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**Institutions:** University of Wollongong, Durham University

**Published on:** 01 Jun 2020 - Human Relations (SAGE PublicationsSage UK: London, England)

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### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Fernando, Mario. and Reveley, James and Learmonth, Mark (2020) 'Identity work by a non-white immigrant business scholar : autoethnographic vignettes of 'covering' and 'accenting'.', *Human relations.*, 73 (6). pp. 765-788.

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# **Identity work by a non-white immigrant business scholar: Autoethnographic vignettes of ‘covering’ and ‘accenting’**

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## **Abstract**

How do immigrants with multiple sources of identity deal with the identity tensions that arise from misidentification within the workplace? In order to answer this question, we reposition two under-researched self-presentational identity work strategies – covering and accenting – as particular types of intersectional identity work. Adopting a minoritarian perspective, we apply this framework to an autoethnographic study of a non-white business scholar’s identity work. To the extent that covering and accenting allow the scholar to draw identity resources from non-threatening and widely available social identities, we find that this work enables him to avoid being discredited in the eyes of others. Yet, as a practical response to being misidentified, it also risks reproducing oppressive social structures. As ways of doing intersectional identity work, we conclude, covering and accenting take on heightened significance for non-white immigrants who seek to craft identities at the intersection of several discriminable and stigmatizable categories of difference.

## **Keywords**

accenting, autoethnography, covering, identity work, intersectionality, misidentification

## **Introduction**

Within the countries of the Global North, the prising open – as Bhabha (2004: 2) put it – of “‘in-between” spaces’ in which new ‘strategies of selfhood’ can flourish is arguably contributing to increasing identity porosity. These intersectional spaces present opportunities

for non-white, multiple-identified immigrants to construct identities that empower them in work situations where ethno-racial discrimination and social stigmatization abound (Mirza, 2013). Arguably, after being misattributed a stigmatizable identity, multiple-identified individuals can respond by drawing less discreditable identity-defining cultural resources from their multifaceted sociocultural location. The first-named author of our article – Mario – has first-hand experience both of being misidentified and of the resulting identity work it entails. He now describes how this shapes his outlook.

Originally from Sri Lanka, I migrated first to New Zealand and then to Australia to forge an academic career. Who I actually am has to a greater or lesser degree often been misconstrued by local people ranging from my co-workers to strangers in the street. Consider this: during the period when I was writing the present article, a white woman clutching a bunch of Christian pamphlets approached me in a shopping mall and asked me ‘are you a Muslim?’ My internal reaction was: though I am not, what would it matter if I were? I was taken aback and bewildered. Since I am dark-skinned and speak with a subcontinental accent, apparently I am seen as ‘the Other’ in the Global North. Being misunderstood is part, therefore, of my quotidian subjective reality. These and similar experiences are the genesis of this article. By presenting theoretically informed, autoethnographic reflections on my life experiences, it examines how immigrants in subject positions like my own strive continuously and creatively to ‘reconstruct the identities imposed on them by locals’ (Valenta, 2009: 352).

Positioned at the individual pole of the various ‘registers’ of identity research (Corlett et al., 2017), my article responds to suggestions that cultural difference must be further factored into the analysis of identity work in and around organizations (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Atewologun et al., 2017). Yet I follow post-colonial scholars who eschew the notion of homogenizing national cultures. I adopt instead a ‘minoritarian perspective’

(Bhabha 2004: xvi), wherein the primary concern is how migrant identities are established and maintained in the Global North. I focus on two closely interlinked and under-researched identity work strategies: covering and accenting. In terms of practical action, covering involves acting so as to ‘tone down’ the markers of ‘a disfavoured identity to fit into the mainstream’ (Yoshino, 2007: ix). Accenting is the flipside of covering; it is the accentuation of an identity element (Khanna and Johnson, 2010).

The decision to utilize these concepts is grounded in my experiences. In retrospect, it appears that I began to cover and accent shortly after I alighted upon antipodean soil. This realization jars my sense of self. This article is thus a response to how I feel about the pervasive assimilationist imperatives I encountered in my new working environment – feelings that run the gamut of emotions from embarrassment to anxiety. Furthermore, by choosing to convey my experiences in autoethnographic vignettes, there is a double sense in which I claim my “right” to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege’ (Bhabha, 2004: 3). My two co-authors (James and Mark) accompanied me on this journey. By embarking on it, we challenge not only the norms of whiteness that prevail in the Global North, but also dominant methodological norms. Next, James and Mark explain how they see our article.

