Ethnicity in research with young children: Invitation/Barrier

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This paper explores special issues that a novice, minority researcher encountered at a multi-racial research site. The first author’s personal experiences as a female, Tamil speaking Indian Singaporean shaped the research process and its reception at the research site. In this paper, she observes that, while her ethnic membership operated as a barrier at times, it also shaped the research process in positive and unexpected ways. It invited conversation about ethnicity in a multi-racial setting, creating opportunities for meaningful dialoguing of sensitive topics, culminating in an expansive definition of differences. She also explores the place for researcher subjectivity in qualitative research analysis. The data presented is selected from her dissertation which studied if race and ethnicity affected friendship choices amongst preschool children in Singapore.

Keywords: children; race; ethnicity; researcher effect; subjectivity and qualitative research

Introduction:

A researcher is enmeshed and intertwined in the research process as much as her participants (Bernal, 1998; De Andrade, 2000); her epistemology forms and continually shapes the research. However, as researchers, we seek to downplay our race, class and gender, and mute our voices in order to be seen as credible informants and analysts of the data we present to our readers (Spivak, 1988). During the course of my study with young children, I found that my racial membership, found ways of seeping into the discussions, despite my restraining efforts. Children’s responses towards my appearance, speech and actions continually shaped the progress of research since research with young children is bi-directional (Briscoe-Smith, 2008; Freeman & Mathison, 2009). My ethnicity was a barrier in some ways, yet it also influenced the research process in positive and unexpected ways.
In this paper, I provide a brief description of the Singapore context, focusing on its diverse multi-cultural characteristics. I discuss the methodology I adopted for this study and proceed to reflect on some issues that I, a novice minority researcher encountered at a multi-racial research site – specifically, I discuss the attitudes and worldviews of the administrators and teachers and how this impacted upon the execution of the research. I provide examples to illustrate how my ethnicity engaged the children in this study and reflect on the ways my subjectivities influenced the research process. The following research questions guided the study:

*What criteria are used by four to six year old Singaporean preschool students in their selection of friends?*

a. Do four to six year old children know their own racial identity?

b. Do four to six year old children choose friends based on racial characteristics?

**The Singapore context**

The Republic of Singapore (main island and about 58 islets surrounding) is situated at the southernmost tip of Peninsular Malaysia. In 2012, the Chinese formed the majority at 74 per cent of the resident population, followed by the Malays with 13 per cent, the Indians with 9.2 per cent and 3.3% Others (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2012).

Colonized by the British in 1819, Singapore saw a vast increase in population when the British settled the island in the 17th century with migrants from China, India and the surrounding Malay Archipelago to capitalize upon the rich trading opportunities present between China and the Southeast Asian region. In 1822, the city was organized in a grid pattern by segregating the island into distinct geographical units to house the various ethnic groups, creating separate enclaves, further reinforcing the plural nature of early Singapore society (Kelly, 1993). The racialized urban spaces (Goh & Holden,
of Chinatown, Little India and Kampung Glam remain intact today, serving as a reminder of Singapore’s origins and continuing to draw in tourists and citizens alike.

Critical to note is that racialized discourse marked ethnic relations during the colonial period. Stereotypical as the discourse was, it encouraged the use of race and ethnicity as key identity markers for the population (Lian, 2006). Additionally, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, race was closely tied to politics, with the rise of the Communists in Singapore and the rigorous canvassing of Singaporean Malay vote in the Singapore State elections of 1963 by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)\(^1\) backed politicians. As Goh and Holden (2006, p. 6) argue, perceived cultural differences and racial beliefs formed the platform upon which the politicians pitched their arguments, culminating in the 1964 race riots\(^2\) in Singapore. These riots have been used as a recurring example in Singapore’s political ethos to reinforce that economic growth and success cannot be attained without racial harmony.

Singapore operationalizes race uniquely. Multiracialism is seen in terms of the four official racial categories – Chinese, Indian, Malay and Others – and these are given the acronym CIMO (Poon, 2009). Though conceptual in nature, the CIMO construct remains a potent source of identification (of self and others) for the local population. Siddique (1990) maintains that, in Singapore, race has taken on a significant role and has been bureaucratized, for instance, it is noted on birth certificates and identity cards of citizens and Permanent Residents. In a recent move, the local

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1 UMNO is Malaysia’s largest political party; as a founding member of the Barisan Nasional coalition, it has played a dominant role in Malaysian politics since Malaysia’s independence in 1963. Singapore was a state in the Federation of Malaysia till 1965, when it separated to form an independent nation. The years 1963 to 1964 were marked by racial tension and political upheaval on both sides of the border.

