interracial intimacies allows couples to reposition their relationship as two people who are in love that just happen to be of different races. Karis (2003) finds that to assert race as unimportant in their relationship is a way to protect themselves and their partners from the “negative cultural stereotypes which make loving along racial lines unimaginable” (p.27). Colour-blind language becomes heavily apparent when they state things such as “it’s the person inside” with Ned, or “I’m still a good person” with Valerie. For Ned in particular, he elaborated further on colour-blindness as a conscious effort on his part in his

relationship stating that he would sometimes downplay his own race when meeting his partner's parents:

Ned, Malay male, 27: "So, in a sense, let's say if I'm meeting her parents, I subconsciously try to tone down my Malay-ness, try to turn off my non-Chinese-ness, because y'know, behave or appear pass off as a bit more mandarin-ish, right? So, like, a bit more 'las' in conversations, stuff like that. I think it probably helps in kind of creating this fuzzy image of this person. Not just one race, but a mixture la, as a Singaporean, right?"

For minorities, this is a commonly adopted strategy to alleviate some of the negative connotations and stereotypes associated with one's race. This form of boundary work is often used to emphasize one's individuality as separate from their racial category. By painting oneself as a 'fuzzy image' of a person, Ned does the boundary work of separating himself from perceived negative stereotypes associated with 'Malay-ness', such as being poor, lazy, uneducated, etc. Further still, boundary work is also sometimes used to emphasize the character of a person, again as a way to distinguish themselves from their racial category:

Anthony, Malay male, 27: "when [my partner] was talking to her mom, her mom made the comment like, oh, you're dating Malay guy, like, why? Then she'll be like, oh but he's the guy that treated me the nicest, out of the Chinese guys she's ever been with, so that in itself, I think it shows, I think, it exemplifies that point la, and I think her parents from their shoes, would probably want to see her happy and being taken care of by a decent person la, as opposed to a Chinese guy, but like, a person of low standards."

Gerald, Chinese male, 29: “But the thing is, from what I know, they were comfortable with me proceeding on, because I was a, like, kind of, scholar in poly. So, to them it’s like, oh ok, maybe this guy even if he’s not the same race, at least he’s somewhere, you know? Ya, actually her mother told me herself as well, like, actually we considered cause, you know, academically, you’re there la.”

Valerie, Chinese female, 25: “I may be of a different background, a different race, but I’m still a good person, and that should not make them stop us from being together.”

Both Anthony and Gerald articulated how their character as a person as being socially desirable was able to offset some of the reservations that their partner’s parents had with regards to race. For the case of Anthony, his partner did the boundary work on his behalf, stating that he was the one that treated her the nicest amongst all her previous partners, regardless of him being Malay. For Gerald, he recognized how being a scholar and displaying academic excellence was a boon in the eyes of his partner’s parents. For Valerie, she expressed her belief that she was ‘still a good person’ despite being from a different ethnic background, again, as a form of boundary work to distinguish herself.

Boundary work, in the form of colour-blind language and emphasizing of individual character, informs a significant part of dealing with the challenges faced in interracial intimacies. For minorities who often find themselves at the mercy of negative racial stereotypes, boundary work is seen as a way to escape some of those stereotypes. It allows them to transcend to a perceived ‘higher’ racial status by being racially ambiguous. For couples that find it difficult to broach the topic of their relationship to their social networks, boundary work allows them to reposition the perception of their relationship in which race is not a crucial aspect

but just happenstance. Emphasizing on their partner's character, rather than their racial background, is seen as a way to break down some of these harmful perceptions.

Another coping mechanism that I have found to be recurring amongst my participants was a form of strategic avoidance. Rather than facing the difficult issues pertaining to their relationship, some participants described taking measures and steps in which they could stall or circumvent these difficult circumstances. This strategy of avoidance is coined by Steinbugler (2012) as a form of emotional labour, in which the choice to avoid the issue altogether exacts an emotional cost on the individual or couple. Foeman & Nance (2002) describes this behaviour as a form of insulation and negotiation. For interracial couples who find themselves in difficult situations, insulation allows them to shield themselves from external forces. Negotiation comes into play only when difficult circumstances can no longer be avoided (p.244). For some participants, this form of insulation and avoidance came in the form of not telling their parents of their relationships at all:

Mel, Chinese female, 26 "Actually, my parents don't know about our relationship yet. My siblings know, but they did not react badly to it? Cos, anyway, they are not one to interfere. So, I guess the obstacle now is like, telling my parents."

Andy, Malay male, 28 "So, we don't tell our parents about the relationship. Which is difficult la because you sort of have to keep it a secret. But also like they already suspect something is going on but they, it's like a don't ask, don't tell situation, y'know? Like, my parents don't want to know that I'm in an interracial relationship, so they don't wanna explicitly ask."

For both Mel and Andy, they understood the extreme difficulty that comes with revealing the nature of their respective relationship to their parents. In order to avoid this situation, neither have explicitly told their parents of their relationship, despite being with their partners for years. When asked how they envision overcoming this obstacle in the future, they expressed some forms of negotiation strategies to alleviate some of the perceived immediate burdens:

Mel, Chinese female, 26: “So, yeah, we have these kinds of pseudo-plans. We also have like, we had planned to introduce each other to our family, but like, as time goes on, we realise it’s not so easy to just like, ‘oh hey, this is my Malay boyfriend.’ It’s cos like, you just know your parents is gonna disapprove of it. So, yeah. Uh, I mean, like, one of the ways is like, one of the ways to sort of maybe skirt around this was maybe introduce each other to our siblings. Cos maybe our siblings will be a bit open minded.”

