



University of Victoria

# What makes a conversation safe? Students perspectives on talking about ethnic-racial identity

by Kimberly Le-Ba, Catherine Costignan, PhD  
Department of Psychology



BRANCH Research  
Building Relationships to Advance  
Newcomer & Community Health

## Background

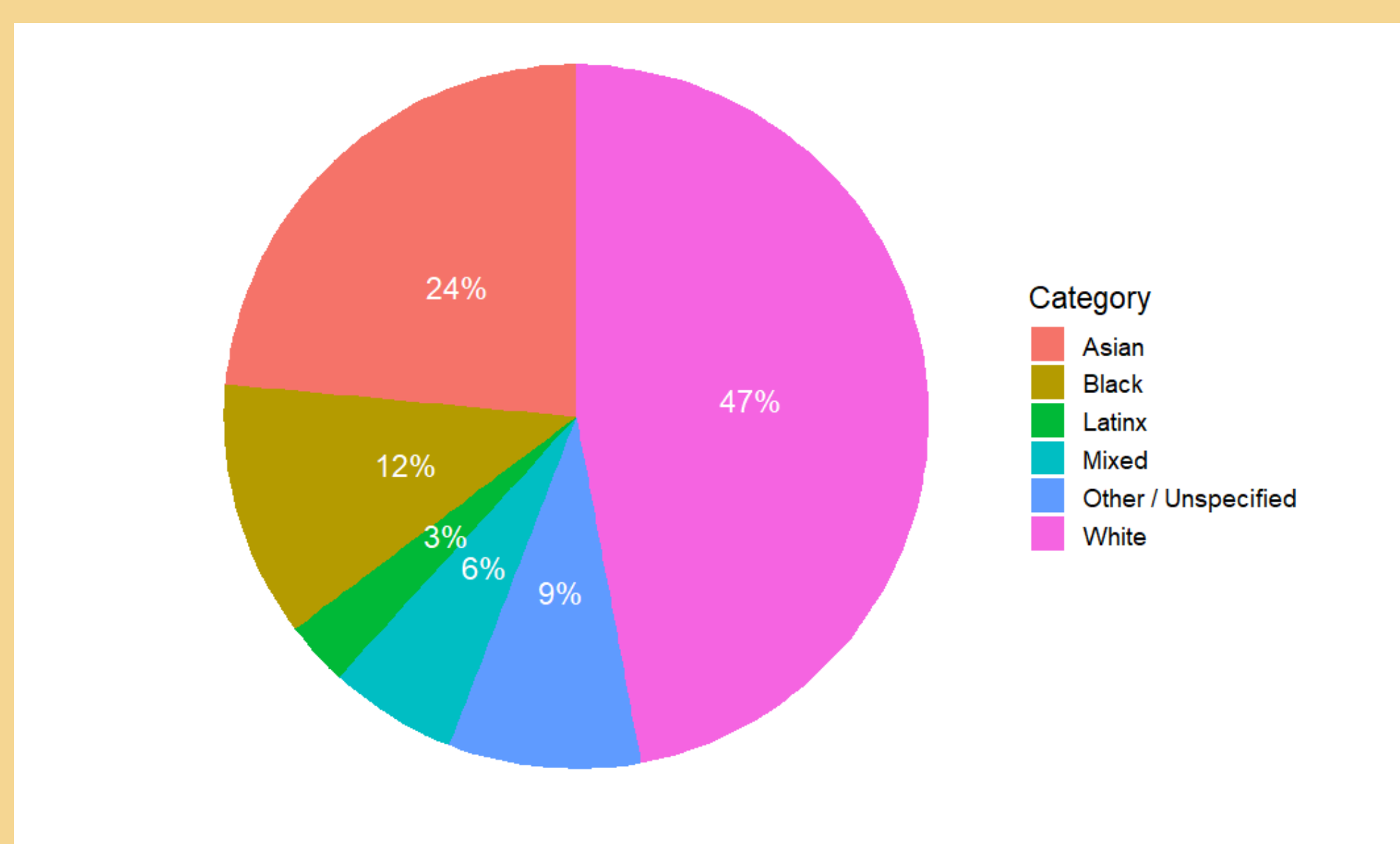
The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1985) affirms diversity, yet many remain uncertain about how to discuss race and ethnicity (Sue et al., 2009). Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that meaningful interaction across groups can reduce prejudice, particularly when conditions such as equal status, shared goals, institutional support, and opportunities for exchange are present (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Research on cultural socialization further finds that positive conversations about heritage with diverse peers encourage ethnic-racial identity (ERI) engagement (Elias et al., 2022). Although ERI dialogue can enhance self-esteem and life satisfaction, colour-blind norms discourage engagement (Elias et al., 2022). Informal peer dialogue in universities—where students share equal status and common goals—offers promise, though fears of offending or being misunderstood often discourage engagement. Avoidance of ERI conversations may be explained by Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, which suggests that reducing anxiety and uncertainty increases willingness to interact with outgroups (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). Using a qualitative approach, this study examines these dynamics through four semi-structured focus groups in which diverse participants discuss their experiences with ERI conversations in casual peer settings in order to identify potentially strategies to increase engagement in ERI affirming conversations.

