Part III

The multidimensionality of vulnerability and risk in biographical research: ethics, vulnerabilities and trauma

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Reframing focus groups as deep collective and (sometimes) collaborative conversations: Biographical vulnerabilities, anti-racist East and Southeast Asian solidarities and protective silences

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Chapter abstract

Doing 'focus group' research with young East and Southeast Asian people on the racialised politics of belonging in Britain reveals rich and complex dynamics of vulnerability and resilience. Inviting young people to share their views and reflect upon their experiences as racially minoritised and underrepresented groups in Britain often entails the sharing of sensitive life stories. This includes the divulging of biographical traumas but also the joyful discovery of shared commonalities, differences, humour and mutual empathy. This chapter reframes focus groups as deep collective and (sometimes) collaborative conversations to explore both their empowering and disempowering potential as a forum for sharing biographical experience. We argue that these collective conversations, when collaborative, can provide opportunities for overcoming vulnerabilities through listening to shared experience, developing solidarity with others and de-individualising experiences of racism. However, they can also generate discomfort when differences between participants and facilitators are too great or too small or where power dynamics are too asymmetrical. In these situations, participants use 'protective silences' to shield

themselves from sharing vulnerabilities and experiencing potential retraumatisation, and the collective conversations fail to be collaborative.

Chapter keywords

East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) category

focus groups as collective, collaborative conversations

shared commonalities

mutual empathy

interracial caring

protective silences

de-individualising racism

Introduction

This chapter highlights the potential of so-called 'focus group' research in building solidarity, empathy and empowerment among racialised youth in the run up to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores both the advantages and pitfalls of the method for creating generative spaces for exploring experiences of racialisation and racism. We reflect upon the construction of a new 'social architecture' under the pandemic that has galvanised East and Southeast Asian solidarity. Here, an increased risk of trauma and vulnerability as a result of anti-Asian COVID racisms has led to a strengthening of community building and the 'group-making' process. At the same time, restrictions of physical co-presence and lockdown during COVID have led to

the emergence of new spaces for online conversations, facilitated by young East and Southeast Asians in order to overcome social and geographical distance from one another. By highlighting how group conversations can open up spaces for the telling and sharing of experiences in the context of life histories and familial biographies, we reframe focus groups as deep collective conversations, which when collaborative can be generative for collective identity-making.

Focus group methods have classically been used for exploring views, opinions and shared experience rather than for 'tapping into individual biographies' (Kitzinger 1995: 301). Yet, given their potential to garner shared experience, to empower the voices of marginalised groups and to minimise the influence of the interviewer/facilitator, focus groups offer a unique potential for participants from a similar background to share and compare biographical experiences of racism and belonging. Storied accounts of individual experience enable a thoroughly grounded and socially located sense of the social subject and their lives and, as we argue in this chapter, the group setting can provide a nurturing context whereby mutual solidarity and a sharing of experience generates safe spaces for producing new biographical narratives and critical views of dominant discourses around race and racisms. The attention to interpersonal communication in focus groups enhances sensitivity to nuances (Kitzinger 1995), and can shed deeper insight into different perspectives and meaning-making. This makes focus groups appropriate for research that explores emergent identity formations among young people. Doing such research with young

East and Southeast Asian people on the racialised politics of belonging in Britain reveals rich and complex dynamics of both vulnerability and empowerment. As this chapter demonstrates, inviting young people to share their views and reflect upon their experiences as racialised and marginalised groups in Britain can encourage a deep sharing of sensitive biographical experience. This can include the sharing of traumas in addition to the discovery or crafting of shared commonalities, differences, humour and mutual empathy of racialised experience.

In this chapter, we explore both the empowering and disempowering potential of collective settings as a forum for sharing biographical experience. We argue that, while 'focus group' settings are usually seen as less intimate spaces, if framed and set up in the right way by the facilitators, collective spaces can also provide opportunities for overcoming vulnerabilities when participants are able to listen to people talk about experiences similar to their own and develop solidarity with others. In particular, when doing research on racism, group dialogue can empower and activate agency and resistance by de-individualising the lived experiences of racism. On other occasions, collective settings can generate discomfort. We argue that discomfort may occur when differences between participants and facilitators are *too great* or *too small* and where power dynamics are too asymmetrical, or where there is a failure to establish trust and a shared purpose. In these circumstances, participants may use 'protective silences' to shield themselves from disclosing vulnerabilities and experiencing potential retraumatisation. We first provide a brief overview of our research with East and

Southeast Asians in the UK and our rationale for reframing focus groups in light of some critiques of this method. We then explore the dynamics of identification, group-making and positionality in the group conversations by analysing interactions of participants with each other, with us as facilitators of the focus groups, and ourselves with them, as well as their reflections on the experience of participating in focus groups in follow-up interviews. We conclude by arguing that there are unique advantages and limitations of group conversations for sharing individual stories in both intensifying sharing and non-sharing. We make initial suggestions on how to navigate this.

