Mixed Messages, Mixed Memories, Mixed Ethnicity: mnemonic heritage and constructing identity through mixed parentage

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of mixed ethnic identity from a social memory-based perspective. Drawing on the personal testimonies of individuals of mixed ethnic heritage in New Zealand, the UK, Australia and Canada, the complex influence of collective memory on the construction of a mixed ethnic identity is drawn out, highlighting the contradictions and reconciliations negotiated by those who feel a strong sense of belonging to two groups, with potentially contrasting stories and memories. Participants express their feelings of belonging in multiple ways, showing how appreciation of heritage and internalization of family memories do not have to be equal nor experienced in the same way for both sides of the family. Rather, the unpredictable way in which collective memory shapes mixed ethnic identity indicates that each collectivity can have its own way of being understood for the individual, without reducing or denying its importance.

Introduction

As a critical yet elusive part of who we are, memory plays an unquestionably important role in everyday life. Different forms of memory are necessary for social existence, shaping our day-to-day interactions and giving texture to our wider sense of personal identity and our positioning in time and space. Individual memories are embedded in cultural and social frameworks, through which identity can be understood and presented to the world, combining lived experience, context and heritage (Chamberlain, 2009, p. 9; Halbwachs, 1992). Memory is thus present as much as it is past, with individual memories taking shape within structured social and cultural arrangements, shifting between the imaginary world and lived experiences (Olick, 2008, p. 155; Tupuola, 2004, p. 93).

The relationship between memory and ethnic heritage is intricate and variable, with ethnicity often providing an important reference for individuals, and in some cases, providing a sense of collective identity which
overrides all others (Climo, 1995; Stephan, 1992). The concept of mixed ethnic identity\(^1\) provides a further layer of complexity to the understanding of ethnicity, memory and memory transmission. While the inter-generational memories of ethnic groups have been explored, less attention has been paid to the identity construction of individuals of mixed heritage, who may inherit memories from groups with vastly different stories.

Mixed ethnic identity has been the subject of renewed sociological interest over the past two decades, as the numbers of individuals identifying themselves as coming from mixed ethnic backgrounds increases worldwide (Ifekwunigwe, 2002; Parker & Song, 2001; Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Attitudes toward mixed ethnicity are intertwined closely with the social context of racial/ethnic relations, and have seen a significant shift since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). Historically, hierarchical sentiments of racial purity pathologised mixed ethnic identity, and individuals of mixed descent were perceived as caught between two worlds, never truly belonging in either one (see Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935). Although more recent research has sought to de-problematise mixed ethnic identity, developing progressive models of identity development (see, for example, Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009; Poston, 1990; Rockquemore, et al., 2009; Root, 1999), this idea of an individual torn between two cultures has proven persistent, re-emerging in recent descriptions of mixed ethnic identity and its social and psychological consequences (for example Fryer Jr., Kahn, Levitt, & Spenkuch, 2008; Herring, 1995; Vivero & Jenkins, 1999).

The lingering idea of marginalization and internal conflict is particularly interesting from the memory perspective. Do individuals of mixed heritage experience internal conflict due to the different experiences and mnemonic heritages of their parents? Is it possible to reconcile “mixed memories”? Vivero and Jenkins (1999, p. 12) describe the “cultural homelessness” of mixed heritage, indicating that the lack of a coherent memory framework can lead to psychological distress: “Culturally homeless individuals may have the intense feeling and longing to ‘go home’; however,

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\(^1\) Terminology in discussing mixed ethnic identity/mixed race is particularly important, as preferred terms vary in different academic and social contexts. In this paper, I will use the term “mixed ethnic identity”, rather than “mixed race”, to avoid reifying the idea of racial differences between groups. In addition, as I will be exploring the histories and memories related to the previous generation, I will use the terms “mixed heritage” and “mixed descent” (See Aspinall, 2009 for a more detailed discussion).
they cannot, because they have never had a cultural home… they cannot rely on memories of having had a cultural home”. In contrast, a number of recent studies have found that individuals of mixed descent have multiple and positive senses of identity, identifying to different extents with both sides of their heritage (Binning, et al., 2009; Root, 1992; Stephan & Stephan, 1989; Ward, 2006).