Andy, Malay male, 28: “Like, I wanna just get out of Singapore as fast as possible, and I’m hoping that after I get out of Singapore, I can settle along with her la, and like maybe not come back to Singapore, you know what I mean? And we don’t even have to get married ah, like you know, just cohabitate.”

Mel felt that in order to get through to her parents, it would perhaps be wise to first gain some form of support network from her siblings. As mentioned before, while her siblings are aware of the relationship, they have not been formally introduced to her partner. Even in her response, her use of ‘maybe’ as qualifying language highlighted the perceived difficulty that she encountered. For Andy, he felt that moving away from Singapore altogether would allow him the freedom to be with his partner, without the difficulties associated with being racially different. His emphasis on not even having to get married also allays

some of the burdens that he felt when it comes to pressure from his family for his partner to convert to Islam. Another participant, Valerie, also expressed similar sentiments when asked how she envisions broaching the topic of revealing her relationship to her partner's parents:

Valerie, Chinese female, 25: "Always take that first step right? So first talk about it. And if there are really objections we'll see if we can sort of rationalise with his parents or at least like, try to convince them to be open to the idea. If it's really not possible then... well..."

Valerie trails off here, hoping that it would not have to come to this matter. She understands the difficult reality of the issue but still remains optimistic on the outcome of her relationship. The strategy of insulation and negotiation is an important coping mechanism for individuals and couples that find themselves powerless to the whims and forces external to their relationship. For some, it provides for an optimistic approach that allows them to slowly broach the difficult topics. As Steinbugler (2012) puts it, couples who employ the strategy of avoidance acknowledge that "letting some of this lie" is a conscious decision (p.99). However, in the case of Anthony, when the issue finally surfaced again, strategic avoidance was no longer a viable option, and the relationship eventually came to an end:

Anthony, Malay male, 27: "It was swept under the rug la, for the longest time, and honestly, it was a relatively happy relationship, because at that time we had school, we were very preoccupied with school, we saw each other so many times, and it's like, we lived in the same campus, okay, not the same campus la, but we lived on campus right. So, there was a lot of face time and all that. So, everything was going smooth, and then once we got out of uni

and then we started having our own jobs, and then we grew a bit more estranged, and then we find that this issue is still there and nowhere near solved right, and then it just became something that we both thought was insurmountable/didn't have the energy to try and salvage it. That's how I'd put it la."

The strategy of avoidance is often employed within relationships where the couple or individual are experiencing difficult topics surrounding their relationship. On the other hand, however, some participants that enjoyed greater success and support for their relationship employed an inverse coping mechanism, in which they actively participated in some way in their partner's ethnic and cultural traditions. For some participants, they recognize how being involved in the cultural practices of their partners was an important aspect of their relationship:

Clarice, Chinese female, 25 "Learn a bit more of his traditions, like um, so he actually made an appointment to actually have us buy the traditional costumes, which I probably would not have done, because he said that, y'know, it would be good to at least have, because, since y'know, you have a traditional ethnic Peranakan or Chinese costume, why not add like a German one now that you y'know, you are part of my family."

Ned, Malay male, 27 "But I guess, when it comes to like family celebrations, we kind of bring them in, just so that she could, y'know, just participate in celebration la, so Hari Raya, CNY we'll go over, like, Chinese New Year I'll bring some treats over, mooncake, just make an effort to buy the mooncake gift the parents, Hari Raya like she will buy stuff and bring, so we do, all

the more, in a sense, all the more culturally... how to say ah?  
Things that are not super religious, we get involved in.”

For Ned, he distinguishes cultural celebrations like Chinese New Year and Hari Raya as separate from ‘super religious’ ones. Indeed, the issue of religion is often a common issue shared amongst my participants, particularly between the Muslim-Non-Muslim couples. From the responses given to me by my participants, the expectations surrounding the issue of conversion seem to be varied. For some non-Muslim participants that were currently or have been with a Muslim partner, participating in the religious beliefs of their partner was seen as a necessary step towards moving forward in their relationship:

John, Chinese male, 40: “Uh, I guess, you have to be willing to make certain sacrifices with regards to how you perceive your culture to be, so to speak. Like I would say after we got married, or when we started dating, there are certain things that I couldn’t do, for her religious reasons. Uh, so I think that that was one of the... I wouldn’t call it a hurdle, but that’s one of the things you got to get used to la, you gotta be able to understand your partner’s culture, and be on the same page, and not hold to, not be too precious about your own cultural identity, because eventually, you know, if you decide to have kids, then your kids would probably, or at least in our case, be a mixture of those cultures, and not predominantly one or the other.”

Gerald, Chinese male, 29: “So, it’s more of me adjusting I think, so for the three and a half years, I was halal, and I did fasting as well, with her. I think it’s... if you’re doing it alone, as someone who has never done it before, it’s hard to, you know, stay anchored and oh, I have to do this. But if you’re doing it with

someone you love, I would think it's quite easy, man, right? Cause you're doing it together.”