2 The 1964 Race Riots were a series of riots that took place in Singapore during two separate periods in July and September involving members of two ethnic groups: the Chinese and Malays. About 36 people were killed in the violence. These riots are also known as the Prophet Muhammad Birthday riots, 1964 Racial riots, and the 1964 Sino-Malay riots.
government allowed for dual classification on biracial children’s birth certificates. Parents are able to include both races instead of adopting paternal race (Tay, 2010).

It is a required category in official forms, for government institutions, banks and schools. Official demarcations, for instance, to ensure a racial mix in HDB\(^3\) estates utilize race as a defining category.

These practices, endorsed by the government serve to heighten racial awareness amongst the populace. Even though race as a biological concept is heavily contested (Connolly, 1998; Ghosh, 2008; Hardimon, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 1992; Skiba, 2012; West & Fenstermaker, 1995), in Singapore, it remains the primary means of identification. This absorption with the CIMO structure and its effect on the populace was noted by Benjamin (1976, p. 73) as a phenomenon which ‘put considerable pressure on people to see themselves as ethnically defined’, as early as in the 1970s.

Though, Singapore has been racially diverse and practices a multi-ethnic ethos, race related surveys done in Singapore have consistently reported that while Singaporeans may seem generally amicable to other races in the public sphere, this does not hold true in their private lives. A recent survey conducted by the Institute for Policy studies found that the Chinese (the majority race in Singapore) were less receptive to other races (Tham, 2013), a finding that seems to validate the fear the minority population of Singapore harbours - of prejudice fuelled discriminatory practices in the social and economic spheres (Ismail & Shaw, 2006).

Siddique and Purushotam (1982) contend that the race-based CIMO structure tends to essentialize, that is, each race is marked by certain unalterable features, which

\(^3\) HDB is the acronym for the Housing Development Board of Singapore. HDB is Singapore's public housing authority and a statutory board under the Ministry of National Development. It was set up in 1960 to alleviate the lack of sanitary dwelling places for the majority of the population. HDB remains the sole provider of public housing for all Singaporeans today.
are attached to a label. The label, then, is accompanied by expectations. For instance, Indians in Singapore are usually characterized as being of Tamil descent, speaking Tamil and practicing Hinduism, which often is not the case. Arumugam (2002) writes that the CIMO categorization is especially difficult for Indians in Singapore, as it cannot really describe or subsume all the multiple ethnicities, languages, castes, religions and cultural practices that characterize Singapore’s Indian population, hence it is an ‘imagined’ framework.

Stereotypes are continually perpetuated and not limited to the Indian community alone; for example, there is an unstated belief that the ethnic Chinese members of Singapore society who are Chinese educated (schooled in Mandarin medium schools) usually speak Mandarin or other Chinese dialects and use Singlish, a colloquial variety of standard Singapore English (Bokhorst-Heng, 2005). Another common stereotype is that the English educated Chinese generally have negative attitudes towards Chinese civilization and do not actively use the Mandarin language (Tan, 2004).

Law Minister K. Shanmugam in reply to the need for racial categories in parliament argued that, while Singaporean identity should ideally come before racial and ethnic identities, ‘race was a central tenet and fact of society…while race does not always equate to culture, it most often does. Policy has to be based on the norm and not the exceptions’ (Chang, 2010). Racial identity has been heightened through official policies like the bilingual education policy, the establishment of ethnic self-help groups and the Speak Mandarin Campaign targeted at Chinese Singaporeans since the 1980s.

It is important to appreciate the currency this concept has within Singapore society. Lian (2006, p. 229) argues that today’s Singaporean bears a ‘hyphenated identity’. People identify themselves as Singaporean-Chinese, Singaporean-Indian or
Singaporean-Malay. It marks the way an average Singaporean sees his/her identity and it influences the meaning making that takes place in the social space of Singapore.

**Young children and race**

Extensive research conducted in Australia (Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001; Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996; MacNaughton & Davis, 2001c; Ramsey, 1991; Skattebol, 2003), Europe (Lappalainen, 2004; Rhedding-Jones, 2001) and United States/Canada (Aboud, 2003; Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; Ausdale & Feagin, 2001; Park, 2011; Williams & Morland, 1976) indicates that prejudice and stereotyping exists in preschoolers who exhibit such attitudes from as early as age three.