## Research Question

- What strategies foster empathy and curiosity in identity dialogue?
- What approaches reduce intergroup anxiety, shame, and defensiveness?
- What conditions increase willingness to interact across racial-ethnic groups?

## Participants

n=29  
 7–8 participants per focus group  
 Age: 19 - 50 years old (X=23)  
 25 women; 2 men; 1 non-binary; 1 gender-fluid  
 Predominantly Psychology Students  
 33% not born in Canada; 59% had parents not born in Canada



## References

This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria

## Preliminary Thematic Analysis

### Navigating Identity Pressure and the Fear of Being Misread

Students of colour feel consistent pressure to manage how their ERI is interpreted. This pressure shapes their willingness, emotional capacity, and ways of taking part in in ERI conversations.

*“And I’ll say, “Oh, I’m from Ireland.” And then it’s, “No, where are you really from?” And then I’m like, “No, I was born in Ireland.” And I feel like I kind of get a little annoyed.”*

-POC

### How Family, Environment, and Generational Context Shape ERI conversations

Family norms, neighbourhood demographics, generational attitudes, and peer environments all influence how comfortable, prepared or hesitant they feel when ERI topics arise.

*“I’ve worked a lot in retail, so, and I grew up in Cochrane, which is a very white town in Alberta. And yeah, I would be asked where I was from or like some iteration of that, probably like weekly.”*

-POC

### Assessing Safety, Intent, and Predictability in ERI Conversations

Students of colour continually assess the interpersonal safety and social predictability of ERI conversations. Their willingness to engage depends on reading cues about intent, respect, emotional risk, and likelihood of harm in order to reduce the uncertainty of the situation.

*“Should I even say where I’m from? Is it important right now? Oh my gosh. Does it outweigh the benefit, outweigh the trouble?”*

### How Political Climate, Multicultural Norms, Power Differences, and Racist events shape ERI Conversations

Participants describe ERI conversations as deeply affected by the wider world around them. Political tensions, media narratives, public debates and visible racist incidents influence how people anticipate conflict, interpret intent, and decide whether to engage.

*“There’s just a lot of like hatred towards Indians right now. So it’s just sometimes when they ask, I just wanna not tell them.”*

## Recommendations

- Reciprocity** - Ask questions *and* share your own experience; don’t make the other person do all the labour
- No entitlement to answers** - No one owes you their story or their identity explanation; be patient with not knowing
- Enter with openness, not assumptions** - Let the other person lead when the topic is their identity
- Ask for consent to engage** - Check whether they are willing to talk about ERI at all or if they are willing to share more
- Normalize mistakes and repair** - Everyone makes mistakes; what matters is how you respond