Fluidity amidst structure: multi-racial identity constructions across the life course of Malaysians and Singaporeans

Geetha Reddy

Published online: 19 Jul 2018.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 580

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Fluidity amidst structure: multi-racial identity constructions across the life course of Malaysians and Singaporeans
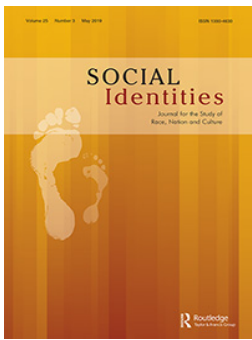
Geetha Reddy

Department of Sociology, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Multi-racial identity construction is understood to be fluid, contextual and dynamic. Yet the dynamics of multi-racial identity construction when racial identities are ascribed and formulated as static by governments is less explored in psychological studies of race. This paper examines the dynamics of racial identity construction among multi-racial Malaysians and Singaporeans in a qualitative study of 31 semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify the different private racial identity constructions of participants who were officially ascribed with single racial identities at birth. Participants reflected on the overwhelming influence of the state and significant Others in limiting their ability to express their multiple racial identities when they were in school, and highlighted their capacity to be agentic in their private racial identity constructions when they were older. This paper shows that across the life course multi-racial individuals possess (1) the ability to adopt different racial identity positions at different times, (2) the ability to hold multiple racial identity constructions at the same time when encounters with Others are dialogical, (3) the reflexivity of past identity positions in the present construction of identities.

Introduction

Multi-racial identity construction is a complex process, made more challenging by racial categorisation policies by government institutions. The census debates[1] in the US (Brunsma, 2006; King, 2000) and in the UK (Owen, 2001) have shown that the mutual exclusivity of racial categories is problematic for individuals with multiple racial identities. In understanding how multi-racial individuals see themselves, there needs to be an understanding of how Others[2] see them, how institutions ascribe racial identities to them and what this means for their everyday experiences. This intersection, under researched in current psychological discourse and empirical studies, is explored in the critical examination of multi-racial identity construction among Malaysians and Singaporeans in this paper. Furthermore, current research (Choudhry, 2010; Kamada, 2010) on multi-racial identities primarily revolves around people of part 'white' heritage and often in European or

North American contexts. Research on multiple Asian heritages is limited in the current discourse, and this paper seeks to expand this literature.

This paper will thus begin with a definition of key concepts and theories in the construction of multi-racial identities, before summarising the racial ascription policies in the two countries to provide the backdrop for understanding multi-racial identity construction. The paper draws from a larger study exploring the influence of racial categorisation policies in Malaysia and Singapore on the construction of racial identities by multi-racial Malaysians and Singaporeans, and analyses specifically the dynamics of private racial identity construction. Adding to literature on the fluidity of multi-racial identity construction, this paper posits that multi-racial individuals who have been ascribed single racial identities at birth construct and maintain complex private racial identities that change over the course of their lives.

Defining identity and 'Mixed Race'

The point of departure for this paper is that identity is not merely a product of membership of different social groups but rather a process of connecting with a group, enacting that group's representations and being viewed as a member of that group (Duveen, 2001, p. 182). Identity is fluid, and can be conceptualised as positions that are taken up on a continuum, rather than as static points that one achieves. Individuals are motivated to construct identities for a number of reasons such as maintaining positive self esteem, as outlined by Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel (1978) defined social identities as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (p. 63). Identities as processes are said to serve a social function that allows the individual to participate in social life and in different social worlds, according to Social Representations Theory (SRT; Moscovici, 1984). SRT shows that reality is co-constructed by Others (community, governments and individuals) and the Self. Indeed, the presence of others is important for us to develop the ability to recognise ourselves, to build relationships with Others, to become self-conscious and agentic (Howarth, 2002). Identities are also negotiated with Others, where individuals are motivated to verify their self-constructions against those of Others (Swann, 1987). What I take this to mean in this paper is that individuals are motivated to construct identities that allow them to participate in community life and identities are co-constructed with Others- imagined, implied and real. This paper thus focuses on the constructions of racial identities by multi-racial individuals, looking at the underlying social cognitive and social construction processes involved.

Importantly, in viewing identity as positions that one can take, and as co-constructions of one's Self, I conceptualise identity as an active position, rather than a passive acceptance of identity categories that exist in the social world. Nevertheless, the construction and negotiation of racial identities can be limited by societal structures and practices (Howard, 2000; Mahtani, 2002) as will be elaborated later. One way individuals can be agentic in their construction of their identities is when they compartmentalise their identities into public and private identities as seen in the case of stigmatised and concealable identities such as gay identities of African American men (Sedlovskaya, Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach, LaFrance, & Camp, 2013), the separation of work and cultural identities (Ramarajan

& Reid, 2013) and the construction of multi-racial identities (Ali, 2012; Reddy, 2018). Drawing from the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1992), Ali (2012) outlines how multi-racial individuals hold private racial identities where one is recognised according to their self-definition, contrasted with a public racial identity where one can officially identify as 'mixed race'. Here, the concept of the public sphere (Jovchelovitch, 2007) is useful. The public sphere is demarcated by three factors, (1) political (2) spatial and (3) psychosocial. The political aspect refers to areas for institutionalised debate and public opinion, the spatial aspect refers to the natural and built up environments and the psychosocial aspect refers to spaces of mediation and communication. On the other hand, the private sphere is a space that is not common to all members of a community. Identity construction is situated in both the public and private spheres, yet at times resulting in different identity constructions. Psychological research that has focused on the structural influences that impact the individual's perceptions of their racial identity has been limited (but see Verkuyten, 2007). The paper argues that the study of multiracial identity construction needs to include the careful negotiation of structural influences such as government social policies (cf. Reddy, 2018).