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: “I think the hardest one right, at the start was to stop eating pork, because my family, Chinese people like to eat pork. My family cooks a lot of pork. Maybe not a lot, but our meat diet usually consists of pork. So, I cannot start off by telling my mother I don't want to eat pork ma, so it was a gradual thing. I started avoiding pork, and gradually my mother stopped giving me pork anymore. ... Then after that, the dressing is not so much la. Maybe more of like, I don't have enough clothes. Because most of my clothes are like, I have a lot of shorts, I don't like to wear pants in the past. I don't like to wear long pants. Yah, so, gradually I got more pants la. And now that I'm wearing long pants so much, I cannot wear shorts any more la. It's something that you won't be used to lor. Yah, so, the dressing. Um, otherwise, I think, Ramadan as of now will be the hardest. I haven't really tried fasting yet. So, the last 2 years, I haven't tried it. First year I wouldn't be able to. Cause I used to have gastric, so my mother will always force me to find food to eat. Like she will cook and make sure I come back to eat. Second year, so I was scared, and also I think it was covid time, so I think my mom was scared also. So, I wouldn't fast in front of her. Cause she will think – she wouldn't understand what's the meaning behind it. She will think that I am just crazy. Then, this year I would try. I mean, I will not try la, I will have to la. Yah. So, I'm not sure how that will be like, but it's something that might be hard, because you have to get up early to eat, and it's not something – I don't usually get up, I'm not able to get up so early and eat a big meal la To pray 5 times. The hardest one is to get up for the morning prayer.

Then the other one is more of understanding the steps. Knowing which step to go to, and then also the – knowing what to say.”

John recognizes having to give up certain practices as ‘sacrifices’ as a way to respect his partner’s religious beliefs. Even though he himself admits to being an atheist, he recognizes the importance of religion in his partner’s life. He also attributes this decision as motivation towards raising a mixed-race child. Gerald and Sarah expressed the challenges with changing their dietary habits to follow Islamic law. Gerald, who at the time was dating a Malay girl, understood that in order to continue being together with her meant having to change his lifestyle, although he never formally went through with the conversion process in the end. Sarah, who has begun her religious conversion expressed similar sentiments. She recognizes the process as being difficult and one that requires constant work. Nevertheless, she highlighted how much easier it was with the support of her partner and his family.

However, in the case of Sarah, she highlights a particular issue with conversion that other participants have also expressed. She understands that while conversion is a necessary step towards moving forward in the relationship, she and her partner have agreed that the conversion would just be for show.

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “for us to get married, he has made it very clear that we have to [convert], because his, as in we talked about like, how our families will react la. Whereas for me, whether I convert or not, I don’t intend to let my relatives know. But I will let my immediate family know but I see no reason for why I have to let people that, in a sense, not important to me, know, and like, the people who will talk the most la. And I also told like many friends like, it’s like everyone’s favourite question, now that we have been together for 6 years? Like y’all gonna get married? Yes.

Are you gonna convert? There are always this same thing, like whether I choose to convert or not, I don't wanna share, because it's like, my personal choice la, in a sense I just don't want to share about it.

She firstly recognizes that conversion is a requirement should she and her partner choose to carry on with the relationship. She also goes on to elaborate that:

“but I don't want to let it like, be a change in my life, I guess. Whereas for his side of family, he has made it very clear that they expect to know and is gonna be as serious as like, him being treated as not part of the family if he marry me without me converting. Like the consequences are way more serious, so, it's a compromise I have to take if we want to get together la. But personally, like what we discussed, he does not expect me to practice it, because it's really my own choice. So to him, it's that you converting on paper legally is already a big compromise, and he's happy with that, ya. But of course, in front of his family, then we have to act more like, I'm learning, I'm practicing the best I can. But not like I'm gonna be damn pious.”

In a similar vein, Anthony also expressed the same sentiment on the matter with regards to having his partner convert to Islam stating that:

Anthony, Malay male, 28: “I think she was very honest about her answer. So she was saying like, she sees no issue in converting, though there might be an issue with believing on her part. To which I was okay. So that kind of answer is very like, it's like well thought, and you can tell it's something believable, like it

wouldn't be like a – I mean, if it was a very quick answer, like, oh ya I'll convert and I'll definitely believe in and I'll follow and, that's a bit more hard to believe, especially if it's, when we just got to know each other. But that kind of stance, is something that I think people might do if I were in their shoes, or that I would do if I were in their shoes.

Q: So would it be fair to say that this was, what she mentioned was more of a, as they say, paper conversion?

A: Uh, yah, yah, yah, yes.

Q: And is that something that you are okay with?

A: I'm okay with.”

Even John, who was brought up earlier as having to give up certain practices as sacrifices to respect the religious beliefs of his partner admits that:

John, Chinese male, 40: “to be perfectly honest, this is, you know, a paper conversion, so there weren't a lot of things I had to stop doing. I just was very mindful not to bring up certain things and uh, do certain things in front of my in-laws la. So I think, more than anything, it's a respect thing that I have for my in-laws. In terms of my personal life, my wife never had any kind of like, issue with me continuing the same lifestyle that I had before. If anything she was like, I don't want you to change, I just need you to have that conversion card. Yeah. So, I guess I'm fortunate.”