The reconciliation of mixed memories is illuminated by Bhabha’s concept of a “third space” of hybridity, which illustrates new forms of identity and belonging where different cultures collide and collude (Ang, 1999, p. 558; Bhabha, 1994). In contrast to historical discourses of “hybrids” as the mingling of biologically separate “races”, this anti-essentialist understanding of identity can instead highlight different forms of cultural recombination, whether based in ancestry or interaction (Bolatagici, 2004, p. 75; Gomes, 2007; Parker & Song, 2001, p. 4). Hybridity thus emphasises the fluidity and multiplicity of mixed ethnic identity, as constructed through memory and experience - suggesting that “cultural homelessness” may not be a lack of a home, but rather “…belonging at one and the same time to several ‘homes’ (and to no one particular ‘home’)” (Hall, 1992, p. 310).

Methods
This paper explores the relationship between memory and mixed ethnic identity, questioning this idea of marginalization and homelessness, and probing the ways in which “mixed memories” provide a base for hybrid identities. Material is drawn from a series of semi-structured interviews with seven participants: two male and five female, ranging in age from 22 to 28 and encompassing a diversity of mixes around the world. Participants were recruited as a convenience sample through personal and academic connections, as part of an exploratory project for a broader doctoral study on mixed ethnic identity.

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2 The gender imbalance of respondents has been noted in a number of other studies in the US and the UK, potentially attributable to women’s greater readiness to participate in surveys on personal issues such as identity, but more research would need to be done to confirm this point.
Table 1: Participant Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Self-identification</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Current location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>English/Irish</td>
<td>Malaysian Indian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>New Zealand European</td>
<td>Fiji Indian</td>
<td>Half Indian, half New Zealander</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Half Japanese, Half Chinese</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>New Zealand European/Maori</td>
<td>NZ European with Maori/Polish ancestry</td>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>Kiribati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>New Zealand European</td>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>Half Persian, half New Zealander</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European Canadian</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Halfies</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>New Zealand European</td>
<td>Half Indian, half Caucasian</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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Individual interviews were carried out over a two-month period in 2009. Each participant was asked a series of open-ended questions which focused on the salience of ethnic identities, parental relationships with ethnicity, and storytelling as a part of family life. The questions aimed to encourage storytelling about personal recollections, drawing out narrative to illustrate the ways in which memories and identities are brought together to construct a coherent sense of self (see Hall, 1992). The interviews focused on details of family life and the role of memory, exploring how narrative about mixed identity is influenced by past events, projected into the future, and experienced in the present (Chase, 2000). Appreciating the uniqueness of narrative within an interview context (Riessman, 2002), interview transcripts were analysed for narratives within narratives: stories about

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3 Interview schedule is available from the author upon request.
memory, ethnicity and mixedness, and the instances in which these strands came together.

Based on the storied quality of participants’ testimonies, and the uniqueness of their experiences and locations in history, geography and between ethnic groups, it is hoped that their responses provide insight into the hybrid construction of mixed ethnic identity, and the way in which memory can be passed down, influenced by context, and recreated. By using memory as a framework through which we can understand more about mixed heritage identities, this study is grounded in narrative and interpretation, allowing for the contradictions and complications of everyday life (Borland, 1991; Portelli, 1991, p. 2). Rather than seeking a larger “truth” about mixed ethnic identity, it aims to provide a window into the way individuals of mixed descent use social frameworks of memory to live their personal realities.

With a small group of respondents, this research is not intended to be representative of the vast and diverse population of individuals of mixed descent. The international and ethnically intricate lives of these seven participants instead provide a small-scale illustration of the growing complexity of identity, as physical and cultural borders are crossed and boundaries are blurred.

The Role of Memory: Individual and Collective

The numerous functions of memory have been well explored by various theorists, from Halbwachs to Nora, describing the symbolic, psychological and formal roles of memory for living in the present and experiencing the past. Memory is crucial in identity formation, and past experiences shape present interpretations, while personal memory is constructed through social interaction, ultimately defining identity and self-hood (Olick, 1999; Portelli, 1991, p. 26). It is this social, discursive aspect, which makes memory such a critical part of identity. The social environments of experiencing and remembering affect the way in which past events are recalled and the tacit social rules of remembrance - indicating what is acceptable to remember and to forget, within the family, the community group, and the society (Zerubavel, 1996).