Researching racism and belonging among East and Southeast Asians in Britain through focus groups

Research focus

East and Southeast Asians in Britain, a newly emergent category in public discourse, include some of the fastest growing 'ethnic' groupings (Knowles 2015), with the highest percentage of international students (HESA 2014), yet they remain invisible in both academic and policy debates on citizenship, 'integration' and multiculturalism. In previous research (Yeh 2014a and 2014b and Barber 2015), we identified increasing racial and panethnic identification and socialising among young East and Southeast Asian people, demonstrating a shift from ethnic to wider group-making processes. This research investigated further *how* and *why* young people in British

urban cities are engaging in East and Southeast Asian racial and pan-ethnic group-making. In line with Brubaker's (2004) critique of tendencies to apply 'common sense groupism' when researching ethnicity, our project did not assume any pre-given sense of group boundaries but instead wanted to explore the moments and situations that gave rise to community-making practices. This focus is of special interest given the rapidly changing demographics of East and Southeast Asians, underpinned by new mobilities and migrations, and attendant opportunities for redrawing social boundaries and new identifications (Yeh 2014b; see also Hall 1992). These new formations are also shaped by the reinvigorated urgency of race as a politicised identity in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movements and anti-Asian racisms precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Runnymede Trust 2021). The aims of our research were to explore the emergence of new identifications among young people as East and Southeast Asians in Britain and co-construct new knowledge on their politics of belonging. Creating a shared space for exploring these was a key consideration of our methodology.

Methodology

Taking a qualitative approach, we aimed to centre the lives and voices of our participants and to understand dynamics and interactions between them by bringing them together in group conversation. We also used in-depth follow-up interviews to explore richer biographical experiences. Our group conversations were designed to

precede interviews, serving to provide a useful overview of emerging themes to investigate in further depth during one-to-one sessions. We also wanted to use collective settings to explore boundary-making processes in action. Both authors were trained in biographical methods (Barber in Biographical Narrative Methods and Yeh in ethnographical, biographical and life-history methods), which inevitably influenced our interviewing and focus group style. Our approach centred participants' individual stories, which led to a sharing of migration stories and stories about family histories and parental backgrounds.

Participants

We conducted 17 focus groups and 26 follow-up interviews with 54 participants aged between 18 and 34. Our focus groups were relatively small in size and ranged from between three and six people in each group. The majority of participants were aged between 20 and 26, and the mean average age was 25. These participants came from a wide range of East and Southeast Asian backgrounds including Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino/a, Thai, Singaporean, Indonesian, Malaysian, and a complex range of ethnic and migratory backgrounds including multiple mixed-race. The research took place in London and Birmingham; however, many participants had lived in other parts of the UK. The majority of our participants lived in areas with few other East and Southeast Asians (as is common for many East and Southeast Asian people in the UK, particularly the Chinese (Benton and Gomez 2008)), contributing to

their often-reduced visibility compared to other groups. Our research took place between August 2019 to September 2020, thus straddling the early events of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five of our focus groups were conducted online over the national lockdown period. Although the online focus groups required more careful facilitation work by us to build rapport within the group, once rapport was established the discussions flowed very well as people seemed keen to share their new COVID experiences and learn from others in return. As a result, we identified few differences between these and our in-person focus groups. Approximately half of our focus groups reflected on the experience of anti-Asian racism emerging from January 2020. Participants were asked if they wanted to use their real names or to choose pseudonyms and we have followed their wishes accordingly.

Advantages and pitfalls of 'focus group' research

As 'focus groups' depend more on group dynamics than one-to-one interviews, they offer advantages, such as enabling insights from specific interaction between participants, which are less researcher-directed (Kitzinger 1995). This provided us a unique opportunity to observe unfolding developments of ideas and collective knowledge building and theorising among participants, disagreements and re-evaluations of opinions and understandings in relation to the topics raised. However, as the research unfolded, we found our collective conversations also yielded much richer and more in-depth life stories than expected and provided unexpected insights

into biographical experience. Chatrakul et al (2014) have noted that, because focus group discussions range between sharing personal experiences and collective experiences (see Pini 2002), they can help us to 'study how people's experiences, opinions and expectations about their individual life course transitions are formed, elaborated on and responded to in a peer group situation' including 'social pressures to agree' and 'opportunities to negotiate positions, challenge and develop one's own ideas' (Chatrakul et al 2014:160). While this process can offer valuable insights into the group social interactions, if power dynamics within the group are too asymmetrical it risks preventing participants from interacting more 'authentically' or in ways of their choosing. Caution thus needs to be used in group research, where the group dynamic can silence marginal voices, of either those in the minority or those who are less vocal (Williams 2021). Given the potential for a range of power asymmetries, focus groups have the potential to generate a false or forced consensus in the group (Kitzinger 1995). These are well-rehearsed critiques of the focus group method and must be carefully anticipated in the design and implementation of the research. Paying attention to the different positionalities of speakers and listeners becomes even more important given the interactive dynamics of the group setting. Exploring the link between biography and social positionality within the collective context can therefore offer a key terrain within which some stories may be more or less narratable and sharable than others.