Mario has invited the two of us – James and Mark – to reflect, in this paragraph and the next, on our collaborative work with him. As qualitative identity researchers, we are both keenly aware that the need to investigate the contextual ‘triggers’ for identity work (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, 2000) – as well as the content of identity work strategies – is well-recognized and documented within the management and organizational studies literature (Brown, 2015). What it lacks, though, are personal accounts that combine a minoritarian standpoint, first-person testimony, and decolonizing methodological intent. These accounts are exactly what this article supplies. By disclosing his identity work in autoethnographic

vignettes, Mario channels a view that we (the other authors of this article) share – namely, that a preoccupation with ‘objective’ explanation, ungrounded in the personal, is a singularly Western conceit (Latour, 2010). Equally, as white persons of European heritage, we do not speak for Mario. Contributing to the ‘ventriloquism of victimage’ (Bhabha, 2004: xviii) is precisely not the point of our engagement with Mario in co-writing this article. Rather, we travel with Mario as he relates experiences that reveal the inner life of identity work.

In our opinion, it is no coincidence that Mario is an academic. The international mobility of academics exposes them to identity ‘dissonance’ (Kim, 2010: 589), but their middle class status gives them viable options for response. Across a range of professional occupations, immigrants often either possess or rapidly acquire enough cultural capital to mitigate the social labelling to which they are subjected (Van Bochove et al., 2010). We look in particular at how, after being misidentified at university, Mario pressed into service a culturally supplied set of identity resources emanating from wider social identities – especially religio-ethnic ones – that lie beyond organizational or occupational bases of identification. This focus accords with a comprehensive review which concludes that future management and organizational research into individual identity should be guided by the question: ‘Beyond organization boundaries, what individual level identity foci become salient for working individuals across different national cultures?’ (Atewologun et al., 2017: 290). Picking up on the idea of identity construction by individuals as a boundary-spanning activity that taps into extra-organizational identity materials, we take a further step by asking: how do multiple-identified immigrants deal with denizens of national cultures superimposing identities onto them in organizational settings, and what sorts of identity work strategies do they use in response? It is in collaboration with Mario that we formulate our answers. They can be read as a response to Meister et al’s (2017) call to add studies of men to the budding literature on being misidentified within work organizations.

By positioning this article in relation to extant studies of identity work, the next section establishes the theoretical framework that informs the analysis. The third section presents a methodological reflection on the suitability of autoethnography to the topic at hand. In the fourth section three reflexive autoethnographic vignettes written by Mario are presented and analyzed. The fifth section discusses the implications of this study for management and organizational research into identity work by multiple-identified persons. Rounding out the paper are some suggestions for future research.

### **Theoretical framework**

In order to answer our research questions, we three – Mario, James and Mark – reconceptualize covering and accenting as identity work techniques of a specifically intersectional nature. The origins of the underlying concept of intersectionality lie in investigations into the forging of Black women’s experiences of ‘double-discrimination’ in the U.S. along the intersecting lines of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989: 149). From the outset, Crenshaw (1991) explicitly recognized the concept’s relevance to understanding identity politics involving members of other oppressed and marginalized groups. Intersectionality has since developed into a feminist-inspired body of research replete with theoretical and methodological ‘complexity’ (McCall, 2005). For our purposes, of particular interest is a strand that explores the interplay between ‘structures of power’ and ‘overlapping identity categories’ (Cho et al., 2013: 797).

Much of the work on intersectionality by management and organizational scholars – correctly in our view – focuses on women (Calas et al., 2013; Carrim and Nkomo, 2016). Nevertheless the very thing that makes the concept of intersectionality so successful in feminist theorizing, its open-endedness (Davis, 2008), is also what makes it flexible enough to accommodate the identity-defining strategies of multiple-identified men.

### *Intersectional identity work*

The term identity work broadly refers to how individuals use practical discursive techniques to augment identity coherence, to manage multiple and intersecting identities, and to remediate identity threats (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Beech et al., 2012; Bardon et al., 2017; Atewologun et al., 2016). Identity work is contextually contingent, heightening especially at transition points where ‘strains, tensions and surprises are prevalent’ (Brown, 2015: 25). The workplace discrimination that non-white – and therefore visibly different – migrants often experience after moving between countries is a case in point (Binggeli, et al., 2013). As is the case with other negative life experiences, such as bullying, one response is to engage in ‘remedial’ identity work to repair damage to self (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Yet, minority groups can also use identity work to resist being positioned as certain type of persons (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017). The concept of intersectionality encompasses the idea that while being a multiple-identified member of a minority, such as a migrant, can be experienced as constraining – in sociological parlance – it is also potentially enabling (Giddens, 1986). The intersectionality literature is replete with studies of migrants who, through identity work located at the intersection of a range of categories of social difference, countered the influence of others on their self-definitions (Rodriguez et al., 2016). Conceptually, the complementarity between intersectionality and agential, resistant, or otherwise ‘creative’ (Bardon et al., 2017) identity work is denoted by the term ‘intersectional identity work’ (Atewologun et al., 2016).