To this end, recognising the situated nature of identities such as citizenship identity (Koh, 2015), and multi-racial identity (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009) means also acknowledging that identity, time and context are intricately linked. This interest in temporal dimensions of identity is less explored in psychological literature (Condor, 1996), compared to within sociology (Maines, 1987). In order to understand the value of time in the processes involved in multi-racial identity construction, this paper focuses identity construction over the course of one's life, taking a developmental social psychological approach to understanding the individual within the context (Adams & Marshall, 1996).

This temporal perspective of identity is especially salient when understanding the multiple racial identities of 'mixed race'[3] or multi-racial individuals. Many theories on multi-racial identity development (while inconclusive) commonly describe a stage when individuals experience conflict and tension about their racial identities (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). This identity conflict experienced by multi-racial individuals has been shown to be temporal in nature (Mahtani, 2002). Conflict may arise from issues within the family and community (Gaskins, 1999), and from the larger societal structures. Different societies in different time periods have had specific rules on the categorisation of individuals with multiple racial identities. The case of South Africa in defining and redefining what it means to be black, white or coloured shows that classification systems are often sites of political and social struggles for individuals with multiple racial identities (Bowker & Star, 2000). In the US, the one-drop rule still has a lingering influence on how individuals of Black and White parentage see themselves (Khanna, 2010). In Singapore, Rocha (2014) outlined how state sanctioned 'mixedness' through the racial category of Eurasian (European + Asian) was created based on British colonisers' perspectives on racial mixing and hybridity, yet is not always a category that many individuals of mixed European and Chinese heritage today can identify with within the government's current racial categorisation framework that is built around four discrete racial categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others). What must be noted here is that structural influences in the US, for example, differ greatly from the two countries studied here. It is therefore important to understand that multi-racial identity development is not linear, cannot be

compared to single racial identity development, is influenced by the specificities of social, cultural and spatial context, and may change over the course of one's life (Rockquemore et al., 2009).

Not all individuals with multiple racial backgrounds necessarily experience identity conflict, and those who do experience them do not do so all the time. Instead, they draw upon a number of strategies to manage potentially conflicting situations. Being able to integrate different identities leads to less affective stress among individuals with multiple identities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Multi-racial individuals may possess chameleon identities, that is, the ability to choose from different racial identities depending on that which is most useful for them in the given situation (Choudhry, 2010). Research in Singapore and New Zealand has shown that individuals may construct hybrid identities that are combinations of multiple racial identities as a means to function in a social world with strict categorisations of race (Rocha, 2011). Thus, multi-racial identities are also strategic social constructions that are shaped by the social environment.

Whether multi-racial individuals experience identity conflict or are able to manage their multiple racial identities positively, what is clear is that there is a need for a multi dimensional perspective of the multi-racial experience, which considers not only immediate social influences (such as family and community members) but also social policies and their consequences for multiracial people (Aspinall, 2011; Shih & Sanchez, 2009) and a temporal dimension of identity construction. This can be achieved by adopting a Social Representations Approach (SRA: Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011), a theoretical framework that marries SIT and SRT in the study of social psychological phenomena. A core aspect of SRA is that social representations are *enacted knowledge*. Indeed, the constructions of identities are examples of knowledge in action. When two or more representational systems expressing different objective, subjective and intersubjective worlds meet, this is known as a *knowledge encounter* (Jovchelovitch, 2007). 'Different kinds of knowledge, possessing different rationalities (can) live side-by-side in the same individual or collective' and this is referred to as the state of *cognitive polyphasia* (Jovchelovitch, 2002, p.122). The recognition or denial of the knowledge of the Other determines the cognitive outcomes of a knowledge encounter. The knowledge encounter thus underpins what becomes of an identity. Therefore, in understanding the multifaceted perspective of racial identity construction, one needs to examine the knowledge encounters that take place between the multi-racial individual and Others (such as institutions and communities) who shape their social environment and determine which actions are possible and which are not.

Race and multi-racial citizens in Malaysia and Singapore

Malaysia and Singapore present complex platforms for the construction of multi-racial identities that differ from much of the research situated in the West. For example, we know much about how structural influences in the US such as census categories and the education system limit multi-racial identity development (Root, 2003). But this knowledge is not enough to facilitate an understanding of multi-racial identity construction in Malaysia and Singapore. This paper adds to growing literature on the influences of social policies on racial identity construction in the region (Chandran, 2017; Rocha, 2011).

Malaysia and Singapore, while adhering to different political ideologies, share similar views on race: race is understood to be biological and follows a patrilineal structure.

Both countries categorise their citizens racially and use these racial categories in the oper-
ationalisation of social policies. Contrasted with self-selection of available identity cat-
egories in census selections in many Western countries, citizens here are ascribed a
racial category at birth, and government officials ensure that individuals adhere to the cat-
egories that they have been assigned. The construction of racial identities in the public
sphere is hence limited by state racial ascription. The states frames discourse and enact-
ment of identity by creating rules regarding racial categorisation- who gets to belong
to one race, and what the boundaries of this race are for example. Unequal statuses
between the racial groups resulting from prevailing political ideologies lead to unequal
outcomes for racialized individuals and the establishment of race-based social hierarchies
in the two countries. In Singapore and Malaysia, racial identity shapes how individuals fit
into local social support systems, and are factored into social policies such as education,
housing and employment.