Collective memory refers to memories commonly shared by all members of a group, a combined endeavour which constitutes more than simply shared individual memories (Coman, Brown, Koppel, & Hirst, 2009;
Zerubavel, 1996). Halbwachs’ social frameworks of memory (1992) suggest that while it is individuals who remember (even if they do this together), materials for memory are constructed and maintained within a group, where rules are established for recall and disregard. A distinction can be made between autobiographyal memory as contextual personal experiences, historical memory as the past which no longer has a strong, felt, connection to individual lives, and collective memory as “the active past that forms our identities” (Olick, 1999, p. 335). Collective memory can be vividly seen in the experiences of ethnic groups and diasporae, where group membership encompasses the ability to remember important past group events “as if they were part of our own past” (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 290). The fusion of personal and group memories and histories, often transcending location and generation, provides a strong sense of kinship and belonging, and a base for the development of personal identity (Chamberlain, 2009; Climo, 1995; Zerubavel, 1996).

This link between collective memory and belonging has interesting implications for individuals of mixed heritage, particularly when looking at the differences between the migrant experience and the host population, when individuals of mixed backgrounds feel ties to and experience aspects of both. How do individuals define their identities when a sense of belonging is felt for more than one group, each with different, and occasionally conflicting, histories? Is one group necessarily chosen over another, as in classical assimilation theory? Does one past need to be forgotten?

Remembering Mixed Heritage
It is widely agreed that ethnic identities are fluid, constructed, and can change over time, and mixed ethnic identities are no exception (see Harris & Sim, 2002). Individuals shift between multiple identities as they make sense of the world, shaped by factors such as history, social context, gender, culture, and personal/collective memories (Mishler, 1992; Norquay, 1990). The seven study participants told detailed stories about their multiple forms of identity, and the ways in which the experiences and memories of their parents and the histories of their parents’ ethnic groups shaped their self-perceptions. Several respondents felt that it was important to acknowledge and understand personal heritage, particularly so in the case of mixed heritage.
I think it is very important for you to have strong ties to your family. In a spiritual way, it is also important to know where you come from. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)

However, the reasons and motivations for remembering both sides of heritage varied, ranging from spirituality, to self-completion, to inter-generational understanding.

The older I get, the more important it becomes to me, not so much as so I ‘know who I am,’ but more so that I can understand my parents. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

One respondent perceptively highlighted that being aware of heritage is not always the same as identifying with it:

I think [heritage] is important however I don't know to what extent. In my experience you have to imagine yourself as part of a cultural/ethnic community for it to be true. (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

Unintentionally echoing Anderson’s notion of imagined communities, this comment deftly illustrates the potential difficulties of imagining a sense of belonging, when belonging is not simple to define.

**A Mixed Inheritance**

What is passed from generation to generation cannot always be easily articulated, particularly in terms of the impact that familial inheritance has on everyday existence and beliefs. The “mythical images” (Thompson, 1993, p. 23) of inheritance can include personal and physical traits, “blood ties” and ethnic identity, as well as cultural and religious practices. It is clear, however, that family inheritance plays an important role in determining identity for individuals of mixed descent.

I assume that it influences everything that I do. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

As occurs in many families, respondents highlighted the casual, light-hearted negotiations that occur regarding family inheritance, including physical appearance and personality characteristics:

I have been told that I have my mother’s work ethic and that I am a lot more like my mother in character … I have many of my father’s physical traits though – the hair, nose, mouth, ears.
Rocha

(Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)
…they love to point out traits – the good ones – that come from THEIR side! Any bad traits get blamed on the OTHER side of the family! (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Not all families make such distinctions however, whether due to the fact that such differences are not seen as important, or to counter the external perceptions of difference. One respondent commented:

…we never speak about what exactly (physical or otherwise) comes from whom. (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

One aspect of family inheritance that was evoked strongly involved painful memories and experiences – emotions and experiences passed on (not necessarily deliberately) to the next generation. This highlights the strength of “the past in the present” and of vicarious memory – how collective memories of struggle and oppression for marginalized groups can be passed along unconsciously, to be re-constructed by the following generation (Climo, 1995, p. 176).

I suspect there is more that has passed down than I could point out. Life perspectives, habits of thought, habits of being, ambitions and values… I think there is also anger that has been passed down; unprocessed anger due to difficult childhoods and experiences. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Identification with older generations also had an important impact for respondents, in shaping their bonds with either side of their ethnic heritages and aiding in “the complex search for self-placement in history” (Santa Ana, 2008, p. 466). Several respondents highlighted that contact with extended family provided more of a sense of where they came from and reinforced that aspect of their heritage.