Qualitative management and organizational research highlights not only the challenges of sustaining stable identities under conditions of ‘in-between-ness’ or ‘liminality’ (Beech, 2008; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018). It underscores the opportunities for self-definition that arise from occupying intersectional sociocultural locations that supply



‘resources and cues’ for identity work (Atewologun et al., 2016: 240). Identity cues are refracted through the processes of sensebreaking and sensemaking (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Whereas sensebreaking stems from receiving meaning-destroying cues that challenge one’s sense of self, sensemaking functions to fill the resulting ‘meaning void’ (Pratt, 2000: 464). Identity resources are the discursive-symbolic elements from which personal self-identity is composed; they supply answers to questions about who we are (Sabet, 2011). Such resources include socially supplied and ‘publicly available’ social identities (Lamont, 2000: 277). These encompass (but are not limited to) gender, nationality, racio-ethnicity, religious belief, and sexuality, as well as migrant status. Helpfully, Watson (2008: 131, emphasis and capitals omitted) calls them ‘social-category social-identities’.

We follow Watson’s ideas about identity work in a second way. This theory contrasts with social psychological approaches (cf. Tajfel, 1978), since social identities are conceptualized not as constituent components of personal self-identities but rather as a set of “‘inputs” into self-identities (mediated by identity work)’ (Watson, 2008: 131). In this view, identity work by individuals involves attempting to influence how social identities externally attach to them. Being the bearer of a stigmatized social identity, for example, can provoke intense identity work (Slay and Smith, 2011; Elraz, 2017). Combatting stigma by drawing on other (non-stigmatized) social identities is a known response (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). This is a particular case of the wider phenomenon of selectively utilizing a social identity ‘as a resource’ (Rodriguez et al., 2016: 213).

Migrants who are situated at the overlap of several categories of sociocultural difference face unique challenges because of the sheer number of potentially discriminable attributes they possess, which threatening social identities can latch onto. Yet the fundamental basis of their discriminability – being multiple identified, that is – can also empower them to resist being ‘Othered’ at work. To the extent that multiple-identified

persons span several social categories, they potentially have access to a wide range of social identities which they can press into service to stave off various forms of disadvantage within organizations (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010). In the wider literature there are studies of multiple-identified migrants in this vein (Lulle and Jurkane-Hobein, 2017), but the specific self-presentational techniques they use in work and organizations to switch to a less threatening social identity is under-researched.

We remedy this situation by exploring how one of the three of us – namely Mario, a multiple-identified immigrant – can be seen, in hindsight, to have employed covering and accenting to substitute one social identity for another. The external cues for identity work we examine are speech and behaviours in organizational contexts that he experienced as confronting and disorienting. In a manner akin to traumatic events, negative emotionality is what ‘triggers’ his sensemaking (Maitlis, 2009: 49).

### *Reconceptualizing covering and accenting*

Conceptually, covering derives from Goffman’s (1963) landmark work on stigma, where he brackets it with passing. To pass is to hide an aspect of one’s identity from others who are not already aware of that identity (Renfrow, 2004). The disabled employee who masks their disability to pass as able-bodied is an example (Boucher, 2017). To pass successfully means that the audience will, by definition, be unaware of the identity that is being hidden (Flett, 2012). To cover, by contrast, is to make aspects of one’s already publicly known or surmisable identity (or identities) less obtrusive (Goffman, 1963). Within the management and organization studies fields passing is well-studied (e.g. Clair et al., 2005; Marrs and Staton, 2016; Boucher, 2017). Covering, however, is not. An exception is DeJordy’s (2008) conceptual synthesis, which notably treats the praxis of covering as passing’s incidental second cousin. The author positions covering not as means of avoiding stigmatization and

discrimination but rather as a way for individuals, whose social identity has already discredited them in the eyes of others, merely to ‘avoid social discomfort’ (DeJordy, 2008: 512). The specifics of this argument are less important than the implication that, unlike passing, covering has little direct identity relevance – in effect, because the individual’s discreditable, and therefore stigmatizable and discriminable, identity has already been revealed.