However, race-based social policies in the two countries also differ. Malaysia has been
ruled by a coalition of racially based political parties since its independence from the
British in 1957, where each party claims to serve the interests of an ethno-racial group
in the country (Ambikaipaker, 2013), while ensuring political primacy for Malays in
exchange for equal citizenship rights among the racially diverse population (Goh, 2008).
Malay is the official language. Different language medium schools labelled as Malay- or
Chinese- or Tamil- schools divide the education system and each individual school is
mainly seen as monolingual, even though a bilingual education policy was implemented
in 2003 (Tan, 2005). Race based social policies in Malaysia consistently favour Malays (also
categorised as *Bumiputras*[4]*, or *sons of the soil*), unlike Singapore. Singapore, on the other
hand, adopts a 'social formula' called the CMIO model, built upon the acceptance of the
four main races in Singapore - Chinese, Malay, Indian and 'Other'[5]- as separate but
equal in formulating most of its social policies (see Reddy, 2016; Barr & Skrbis, 2008 for
elaboration). English is the official language and citizens are expected to develop compe-
tency in a second language, which is also referred to as their mother tongue. As such, race
is reinforced as a visible identity where everyone is a hyphenated citizen (i.e. Chinese-Sin-
gaporean) (Chua, 2003) and presents tangible consequences in the daily lives of
individuals.

Changing family structures have seen inter-racial marriages in Singapore and Malaysia
rising steadily (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2010; Nagaraj, 2009). As an extension of
this social change, it can be presumed that the number of multi-racial children has
increased. It is challenging to chart this in Singapore and Malaysia, particularly because
all Singaporeans and Malaysians are required to state their race, and only one, on their
birth certificates. However, yet another factor differentiates the two countries. In 2010,
the Singapore government recognised the increasing numbers of Singaporeans who
are of mixed parentage and allowed a double-barrelled racial option (Hoe, 2010). Yet, indi-
viduals still need to choose which of the two races indicated will be the primary race,
which will then be used in classifying them according to the CMIO model. Prior to this
double-barrelled option, children of mixed parentage were ascribed their father's racial
identity (Rocha, 2016). In Malaysia, the Bumiputra identity is often ascribed to the child
as long as one parent is categorised as Bumiputra. But this ruling seems to be more arbi-
trary, with differences among the states of Sabah, Sarawak and the states of west Malaysia
(Wong, 2009).

Nonetheless, the emphasis on individual racial development within these institutional representations of race may be problematic for multi-racial Singaporeans and Malaysians who do not fit neatly in one of the categories. Racial ascription is socially significant especially when one is 'morphologically atypical' for one's racial group (Appiah, 1985). What this means is that multi-racial individuals may be ascribed a racial category that they do not self-identify with, and may not also be perceived by Others as belonging to because they do not fit socially prescribed norms regarding appearance. Multi-racial individuals are also faced with a few challenges when they enter the education system in these countries, namely, which language to adopt as their 'mother tongue' when their parents do not share the same racial identity or second language. Thus, within institutional representations of race, race is constructed as static and singular across the life course, which may be at odds with the multi-racial individual's self-concept and lived experiences.

In dealing with the single racial ascription and the racial categorisation policies in these two countries, multi-racial individuals have been shown to construct public and private racial identities. In their everyday engagement with social policies, individuals often construct a public racial identity around the singular racial identification that society places on them (Reddy, 2018). Yet the changes, if any, in the private racial identity construction process across the multi racial individual's life is in need of exploration. In this paper, I examine how specific government policies influence private racial identity construction among multi-racial individuals, seeking to answer the question: '*How are private racial identities constructed and maintained by Malaysian and Singaporean multi-racial individuals when they have been ascribed with single racial identities?*'

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative methodologies which are particularly useful for the exploration of temporal dimensions of identity processes (Cinnirella, 1998). A total of 31 interviews were carried out with Malaysian (*n* = 16) and Singaporean (*n* = 15) participants. Individuals with different combinations of Asian identities spanning a large age range (21 to 62) were selected to capture the breadth in meaning making among a diverse group of individuals. Participants who self-identified as multi-racial were recruited via multiple social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Participants either had 'mono-racial' parents of different Asian racial identities (for example Malay mother, Indian father) or had parents who were multi-racial themselves (Chinese and Indian father, Chinese mother). Snowball sampling was also utilised where participants recommended friends and family who also identified as multi-racial. Combining two different recruitments methods in reaching out to a population that is challenging to locate and access was useful, given that Malaysians and Singaporeans above the age of 18 have been ascribed single identities at birth, and multi-racial individuals often do not consider themselves a community (Ali, 2003) and thus are often invisible from the perspective of census data or social organisations.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and examined by two senior academic researchers who have expertise in the area of multicultural policies in Malaysia and Singapore. It consisted of nine exploratory questions such as 'In 2010, the Singapore government gave parents the option of putting both the identities on the birth certificate/IC (identity cards) for their children. Did you know about this new option?' and 'Do you think

being identified as a single race is better?'. Participants in both countries were asked the same questions, though country specific explanatory probes were used as and when they were necessary. For example, Singaporean participants were prompted with questions referring to the CMIO model, while Malaysian participants were given references to specific policies such as race-based political parties. The interviews were held over the Internet via 'Skype', as the research was carried out from the U.K and Singapore, and were electronically recorded using the programme 'Call-recorder'. The sessions lasted between 50 and 75 min. The interviews were transcribed verbatim upon completion and where local languages were used, individual quotations were then translated into English.

Themes within the data were identified using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both deductive and inductive analysis was carried out where exploratory analysis, as well as existing research and theories, guided the development of the coding framework. A critical realist ontology and pragmatic epistemology was adopted (Willig, 1999) to allow for the understanding of multiple versions of reality that participants perceived. Five transcripts from Malaysian participants and five transcripts from Singaporean participants were randomly selected and coded independently to develop a coding framework. The coding framework was discussed with the research team and this was then applied to the remaining transcripts.

Analysis and discussion

Changing constructions over the life course

A recurrent theme among participants was the difference between their current racial constructions and those when they were younger. Participants recollected how their racial identities were often constructed in a singular fashion when they were children or teenagers, pointing to their ascribed racial identities, and resultant race-based division in society as being a key influence in their decision to identify in this manner.