I felt much more of a connection with Ireland when my Nana was still alive. She was very Irish and so I felt a link through her. (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

I have a relatively strong connection with my father’s culture, as I spent much time with my grandparents when I was a child… (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)
**Telling Family Stories**

Storytelling and reminiscing by family and close family friends proved to be a significant part of memory transmission for respondents. Storytelling occurs in everyday social exchanges in the majority of all families, and is a key mechanism through which we locate ourselves within the family, the society and the historical period (Fivush, 2008; Miller, 1994, p. 159; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). A number of respondents described repetition of light-hearted stories about family members, which tended to be amusing, strengthening family bonds:

> There are several stories which are repeated at family gatherings – these stories are always about me and my siblings as young children. These stories are always funny. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)

> …most of the time my parents tell stories about me and my siblings as children, because they find a lot of happiness in remembering funny little things we used to do. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

However, personal stories, particularly in the family context, have an important function in framing which aspects of the past should be remembered, and which should be forgotten (Miller, 1994). As Ali (2003, p. 114) describes in her study of narratives for mixed families in London, stories are told to pass on a sense of the parent’s own childhood, in order to develop a shared family memory. Success in the face of adversity was a common theme for family stories, often reflected in the backgrounds of both parents.

> Both grew up very poor, and under difficult circumstances. I am amazed at the adversity they have faced, and how much they have done to improve their lives, and to create a good life for their children. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Stories within families thus connect the past to the present, providing a sense of continuity and a link from the parent to the child, either through comparison or similarity (Byng-Hall, 1990). Respondents stressed the difference between the childhoods of each of their parents and their own,
often indicating their appreciation for the sacrifices and efforts made by their families.

My mother tells stories mostly about her hard working parents; helping her father with the gardening; the closeness of her family; how, despite tough economic conditions, the family always managed...My father doesn’t talk much about his childhood but my mother and my aunty have shared his story with me – moving... as a young child, being abandoned by his mother, living in an orphanage for some time, being raised by his sister...

(Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)

Interestingly, while comparing the backgrounds of their parents, respondents emphasized not only cultural/ethnic differences, but also drew out similarities.

While they were culturally quite different, in terms of socio-economic status, they were very similar. Compared to [me], they were much less privileged and had to work much harder to get to where they are. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)

Byng-Hall (1990, p. 220) indicates that is not the story itself which is important, but rather the family message which it provides for the next generation. The examples given by participants show a common thread of working to overcome immense difficulties and finding commonality in ethnic difference, while emphasizing the cohesiveness of the family. Such stories were both positive and negative, even cathartic, illustrating past injustices.

When they tell the difficult ones, I feel as if it helps them to relieve whatever anger or sadness they have left over from their childhoods. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

The stories that go untold, or the stories that are not willingly heard, can be equally important in the transmission of family memory, with the silence surrounding the story having a significant impact on the next generation and the ways in which they see themselves (see Byng-Hall, 1990; Climo, 1995). Painful experiences of racism and oppression, and the loneliness of migration and social disapproval were conveyed to respondents, without necessarily being deliberately articulated.
When I was in my late teens I used to ask my mother what she was like when she was my age – she very rarely gave me a reply, or it was only ever a very vague reply. I asked her once and she started crying. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)

I didn’t like hearing my mother’s stories because they seemed so dramatic, almost to the point of being unbelievable. (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

Family stories, both positive and negative, provided important context and background for respondents and helped to strengthen familial bonds, constructing a family identity using both cultural practices, and telling stories about cultural practices (Ali, 2003, p. 110). Through these stories and practices, including family events and traditions, identities are maintained at the intersection of discourse and action:

I think Christmas is our most important tradition. It’s not Christian though. Not in my eyes, at least. Dad does have some affinity to the church (Presbyterian), not that we ever go. Christmas will start in the morning. My sister comes over… and we’ll open presents and probably have some samosas. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

Thus events and stories about events can be constructed as a representation of a family identity – difference creating a unique tradition located within a family, with the story allowing the listener and the storyteller to participate in the reconstruction of a family memory and a sense of the (mixed) family as a cohesive unit.

**Different Ways of Remembering**

A key outcome revealed the multiple ways in which respondents remember and identify with both sides of their heritage, and with the context in which they were raised. Among the diversity of practices and traditions described, language, food, music and dress had a considerable impact on constructing a sense of self. For some respondents, language proved a barrier to getting to know older relatives, highlighting the fact that while language may be an important ethnic marker, it may not always be deliberately passed onto the next generation.