Reframing focus groups in action as 'deep collective (and sometimes) collaborative conversations with purpose'

While focus groups have been recognised as important in community-based research in allowing community members to contribute to the design and implementation of research, for some as a 'research procedure' they retain colonial connotations (Denny-Smith et al 2019). In response, there is growing research, often led by Indigenous or racially minoritised scholars, that uses alternative methods of facilitating group discussion to privilege the telling and sharing of stories. Yarning, for example, pioneered by Bessarab and Ng'Andu (2010) in Botswana and Western Australia, is described as a relational process that is 'two way and inclusive' – it is 'a dialogical process that is reciprocal and mutual' (Bessarab and Ng'Andu 2010: 38). In a similar way, we ran our group dialogues as informal and collaborative conversations with a purpose and encouraged the sharing of biographical stories. Romm (has argued that 'most authors do not indicate how discussions *can be set up* so that participants can appreciate that collective re-searching of the topic(s) by participants is what is being encouraged, as a process of people thinking together about the issues being raised'. This is what we attempted to achieve, asking participants to join a conversation lasting 90–120 minutes, held either at City, University of London or at a location of their collective choosing (including other universities, or cafes/hotels with private group dining areas and later, during the first national lockdown, online). To grant

privacy, sensitive demographic data, such as age, place of occupation and ethnicity, were collected via a written form at the beginning of the session. To start, we introduced ourselves and the research, situating our motivations within context of a relative lack of scholarship on East and Southeast Asian groups, which often created a shared sense of purpose. After we discussed and collected the ethics forms, and gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions, we set the tone for dialogue as 'conversations', that they need not be too formal but rather, 'just like a conversation with a group of friends'. In particular, we specifically invited them to co-lead discussion by feeling free to respond to each other and to ask each other questions without waiting for our direction: 'Any time you want to come in, go "yes I want to say something now" or whatever, just come in. Don't feel like you're waiting for us to ask you the questions. If you have a relevant point, just come in whenever you feel like it' (Group 5). Participants were then invited to introduce themselves to the group and to say why they were interested in participating in the research. Their introductory comments were often foundational in embedding life stories in the conversation, which were then mutually explored and returned to over the course of the group discussion. Participants were also very active in taking up our invitations to lead the collaborative exploration of ideas and experiences, making numerous unprompted interventions, especially to ask each other questions, share their own stories and respond empathically to each other.

As researchers we adopted the role of facilitator, using a topic guide and questions designed as prompts to open out conversation among participants. Interactions between participants were continually encouraged and prioritised; as facilitators of the discussion, we interjected only to ensure that the topics were covered, that all members of the group were able to participate and to follow up or seek clarification or examples of points raised. Our positionalities as researchers were key to our interactions with participants. Both of us are middle-class, university-educated cis-gendered women of similar age, but Yeh is British East Asian (Chinese) and Barber is white British. As scholars of racism and migration, we were analytically interested in facilitating the focus groups together to explore how our presence as differentially positioned racial subjects might shape the research. Deconstructing issues of commonality and difference according to race and other social identifiers (Song and Parker 1995) were part of our ongoing conversations over the course of research and analysis.

Creating space for sharing tellable stories

A focus on biography and narrative was important for our research because we wanted to explore young peoples' personal stories and to elicit and prioritise individuals' own constructions of themselves, their experiences and their actions. When researching ethnic and racial identities, Anthias has noted: 'it is best to allow subjects to talk about themselves; their lives and their experiences, and their 'identity'

will emerge through this narration' (2002: 492). In this way, the biographical narrative method is particularly well suited for researching 'identity' and belonging. Adopting a biographical approach rather than framing conversations solely around specific issues, such as 'ethnicity' or 'race', allowed us to create an open discursive space in which participants could share their memories and experiences without being guided by pre-conceived categories of interpretation or researchers' assumptions of what was important to know. In our research, we suggest that it is important to understand the ways in which biography, narrative and positionality frame the research context. We understand biography as being ordered though the process of narration, as biographical experiences are often only made sense of through narrational ordering (Ricouer 1992), but also collectively co-constructed in the 'focus group' setting (Chartakul et al 2014). Biography and 'tellable stories' are circumscribed by the nature of the research settings and the dynamics between participants themselves and with researchers, which relate respectively to their own positionalities. In such contexts, we understand biographies as both the ways they are narrated but also how biographies of the listeners shape positionalities and are evoked and responded to in particular ways by self and others.