Extract 1:

And because you know there is a genuine problem with racial categorisation. It's not just like a name that people put on you. I feel that it's got so much more impact. Even though I don't feel Indian at all, don't know anything about being Indian. (…) I don't have any Indian relatives. Erhm, when the government says that you are Indian, it really does affect, at least for me, affect what I feel. Like oh, I am Indian. You know when you're 15 and you realize that your IC says you're Indian, you feel like you've kind of internalised that identity even though it doesn't make any sense (because) I am not Indian at all. Apart from like the government says I'm Indian.

Pat, Singaporean[6]

Here Pat explained that being ascribed Indian identity at birth had a direct influence on how she viewed her own racial identity. Her public identity of Indian becomes 'internalised' and thus becomes a private identity as well. Nevertheless, she experienced conflict because she did not have any concept of being Indian within her understanding of her social world. She brought to light how this labelling affected her at a young age, probably at a time when she first received her identity card (IC)[7]. Prior to this event, Pat was less concerned about distinguishing her two racial identities, Chinese and Indian, which was

not an issue growing up in a family where her father had Chinese and Indian parents himself. Pat represents a second generation of multi-racial individuals whose increasing racial identity complexity is not addressed by the singular racial categorisation frameworks that existed when she was born.

Yet this internalisation of the ascribed identity is seen only at a specific time point in her life, as Pat currently maintains a more fluid racial identity that transcends the singular identity categorisation. While Pat's public racial identity (Indian) did not change from her teens, she later developed a more nuanced private racial identity (Chindian). In other multi-racial participants, we see that being forced to accept one racial identity over the other is not only influenced by state ascription, but also because of social racial hierarchies that develop as a result of racial categorisation in Malaysia and Singapore, as seen in the extract below.

Extract 2:

"I have found myself to identify with different ethnicities differently throughout certain phases in my life. I think I identified most with my mother's sort of Chinese native ethnicity[8] throughout most of my, I would say my teens, my pre-teens (…) But somehow or other, as I got into academia and I did a lot of writing about the socio-political makeup of Malaysia, I started to identify more with my father's ethnicity as Indian."

Vinodhini, Malaysian

Vinodhini even went on to describe that as a child in school it would have been 'social hara-kiri to identify as Indian', even though she had been categorised as Indian by the state, because of the negative stereotypes associated with being Indian in Malaysia. What is different to Pat's experiences is that Vinodhini's private identity as a teenager (Chinese) was different from her ascribed identity (Indian). Yet similarly, Vinodhini described how her self-identification changed over the course of her life. Her awareness of socio-political issues influenced her decision to identify as Indian, both publicly and privately, later on in her life. Vinodhini also maintained the more fluid, private identity of Chindian, explored in the next section.

In these two extracts, two key aspects of multi-racial identity construction are demonstrated. Firstly, while public constructions remained the same, private constructions changed across the participants' lives. Secondly, we see that the identity conflict experienced by some multi-racial individuals was limited to a certain time period in their lives. This time, participants' school years, generates conflict precisely because they are limited to, and have imposed upon them, one identity option by the state, and by Others in their lives who also prescribe a single racial identification. The developmental period while in school is pivotal because adolescents are motivated to search for structure (Ianni, 1989), and this may be antithetical to the multifaceted nature of multiracial identities. Because identity is also relational, and a core motivation in the construction of an identity is a desire to maintain positive self-esteem, participants tend to choose the racial identity that is not devalued by Others in the school environment. Here we see a non-dialogical encounter between different knowledge systems. The lack of mutual recognition, either by the state or by peers, leads to a displacement of alternative ways of thinking (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2015). Participants are expected to adopt a single racial identity position even when they do not identify with their racial ascription, or when

there are social limits such as negative stereotypes that hinder the identification of multi-racial individuals with the devalued identity. However, this limited perspective on identity may be transcended at a later stage in participants' lives.

Hybrid or chameleon? It depends

Participants often discussed multiple identity positions that they adopted privately, and when they were older, that were different from their public racial identities. For some participants, having multiple racial identities allowed for the creation of a new hybrid identity that drew from their different racial backgrounds.

> Extract 3:

> "We had elements of Chinese in there because of my mum's side, my grandparents; we had elements of Indian in there from my dad's side, but not so much so that we were that Indian or we were that Chinese. I always struggle to describe this because there's nothing …. there's no particular identity that I can say that this is what we were. It was just a mixed hodgepodge of all kinds of things."

> Sufian, Malaysian

Sufian's personal relationship with race was one that could not be traced to either one of his parents' racial identities. The melange of these racial identities was an everyday experience for Sufian, and the fact that he is unable to explain this to someone who does not belong to his family, makes this identity position truly private.

The extent of this new identity construction can be seen in the informal naming of a new hybrid identity such as the 'Chindian' identity. Unlike Sufian's experience, this hybrid identity can be traced back to Chinese and Indian identities.

> Extract 4:

> Seema : Yah, I tend to identify myself as being Chinese-Indian or Chindian … yah
> Author: Chindian … what's being Chindian like?
> Seema: [laughs] … I think that it's being different. It's kind of like … erhm, different but there's also a growing community of Chindian … so it's also a sense of belonging to this special, unique erhm, race, if you wanna call it a race. Especially in Singapore, cuz' I do have friends who are Chindian (…) I mean you just become, truly because I'm of mixed race, I straddle both races … I don't, I find it difficult to put myself into a box."

> Seema, Singaporean

At a basic level, 'Chindian' identity provided participants with a sense of personal location and acceptance (Chandran, 2017) where individuals who identify as such share common parentage with other members of the 'Chindian' group. Other participants who shared both Indian and Chinese racial heritage would use this term in their discussions[9]. This hybrid identity position offered multi-racial individuals a new racial identity that they felt more comfortable adopting rather than the singular racial categorisation ascribed at birth. While participants would prefer to be classified as 'Chindian' instead of a single race this becomes problematic as there is no official medium that allows for this identification to work at an institutional level, firmly placing this identity position as one that can exist only in the private sphere where there is little contestation on the use of the term.