When the issue of religious conversion was brought up during my interview process, I found a wide spectrum in which my participants broached and talked about the matter. The variations in responses highlighted the complexities present on the issue. For starters, there is an assumption that if you were to be involved romantically with a person from the Islamic faith, conversion

is a guaranteed fact with little to no room for negotiation. However, responses from my participants painted a very diverse picture contrary on the matter. While some actively participate in the religious practices as an extension of their conversion, the majority of participants facing this issue were okay with the paper conversion route. They felt that conversion was an easier way to remain with their partner whilst mitigating some of the obstacles that they may encounter in the future.

When it comes to coping with perceived difficulties that my participants encountered during the course of their relationship, it was particularly striking how often the same points were brought up across different responses. Colour-blindness as a coping mechanism amongst interracial couples is a well-documented phenomenon. Framing one's relationship as 'normal' and 'like the others' helps some couples detract from the negative aspects of their relationship associated with racial tensions. It is also often used to justify their choice of partner to their social networks and as a way to downplay negative racial stereotyping. Strategic avoidance as a coping strategy was particularly salient amongst those that encountered acute difficulties in convincing parents of their relationships. In a way, strategic avoidance allowed these participants to cope with these difficulties by giving them the choice to actively not cope with it. Within the specific cases of religious conversion, I found that participants employed some degree of negotiation on the matter. The spectrum in which participants dealt with interfaith relationships – from civil marriages to paper conversions to full conversions – highlights the complex space of religious conversion in which couples are able to negotiate in.

## **Experiences of race and racism**

The final thematic concern grapples with the issue of race and racism that seems to consistently come up during my conversations with my participants. Hailing from the positionality of being in an interracial relationship, the responses from my participants can elucidate certain narratives surrounding race in Singapore. The way they speak of their experiences in their relationships and how those experiences have shaped their views on race and race relations can highlight several key points about race in general. To begin with, the most overt encounters of race that some participants dealt with was dealing with what they described as racist sentiments from those around them. These sentiments would often come from those closest to them:

Andy, Malay male, 28: “Like, okay, for her right, because I think she’s dating a Malay guy now, it’s like, sometimes when she hears her parents say some stuff about Malay people, like, it’s even more painful for her la. Like, I remember there was a period where she was saying that her mom or dad read something on the newspaper about Malay divorce rate, or something like that. And then, they made a comment about Malay people la. And, yeah, it was very difficult for my girlfriend to deal with that, and it was made worse that, the fact that, her siblings, like her sister and her brother also supported her parents la, saying stuff about Malay people. And because she thought like, okay, at least the younger generation might see things differently, but yeah, and things like that will cause friction with your parents la.”

Sally, Chinese female, 26: “And then, even when I try to like protect [my partner from stereotypes] by being more logical, like, it does not translate to these people. And then, when I talk to my

partner about it, I just said like, y'know, I've only been with you for a year and the amount of negativity I've been receiving on your behalf la, in a sense, cos, no one is attacking me. Then say like, it's so tiring to the point that I don't even know how to react anymore, because it's more like, baffling, and upsetting that, upsetting in the sense that because you are attacking someone important to me. And then, secondly, why are you like this? Like, I expected more of you as a person. Then he told me like, whatever you expressed, experiencing, is just the daily life of what I've been going through since I was young la. And then it just really slams onto you, like how the Chinese privilege is like, so real.

In the case of Andy's partner and Sally, they were able to witness first-hand the overtly racist sentiments that were directed towards a minority group. Andy believes that that incident was particularly poignant for his partner stating that it is "even more painful for her" because she is dating a Malay guy. Sally also expressed a similar sentiment stating that early in the relationship, she has had to deal with negativity on behalf of her partner. She went so far as to explain that through this experience was she able to see the issue of Chinese privilege as 'so real'. When it comes to the experience of racism in an interracial relationship, it is not uncommon for partners from majority groups to be largely ignorant about racial issues (Dalton, 2002). However, that ignorance is often swiftly swept away following their experiences within an interracial relationship. In the study of White Americans who outmarry, Yancey (2007) finds that the first-hand recounts of racism that they experience through their non-White partners can fundamentally change their understanding of racial issues (p.209). Mel also expressed a moment in which she perceived her parents to hold racist sentiments:

Mel, Chinese female, 26: “A: uh, don’t mind me saying this, sometimes [my parents] will be a bit racist. Yah. Towards like, other races.

Q: In what ways would you see this happening?

A: In what ways ah? (pause) I think our neighbourhood there’s a lot of Malays, ya, so they will always talk about the kids, like, just loitering around, like, very noisy and stuff. Ya, but I don’t agree. Like, as kids, you can just – I mean, I also was part of like, playing downstairs and all that stuff also.

Q: But was there a specific instance that really captured your attention in that regard?

A: There wasn’t a specific instance, but it’s more of recurring since young, I’d say.”

