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- 1 Part III
- 2 The multidimensionality of vulnerability and risk in
- 3 biographical research: ethics, vulnerabilities and trauma

1 8

2 Reframing focus groups as deep collective and (sometimes) collaborative
3 conversations: Biographical vulnerabilities, anti-racist East and Southeast Asian
4 solidarities and protective silences Tamsin Barber and Diana Yeh¹

5 Chapter abstract

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

1 themselves from sharing vulnerabilities and experiencing potential retraumatisation,

2 and the collective conversations fail to be collaborative.

3 Chapter keywords

4 East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) category

5 focus groups as collective, collaborative conversations

6 shared commonalities

7 mutual empathy

8 interracial caring

9 protective silences

10 de-individualising racism

11 Introduction

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

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

7 Focus group methods have classically been used for exploring views, opinions
8 and shared experience rather than for tapping into individual biographies (Kitzinger
9 [1995](#): 301). Yet, given their potential to garner shared experience, to empower the
10 voices of marginalised groups and to minimise the influence of the
11 interviewer/facilitator, focus groups offer a unique potential for participants from a
12 similar background to share and compare biographical experiences of racism and
13 belonging. Storied accounts of individual experience enable a thoroughly grounded
14 and socially located sense of the social subject and their lives and, as we argue in this
15 chapter, the group setting can provide a nurturing context whereby mutual solidarity
16 and a sharing of experience generates safe spaces for producing new biographical
17 narratives and critical views of dominant discourses around race and racisms. The
18 attention to interpersonal communication in focus groups enhances sensitivity to
19 nuances ([Kitzinger 1995](#)), and can shed deeper insight into different perspectives and
20 meaning-making. This makes focus groups appropriate for research that explores
21 emergent identity formations among young people. Doing such research with young

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

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

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

10 [Researching racism and belonging among East and Southeast](#) 11 [Asians in Britain through focus groups](#)

12 [Research focus](#)

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

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

16 Methodology

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

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

9 **Participants**

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

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

12 Advantages and pitfalls of 'focus group' research

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

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

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

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

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

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

15 **Creating space for sharing tellable stories**

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

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

18 **Collective conversations as a solidarity event: creating shared**
19 **biographies**

1 The vast majority of our participants expressed their experiences of participating in
2 our research in positive terms, such as feeling like a warm hug. One declared, this
3 is the first time I have felt understood, affirming both their enjoyment and sense of
4 comfort and safety in the group. Although we remain alert to the potential of group
5 dynamics in upholding group norms and silencing voices of dissent ([Kitzinger 1995](#)),
6 we mostly discerned a form of group-making in action ([Kristiansen and Gronkjaer
7 2018](#)), where participants sought to express mutual solidarity and shared empathy for
8 one another particularly around experiences of racism. The research often served as
9 an interesting and often even highly empowering moment for participants, enabling
10 recognition and the facilitation of new pan-ethnic connections between participants.
11 During the conversations, for example, participants shared and reflected upon their
12 current group-making and mobilising practices. They shared experiences in many
13 cases, it was their first opportunity to do so and also participated in developing each
14 other's ideas. They disagreed with each other and re-evaluated their opinions and
15 understandings. They even experienced moments of enlightenment and revelation
16 (participants phrasing) in relation to their experience as East and Southeast Asians in
17 Britain. The distinctive element of group-making was how the conversation served as
18 a solidarity event, developed through and by participants in the sharing of stories, of
19 care and empathy. Black, feminist, queer and critical race theory has long emphasised
20 the important role of love and care among oppressed groups as a precondition for
21 survival and a means of constructing political communities (for example, [Lorde 1988](#);

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

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

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

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

15 Dai [Vietnamese, male]: Not very Chinese.

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

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

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

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

1 think that's a big deal.

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

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

13 Nina: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

4 Nina: Yeah, yeah.

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

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

8 Facilitator 1: Did you want to say more?

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

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

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

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

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

3 Interviewer: How did you find the focus group experience?

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

6 Interviewer: Did you?

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

10 Interviewer: Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

15 Lara: um, and then I think in our focus group we used the words commonality of
16 pain which was very interesting

17 Facilitator: yeah that came up

18 Lara: yeah um, and it was just I think the focus group was just quite nice to hear
19 [pause] how these 4 people, it was only 4 of us but everyone had fingers in
20 like different pies of the world ... erm, just lovely to sit down and chat and
21 feel like a little community in the room [laughs].

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

11 Evasion and protective silences

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

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

8 Below is an example of how this played out:

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

11 [Pause]

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

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

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

20 Facilitator: How's it made you feel?

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

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

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

5 [Group 7]

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

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

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

21 Interviewer: Right.

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

23 Interviewer: Reticent?

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

2 Interviewer: That we were looking for something specific or ...?

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

4 Interviewer: Right.

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

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

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

16 '(Inter)racial caring', race, difference and commonality:

17 insider/outsider

18 In our role as researchers from different racial backgrounds and given our relative
19 power as facilitators of the collective conversations, we also experienced unexpected
20 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

Commented [TB2R1]: Use a comma I think

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

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

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

13 Interviewer: That’s really interesting.

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

1 might feel uncomfortable saying it, so yes.

2 Interviewer: That's really interesting, I hadn't thought about that at all, thinking
3 about the dynamics of also Tamsin's positioning and also Lara's, who is
4 mixed race, obviously. Do you think that shapes how you would talk about
5 things, like really subtly, I guess?

6 Hoang: No, I would not in this context because I know it's a safe space well, I
7 assume it's a safe space because we've been invited to speak, but if I'm with
8 other people, then I'm careful, I'm a lot more careful.

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

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

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

3 [Korean woman tells Diana her experience of racism]

4 Interviewer: Yeah. Really interesting, thank you. My goodness.

5 Jenny: Sorry, it's probably a lot for you to take on.

6 Interviewer: It's amazing. I mean it's amazing to hear so many experiences and
7 to reflect on it and obviously I'm listening to this through my own life
8 history which is very different to yours so it's kind of, I feel like you've
9 been through so much in a way. In my own way, each of us have our own
10 stories.

11 Jenny: Yeah, and I think it can't be easy having to listen to all this because I think
12 these are the kind of things that, like are very personal and like it's almost I
13 guess like, well these are the kind of issues that maybe that a therapist
14 would listen to and other people wouldn't have to listen to but it's part of
15 your work and that can't be easy because I think it affects you emotionally
16 and that can be draining.

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

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

12 Conclusion: unexpectedness, care and protection as coping 13 strategies in deep collective conversations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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