I really wish I had learned to speak Persian so I could communicate with my mother’s side of the family… I am
embarrassed that I can’t, and think that it’s very important for children from mixed ethnicities to learn the language and culture of both. (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

From respondents’ testimonies, it appears that reasons for the non-transfer of language are complex on the part of the parent. Assimilation theory, addressing migrant groups, indicates that language can be lost in the process of adopting a new society and culture, yet this does not appear to be a necessary condition for all families (Portes & Zhou, 1993). For some respondents, language proficiency was seen as a critical part of their ethnic identity, and some were choosing to learn a language in later life, to forge a stronger connection with their past:

I am about to start Hindi lessons so that I can become closer to my Indian heritage, particularly my grandmother whose English is very limited. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

However, for others, a lack of language skills did not in any way detract from their identification with both sides of their heritage. In fact, language does not necessarily accompany a sense of belonging or personal identification:

I am experiencing a strange ‘in-betweenness’ as I speak the language fluently, consider I-Kiribati to be family, have many friends here … Yet, strangely, I no longer consider myself to be a part of the Kiribati community. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)

Certain aspects of remembering are closely intertwined with physicality, indicating the embodied way the past is remembered and understood (Misztal 2003, cited in Low, 2007). Respondents described the importance of food, smells, textures and styles of dress in defining how they identify with each side of their heritage, showing the ways in which selected aspects of culture and memory can be adopted and re-constituted in a more complex form of identity.

I understand, but don’t particularly identify with many aspects of the culture, however through my mother’s cooking, I definitely enjoy the cuisine. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)

I identify with India in some ways: I wear sarees and shalwar
kamees, and many rituals and customs that I practice as a Muslim come from Indian culture. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Physical location and the remembrance of place have been researched in the context of migrant communities, and the construction of a diasporic identity. Locations are not simply backdrops to experiences, but can have important personal memories and connections attributed to them (Scriver, 2006, p. 207; Tolia-Kelly, 2004). This connection to place was evident on two levels. On the individual level, locations of personal significance to their parents were often referred to, reinforcing the strength of the family unit and the role of family in memory transmission.

As I get older I want to get to know my parents as people. I want to know how they feel about what has happened in their lives, about their families and heritages, about their upbringings and about their life perspectives. Going to these places has helped me to get to know my parents. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

On a broader level, reflecting a felt connection with an ethnic/national group, one respondent also referred to a link to a country as a whole, despite never having visited:

I feel a strong connection to [Iran] – both as the birthplace of my religion, and the birthplace of my mother... (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

**Developing (Mixed) Ethnic Identity**

The transfer of memories within families, and the numerous ways in which individuals seek to remember both sides of their heritages and connect with the past, lead to a complex and shifting conceptualization of mixed ethnic identity. The respondents illustrated that individuals of mixed descent can have multiple identities, and that mixed ethnic identity can take various forms – identifying primarily with one side, both, or neither, or a fluid combination of all three (Root, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 1989). Several respondents stressed their equally felt connections with both sides of their heritage, identifying with both parents and ethnic groups.

I feel an equal connection with my father and mother’s cultures, and I value traditions and rituals from both sides. I have never felt
like I have to pick one over the other… [I am] half of mum’s background and half of dad’s. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada) [My ethnicity is] New Zealand and Indian - both equally. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

In addition, one respondent stressed that she also feels separate from both cultures, illustrating Bhabha’s in-between “third space”, and the hypothesis that lived experiences of hybridity allow individuals to more freely disregard external fixed categorizations of ‘race’ (Pauker & Ambady, 2009).

In many ways, I think very differently to both of them, and I feel like I am a third culture. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

As seen in the ethnic backgrounds of participants, for many respondents, one parent identified with a minority ethnic group, while the other came from the dominant ethnic majority. Thus respondents experienced the unique situation of potentially identifying with both minority and majority groups, and the accompanying similarities and contradictions. This location in social and historical (and often post-colonial) context necessarily shaped ethnic identities for participants. Several commented on the strength of their bond with the dominant culture, due to their parent’s role and the ubiquitous and unmarked “normality” of the majority culture (see Keddell, 2006). For one participant, a primary ethnic identification was, in part, due to a deliberate act of forgetting for one of the parents. This led to a stronger identification with the majority culture and a sense of confusion and loss over the minority culture.

I feel confused and cut off from my mother's culture because she herself cut herself off so forcefully. I don't feel a connection with Indian and Malaysian culture however I feel that I ought to feel more connection. (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

Others veered in the opposite direction, with their status as a ‘visible minority’ giving strength to their identification with their minority parent’s culture.