This notion of a constant recurrence of racist sentiments is what Essed (1991) describes as integral towards the persistence of ‘everyday racism’. She argues that this process “must be seen as a continuum through which the integration of racism into everyday practices becomes part of the expected” (p.50). Racism, from this point of view, are not single sporadic events that occur in short bursts. Rather, this understanding of racism is built on an understanding that racist sentiments can be enduring in its occurrence. Velayutham (2017) expands upon this understanding by arguing that racist practices “rely on cultural stereotypes for the perpetuation of racial inequities” (p.462). The claim here is that when society fails to address the stereotypes affecting its citizens, racial discrimination working off those stereotypes will nevertheless persist through generations. John was able to articulate this point well when asked whether he predicts that his mixed-race daughter might be bullied in school due to her race:

John, Chinese male, 40: “A: We hope it doesn’t, but we... I personally think it might happen la. Cause my wife experienced

it, being mixed-race, because she was bullied quite a lot as a kid, because kids are very brutal, and they just repeat a lot of the maybe racist views that their parents have. Uh, but you know, we just have to make sure that if it happens, she's somewhat prepared for it.

Q: And do you have any like, thoughts on how you're going to prepare her for that? At this point.

A: (Sigh) Not yet man."

His response highlights an understanding that racial discrimination, especially those coming from children, are often the product of the racist views that their parents may hold. He recognizes the enduring nature of racism and how it can persist through generations, based off ill-conceived stereotypes. He also recognizes the difficulty in broaching the topic of race with his mixed-race daughter, stating that he has yet to prepare her for these incidents, should they occur. The issue of stereotyping was particularly salient amongst my participants. Many of them reported having to deal with stereotypes and stereotypical comments through the duration of their relationships:

Joan, Chinese female, 25: "Just like, I guess our friends would be like, oh why you dating this Indian guy, y'know? And, I guess, family also, oh, yeah, why you dating this guy? And then like, y'know, stereotypes about race will come out. Like, will Indian guys always beat their wives, that kind of thing. So, yeah. That's the kind of comments that you get."

Sally, Chinese female, 26: "just knowing he's Malay right, there's so much like, negativity, and then it really baffles you, because like, did we not all like, grow up the same environment? Like, how come y'all have such negative assumption of them? Like,

where are these stereotypes coming from? I mean, like, I know it exists, but then you wouldn't think that the people around you have it. And then, it also makes you realise like, how many close people around you will not date out of their race.”

Joan and Sally's responses exemplify the point that when it comes to racial stereotyping, minorities often have to deal with the brunt of it. Velayutham (2017) again highlights how this perception of minorities in Singapore is a product of an “entrenched racialized economic and social hierarchy” (p.465) that finds minority races to be placed below the Chinese majority. Using Tan's (2009) typology of stereotypes, it can be seen that stereotypes on minorities in Singapore often fall into the category of *'False-undesirable'* in which those stereotypes are part of a system that “marginalizes the minorities, their 'good' qualities redefined as negative by the overwhelming standards of a dominant class” (p.132). These stereotypes are often not isolated within Singapore as well:

Sarah, Chinese female, 25: “Like, kind of the pre-conceived negative connotations that they have against the other races or other religions, or like, with people that they don't identify with. And it got exacerbated because my father would ask Malaysian Chinese about Muslims, which doesn't make sense at all. Yah. And then also because Malaysian Chinese, their perceptions of Malaysian Muslims is different also. So it can't be applied to Singaporean Muslim as well.”

Anthony, Malay male, 27: “Her mom is a Malaysian, so, I don't know, I consider it as if she didn't have a good experience with the native Malays in Malaysia la. Which might form her perception. Her dad is also very old school kind of, I think they are elderly la, elderly Chinese parents, so they have a bit more,

maybe they're a bit more like, strict, especially with regards to that la, so I think that's the main reason. Negative stereotypes, because they don't really know much about me, besides what shesay la, like, uni guy, doing accounting."

There is an assumption here that negative racial perceptions can often seep across borders and as Sarah and Anthony have pointed out, negative racial perceptions towards Malays and Muslims can also sometimes be carried over and be strongly held by Malaysian. And when stereotypes take root across society and become indistinguishable from the actual truth, minorities often have to grapple with racial discrimination even in the most mundane of situations:

Andy, Malay male, 28: "And, other small, small things like, so there was once when we were eating at a Chinese restaurant, and the waiter was a Chinese person, and she said something to my girlfriend la, which I mean, of course I didn't understand Chinese, but I knew she was saying something about me. Cos she was like sort of like, hinting at like, her eyes was pointing at me, y'know? And then apparently we were eating Chinese food and we were ordering some Chinese dishes, and she asked my girlfriend like, eh, this one know how to eat meh? That kind of thing. Which I thought was a bit, like why would you ever say that? Like, just because I'm Malay I dunno how to eat Chinese food ah? That's like, kinda stupid ass thing to say la."

Andy highlights a deep frustration through the above incident and reflects that his ability to partake in Chinese cuisine should not have been placed into question vis-à-vis his race.

On the issue of race and racism experienced by participants of this study, I again reflect on the striking consistency in which they highlighted similar points. Being exposed to racial discrimination, overtly or through stereotypes was highlighted as a regular occurrence amongst my minority non-Chinese participants. However, for my majority Chinese participants, many often reflected on how their relationships allowed them to experience first-hand the levels of racial discrimination that their partners were experiencing. As mentioned earlier, people from majority race groups are rarely aware of the racial prejudice and discrimination minorities face. It is only through their partners that they become aware of underlying racial tensions within their society.