Collective conversations as a solidarity event: creating shared biographies

The vast majority of our participants expressed their experiences of participating in our research in positive terms, such as feeling 'like a warm hug'. One declared, 'this is the first time I have felt understood', affirming both their enjoyment and sense of comfort and safety in the group. Although we remain alert to the potential of group dynamics in upholding group norms and silencing voices of dissent (Kitzinger 1995), we mostly discerned a form of 'group-making in action' (Kristiansen and Gronkjaer 2018), where participants sought to express mutual solidarity and shared empathy for one another particularly around experiences of racism. The research often served as an interesting and often even highly empowering moment for participants, enabling recognition and the facilitation of new pan-ethnic connections between participants. During the conversations, for example, participants shared and reflected upon their current group-making and mobilising practices. They shared experiences – in many cases, it was their first opportunity to do so – and also participated in developing each other's ideas. They disagreed with each other and re-evaluated their opinions and understandings. They even experienced moments of 'enlightenment' and 'revelation' (participants' phrasing) in relation to their experience as East and Southeast Asians in Britain. The distinctive element of group-making was how the conversation served as a solidarity event, developed through and by participants in the sharing of stories, of care and empathy. Black, feminist, queer and critical race theory has long emphasised the important role of love and care among oppressed groups as a precondition for survival and a means of constructing political communities (for example, Lorde 1988;

hooks 1992) and it has recently been identified among emerging East and Southeast Asian collectives in the UK (Yeh 2021). In all but one of our sessions the key bonding and group-making moments occurred deeply during participants' sharing of racist experiences and empathic response. The exchange below highlights a classic example of how racist experience was shared, made sense of and empathised with through biographical sharings:

June: [British born, Hong Kong Chinese, female]: I grew up in Wales … and at the time, it is majority white. We were the only Chinese family in that school. There was a couple of Indian families, but really not that many, so majority white. There was one comment that I distinctly remember, and it is such a silly comment as well. So, I was eating a scotch egg in school, part of my lunch.

Anh: [Vietnamese, female]: A what? Sorry.

June: [Chinese, female] Scotch egg. And the scotch egg kind of smelled, right?

Dai [Vietnamese, male]: Not very Chinese.

June: But somehow, all my … A comment that a white friend made was like, oh, why do you like eggs so much? Is it because you're Asian? And I thought, wait, this is a British [dish].

Anh: Yes. Oh wow, that's offensive.

June: Yes, I think I just didn't realise, but they noticed a difference that I was getting along, going to school.

Anh: Yes, same as well. I always felt I get along. I don't really see myself as so differently, Asian or anything. I'm just there. I'm just a human being going along with my work, so I don't really see it. But …

June: I think I probably saw myself more as a little girl first before a little Chinese girl. Yes, that's right.

[Group 12]

The discussion above exemplifies how, through sharing biographical experience, empathy is expressed, sense-making is collectively produced, and events reframed to de-individualise racism. Racism becomes collaboratively unpacked as illogical ('not very Chinese' or 'it's a British [dish]'), unacceptable ('that's offensive') and as dehumanising ('I'm just a human being' or 'a little girl'). In this conversation June's experience of the racist experience is validated by other participants who reflect upon their own experience to empathise ('same as well'). Notably, care is taken by other participants to explore the incident with her and relate it to their own experience rather than brushing over it or moving on to the next point of conversation. This tendency was common across our discussions.

In another conversation, for example, a young Korean woman shares a story about experiencing racial discrimination in the acting industry around racial type-casting. An exchange of empathy between participants is based upon the construction of shared biographies, as follows below:

Nina: [Korean, female]: So most of my friends are actors, and when I share my experience or when I talk about prejudice in the industry and how difficult it is as an East Asian actor to be cast in anything they're mostly like 'Oh yeah, that's too bad', they try to sympathise but they don't actually share that same feeling and they would say some insensitive things because they don't

think that's a big deal.

[redacted] … and I don't know if you've heard about it but there is this big protest against this show, I can't remember what it's called, the play was based in China but all the actors in the production were white, playing Chinese characters, and there was a huge outcry from the East Asian community […] So there was this huge protest in front of the theatre, when I talked about this with my friends who are not East Asians but actors they didn't understand why, that it mattered. Yeah, so I didn't even know where to start from to get that across.

Sasha: [Mixed race: Chinese/white female]: I'm sorry, that's horrible, because that's quite a big thing, especially being in an acting community, that must have been like especially hurtful.

Nina: Yeah.