Children understand the power associated with race and systematically use this in daily interactions when deciding friendships. Brown (1998, p. 11) pinpoints that children ‘pick up misinformation, stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes and behaviours towards certain groups’ from society. Siraj-Blatchford (1992) further stresses that a young child’s self-concept is created by the way other people treat him/her, emphasizing that peer relations are critical for a healthy self-concept. Societal input, as Ausdale et al. (1996) and Youdell (2006a) assert, is a significant factor on young children’s’ generalizations.

Klein and Chen (2001) state that children are aware of differences amongst people from as early as age two. According to Bernstein, Wilson, Zimmerman and Vosburg (2000), children notice the most conspicuous features of people first and they categorize based on these salient features. Skin color, hair type and facial features are the first step in categorizing. Being aware of differences is part of the normal cognitive development associated with the act of classification or categorization (Piaget, 1955). Briscoe-Smith (2008) suggests that this categorization is seen as sign of the other being different from self, similar to noting issues like weight and gender. The act of
categorization does not constitute prejudice – that develops when physical features are associated to socially unaccepted behaviours or character failings.

Interestingly, qualitative research by Ausdale et al. (1996, 2001), Skattebol (2003), Park (2011) and Jesuvadian and Wright (2011) reveal that young children do use mental constructs of race to exclude some peers, use racial labels with sophistication and utilize racial concepts to dominate. Children understood the power associated with race and belonging to a particular group of people. A series of studies (MacNaughton, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; MacNaughton & Davis, 2001) conducted in Australia using Persona Dolls also present compelling evidence of stereotyping. The studies revealed that Anglo-Australian children perceived difference in terms of physical appearance, focusing on skin colour and hair texture, associating these items to character traits, with minority children identifying with the Persona Doll representing the White community (MacNaughton, 2001a). Another key finding reported was the overt rejection of the dark skinned Shiree, the Aborigine doll. The children did not freely choose to engage with this doll. The researchers concluded that, consistent with research in the United States and the United Kingdom, white children had negative biases against dark skinned children.

Research on race and ethnicity and its influence on young children have implications for Singapore as well, since a substantial resident population is dark skinned. A study conducted by Lee, Cherian, Ismail, Ng, Sim, & Chee (2004), which examined children’s social interactions in informal primary school settings, found that children preferred to participate in same race groups during informal settings and at recess time. There was ample evidence that cliques formed, each carving out their own territory. This study confirmed that peers actively alienated dark skinned children. The researchers, however, cautioned that personal traits could also have caused alienation in
the instances they recorded. But, they also noted that Indian students report a discernible reduction in friends of other races by age twelve. It was observed that, with age, preference for same race friends increased. This is consistent with research done in the West (Klein & Chen, 2001; Moore, 2002). Skin colour remains a key determiner of friendships in primary school settings; very dark skinned students [mostly Indians] were on the receiving end of ‘cruel reactions’ and they ‘inspire unkind nicknames’ (Davie, 2003).

Research Methodology

I draw my discussion from a dissertation study I conducted that focused on understanding how race and ethnicity operate in the specific setting of one ethnically mixed childcare centre in the South West district of Singapore. Three data collection tools were used in this study, namely participant observation, use of Persona Dolls and coloured photographs (above listed tools were used in conjunction with semi-structured interviews) of children.

Data was collected in 2 phases. Phase A of the study was observational and it included children of both genders. Fourteen children (ages 3–4.5) and ten children (ages 5.5–6) from the Nursery and Kindergarten One classes participated respectively. Phase B of the study involved 6 girls from the ages 4 to 6. These six were purposefully selected to represent the Singaporean majority race (Chinese) and the other three minority races (Malay, Indian or Eurasian).

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4 The center did not have enough boys enrolled in both the Nursery and Kindergarten 1 classes who were representative of the major races. Hence, the sample had to be restricted to girls.

5 Ethnic group refers to a person's race. The Singapore population is classified into the following four categories:
   
   Chinese: Persons of Chinese origin such as Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas, Hainanese, Hockchias, Foochows, Henghuas, Shanghainese, etc.
   
   Malays: Persons of Malay or Indonesian origin, such as Javanese, Boyanese, Bugis, etc.
In Phase A, children were observed in their own class environments in order to get an understanding of their attitudes, worldviews and the social behaviours. Seventeen observation sessions involving both classes were undertaken, each observation lasting between three to four hours on average. Classes were observed during class activities, indoor and outdoor play times, meal and nap times in the months of October and November.