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4 A number of studies have looked at identification in relation to the minority/majority parent, exploring the impacts of gender, education, and location (Kukutai, 2007; Xie & Goyette, 1997).
I think culture-wise, I feel more strongly Persian than New Zealander. Maybe this is because Persian culture is more obvious than ‘Western’ culture; maybe it’s because it’s the culture of my mother… all the more so because from my appearance it is clear that I am not ‘white’. (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

This last comment raises a key point regarding the importance of gender in both the transmission and construction of memory – the intersection between racialised and gendered forms of identity (Omi & Winant, 1994). Previous work on mixed ethnic identity has explored gendered markers and processes such as surname transmission, primary care, and language conveyance, finding a complex set of interactions at the intersection of ethnicity/race and gender (Kukutai, 2007; Roth, 2005; Xie & Goyette, 1997). The respondents reinforced this complexity of gender roles and the transmission of ethnicity, particularly when it came to food as a marker of ethnicity – in one case, food preparation was strongly associated with the father (of Indian origin). Respondents also showed their awareness of this gendered dimension of ethnic identity and the implied power dynamics, looking at the intersection of gender and majority/minority ethnic relations:

I sometimes … wonder what it would be like if Mum was white and Dad was Indian. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

Storytelling and the content of stories also varied by the gender of the parent, illustrating how gender plays a key role in the shaping of personal narratives, and the ways in which these are then re-told (Ali, 2003; Waterson, 2007).

My mum always looked for books about girl heroines; about strong, capable girls. I share a love of science with my dad, so he and I have always shared articles about health, technology and science in general. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Respondents were mixed in their relationships with their parents. Many indicated that they related to both equally (although in potentially different ways), similarly to relating to both ethnic backgrounds equally but in potentially different situations. In several cases, however, the respondent identified more strongly with one culture and the corresponding parent.

I relate more to my father. We have more characteristics and interests in common. I also understand his attitude to his
background... I feel that my mother has really severed ties with her background in a way that I could never do. (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK) I have a relatively strong connection with my father’s culture, as I spent much time with my grandparents when I was a child. I can generally understand Cantonese, and find that my comfort foods are predominantly Cantonese cuisine... I relate more to my father than my mother. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)

These respondents also made clear their links to the backgrounds of both parents – relating more to one parent not indicating a disregard for or denial of either side of their heritage. This highlights the personal and contextual negotiations involved in defining a mixed form of identity, and the fact that affinity and respect for family heritage does not necessarily translate to personal identification or practice – an interesting reflection of symbolic ethnicity (see Gans, 1979; Gans, 2009).

**Multiplicity and Fluidity of Identities**

Each respondent indicated that many forms of identity held particular importance for them as individuals, including gender, religion, socioeconomic group, education, location, nationality, political views, and community group. The majority of respondents placed particular importance on their place of birth and nationality, with this aspect of identity becoming pronounced when living elsewhere in the world.

Being from New Zealand [is important to me], especially while travelling and living overseas (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

The importance of national identity illustrates the contextual ways in which identity is defined, and how memories of self are made up through heritage and personal experience. A distinction between national and ethnic identity was made by respondents – a public national/civic identity was generally seen as more encompassing, including but not limited to private ethnic identities.

I love my country and I am proud that being Canadian means being a whole assortment of things. I envision ‘Canadian’ as the umbrella title under which all of my other aspects can exist

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5 These do not necessarily coincide.
without contradiction. I am white and brown. I am a practising Muslim who studies Buddhism and celebrates Christmas. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

One further distinction was made between the country of origin for each parent, and the ethnicity/culture associated with that country.

While I identify with culture and people, I do not feel a strong personal connection with China. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in Canada)

This important difference provides a counterpoint to research on migrant groups and diasporic memory, drawing a clear line between the national identity/country, and the ethnic heritage and memories of the parents. Similarly, for the children of “twice migrants”6, the ethnic heritage of the parent’s family held greater importance than the country of birth of the parent.

I do not consider myself as Kenyan in any way and do not feel a very strong connection with the country. I feel a much stronger connection with India. (Female; father Kenyan Indian, mother New Zealand European; born in New Zealand)

The multiplicity of identities listed by participants, and the complex interplay between ethnicity, nationality, culture and contextual lived experience further highlights the complexity (and perhaps the willingness to accept complications) experienced by individuals of mixed ethnic backgrounds.