Sasha: And then to try and speak to your friends about that and they're not even recognising the issue, I would find that quite difficult, so I'm sorry that you went through that, yeah.

Nina: Yeah, because when I talk about these things, like they never say those things to me, but in my head I'm a little bit concerned that I'm angry about something that's not entirely ... I don't know, something, that I'm not entitled to be angry about, in a way. Yeah, I think me not being British kind of has to do with it in a way, because, of course, the artistic director saying British being white angered me, but then I'm not British either, so it's –

Sasha: Yeah, it's completely infuriating, like whenever these things happen sometimes I just feel like, in however many years time, people are going to look back and be like 'Oh my god', and maybe there's just going to be more

of an awareness of how wrong these things are, but I don't know, I think that's the only way that I can feel better about it. is that at some point in the future people will be like 'Oh that's just ridiculous' –

Nina: Yeah, yeah.

Sasha: and it's infuriating that people can't feel that now and share that with you.

Nina: I can't quite find the words to describe what I'm feeling about these things, but yeah.

Facilitator 1: Did you want to say more?

Sasha: I just wanted to say that you should feel valid if you're angry about that.

Above we see a kind of therapeutic exchange between participants where attention is paid to exploring the emotional impact this experience gave rise to and validating those feelings. Sasha is very attentive to Nina's feelings. Scholars have noted the function of focus groups for enabling the 'venting of feelings of frustration and anger' (Khan and Manderson, in Kitzinger 1995) due to the possibility of participants reinforcing each other's views and feelings. Importantly, this demonstrates the potentiality of deep collective conversations for empowerment, where the role of group dynamics may allow a shift from 'personal, self-blaming psychological explanations' to the exploration of 'structural solutions' (Kitzinger 1995: 300). Above, we see Sasha encouraging Nina to shift away from doubting the legitimacy of her feelings by validating her feelings, acknowledging and naming them. By sharing how she would react, Sasha also highlights Nina's feelings as a collective experience. This has the effect of de-individualising racism by highlighting it as a public issue

with structural dynamics and encourages Nina beyond seeing racism as 'a personal trouble' (Mills 1959). However, what is distinctive in this exchange is how the response from Sasha is based upon her own biographical experience – 'whenever these things happen' where she has also felt unable to legitimately claim an experience of racism due to her white-presenting mixed-race background. As she says elsewhere in this focus group 'I felt somewhat hesitant as well [in anti-racist discussions], because I think there's definitely a sense that I feel very white passing'. Here the sense of a right to anger is strongly embedded in shared biography and positionality, not only of being an East Asian whose experiences of racism often go disavowed but also women who stand outside of dominant constructions of East and Southeast Asianness in Britain, due to their lack of British citizenship and their mixed-race heritage and appearance respectively. What is notable in this exchange is the biographical foregrounding of commonality – the particular dynamics of a shared precarious East Asian female identity (elsewhere in the conversation, gender features prominently) and the experience of a disavowal of racism, rather than a focus on their ethnic and national differences: Korean versus mixed race (Hong Kong Chinese/white); British citizen versus Korean citizen.

The narrating of biographical experiences in the group setting also facilitated a profound sense of solidarity-building and the creation of 'safe spaces' where the sharing of migration stories and family histories drew participants in deeply through examining the life story of others. This enabled participants to compare, contextualise

and contrast their own biographical experiences. A reflection on this process of this was shared with us in follow-up interviews with participants:

Interviewer: How did you find the focus group experience?

Mia: Very interesting. I think for all of us which took part because we talked about it after.

Interviewer: Did you?

Mia: Yes, we all found it very interesting and beneficial because we had a lot of revelations. And I think as well just having a lot of people talking about their experiences and their identity, in a room, is very validating.

Interviewer: Yes.

Mia: So I think in that sense it was really good and we all really felt like it was very inclusive and a safe space to share.

Interviewer: And when you say there were quite a lot of revelations, what kind of revelations do you mean?

Mia: [w]e were talking about the experiences of [male Filipino participant] and [female Filipina participant] in comparison to me, because I'm mixed race, some people have Chinese parents, like they were Filipino, and just the differences between that and … because I don't know, I've never been surrounded by people that are from a similar background, really. Like I've never really had friends that are East Asian or Asian at all, really [..] So I think just having conversations like that were revelations [..] so I feel like just *being in a room with people really helped me also embrace my identity and think about it and have realisations about what that means to me.* And I'd say those were the revelations.

This interviewee recounts her interpretation of a shared sense of 'Asianness' during the conversation. Yet while this is experienced differently according to different ethnic/racial specificities, it is also constructed as giving rise to the revelation and simultaneous embrace of identity. The distinctive contribution of the deep collaborative conversation is its ability to facilitate an exploration of the different contours of Asianness. Here, experiences of colourism and different ethnic positionings within the group led to a collective inquiry and appreciation of how 'Asianness' can be understood across difference. In short, in a group setting, through collaborative exploration and conversation, participants together began crafting Asianness as a '[politics of] difference' (Hall 2003), which accounted for their multiple complex positionalities.