However, many participants also discussed how they were able to construct their racial identities like a chameleon, that is to say, they would change their identity according to the racial identity that was most relevant in that situation. This meant choosing one racial identity over the other, unlike the hybrid identity position discussed above.

Extract 5:

"If we're in a group that's predominantly speaking Chinese, we just try to fit ourselves in and using the same terminology, the same words, the same speech pattern, the same language and so on"

Robin, Malaysian

Robin adopted a strategy of blending in with the racial group at any point in time by using language markers that are relevant to that particular group identity. This is similar to Choudhry's (2010) findings of British Asian individuals choosing to be white British, or Asian, given the situation. Other theorists have named this ability to move between and among multiple racial identities as a situational or protean identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009).

Yet the decision to construct one's identity as a hybrid identity or a chameleon identity is dependent on many factors. Participants often do not choose one strategy over the course of their lives, but rather decide which strategy affords them the best outcomes in any given situation. As another participant explains,

Extract 6:

"You suddenly become a very good interlocutor, and in this day and age, I think it's very important and it goes beyond learning a second language, a third language, whatever because you're part of the community (…) You just have to play your cards right."

Priyan, Singaporean

Priyan's view highlights the importance of drawing on multiple identities (and their respective languages) so as to belong to the larger community. It is of significance that Priyan himself identified as Indian at the start of the interview, even though he was ascribed Chinese identity from birth, and chose different racial identities at different times. This need for belonging, regarded as one of the fundamental motives for identity enactment (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006) fuels the strategy of choosing an identity option at different points in their lives. This type of cognitive polyphasia, referred to as *selective prevalence* (Jovchelovitch & Priego-Hernández, 2015) means that multiple rationalities can co-exist within the same individual and are retrieved separately at different points in time.

However, participants are seen to be agentic and can choose between different identities only when there is recognition of their multiple identities. In a knowledge encounter, individuals engage in communicative activity and can choose from different systems of knowledge (Priego-Hernández, 2011). The experience of Priyan being able to choose different 'cards' or racial identities and the experience of Robin codeswitching when in different groups, shows the process of selecting different systems of knowledge. Yet this is possible only because their multiple identities are recognised by Others. If Others refuse to engage with them in the communicative activity, this may signal a lack of recognition of their multiple identities. Each privately constructed racial identity can only be drawn upon in communication with Others who accept their multiple identities. Thus

private racial identities are not solely an internal construction, but can also be defined as a co-construction that takes place with Others who share an understanding of the complex, nuanced nature of multi-racial identities (Reddy, 2018).

Recognition thus allows individuals to belong, and a public recognition of multi-racial identities can be seen in the case of double-barrelled identity categories in Singapore. The introduction of this new type of racial identity category represents another knowledge encounter between multi-racial individuals and the racial ascription policies.

Double-Barrelled dilemma: Malaysia vs. Singapore

The introduction of a double-barrelled racial categorisation in Singapore in 2010 was seen as a bid on the government's part to reflect the increasing heterogeneity of its population. This drew mixed responses from Malaysian and Singaporean participants. While Malaysians welcomed the change of government social policies to afford new identity choices for multi-racial individuals, Singaporeans were less inclined to change their racial identity categories as will be shown in these extracts below.

Malaysian participants discussed the introduction of this policy, at times even before the author brought it up.

Extract 7:

The first step is in Singapore, Malaysia hasn't gone there yet but Singapore is pretty good. They actually acknowledged in 2010 that a kid being born to two races that they are able to tick two racial boxes in an official form. So I think that's at least a small step in the right direction.

Kai, Malaysian

Kai showed support for Singapore's new policy allowing for recognition of multiple racial identities at the institutional level, and thus the ability to possess a more 'true' public racial identity, one more in line with one's private racial identity. This need for recognition of both racial identities by the state was also reflected in other Malaysian participants' discussions, as they described not wanting one of their racial identities to be 'ignored' by the state. Public recognition of individual's self-identification of their multiple racial identities is valued because of the importance that reciprocal recognition has on strengthening one's rights and claims to that identity (Andreouli, 2010).

However, there were mixed responses to the double-barrelled categorisation offered to multi-racial Singaporeans. Since this new policy was only introduced in 2011, none of the participants had the double-barrelled option offered to their parents when they were born. Some of them accepted that the categorisation was not able to reflect their lived experiences and decided to maintain their current single racial identification.

Extract 8:

"I've lived with Indian all my life. My surname is Indian and I also considered like okay, it doesn't change who I am just having the tag there … It doesn't change my own self identity."

Sophia, Singaporean

Sophia maintained that racial ascription did not change her own private views about her multiple racial identities and thus distanced herself from the ascribed identity of Indian by referring to it as a 'tag', likening the ascription to a shopping label. This is contrasted with Pat's

(Extract 1) experience with the ascription of the Indian identity at the age of 15. To the younger self, the ascription is more than a label, presenting a reality that becomes internalised. When older, the ascription can be relegated to a label that has little bearing on the individual's self-concept because individuals possess the capacity to influence the outcome of the knowledge encounter. The knowledge encounter, between the different representations of race (that of the government in this extract, and the individual's representation of race) becomes dialogical when the individuals are older because they are able to maintain conflicting representations of the same identity. I argue that this change lies in the ability of the individual to exercise agency at a later stage in life, which I will return to later.

The fact that participants felt that the policy change was superficial could be an important reason why participants did not feel the need to change their racial identities on official documents.

Extract 9:

"To me it's more like a cosmetic change. But fundamentally, the policy is to prioritise one side over the other … so … I mean maybe when they … if they recognise that like … mixed race as a category of its own, you know, then I'd probably get it changed then. (…) Personally, I think it makes little difference to me until the policy is a substantive one."