In Phase B, four Persona dolls (presented as female) were used [for a detailed discussion on how Persona Dolls were used in this study, see Jesuvadian & Wright (2011)], each designed to represent one of the four main racial groups commonly seen in Singapore. Three aspects differentiated each doll: skin tone, hair type and eye shape and colour. All dolls were dressed in contemporary clothing and shoes. The degree of attractiveness was kept similar.

Interviews with the children using photographs were guided by procedures outlined in studies conducted by Black-Gutman and Hickson (1996) and Ramsey (1991). Coloured photographs were utilized as they present to the viewer visible traits like skin and eye colour, facial features and hair type. The photographs were close-up shots of unfamiliar 4-to-6 year old European-American, Chinese, Indian and Malay children of both genders.

**Researcher background**

The focus of this paper is how my ethnic membership has shaped the research process at this site. It would then be appropriate to discuss my personal life experiences and how

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*Indians:* Persons of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan origin such as Tamils, Malayalis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Singhalese, etc.

*Other Ethnic Groups* All persons other than Chinese, Malays and Indians, such as Eurasians, Caucasians, Arabs, Japanese, etc.

*(The Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010)*
they may have contributed to my understanding of how race and ethnicity operate in the social space of Singapore.

I am a second generation Singaporean Indian who belongs to the Tamil speaking community. I was born and raised in Singapore, the eldest child of a lower-middle class family of five. As a young student in government schools, my early experiences with race were mostly marked by how different I looked from the average Singaporean Chinese. I grew up self-conscious, ashamed of my dark skin tone and weary of trying to blend in and be accepted as normal. Though my primary school teachers were aware of the teasing and racial bullying that was happening to minority students, they did not dialogue about it nor did they address the problems that cropped up time and time again.

I realized, as I progressed through the school system and became a teacher myself, that the racial stereotypes that existed in Singapore remained potent and tormented the few who faced the brunt of prejudice. In my capacity as a teacher, I strove to dialogue about race and address discrimination when I encountered it. However, I was not prepared for the subtle, sophisticated way racial profiling and epithets were being used. My teacher training did not address diversity issues and I lacked the skills needed to mediate such abuses.

Still, in my capacity as teacher I sought to voice the views of the minority communities and continued to bring empathy and understanding to the core of my teaching subjects – English Language, History and Social studies. I wanted my students to see themselves similar to other human beings rather than different.

**Researcher effect: considerations from literature**

Modern science values measurable data as being objective – a dictate that leaves many qualitative researchers to self-censor the role their subjectivity and reflexivity plays in the analysis of data (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). Still, the qualitative research process,
especially participant observation and semi-structured interviews, necessitate a close interactive, dialogic connection between the researcher and the researched (Subedi & Rhee, 2008). It is not only the researched who is engaging, discussing and sharing their thoughts and feelings; the researcher’s emotions are also engaged in the process of joint meaning-making (Bhattacharya, 2007; Gemignani, 2011).

Consent was sought from both the children and their parents involved in this study through the childcare center administrators. Children were briefed by the teachers and the principal regarding my purpose and role in their class. However, I realized as the research went on that the children were engaging with me on their own terms. What happens when the researched take the research focus to another space? Delgado-Gaitan (1993) speaks of her deliberate decision to empower her participants. The decision could have been perceived as non-objective researching.

In my research, I used child-friendly research modalities that encouraged children to have meaningful conversations with me in order to access children’s worlds (Morrow, 2008; Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). I was entangled in the data I generated and the representations I produced at this site (Youdell, 2006b, p. 513) as I was the chief interlocutor.

Meaningful conversation and shared activities encouraged rapport, giving me opportunities to hear children’s family histories and struggles. Children, once the trust was built saw me as non-teacher adult who loved to talk and so they did – sharing details about their home and their families. This had implications for the analysis; like Bhattacharya (2007), I had to be very careful about how I was going re-present the children in my study, knowing full well that their stories were being interpreted through the lens of my socio-cultural experiences and knowledge. It is important to note that as
a minority researcher, I had a collection of tools to with which to understand the data field, gathered through my lived experience (Hendrix, 2001).

Throughout the research process at this site, I was reminded to consider how my social identity influenced the decisions regarding the approaches I took towards both the adults and the children how it may impact upon the analysis of the data I gathered. Like Hawkins (2010) I had to be conscious of the fact that I could not just take on the role of a researcher – I had to be cognizant of my race and gender and how these may be read by my research participants.