Likewise, in another follow-up interview the experience of building and sharing commonality across difference ('different pies of the world') through shared experiences of pain is emphasised:

> Lara: um, and then I think in our focus group we used the words 'commonality of pain' which was very interesting
>
> Facilitator: yeah that came up
>
> Lara: yeah um, and it was just I think the focus group was just quite nice to hear [pause] how these 4 people, it was only 4 of us but everyone had fingers in like different pies of the world ... ...erm, just lovely to sit down and chat and feel like a little community in the room [laughs].

In the discussions above the notion of 'commonality of pain' relates to shared biographies of negotiating parenting expectations, seen in this group as foundational to the 'Asian' experience. We see that, when collective conversations work well, they can create a sense of solidarity, empowerment and even transformation. They are able to facilitate an exploration of commonality and difference, agreement and disagreement and co-created understandings of individual experience as collective, with both sensitivity and nuance to produce new biographies and identifications. This is especially significant for marginalised young people, such as East and Southeast Asians, who lack community and shared public narratives due to invisibility and misrepresentation in Britain.

Evasion and protective silences

As we anticipated, there were conversations in our research where there were notable power imbalances between different participants in relation to ethnicity, as well as class, gender and sexuality and other divisions. At times this made participation appear more difficult for those with more marginalised backgrounds or experiences, leading individuals to be hesitant in sharing, and remaining quiet. While we tried to mitigate these risks by creating space and validating different perspectives, it was notable that participants themselves also took great care to foster space for each other as well as understand across inequalities and differences.

In one of our collective conversations, however, the sharing of biographical stories did not successfully take place and the group discussion did not flow easily. In this instance, the power imbalances between the researchers and the participants were too great and we experienced many silences, which we interpret as both signalling the awkwardness of the situation and as protective silences where people did not want to share and used their agency to refuse. Significantly, this was also an instance where we failed to follow a biographical method due to the difficulty in building rapport. Below is an example of how this played out:

Facilitator: Has anyone ever experienced any unwanted comments based on your ethnic background?

[Pause]

Philip [Vietnamese, male]: I can't remember. [long pause …]

Facilitator: Have the rest of you experienced any kind of racism or sort of uncomfortable experiences in the UK because of your ethnicity or how you look or your race?

Becca [Filipino, female]: I don't know, when I walk down the street some people just say 'ni hao'. And they're usually guys, so I can't really stand up to them because I don't know what could happen. So I just ignore them. I pretend I didn't hear anything. Just walk away.

Facilitator: How's it made you feel?

Becca: Kind of bad, but like on the other it's kind of normalised, so I just say it's okay, I don't really care but on the other hand I feel bad in a way because like more people are suffering this and might take it more seriously.

Facilitator: When you say it's normalised, can you say a bit more what you mean by that?

Becca: So like, I don't know, it happens everywhere, every time. I mean it's bad to normalise something like this as well. So I don't know.

[Group 7]

In the above exchange it is notable how participants use forms of evasion through using 'I can't remember' and 'I don't know' to divert attention away and avoid further discussion of what might be an uncomfortable experience. In one of our follow-up interviews with a participant from the same group, interesting insights were shared about how and why the collective conversation failed to be collaborative. As the interviewee discusses below, there was a sense in which the researchers were trying to extract knowledge from the participants rather than providing a context for group discussion.

Interviewer: [Since] we've been talking a little bit about the focus group, was there anything, just to get your feedback about what it was like, your reflections, if you had any, about the kind of group experience?

Agung: OK. I think it's more not so much from me but I think when I was leaving the focus group, I went back with [participant], you know, so she was saying something like it felt like a lot of the times that you guys were trying to *get something from them.*

Interviewer: Right.

Agung: That's why they were a bit more like …

Interviewer: Reticent?

Agung: Yes, they *didn't* really want to, like, you know, *open up.*

Interviewer: That we were looking for something specific or …?

Agung: No, like *you wanted something from them.*

Interviewer: Right.

Agung: Yes, rather than making it like a, I don't know, *like a safe environment*, I don't know.