Dev, Singaporean

Changes in the social context require a change to identity only when those changes have personal relevance for the individual (Breakwell, 1986). While official, public recognition was important for Malaysian participants, Singaporean participants perceived that the policy itself did not address the challenges faced by multi-racial individuals who still had to manoeuvre their way around social policies that continued to emphasise single racial identification. Dev's view of the double-barrelled policy as being 'cosmetic' is a result of the policy not being able to capture the lived reality of multi-racial individuals who often switch between their multiple racial identities. While individuals are able to agentically relegate public racial identity to a less important feature of their self-concepts when they are older, there are limits to their agency. Participants perceived that they cannot change the system with their decisions. Here again we see how multiple rationalities of one's racial identity can co-exist, therefore not prompting participants to make an official, albeit token, change to their racial identification by the state.

Participants often wondered what the categorisation of their children would be if they married a partner of another mixed heritage different to theirs.

Extract 10:

"(My) boyfriend is also mixed, he is Chinese and Thai. So we were joking around, like 'okay, what are we going to put on our kids' ICs?' You know? If we just put Malay and Chinese, it's like there's these two options, these two components of your identity. And you're just ignoring the fact that you have two other ethnicities in there, and I think it oversimplifies things."

Sayidah, Singaporean

While the double-barrelled ascription allows the option of reflecting both the racial identities of the bi-racial individual, it does not take into account second generation and third generation multi-racial individuals. The duality of the identity categories means that individuals who self-identify with more than two racial identities are forced to choose only two

identities, and individuals who self-identify with two racial identities still need to indicate which of the two racial identities is the primary racial identity so that they can fit into the racial categorisation framework that is defined by the single racial ascription system. This reinforces the point that the categorisation is rigid, often irrelevant to the everyday lives of multi-racial individuals and thus not favoured by these individuals. Participants questioned the need for these structures and the validity of these strict ascription policies in the future.

The lack of recognition by relevant Others is the heart of the conflict for many multi-racial individuals (Song, 2012). Yet within these extracts we see a tension within the need for recognition. There is a desire for people to identify themselves as mixed when government denies them this opportunity (seen in the Malaysian participants), yet there is no need for the recognition when this recognition is superficial (seen in Singaporean participants). Race based social policies, while different in both countries, influence individuals along the same factors such as access to housing, political party representation, development of languages, and access to and provision of social support (Reddy, 2018). Therefore, we see that the official recognition in Singapore is foreshadowed by a lack of concrete changes to social policies. When racial identity policies are constructed with mono racial individuals in mind on the basis of the assumption that race is only biological and patrilineal, there is no room for the re-presentation of race within the government structures. What this means is that the multi-racial individuals' understanding of race is still not met by institutional representations, rendering these institutional representations irrelevant in the individual's everyday experiences. Official recognition is good to have when there is none, but a purely symbolic recognition is not enough for participants.

Conclusion

Multi-racial individuals in Singapore and Malaysia are faced with unique structural influences that they navigate in their day-to-day lives. It is indeed true that identities are contextual, bound by certain limitations and develop in the space of possibilities. This is especially so when categorised by the state in a static and definite way throughout the course of their lives, and also when perceived by significant Others (at times) as different to their racial categorisation and self-identification. By drawing these aspects of identity construction together (state categorisation, perception of Others and self-identification), and by observing multi-racial identity construction over the life course, the paper sheds light on three key issues in the study of multi-racial identity constructions in Malaysia and Singapore. Firstly, multi-racial individuals exhibit agency in their private sphere when society limits identity choices in their public sphere and adopt different private racial identity positions in the course of their lives. Secondly, individuals are continuously reflexive of the identity positions that they have adopted in the course of their lives. Thirdly, multiple representations of one's racial identity can co-exist in the multi-racial individual at any given point in time, provided that the knowledge encounter with the Other is dialogical.

This paper has argued for racial identity construction to be conceptualised as active positions that multi-racial individuals take *at different points in time in their lives*. We know that identity construction is limited by societal structures (Howard, 2000). However, when we view identity as an action that has utility in certain situations, we transcend the notion that multi-racial identity is always limited by structural influences such as

racial ascription policies and that individuals are bound by these single racial categories for the entire duration of their lives. As shown in extracts 1 and 2, Pat and Vinodhini constructed a 'mono-racial' private identity when they were in school because of a non-recognition of their multi-racial identities by significant Others. The knowledge encounter is thus non-dialogical because one knowledge system (societal structures) possess power over the other (Jovchelovitch, 2002). The double-barrelled racial categorisation option also presented a non-dialogical encounter for some participants (Extracts 8, 9 & 10) because recognition was perceived as superficial. However, participants were able to develop multiple private racial identity positions in dialogical knowledge encounters at other times in their lives, demonstrating the ability to (re)claim agency from these structural influences (Extracts 3, 4, 5 & 6). Different identities are thus constructed as a response to the presence or absence of recognition, and available identity options, at those specific points in time.

Furthermore, participants reflected on their identity choices over the course of their lives and have been able to reconcile some of the conflicts faced in non-dialogical encounters, at a later stage in their lives. This is telling not only of the *reflexive nature of the identity construction process* but also of the continual evolution of the multi-racial identity. Participants do not reflect a linear development of racial identities as seen elsewhere (Rockquemore et al., 2009); rather, they move back and forth between the different identity positions that they have constructed in their lives. In the process of constructing one's identity, the present 'I' and the past 'I' simultaneously exist (Cassinari, 2007 in Ruggiu, 2015) and the individual continuously evolves in this process of self-reflection (Ruggiu, 2015). This reflexive process highlights why racial identity constructions may change over the course of one's life.