Analysis and findings

In this paper, I selectively discuss my experiences as a participant researcher whose racial membership has influenced the research process. ⁶ I also comment on the role that researcher subjectivity can play in the analysis of data on sensitive topics like race.

Race as embedded in culture

Given the sensitivity of race and ethnicity in Singapore, I expected to encounter reticence from adults, or at most a very hesitant discussion of the place race and ethnicity may play in children’s lives. Conversely, I found that, in my discussions with the childcare centre’s principal and her teachers (conducted early in the research and during the fieldwork), there was an openness to discuss race, but that this was defined in terms of culture. Culture was interpreted in a specific manner. The management informed me that the centre adopted an open multi-cultural ethos.

The teachers and the other staff at the center were representative of the major races seen in Singapore. The center observed all official festivals and holidays. These festivals were celebrated at the center - children were encouraged to wear their ethnic

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⁶ For the full study, see Jesuvadian, M.K (2010).
clothes, and to share food and stories of how these festivals are celebrated by their families. At particular times of the year, the centre is decorated with symbolic items like *hong bao* (red packets, usually containing money to be given as gifts to visiting family members) during Chinese New Year and green coloured *ketupats* (a type of dumpling made with rice) during the Muslim festival of Hari Raya Puasa and the use of lights (pictures or physical lamps) to celebrate the Indian festival of Deepavali.

Even though differences were celebrated, the adults I spoke to were insistent that young children were ‘colour-blind’. For instance, when I met the Principal and her team of teachers to show her the Personal Dolls and the types of questions I intended to ask, the staff was very intrigued. They handled the dolls, commented on their appearance and told me specifically that the children probably will not make friend choices based on race – their argument was that children were not yet aware of racial and religious differences and not capable of being prejudiced or of practicing discrimination. Since I had set out to discover if race and ethnicity influenced friend selection among preschool children, the centre gave me permission to explore the topic, but the degree of openness to discuss race in this respect was very small. The curriculum at the centre was not multi-cultural and teachers did not speak of race or ethnicity, even when opportunities arose through young children’s questions.

There seemed to be a tacit understanding that race, ethnicity and religion are sensitive topics, not be discussed in negative ways, and undergirded by the strong belief that young children were unaware of race and ethnicity. This reticence is an ubiquitous feature of Singaporean life, as race and ethnicity are politically charged topics that are not very openly discussed (Clammer, 1998; Lian, 2006).

However, in my six month data collection phase, there were many instances when the children wanted to explore matters of race, but the teachers did not actively
pick up or explore the topic. If they did, they limited the discussion to how people may look different. I provide a snippet from my research where the children raised the question of my race without any prompting from me. This incident happened during free play and both the girls were dressing two dolls.

Table 1: Not Indian

**Researcher's race as barrier**

As discussed earlier, I am a Tamil speaking female member of the Singaporean Indian community who is dark skinned. My lived experiences shape my attitudes towards social relationships. My socio-cultural experiences have impacted upon my reading of events and people – but having reflected on this, I believe I was aware of how else I could read the events that unfolded at the center.

Interestingly throughout the fieldwork at the center, I was aware of that some of the teachers at the center were of the opinion that, as a member of a minority race, I was *prejudiced*, meaning I was deliberately searching for instances which could be translated as discrimination or prejudice against minorities. It was as if I was seeing bias when none was intended. The class teacher of the K1 class was mostly unhappy with my presence in her class. She was one of the teachers who voiced that children are not colour conscious and I would probably not find what I was looking for at this center – her approach was always curt. In the few instances, I approached her for clarification of some of my observations she was brusque in her responses, not encouraging conversation.
This undercurrent grew apparent as the months rolled by. I could feel mounting resentment among the teachers that I was doing research which they evidently felt was flawed. Teachers were not very forthcoming with their views. My racial membership was viewed by some of the adults as an indication of a negative, fault-finding attitude towards the organization and its people.

This undercurrent was a barrier for me as a young minority race researcher. I had made the objective of the research project very clear from the onset but, as time went by, I realized that I had to try to not discuss race or ethnicity, as teachers would deliberately grow quiet and not be forthcoming with their views. I found that I had to redirect the attention of the adults to the friend selection aspect of the research study and not explicitly discuss any events or episodes which I felt stemmed out of prejudice or bias. This made it especially difficult for me to probe teachers’ reactions to events in the class. I present a snippet from the research notes I made to illustrate the above point.

This episode was recorded during lunch time. Christopher (4/C)\(^7\) was seated at the table alongside Rahim (4/I) and Abishek (4/I). I was helping out as teacher assistant for that day so I was seated next to the teacher (Indian) when the following conversation happened.