[I identify with] Canadian, British, Kenyan, Indian, and most recently now that I live here, American [cultures]. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

I am British and I feel British although I don't feel that I identify strongly with British culture. I feel a connection with Greek and Russian culture because I grew up in an Orthodox Christian community… (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

Not only are identities complex, but they shift depending on time and place, with participants describing the way mixed ethnic identity can be in flux,

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6 For example, the Indian diaspora moving from East Africa to the UK/North America.
particularly in relation to the perceptions of others.

I feel so English when I'm in Malaysia which is funny as I don't feel particularly English when I am in England! (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

In addition, personal perceptions and understandings of mixed ethnicity identity are strongly influenced by wider social beliefs, stressing the importance of social context, as individuals of mixed ethnic heritage may experience pressure to accept the identity assigned by society (Root, 1999).

I like Malaysia however I felt a little bit like a fake because they assume that I feel partly Indian/Malaysian and I don't at all. (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

This mirroring and reconstruction of identity illustrates Cooley’s looking glass theory, as seeing personal identity reflected in the attitudes of others (Oikawa & Yoshida, 2007). Nakashima highlights the importance of these public/private conflicts, with a potential dissonance experienced by individuals of mixed ethnic descent as a result of the conflict between their personal feelings of identity and the socially assigned, less flexible, identity (cited in Shih & Sanchez, 2005, p. 572). Respondents described how they reconciled this public/private relationship, as wider social beliefs are both internalized and rebelled against in constructing a mixed identity, contrasting internal and external understandings of “home”.

I appreciate that many people have a background/heritage which is much more defined and in focus than mine, and that this can be reassuring. However it is frustrating if people don't realise that it is possible to be a stable, together person even with a mixed background! (Female; father English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)

My citizenship is New Zealand, although I haven’t lived there for 10 years and no longer have a typical NZ accent and don’t look like a New Zealander (so from my appearance, accent am not identifiable as such) but it is my ‘home’; Australia is also my ‘home’ since my parents live there, most of my friends are still from there, and I lived and studied there for 5 years. However, I don’t have Australian citizenship, and don’t have an Australian accent! I am half-Iranian but I’ve never visited the country and don’t speak the language – I sort of belong there but not really (I identify with the culture but not really the country). Then finally I
now live in Germany (and have been for the past 3 years) and am still learning the language… this is also my ‘home’; except I don’t have citizenship and don’t speak the language fluently enough not to stick out; apart from that, I don’t really identify with the culture, and certainly don’t look German so don’t really belong here either! (Female; father New Zealand European, mother Persian; born in New Zealand)

Several participants described their religious identity as intertwined with their ethnic identities, and in some cases, eclipsing ethnicity in importance. Participants identified with a range of religions, including Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Baha’i and Buddhism. While not all participants felt a sense of continuity from the faith of their parents to their own beliefs, religious bonds were described by some participants as particularly lasting, either in a public sense of belonging or a private practice of faith.

Family ties are important but, from personal experience, it is the spiritual ties which have always been much stronger and most enduring. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)
My religion, and moreso my spiritual practice, are very much a part of my identity. But these feel like very private aspects of my identity (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

A final sense of identity mentioned by participants described the duality experienced by individuals of mixed heritage, defining identity as “the fact that I am from two cultures” (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand) and “my feeling of being a world-wide citizen” (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada).

This diverse and shifting mix of identifications resists compartmentalization, and provides a significant contrast to the idea of “homelessness”. Rather than locating themselves as outside of spaces of belonging, participants grounded themselves on a number of overlapping and diverging terrains, drawing together strands of identity and in some cases creating a “home” by belonging in multiple places. Thus, as described by Hall, mixed/hybrid identities combine memories of the past with experiences of the present, as “a matter of becoming rather than being, not of who we
are, or where we are from, but what we might become” (cited in Ang, 2001, p. 150).

**Reconciling Mixed Memories**

Looking outwards, respondents described this lived hybridity as making them sensitive to the potential for ambiguity in themselves and in the perceptions and backgrounds of others.

I guess knowledge of my dynamic heritage makes me more sensitive to other people’s backgrounds and cultural make-up. I am alert to the fact that people are an amalgamation of various experiences and traits they inherited. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

This intersection of memory and mixed ethnic identity then illustrates how memory serves both to describe family heritage and frame an individual’s present and future. While memory may serve to iron out contradictions in the past through selective forgetting, the participants’ experiences show how re-editing the past(s) through a broader, less ethnically defined lens can allow space for an alternative story of multiplicity and inclusion, and not necessarily of denial and marginalization (see Byng-Hall, 1990; Norquay, 1990). The respondents described how appreciation of heritage and internalization of family memories do not have to be equal, nor experienced in the same way for both sides of the family. Rather, each can have its own way of being understood, without reducing or denying its importance.