Agung reiterates four times that other participants in the group felt we (the researchers) were trying to get something from them. This reflects how we were trying to get elaboration and description and they were not willing or comfortable to share with us and they could not understand why we would seek that. In this context, the participants seemed to be using their agency by asserting silences to avoid revealing their vulnerabilities (around experiences of racism). This can be understood as an important and effective strategy to avoid talking about sensitive issues within a context that did not feel like a 'safe environment'. Similar experiences have also been found in other research; for example, Williams (2021), in her research with young people, received single-syllable answers and 'one-sentence responses' in focus groups. Williams (2021) argues the use of silence was 'indicative of the reticence of youth to speak about sensitive matters in front of a group and to divulge information to the researcher' (2021: 457). In this particular session, the young age dynamic of the group, which ranged between 18 –20 (rather than mid 20s in other groups), and with many only recently arriving in the UK as international students (from one month to two or three years) may have contributed to the reluctance to divulge information to

the researchers who in this case were more than twice their age. Added to this was the fact that the conversation took place in a third-party university common room (where the participants were studying) and, while the researchers are university lecturers (elsewhere), this is likely to have introduced significant power asymmetry to the context. Another significant difference in this group was the recruitment process: participants were identified via the snowball method, where one person (Agung) invited a group of friends. Most participants therefore did not individually self-select for the research. Coupled with this was the fact that, despite explaining the research and going through the ethics forms collectively, there seemed to be a misunderstanding of the purpose of the session. When asked why they decided to participate, one participant replied: "I just knew about this because of Becca. That's how I ended up here. But the topic, just like, really getting more information, I thought it would be really interesting." In this case, it appears that the participant had expected to *receive* not provide 'information' – perhaps in line with her previous biographical experience of interactions with university lecturers.

'(Inter)racial caring', race, difference and commonality: insider/outsider

In our role as researchers from different racial backgrounds and given our relative power as facilitators of the collective conversations, we also experienced unexpected practices such as gestures of mutual and cross-racial caring which were extended not

Commented [MOU1]: T- does this need to change as we have two colons here

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only to other participants but also towards us. These gestures were mainly towards Diana, who fits problematic but dominant expectations of what East Asianness 'looks like', but in a few cases towards Tamsin, where whiteness was perceived as a stigma and the white researcher as outsider. In this case one participant reflects upon our group conversation in a one-to-one interview with Diana. Here he reflects upon a discussion around race and whiteness and levels of comfort over the term 'white'.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you felt uncomfortable about what was said at all?

Hoang: No, not uncomfortable for myself, personally, it might be uncomfortable for others, especially if I'm talking about race, because obviously, Tamsin isn't Asian, so sometimes it can sound like we're being a bit too, I guess polemic in a sense.

Interviewer: That's really interesting.

Hoang: Yes, because sometimes you just forget, because Will [Vietnamese participant] used the term 'Caucasian' which is an invented term, it was invented so I didn't like using that term. And then the idea of Anglo Saxon as well, I find that a bit too … but I think it works, but because whiteness is now considered a respectable … well, I say now 'respectable', but it's a label but it's also taken on by certain groups and adopted in such a popular meaning. I think 'Caucasian', it was just invented for the servicing of their own needs, so I didn't like using it. So, obviously, when sometimes you say the word 'whites' it can become quite heavy sometimes, so I didn't feel uncomfortable saying it, but maybe I'm aware that other people might, like maybe [female participant 1] and [female participant 2]. So, other people

> might feel uncomfortable saying it, so yes.
>
> Interviewer: That's really interesting, I hadn't thought about that at all, thinking about the dynamics of also Tamsin's positioning and also Lara's, who is mixed race, obviously. Do you think that shapes how you would talk about things, like really subtly, I guess?
>
> Hoang: No, I would not in this context because I know it's a safe space … well, I assume it's a safe space because we've been invited to speak, but if I'm with other people, then I'm careful, I'm a lot more careful.

In this exchange, Hoang discusses negotiating the sensitivities of using racial labels around whiteness, given the presence in the group of the white researcher and a mixed race, Asian/white participant. What is interesting is the care that the participant displays towards Tamsin and the other participant who are understood as not wanting to align themselves with the colonial dominance and racism associated with their racial identity, but who are uncomfortably implicated by such labels. Hoang enacts care by choosing terms carefully and reflecting upon whether they may have felt offended by being identified as white. Care and empathy are also extended to the other East and Southeast Asian participants by anticipating their discomfort and difficulty to express themselves for fear of causing offence.

In another example, during a follow-up interview between Diana (British-born Chinese researcher) and a young Korean woman who migrated to England at school age, the interviewee asks Diana about her own biography and a mutual exchange of life stories takes place. The interviewee performs intergenerational racial care towards

Diana on the basis of her perceived commonality and enacts protective practices to avoid retraumatising the interviewer:

> [Korean woman tells Diana her experience of racism …]
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. Really interesting, thank you. My goodness.
>
> Jenny: Sorry, it's probably a lot for you to take on.
>
> Interviewer: It's amazing. I mean it's amazing to hear so many experiences and to reflect on it and obviously I'm listening to this through my own life history which is very different to yours so it's kind of, I feel like you've been through so much in a way. In my own way, each of us have our own stories.
>
> Jenny: Yeah, and I think it can't be easy having to listen to all this because I think these are the kind of things that, like are very personal and like it's almost I guess like, well these are the kind of issues that maybe that a therapist would listen to and other people wouldn't have to listen to but it's part of your work and that can't be easy because I think it affects you emotionally and that can be draining.