Table 2: So what? You are still friends right?

The teacher did not pursue this discussion – lunch continued. I wanted to ask the teacher what she felt about that incident and why she took that approach to handling the matter. But it was quite evident that she felt the incident was over and there was nothing to discuss.

\(^7\) The terms in the bracket translate to (age/ethnic membership) – for example, Christopher is 4 and is Chinese. C=Chinese, I=Indian, M=Malay & O=Others.
Teachers consistently displayed this management approach to matters of race and ethnicity. I believe much of this attitude stems from the unofficial dictum, pervasive in Singapore, to not bring undue attention to matters of race. Additionally, teachers may not have been comfortable to raise race related issues with me as there was already this perception that I was sitting in judgment of them, searching for acts of discrimination in their establishment. Perhaps then it was better to not bring notice to such events. And so, I constantly downplayed the research agenda. This was causing me considerable stress: like Cegłowski (2000), I felt I was deliberately withholding information from the participants.

Race as colour
My racial membership also functioned as a barrier with some of the children in the study. My visual appearance was a catalyst, accentuating hidden and rarely exhibited prejudice of some children. My presence precipitated acts of stereotyping and exclusion, and some of the children in the center reacted negatively to my skin color. For instance, Christopher (4/C) refused to play with me because I was dark skinned. He emphatically told me, ‘you are black color, brown color…you smelly. I don’t want you sit here’. Christopher and Jenson (4/C) were quite vocal about their rejection of dark-skinned people. Jenson shared with me that he would not have played with Rahim (4/I), a light-skinned North-Indian boy, if he had been black.

Such reactions confirmed my belief that dark-skin could be a point for discrimination and that young children are able to purposefully do this type of exclusion. For instance, Jenson told me that I was Indian because I was black, but when he realized that Rahim was looking at him, Jenson told him, ‘But you’re not black’. It
should be noted Jenson waited for me to turn away first, saying this statement only when he believed I was out of earshot and could not hear him.

My visual appearance may have served as a catalyst for some children’s negative responses to the discussion of cross-racial friendships in this study. I found that children focused on skin color as a salient feature of identity, using color as a point of difference, however they were not always accurate in associating race with color. Recent research by Pascale (2008) suggests that everyday conceptualization of race among American adults seem to be in four ways – race as color, nationality, culture or blood. The children in this study conceptualized race as color or nationality, while the adults introduced the notion of race as culture.

**Race as an invitation**

Thus far, I have discussed how race functioned as a barrier in the research I conducted at this center. However, I realize that this was not always the case. My racial membership functioned as an invite to discussions as well. Many times, deliberations about race began spontaneously during observation sessions, initiated by children’s questions on ‘what’ I was. Such questions likely would not have arisen if a Chinese or Caucasian researcher had sought out children’s understanding of cross-racial friendship. My presence and looks encouraged children to ask questions on skin color, to touch and feel my skin and to surface other matters associated with understanding differences between peoples. I became a ‘talking point’ for them, which enabled me to delve deeper into their worldviews.

I discuss one episode which stemmed out of a spontaneous discussion among the K2 class students on ‘what’ I was, which provided some interesting views on how children constructed the concept of nationality in relation to ethnicity. Harry (6/C) was
working with me on his art and craft project of making parachutes. During the course of this activity, he inquired about my race.

Table 3: You are Malaysian

Understandably, Harry has generalized the Singaporean as being light-skinned based on his daily experience and, like Jenson (4/C), applied the same framework for ‘Indianness’: dark skin tone and the wearing of *pottu*\(^8\), a cultural symbol. Jennifer (6/C) who was working on her parachute joined this conversation and asked me why I was ‘black’ if I am Singaporean? The children had created a framework for ‘Singaporean’ and obviously, such persons were seen to be light-skinned. The rest who did not fit this framework were classified as Malaysian (Singapore’s nearest neighbor). When Tanya (6/C) heard I was Indian, she introduced further stereotypical ideas about what she believed were Indian activities, saying: ‘Indians can carry a tray on their heads… all Indians carry food on their heads’.

Harry (6/C) and Carmine (6/C) agree to this and confirmed that they have seen this on television. I asked Tanya (6/C) to explain further what she saw on television (see below).

Table 4: People carry trays on their heads

Additionally, sharing the same racial and linguistic background as two of my participants also engendered candid sharing, for instance Maya, a Tamil speaking Indian child, used two languages to explain her views and opinions. I present a snippet from the interview I conducted with Maya (4/I) to illustrate this.