I guess I know and experience less of the Indian culture, but it’s equal in importance. (Male; father New Zealand European, mother Fiji Indian; born in New Zealand)

Acknowledging heritage and the collective memories of an ethnic group can remain a part of a person’s *identity*, without always having a strong, defined sense of personal *identification*. This is supported by Aspinall et al. (2008), who found that individuals of mixed ethnic heritage place high symbolic value on their “mixedness”, without it necessarily becoming central to their day-to-day lives. Collective memory thus shapes identity, but not always in predictable ways.

I also continue to introduce myself as half-Polish although I feel no connection to my Polish heritage. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)
Conclusion: Memories of Belonging
For individuals of mixed ethnic heritage, mnemonic heritages and hybrid identities can overlap with the dichotomies of colonizer/colonized, migrant/host, and the perceived contradictions and conflicts inherent in these different stories. Even the word “mixed” implies a tangled, over-complicated identity, something to be unravelled and separated into its constituent parts. However, individuals cannot be divided into halves, no matter how far apart the cultures of their parents may seem, and this resulting holistic and integrative (and often unpredictable) identity is seen in the experiences of the respondents.

Describing a similar duality in the immigrant experience, Gilroy suggests that “it no longer matters where you’re from, but where you’re at” (cited in Ang, 1999, p. 551). This is mirrored in respondents’ descriptions of how the meaning of “belonging” has changed for them over the years, as memory and heritage are overlaid with increasing life experience.

I am comfortable not belonging in certain environments where, as a child, I strived to belong and wished I belonged… Now I belong when I make myself comfortable by being of service, doing what is right, and putting in my best effort. (Female; father European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada)

Now, I feel I belong to many communities… [they] largely shape who I am and what I do in my everyday life. (Female; father Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)

Respondents provided vivid examples of Hall’s “flexible identity” (also used to describe diasporic communities), indicating that while individuals may construct their identities around a number of intersecting memories and cultures, they find new ways to belong in multiple “homes” (Hall, 1992, p. 310; Tupuola, 2004, p. 89). This malleable definition of belonging and “home” is in stark contrast with the notions of cultural homelessness and marginality, and the associated assumptions of negative outcomes. The hybridity of mixedness thus serves to illuminate the permeability of ethnic boundaries, highlighting that “everyone lives their lives in the liminal grey space between the extremes of black and white” (Daniel, 2002/2004, p. 291). As the respondents described:

I think that having a mixed background has reduced the importance of belonging to a community for me. Even my church
community that feels like family can be subdivided into smaller
groups depending on background and language. (Female; father
English/Irish, mother Malaysian Indian; born in the UK)
Belonging [is now a] matter of choice: I feel now that I choose to
belong to the Chinese and Japanese communities, rather than when
I was a child. (Male; father Chinese, mother Japanese; born in
Canada)
I feel like I belong to a community when the beliefs, attitudes and
customs of that community resonate with my own beliefs and
attitudes. I feel like I belong when I can comfortably partake in
community events and customs and not feel like I am undermining
or contradicting my personal values and ideals. (Female; father
Polish, mother New Zealand European/Maori; born in Kiribati)
I do not feel like I belong in one set community now, but rather in
many… I now feel part of communities that are distinct from my
parents as well as those that my parents are part of. (Female; father
Kenyan Indian, mother New Zealand European; born in New
Zealand)

The experiences of these seven individuals of mixed heritage illustrate how
memory shapes personal identity, and the possibilities inherent in developing
identity through combining often vastly different ethnic heritages. While
social memory provides a framework in which individuals play out their
lives, the role of agency is also particularly evident – as individual stories
both shape and are shaped by culture and history through the stories they tell
and internalize (Fivush, 2008, p. 56). Although potential for conflict
between ethnic histories and memories is very real, the lived experiences of
individuals of mixed descent provide insight into possibilities for integration
and re-evaluation of painful or conflicting histories, taking family memories
from the past into the lived and expressed future.

There is a tension that exists in our bellies being half of the
oppressor and half of the oppressed. If you just sit in that tension,
there is no relief. We have had to find ways of moving beyond, of
assimilating both, of forgiving, of re-defining. (Female; father
European Canadian, mother Kenyan Indian; born in Canada).

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Biographical

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