Lastly, this paper shows that participants possess the capacity to hold *multiple representations of race at the same time* despite being categorised (by state or community members) in a singular fashion when knowledge encounters are dialogical. Vinodhini (Extract 2) identified both as Indian and Chindian at the time of the interview. Yet, constructing a hybrid identity of Chindian seen in Extract 3, is in opposition to holding either Chinese or Indian racial identities only because of the perceived exclusivity of these racial identities by non-multi-racial individuals, as well as institutional representations of race and government categorisation frameworks. In a dialogical knowledge encounter individuals take the perspective of the Other and give it legitimacy (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Therefore, when participants encountered a mutual recognition of their racial identities, they showed the ability to maintain multiple, at times conflicting, identity positions (chameleon-Extracts 5 & 6, hybrid-Extracts 3 & 4,) alongside their public racial identities, only to be utilised when they feel it would be most strategic. Even within contexts where social and political structures are based on the ideological construction of 'singular' races, this paper shows that multi-racial individuals are able to construct fluid racial identities at different times in their lives.

Notes

1. Briefly, the census debates refers to discussions regarding the addition of 'mixed race' identity categories to census data collection.
2. Other is capitalised to differentiate from the interpersonal other. Self is capitalised to distinguish from a reference by a subject to the same subject.

3. In this paper, I adopt the term multi-racial individuals (Root, 1996) to reflect the participants' discourses and experiences where possessing different races meant being a combination of individual races ('mixed') at times, and being a single race at other times. The term 'mixed race' term has been critiqued as being inadequate as a coherent category (Ali, 2003; Phoenix & Owen, 2000). Race and racial discourse is also pervasive in Malaysia and Singapore, as will be discussed later in this paper, and thus I maintain the use of the term race without the use of double quotes.

4. Bumiputra policy in Malay is a social policy that stipulates the special privileges of indigenous and Malay communities with respect to different aspects of everyday life such as housing, and education.

5. The category of 'Other' encompasses all who did not fit into the categories Chinese, Malay or Indian, and includes all European ethnicities and nationalities as minority groups (Hill & Lian, 1995).

6. The quotes identify participants by their pseudonyms and nationality.

7. Singaporeans receive their IC at the age of 15. Prior to this, the birth certificate is their means of national identification.

8. Participants used the term ethnicity and race interchangeably.

9. In collaboratively constructing the data with the participants, I was mindful not to use the term 'Chindian' until the participants themselves used it.

Disclosure statement

Acknowledgment

References

Adams, G. R., & Marshall, S. K. (1996). A developmental social psychology of identity: Understanding the person-in-context. *Journal of Adolescence*, *19*(5), 429–442.

Ali, S. (2003). *Mixed-race, post-race: Gender, new ethnicities and cultural practices*. Oxford: Berg.

Ali, S. (2012). Mixed race politics. *Annales: Journal of Social Sciences*, *21*, 237–248.

Ambikaipaker, M. (2013). Anti-polarization identity politics in Malaysia: Critical race subjects and the theatre of Leow Puay Tin. *Postcolonial Studies*, *6*(4), 340–357.

Andreouli, E. (2010). Identity, positioning and self-other relations. *Papers on Social Representations*, *19*, 14.1–14.13.

Appiah, A. (1985). The uncompleted argument: Du bois and the illusion of race. *Critical Inquiry*, *12*(1), 21–37.

Aspinall, P. J. (2011). The utility and validity for public health of ethnicity categorisation in the 1991, 2001 and 2011 British censuses. *Public Health*, *125*(10), 680–687.

Barr, M. D., & Skrbis, Z. (2008). *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Benet-Martínez, V., & Haritatos, J. (2005). Bicultural identity integration (BII): Components and psycho-social antecedents. *Journal of Personality*, *73*(4), 1015–1050.

Bowker, G. C., & Star, S. L. (2000). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Breakwell, G. M. (1986). *Coping with threatened identities*. London: Methuen.

Brunsma, D. L. (2006). Public categories, private identities: Exploring regional differences in the bira-cial experience. *Social Science Research*, 35, 555–576.

Chandran, R. (2017). Chinese, Indians and the grey space in between: Strategies of identity work among chindians in a plural society. In Z. L. Rocha & F. Fozdar (Eds.), *Mixed race in Asia: Past present and future* (pp. 132–146). Oxon: Routledge.

Choudhry, S. (2010). *Multifaceted identity of interethnic young people: Chameleon identities*. London: Ashgate Publishing.

Chua, B. H. (2003). Multiculturalism in Singapore: An instrument of social control. *Race & Class*, 44(3), 58–77.

Cinnirella, M. (1998). Exploring temporal aspects of social identity: The concept of possible social identities. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 227–248.

Condor, S. (1996). Social identity and time. In W. P. Robinson (Ed.), *Social groups and identities: Developing the legacy of Henri Tajfel* (pp. 285–315). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Department of Statistics, Singapore. (2010). *Singapore Department of Statistics*. Retrieved 4 August 2014, from http://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_release2/cop2010sr2.pdf

Duveen, G. (2001). Representations, identities, resistance. In K. Deaux & G. Philogène (Eds.), *Representations of the social: Bridging theoretical traditions* (pp. 257–270). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Elcheroth, G., Doise, W., & Reicher, S. (2011). On the knowledge of politics and the politics of knowl-edge: How a social representations approach helps us rethink the subject of political psychology. *Political Psychology*, 32(5), 729–758.

Gaskins, P. (1999). *What are you? Voices of mixed-race young people*. New York: Holt.

Goh, D. P. S. (2008). From colonial pluralism to postcolonial multiculturalism: Race, state formation and the question of cultural diversity in Malaysia and Singapore. *Sociology Compass*, 2(1), 232–252.

Hill, M., & Lian, K. F. (1995). *The politics of nation building and citizenship in Singapore*. London: Psychology Press.