Table 5: I look like this one

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\(^8\) *Pottu* (Tamil) also known as *Bindhi* (Hindi) is a red dot worn on the lower forehead (between the eyebrows) that signifies that a woman is married. This tradition is common to South Asian women and women of South Asian Hindu background in South East Asia.
Maya’s close identification with the Chinese doll in terms of appearance could be due to her need to fit in better with what she perceived as more acceptable in her society. This was something that I personally experienced as I grew up in Singapore. I could strongly identify with her attitude and it enabled me to speak to her in a more understanding way. Maya’s willingness to explain her preferences to me, I believe could be due to her and me sharing the same mother tongue. Though at age 4, Maya was able to competently converse in English, she was more comfortable using Tamil.

Our common racial and linguistic membership allowed me to tap into shared language and cultural knowledge (Adler, 2001; Hye, 2012) to an extent. It provided a close link and created an environment which was tension free even though I was a relatively unfamiliar adult for Maya. Hence, my participation in the research was not always a barrier, it was significant invite for participants to raise questions, seek answers and share their world views.

Unlearning Race: Researcher’s perspective

As I reflect on my field experience for this research, I realize that as a member of a minority group who grew up in the Singapore context, I was especially attuned to identifying people by race or ethnicity. Hence, I identified the children in the class based on visual characteristics. For instance, I identified one of the 6 year-olds in my study as Indian, mainly because she was brown skinned, black eyed and possessed thick wavy black hair. But as the following episode illustrates, she begged to differ. This incident was recorded during the interview I conducted with the 6 year-olds using Persona Dolls. The scenario I presented to the interviewee to consider was why Rathi (the Indian doll, see Figure 1) was unable to make friends in school. In response to Leigh’s statement that Rathi was not pretty, the following discussion ensued.
Leigh was very insistent that she not be considered Indian. After this incident I checked with the center principal and she confirmed that Leigh was of mixed parentage. Her father was Indian but her mother was Eurasian. Leigh chose to be identified as a Eurasian and so classified herself as Others according to the CIMO structure.

Apart from using visual characteristics to identify people, I also had a very strong conviction that dark skin was a cause for discrimination or rejection. I was of the opinion that discrimination happens mostly to the minorities (i.e., Malays and Indians), but that skin tone was not relevant. However, Adele’s (6/C) acceptance in the K2 class was influenced by the darkness of her skin, rather than on her racial membership. Observation data that I recorded in my field notes highlighted that the popular girls in the K2 class, namely, Jennifer and Carmine (both 6/C) and Alyssa (6/O), did not readily accept Adele (6/C) and actively isolated her from group play. In one instance, they refused to even let her sit next to them.

When asked why they did this, Alyssa (6/O) mentioned that Adele is not cooperative and constantly challenges decisions made by the others in the playgroup. But Carmine (6/C) and Christine (6/C) highlighted Adele’s dark skin colour and informed me that Adele’s brother (in the pre-nursery class) is also black. These two girls actively rejected Adele because she did not possess the acceptable colour. Adele was a Chinese girl, who was very conversant in both English and Mandarin. She shared
the same cultural practices as the rest of the class who were Chinese and yet, Adele found it very difficult to be included in this circle of friends. Most times, Adele worked alone. This was a very important learning point for me. This experience highlighted the myopic way I was defining discrimination (based on race alone) and who it may affect.

**Researcher subjectivities and analysis**

Data in this study were examined with a poststructural lens. I sought to understand how children constituted others vis-à-vis themselves - through verbal and non-verbal means. Central to the study was the poststructural understanding that discourse is socially reflexive – it both describes and, at the same time, constitutes the world and its subjects. Mill (2004) argues that people are co-conspirers in their own subjugation. They buy into the discourse and emplace themselves into particular positions. It is my contention that researchers are themselves part of the discursive social fabric and their subjectivities would frame their interpretation of the people and events they study. Critical to the subjectivity they employ is their emotional engagement with the people and the circumstances of the research.