Here, after telling several stories of racism, the participant, Jenny, fears retraumatising Diana and apologises for the potential burden on her, acknowledging how it might affect her emotionally. The interviewer tries to explain her clumsy response to listening to experiences of racisms 'it's amazing' (by which she is reflecting on the differences between them) by saying how she listens to the participant through her own (different) life history but shared racial positionality. The participant, despite being in her early 20s, enacts care towards the researcher, acknowledging the

potential effects on her, noting later on in the interview, "I would imagine this can be quite personal for you coming from your own cultural background". Here, the generational differences in experiences and responses to racism was notable – the interviewer feeling that the participant had experienced more frequent episodes of explicit racism, but also had more agency in articulating those experiences and responding to them (for example, by attempting to record instances on her phone) and also feeling more dispossessed through her worry, in a post-racial context, of being blamed for being a victim of racism. The feelings of protectiveness experienced by the researcher (due to the participant's younger age) is mirrored by the participant for the researcher. This creates a space where both at once enact care, share vulnerability but also claim agency.

Conclusion: unexpectedness, care and protection as coping strategies in deep collective conversations

As set out at the beginning of this chapter, while 'focus groups' have been traditionally used for exploring social attitudes and opinions, our research develops an emerging body of literature that identifies the distinctive contributions of group methods for collecting in-depth stories with vulnerable communities (see Överlien et al 2005), and notably its increasing relevance for drawing upon individual biographies and life-course narratives in group settings (for example, Chatrakul et al 2014). In particular, we have identified how collective conversations provide a way of

sustaining and generating co-produced biographies, solidarities and identifications in a way that would not be possible in a one-to-one interview alone. We have shown how reframing the use and language of 'focus groups' as 'deep collective and (sometimes) collaborative conversations' in line with a decolonial approach can be particularly fruitful for exploring sensitive topics by evoking stories of biographical events, and the sharing of empathy. These are made possible through the biographical foundation of experiences of racism, familial or personal migration, identity and belonging through which the identification of commonalities and differences of positionality come to the fore. 'Deep collective conversations' can also offer participants space for agency through allowing for the reframing and managing of vulnerabilities through the sharing of stories and through the collaborative teasing out of the complex nuances of becoming East and Southeast Asian. However, the success of this process very much depends upon a shared understanding of the purpose of the conversation, and the power dynamics among participants (especially the researchers), which are strongly shaped by age, migration history, ethnic and racial background, sexuality and gender positionalities.

The emergence of life stories during research on young racialised people's politics of identity and belonging has demonstrated the rich potential of biographical sharing to intensify collaborative conversations and produce a kind of 'deep' collective group experience. The depth of these discussions is testified by the richness of the stories and the impact upon participants who describe feeling 'enlightened' and

empowered with a new sense of belonging for the first time or experiencing 'revelation'. However, this is not always the case. We argue that evoking biographical experience in a collective setting may encourage a polarised reaction, which results in either an intensification of empathy and '(inter)racial caring' (among participants and towards researchers) or protective silences. We have shown how the multiple and shifting power dynamics can lead to unexpected outcomes, including protective practices towards the researchers as well as other participants. During the more negative experiences, participants used their agency by refusing to speak or using evasive strategies to avoid the topic. Given this observation, we note the importance of paying close attention to the ethical dimensions of these scenarios, as a sense of coercion may make participants feel they need to disclose more sensitive biographical memories in the group, which may intensify their feelings of exposure and vulnerability. Another aspect relates to the extent to which participants may feel the need to 'perform' commonality and agreement with the rest of the group. While we did not identify this taking place in our research (hence the use of the strategy of protective silences), this could lead to a sense of being compromised or pressured to be inauthentic.

Our research has also demonstrated the usefulness of combining 'deep collective (and sometimes collaborative) conversations' with follow-up one-to one-interviews (or conversations) to generate additional insights on the group discussion. These interviews allowed us to tease out both the more uncomfortable experiences of

the collective conversations as well as explore the positive ones. The one-to-one follow-up interviews may produce an environment that allows for a more confidential disclosure about the experiences, topics and interactions between participants and the researchers. By reframing focus groups as 'deep collective and (sometimes) collaborative conversations', which can be generative for collective identity-making, we have highlighted the importance of the approach taken by researchers for holding spaces for the telling and sharing of experiences in the context of life histories and familial biographies.

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