Hoe, Y. N. (2010, January 14). How the (dual) race card may be played, in. *Today Online*. Retrieved from %3Cwww.todayonline.com/Singapore/ EDC100114-0000114/How-the-(dual)-race-card-may-be-played

Howard, J. A. (2000). Social psychology of identities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 367–393.

Howarth, C. (2002). Identity in whose eyes? The role of representations in identity construction. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 32(2), 145–162.

Ianni, F. A. J. (1989). *The search for structure: A report on American youth today*. New York: Free Press.

Jovchelovitch, S. (2002). Re-thinking the diversity of knowledge: Cognitive polyphasia, belief and rep-resentation. *Psychologie et société*, 5(1), 121–138.

Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). *Knowledge in context: Representations, community and culture*. London: Routledge.

Jovchelovitch, S., & Priego-Hernández, J. (2015). Cognitive polyphasia, knowledge encounters and public spheres. In G. Sammut, E. Andreouli, G. Gaskell, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The cambridge handbook of social representations* (pp. 163–178). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kamada, L. D. (2010). *Hybrid identities and adolescent girls: Being 'half' 'in Japan*. Exeter: Short Run Press.

Khanna, N. (2010). "If you're half black, you're just black": Reflected appraisals and the persistence of the one-drop rule. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 51(1), 96–121.

King, R. (2000). Racialization, recognition, and rights: Lumping and splitting multiracial Asian Americans in the 2000 census. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 3, 191–217.

Koh, S. Y. (2015). Temporalities of citizenship: Malaysian-Chinese skilled migrants in Singapore and returnees to Malaysia. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 24(1), 3–27.

Mahtani, M. (2002). What's in a name? Exploring the employment of "mixed race" as an identification. *Ethnicities*, 2(4), 469–490.

Maines, D. R. (1987). The significance of temporality for the development of sociological theory. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 28(3), 303–311.

Moscovici, S. (1984). The phenomenon of social representations. In R. M. Fair & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Social representations* (pp. 3–69). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nagaraj, S. (2009). Intermarriage in Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Economic Studies*, *46*, 75–92.

Owen, C. (2001). Mixed race in official statistics. In D. Parker & M. Song (Eds.), *Rethinking mixed race* (pp. 134–153). London: Pluto Press.

Phoenix, A., & Owen, C. (2000). From Miscegenation to Hybridity: Mixed parentage and mixed relationships in profile. In A. Brah & A. Coombes (Eds.), *Hybridity and its discontents, politics, science, culture* (pp. 72–95). London: Routledge.

Priego-Hernández, J. (2011). *Sexual and reproductive health among indigenous Mexican adolescents: A socio-representational perspective* (*PhD thesis*). The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Ramarajan, L., & Reid, E. (2013). Shattering the myth of separate worlds: Negotiating nonwork identities at work. *Academy of Management Review*, *38*(4), 621–644.

Reddy, G. (2016). Race rules in Singapore. In J. Lim & T. Lee (Eds.), *Singapore: Negotiating state and society, 1965–2015* (pp. 82–116). London: Routledge.

Reddy, G. (2018). The influence of socio-political context on racial identity: strategic identity construction among Malaysians and Singaporeans. (PhD thesis). The London School of Economics and Political Science.

Rocha, Z. L. (2011). Multiplicity within singularity. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, *30*(3), 95–131.

Rocha, Z. L. (2014). "Stretching out the categories": Chinese/european narratives of mixedness, belonging and home in Singapore. *Ethnicities*, *14*, 279–302.

Rocha, Z. L. (2016). *"Mixed race" identities in Asia and the pacific: Experiences from Singapore and New Zealand*. Oxon: Routledge.

Rockquemore, K. A., Brunsma, D. L., & Delgado, D. J. (2009). Racing to theory or retheorizing race? Understanding the struggle to build a multiracial identity theory. *Journal of Social Issues*, *65*(1), 13–34.

Root, M. P. (Ed.). (1996). *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Root, M. P. P. (2003). Multiracial families and children: Implications for educational research and practice. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd Ed., pp. 110–124). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ruggiu, D. (2015). The self and the other in post-modern European societies. In M. La Barbera (Ed.), *Identity and migration in Europe: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (Vol. 13, pp. 77–96). Springer: London.

Sedlovskaya, A., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Eibach, R. P., LaFrance, R.-C. R., & Camp, N. P. (2013). Internalizing the closet: Concealment heightens the cognitive distinction between public and private selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*(4), 695–715.

Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2005). Perspectives and research on the positive and negative implications of having multiple racial identities. *Psychological Bulletin*, *131*(4), 569–591.

Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2009). When race becomes even more complex: Toward understanding the landscape of multiracial identity and experiences. *Journal of Social Issues*, *65*(1), 1–11.

Song, M. (2012). Making sense of "mixture": States and the classification of "mixed" people. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *35*(4), 565–573.

Swann, W. B. (1987). Identity negotiation: Where two roads meet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*(6), 1038–1051.

Tajfel, H. (1978). *Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations*. (H. Tajfel, Ed.). London: Academic.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole.

Tan, P. K. W. (2005). The medium-of-instruction debate in Malaysia English as a Malaysian language? *Language Problems and Language Planning*, *29*(1), 47–66.

Taylor, C. (1992). The politics of recognition. In C. Taylor & A. Gutmann (Eds.), *Multi-culturalism and `The politics of recognition'*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Verkuyten, M. (2007). Social psychology and multiculturalism. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *1*(1), 280–297.

Vignoles, V. L., Regalia, C., Manzi, C., Golledge, J., & Scabini, E. (2006). Beyond self-esteem: Influence of multiple motives on identity construction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(2), 308–333.

Willig, C. (1999). *Applied discourse analysis: Social and psychological interventions*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Wong, J. (2009). Archives, The Star Online. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com.my/story/?file=%2F2009%2F11%2F4%2Fnation%2F20091104194453&sec = nation