Hence, I found it was necessary to position myself as a minority researcher and, in the words of Michelle Fine (1994) ‘work the hyphens’. I realized that I had to accept that the lens with which I observe may not be objective or neutral. The children’s experiences that I observed during the fieldwork along with the views they shared during the Persona Doll interviews generated a deep emotional engagement in me. I was moved by the children’s sharing, and identified with their experiences. Some, like the one I elaborate below, resonated with my own growing up experiences and triggered a deep emotional response.
Let me present a snippet from my research with Leigh (O/6). The Persona Doll interview, as mentioned earlier in the paper, included a scenario discussion. I informed the interviewees that Rathi, the Indian doll was sad because she could not make friends at her new center. I then asked them for possible reasons why that was the case and asked them to suggest ways that they can suggest to the doll for her to make friends.

Table 7: She should be White too

I told Leigh that skin colour cannot be altered and probed her to share other strategies that were available to the doll. Leigh’s answer was a poignant, ‘She should have her own teddy bear’ (demonstrating how cuddling and holding a personal soft toy could substitute for a friend). From my interactions with her, I understood that she was uncomfortable with her skin colour and she often took her own advice by playing with cuddly soft toys rather than navigate the minefield that preschool friendships seemed to be at this research site.

There were many such instances when I teared as the children shared their stories of rejection, or felt very helpless to hear their crying because another child won’t play with them. I had to remind myself that I was a researcher who could not give into her emotions. Yet the emotions existed and as Dickson, James, Kippen and Liamputtong assert (2009; p. 64) ‘…that is appropriate for qualitative researchers to see their emotional and cognitive functions as inseparable from each other and that emotions should be central to the research process’.

Throughout this research process, I constantly reminded myself to read events, episodes and people in ways that minimized my views and foregrounded the views of the research participants as much as possible. Yet, I also could not help but see that I
was entangled in the research emotionally and my subjectivities could not be ignored. (Bhattacharya, 2007; Hawkins, 2010).

I believe there is a place for researchers writing in their own subjectivities – in this study, it threw up the ‘complex and fraught positioning’ (Nelson, 2005; p. 315) that I experienced when analyzing how race was conceptualized and enacted by the adults and the children at this center. Such an acknowledgment is necessary to avoid discrediting the phenomenon.

**Concluding remarks**

Examining the thorny issues of race and ethnicity within the Singapore context can be exigent, and being a minority researcher probing the influence of race and ethnicity further compounded these challenges. However, I believe that there is a silver lining in the cloud as such research, if undertaken sensitively and utilizing dialogue in an open and engaging ways can help in redefinition of limiting concepts like race and ethnicity and their application in non-homogenous societies like Singapore.

Word Count: 8358
References


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Skiba, R. (2012). "As nature has formed them": The history and current status of racial difference research. *Teachers College Record, 114*(5), 1-49.


Tham, Y.-C. (2013, 21 September 2013). Winning the race issue: a few more laps to go. The Straits Times, p. D2.


Table 1: Not Indian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lian</th>
<th>Indian <em>(pointing to Mercy, the researcher)</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Yes, I am Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>You are?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lian</td>
<td>No, you’re not!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: So what? You are still friends right?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christopher</th>
<th>You’re black and Indians are smelly cos they are black (addressing Mercy).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>How do you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td>You are Indians too (pointing at the two Indian boys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>So what? You are still friends right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher</td>
<td><em>Looks at her but provides no answer</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: You are Malaysian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harry</th>
<th>Mercy, you’re Malaysian right?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>No, I’m Singaporean. How do you know [why do you think] that I’m Malaysian?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Because Malaysians are dark skinned and you are dark, so you must be Malaysian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Why can’t I be Singaporean?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Harry  You’re Malay because you don’t have a red dot…

**Table 4: People carry trays on their heads**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tanya</th>
<th>Huge mountain of sand everywhere and the people carry things on their heads… they are Indians.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>How do you know they are Indians?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>They got dark skin… they carry the food on their heads and walk across the sand…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Can a Chinese person also carry a tray on their head?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>No… only Indians can. They wear a hat on their head and put the trays on top of it. (Harry demonstrated how such a feat is done).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: I look like this**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maya</th>
<th>I look like this one… <em>(pointing to the Chinese doll).</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>Do you think this doll <em>(pointing to the Indian doll)</em> and you look alike? Is this the same color <em>(comparing Maya’s skin color and that of the doll’s)</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td><em>(Shakes her head immediately and points to the Chinese doll).</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td><em>(Picking up the Chinese doll), You and this doll? Same color? [I asked this question in Tamil and her replies are in that language]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
<td>You like this doll?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maya: Yes.

Mercy: What do you like about her? [I ask her this in English]

Maya: (touches the doll’s eyes and hair).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6: I’m an Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7: She should be White too</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mercy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Rathi Jeyaram, the Indian Persona Doll