Further, by looking into my participants' experiences of race and racism through their private interracial intimacies, one can glean deeper insights into what race means to Singaporeans across different racial backgrounds. While these intimate relationships are believed to be private affairs, they are not completely insulated against the social realities of racial inequality within Singapore society. The responses provided by my participants highlights the racialized notions of hierarchy in Singapore, in which certain racial groups tend to be viewed as inferior or lacking against another. A priority or preference is afforded to the Chinese majority whereas minority groups, such as Malays and Indians, are likely to occupy a lower social standing. This lower standing often comes with it the burdens of discrimination and prejudice that may materialize in various forms, from overt and blatant racism to stereotyping. While minorities consistently have to deal and confront with the constant reproduction of these negative attitudes and perceptions as a part to their daily lives, the Chinese majority are often unaware or even ignorant to these realities. It is only within certain spaces – in this case the space of interracial intimacies – whereby some within the majority becomes exposed to and learns how to grapple with this reality of racial inequality in Singapore. This lopsided experience between majority and minority groups further highlights the uneven ways in which race tends to be internalized and experienced between different racial groups in Singapore.

## **Limitations**

All research is subject to the constraints encountered by the researcher and the project itself. In this section, I hope to highlight some areas of limitations that may affect its findings and conclusions. First, as the study was conducted with an exploratory approach in mind, the sampling frame was purposely left somewhat broad in terms of participant requirements. It was open to any Singaporean that have been or currently engaged in an interracial relationship. Casting a wide net can reveal shared experiences across a wider variety of participants. However, it may fall short in drawing upon nuances that may be specific to particular racial groups. The researcher recognizes that the experience of a Chinese male dating a Malay female may greatly differ from that of an Indian male dating a Chinese female. Likewise, the experiences of an interracial couple looking to get married may greatly differ from the experiences of an interracial couple that is already married with kids. This research may not be able to fully capture these nuances found in these variations. Additionally, as participants were gathered through snowball sampling, those that came forward to participate in the study had very similar socio-economic backgrounds, not only to each other but to the researcher as well. By extension, this study might not be able to capture the complete experiences of individuals across class and social backgrounds. Finally, while the findings of this research attempts to highlight trends by drawing across similar experiences, the findings may not be entirely applicable to the general demographic of interracial unions.

Another limitation lies in my positionality as a Malay male Singaporean. The nature of this study explores race as a core thematic concern. As someone who is socially visible as belonging to an ethnic minority in the country, there were certain connotations attached to that identity. While I encouraged my participants to speak frankly of their experiences, there were several instances where participants felt hesitant to share certain experiences with the concern that

I would take offence to their comments. However, there were also moments in which my positionality served as a way to build rapport with my participants owing to the perception that I would be able to identify and empathize with their experiences with race and racism.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this paper have explored several key thematic concerns that consistently surface during the interview process. The following discussion will seek to contextualize those findings in a way that can elucidate several key points with regards to the larger issues in Singapore. To begin with, the research findings indicate that when it comes to mate selection within the Singapore context, the family unit can often make or break that selection process. This point is congruent with the literature and is consistent with findings by Childs (2006), Rosenblatt (2009) and Yancey & Lewis (2009). Participants of the study cite the parents as an important consideration, some even stating that they would not go against their parent's wishes in favour of staying with their partner. This behaviour evokes ideals surrounding the values of 'filial piety, a Confucian value that the state often pushes as part of a wide-range of state-sponsored values. Studies by Kuah (1990) and Rozario & Hong (2011) have shown how the rhetoric of 'filial piety' has been used by the state as a way to socially engineer certain 'desirable' practices amongst its citizens with regards to elderly parental care. Labelling it under the banner of filial piety shifts the burden of care work away from the state towards the children. Chua (2009) does make a note that the ideology of filial piety has failed to resonate amongst the younger generation referring to later marriages and declining birth rates (p.247). However, findings by Teo (2010) indicate that a belief in the value of filial piety still had a 'significant affirmative meaning. They saw the value of 'filial piety' to be integral towards a belief in the country's 'national exceptionalism' (p.350). While participants of this study did not explicitly state filial piety as a motivating factor behind their decision-making process, a majority understood and reflected that their parents were an important consideration when picking a partner. In some ways, they exemplified and internalized this belief in 'filial piety' through this behaviour. Many felt that they would find it extremely difficult to move forward in their romantic relationships without the approval of their parents. Inversely,

participants that gained immediate or eventual approval from their parents enjoyed greater success in their relationships. As inter-ethnic marriage rates have steadily increased over the past decades, this uptick could also highlight shifting trends with regards to the influence of the family on romantic relationships. Individuals may perhaps believe it to be more important to act independently from their parents' decisions when it comes to personal matters in their romantic relationships. It could also highlight a general growing acceptance by parents towards inter-ethnic relationships and marriages.

Further still, race as a factor, is seen as an important consideration and the choice to date and even marry across racial lines has shown to be incredibly problematic within the context of some families. The objection faced by participants from their family due to the issue of race reveals the deeply rooted racialized anxieties present in the minds of the Singapore public. For most Singaporeans, race is viewed as a master category as it has a great deal of salience in their lives. From birth, every Singaporean individual is ascribed a racialized identity under the CMIO<sup>3</sup> model that may either grant or deny them access to the structures of power present in greater society. However, the CMIO model was largely an attempt by the state to reduce the individual's racial identity into overly simplistic groups based on perceived ancestry. It was ultimately a political tool that "used only a single element ... to simplify and homogenize the complex ethnic, linguistic and religious differences that it represented (Chua, 2017:129). As a Singaporean's racialized identity is constructed during its postcolonial period along race/culture, the state positions it along a static imagined ancestral past that adopts an essentialist thinking of race. This approach fails to acknowledge the dynamic historical processes that those identities have been subjected to. Hall (1996) describes this situation through his second position of cultural identity arguing that cultural identities are not 'fixed in some essentialized past' but 'subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and

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<sup>3</sup> Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others

power' (p.225). Goh (2010) further reifies this by arguing that rather than foregoing racialized stereotypes that came about from an essentialist thinking during the colonial era, an independent Singapore government adopted political technologies that built on those very stereotypes. Instead of having to grapple with 'negative stereotypes of colonial racialism', we now have 'positive cultural stereotypes' realized through 'postcolonial multiracialism' (p.24). As surfaced in the findings of this study, stereotyping was a major issue encountered by most participants. They reflected how grappling with stereotypes was the most overt form of racism they encountered, either facing it themselves or through their partner. Stereotyping reflects the inherent problem with viewing race through an essentialist lens. It instils in people's minds that certain perceived traits and behaviours exemplified by a racial group are somehow inherent of said race. When stereotypes that are both false and negative become ideologically ingrained, they become "part of the national-popular consciousness that sustains latent and asymmetrical power relations", eventually becoming self-fulfilling and 'true' (Tan, 2009;132).

A discussion of race in Singapore would also be lacking without paying attention to its brand of state-sponsored "multiculturalism". On the government-run Public Service Division website, "multiculturalism" is touted as one of three principles that ensure social harmony in Singapore. It is defined as such: "Singapore's different ethnic groups coming together as one united people, without giving up their cultural heritage or beliefs. At the same time, our common national identity takes precedence over our ethnic or religious identities" (Public Service Division, 2015). Following this definition, I contend that Singapore's brand of "multiculturalism" closely aligns with what scholars have defined as cultural pluralism. The definition provided by the state follows an understanding of cultural pluralism through a belief that different ethnic groups should retain their cultural heritage or beliefs. The theory of cultural pluralism has been forwarded as a theoretical approach to understanding societies where the contact

points between different racial and cultural groups have grown increasingly intimate and began to enter mainstream scholarship in the 70s, seeking a definitive understanding from sociologists and anthropologists alike (Bonilla, 1972; Stent, 1973). Pantoja et al (1976) has even attempted to redefine the term, setting up several conditions in order for a society to be deemed culturally pluralist (p.130-131). The main crux of cultural pluralism is an understanding that minority groups “*should* retain their lifestyles and identities and preserve their ethnic, racial, or minority cultures” (Berbrier, 2004:36). There is an assumption here then that societies that are culturally pluralist would see limited intermingling between ethnic groups as the desire to preserve ethnic cultures would result in the expectation of actively maintaining ethnic boundaries. The model of Singapore’s multiculturalism thus “solidifies racial boundaries in the course of administratively and politically recognizing and celebrating the differences between races”. By cementing racial groups as visibly separate through state policy, it creates a “sense of incommensurability among the racial and cultural groups” (Poon, 2009:72-73). But as Kathiravelu (2017) argues, this narrative is predicated on an ‘inherent incompatibility’ between races that fails to acknowledge the historical significance of race being used as a political battleground against the backdrop of political instability (p.160).

At this point, I seek to understand how the thematic concerns that have arisen from this research paper are inextricably linked to the issues of the family, race, and the state. Taken together, these ideas all create a backdrop that further complicates the issue of interracial intimacies in Singapore. The tensions and problems that couples face within these unions are largely affected and influenced by forces external to the relationship itself as evidenced by my participants’ responses. When couples in interracial intimacies negotiate the boundaries of race and romance in their own relationship, they do the work of grappling with these external forces that are already present around them. As mentioned, the family unit is one of the greater, if not greatest, influence on an individual’s romantic relationship. There exists certain ideals and norms surrounding appropriate

behaviours when it comes to the family unit. Children are expected to pay deference to their parents, and part of that may involve ensuring the continuity of a perceived ancestral heritage. This perceived ancestry held by the family, however, can be argued as an extension of the state's public narratives surrounding race. Indeed, the top-down approach of ascribing its citizens a singular racialized identity along an imagined static ancestry is an inherently political tool formulated by the Singapore state (Chua, 2003). These ascribed racialized identities fail to consider the complex ethnic and linguistic diversity present in one's past. Instead, racial groups in Singapore tend to be reduced into singular and simplistic monoliths with clearly demarcated boundaries from one another. Nevertheless, over time citizens still draw upon these public narratives around race and internalize and reproduce them regularly. Consequently, boundaries between the various racial groups are constantly reproduced as well. When family members insist that their children seek out partners within their own racial groups, this represents a reproduction of those narratives and boundaries. Further still, when families reject potential partners of their children along the lines of race – based on perceived negative stereotypes – this too represents a reproduction of those racial narratives and boundaries. These tensions that arise highlights the fact that despite public and state narratives of multiracialism/multiculturalism, there still exists clearly demarcated boundaries between racial groups and violating these boundaries often triggers strong emotional responses, particularly by those who seek to reproduce them. These racialized fault lines tell us that the simplified public narratives surrounding race that are typically put forth by the state tend to be more complex than it seems. And while these nuances may not impact the average citizen on a daily basis, it tends to hit a flashpoint in the lives of individuals who constantly navigate across these boundaries, such as individuals in interracial intimacies.

Here I argue that in a society in which the state plays a heavy-handed role in disciplining and controlling boundaries between ethnic groups, individuals that engage in intimate romantic relationships across racial lines find themselves constantly crossing those boundaries. It is when they cross those boundaries do complication surrounding race become apparent. While Singapore does not have anti-miscegenation laws enshrined in policy, that does not discount from the fact

that participants in this study who engaged in interracial intimacies are often met with negative sanctions. Negative reactions from their social networks highlights how those romances are perceived as violating a 'natural' order. Their responses also highlighted a desire from their family to maintain intimate romantic relations within their racial 'in-group'. In order to transcend what they saw as rigid racial boundaries, participants adopted various strategies that allowed them to more freely navigate those restrictions. A very common strategy amongst my participants was to downplay the role of race in their relationships. In a situation in which racial incompatibility was viewed as problematic to those around them, adopting a colour-blind approach can go towards rectifying that perceived problem. Many participants reported seeing their partner as a person, rather than as a 'raced' person and would rationalize accordingly to those around them. Further still, for those that found themselves in the difficult position of crossing interfaith lines, contesting and negotiating those lines also became an integral part of their relationship. I argue that these strategies highlight the important work that individuals in interracial intimacies do to constantly contest boundaries. These individuals are uniquely positioned to straddle the lines between racial and ethnic groups, and it is through this positionality that they are better able to negotiate what they see as unnecessary ethnic boundaries. In many ways, as the demographic of people who engage in inter-ethnic unions continues to increase, the state-sponsored project of 'multiculturalism' – in which individuals are racialized into neat and simplified categories distinct from one another – becomes increasingly irrelevant as such a system fails to acknowledge the racial nuances present in the lives of these individuals.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, this paper set out to study the growing phenomena of interracial intimacies in Singapore. Upon undertaking this research, it came as a surprise to me that the scholarship on this issue has not kept up with shifting demographic changes. In order to elucidate deeper insights into this growing demographic, I undertook an exploratory approach to draw out significant experiences shared by individuals in interracial intimacies. By using semi-structured in-depth interviews, I was able to get at the lived experiences of these individuals with regards to their romantic relationships and found several key thematic concerns that were congruent with similar studies done outside of Singapore. When it comes to romantic relationships, I found that close personal networks, particularly the family unit, often play a significant role in the decision-making process within these relationships. The approval, or lack thereof, of their relationship from the parents can have long-term consequences for the couple's well-being. I also found that those in interracial intimacies employ a unique set of strategies to overcome perceived racial anxieties within their relationship. Where race was a contentious issue in their relationship, most of my participants and their partners would find ways to downplay or even completely avoid the issue of race altogether. For them, it was a way to navigate around difficult conversations that they had little control over. Finally, I found that participants from the majority race often had little experience with race and racism prior to their relationships. It is only through being in a romantic relationship with a partner from a minority race were they able to see first-hand the types of racism present around them.

## **Contributions to the literature**

The findings of this research contribute to the literature by highlighting the significance of interracial intimacies in Singapore as sites that are worth further study and investigation. Current available research and data on the issue has failed to keep up to date with this constantly evolving and growing demographic. While still in the minority, individuals who engage in interracial intimacies today make up a significant minority. If current trends are anything to

go by, those numbers will only continue to increase over time. The findings of this research have also attempted to do the theoretical work of establishing the link between public narratives of race and romance with the lived realities of private interracial intimacies. It asserts that private romantic relationships are almost never truly private but in fact at the mercy of consistently shifting external forces that pertain to attitudes of race, romance, and the family.

### **Potential for future research**

Here, I would like to highlight several research areas that can be extended from this study. The first would be the literature on interracial intimacies in the contemporary Singapore context. Literature on this issue continues to be sparse and major research already done on the matter has become increasingly dated. While this study attempts to update this body of work, there still remains plenty to discover with regards to the experiences of those who choose to date and marry across racial boundaries. Future potential research may narrow down the sampling frame so as to apply only to specific racial unions. Future research can also look into specific age groups and how couples across different generations grapple with the issues highlighted in this study. Drawing from an intersectional approach, insights may also be gleaned by looking at how race, gender, and class when taken together may influence and play a role in these relationships.

Another possible avenue of research would be to investigate how state mechanisms pertaining to race can greatly shape the experiences of those that engage in interracial intimacies. This study finds that Singaporeans that date across racial lines are particularly subjected to the racial tensions that exist between different ethnic groups. These anxieties are shown to be a product of race-based governance. As the demographic of interracial couples continues to grow, it would be interesting to look into how race-based governance directly affects and possibly constrain the lives of those that choose to date across racial boundaries. Furthermore, looking into the ways that these individuals strategize and negotiate around these constraints can glean further reveal the types of strategies required to overcome difficult situations where race is a contentious issue.

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