Following DeJordy’s line of thinking to its natural conclusion, covering can arguably minimize, but it cannot negate, the negative identity-related effects of stigmatization and discrimination. To argue this way, we believe, is misguided. It risks looking at just one side of the equation – not least because covering can be employed in tandem with accenting (Khanna and Johnson, 2010). For an individual whose identity is unfairly discreditable, but who has not yet been discredited, covering and accenting can stop them from being fully and finally discredited. In this sense, covering is especially identity relevant when it is yoked with the accentuation of a more socially acceptable social identity than the one covered. The multiple-identified person can cover an identity element aligned with a socially threatening (or stigmatizable) social identity that has been imposed onto them by others, for example, while simultaneously accenting an identity element they themselves draw from a less threatening social identity. When reconceptualized as variants of intersectional identity work by the multiple-identified, covering and accenting denote practical techniques for moving between – and selectively appropriating identity resources from – Watson’s social category social identities. They are ways, therefore, of doing intersectional identity work. Having now discussed the conceptual background, we turn to the method used: autoethnography.

### **Autoethnography and identity work**

In recent years, certain leading ethnographic researchers have placed an increasingly strong emphasis on highly personal, experiential and often emotionally evocative narratives. Typically using short stories, drama, poetry and other experimental modes of literary and artistic expression (Denzin, 2003; Spry, 2010; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), the narratives produced seek to encourage empathy and identification in readers (Adams and Holman Jones, 2011; Bochner, 2001). By seeking to ‘change the world by writing from the heart’ (Denzin, 2006: 422), this mode of enquiry sets aside conventional social scientific preoccupations (with validity, reliability, generalizability and so on) in favour of factors like personal meaning and empathetic connection. Indeed, to conduct such autoethnography, in the words of Denzin (2010: 38), is to ‘focus on epiphanies, on the intersection of biography, history, culture and politics, turning point moments in people’s lives.’

Together, we three scholars – Mario, James and Mark – find autoethnography particularly well suited to representing and understanding the identity work covering and accenting entails. Emigrating from a country in the Global South to the Global North was a turning point in one of our lives which we feel strongly lends itself to this form of autoethnography. Indeed, the emphasis on the personal and evocative, along with autoethnography’s often literary and storied nature seems to us to open up new opportunities for novel contributions to be made in the area of intersectional identity work (Cruz et al., 2018). This is because, for us, covering and accenting are not primarily intellectual phenomena, but deeply personal ones, very much at the overlap of an individual’s biography and history, albeit experienced within a wider cultural and political context. Hence, were we to discuss these identity work techniques exclusively in the apparently disinterested and ‘objective’ manner of traditional academic discourse we would necessarily be misrepresenting them. Given their nature, it is important not merely to analyse but also to evoke something of the personal vulnerabilities involved in covering and accenting – not

least so that the reader might be able to identify with them as emotional responses and be able to share (if only in the imagination) something of the vulnerability they involve.

In employing autoethnography, we are far from alone within management and organizational analysis. As Doloriert and Sambrook (2012) show, there is an emergent tradition of workplace autoethnographic studies within our discipline. Of particular interest to us are studies of higher education organizations by business academics who have analyzed their own personal experiences of academic life. Indeed, there is an ever-growing list of autoethnographies including on the areas of teaching, research, and administration, particularly in the perceived managerialist context of recent research assessment exercises (e.g. Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011; Haynes, 2018; Humphreys, 2005; King and Learmonth, 2015; Krizek, 1998; Learmonth, 2007; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012; Scott, 2009).

Autoethnography is a cluster concept that signifies a different methodological orientation from the classic fieldwork studies of twentieth-century anthropologists, sociologists, and organizational ethnographers. Typically they construct narratives in which the participant observer enters an alien culture, gets a view of that culture from within, and then escapes from that culture to present a vision of it unavailable to those inside (Van Maanen, 1979). Autoethnography reverses this process: it concerns looking at one's own culture from without, writing about it, then returning to that culture (Hayano, 1979). An early definition of autoethnography as 'insider account', which comes from a cultural anthropological tradition, is attentive to the power relations inherent in representing 'the other':

"autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression" ... refers to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's terms. (Pratt, 1992: 9, original emphasis)

For Pratt, autoethnography always emerges from the receiving (or resisting) end of ethnographic work. She argues that subjugated groups, should they wish to speak of themselves in ways intelligible to their oppressors (and thereby producing her version of an autoethnographic account), are obliged to appropriate certain of their oppressor's intellectual resources (Frenkel, 2008).

Much contemporary autoethnographic work, and the earlier cultural anthropological tradition of autoethnography that Pratt's (1992) work epitomizes, share debts to similar intellectual traditions. For instance, both versions were borne – at least in part – out of responsiveness to the problematic nature of ethnographic authority (Clifford, 2007). Both are sensitive, in other words, to the question: 'how can one speak about or on behalf of the other?' Or, as Denzin and Lincoln (1998) have it, both take seriously 'the crisis of representation' in social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s. The so-called experimental (Denzin, 2006) or evocative tradition of autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016) – epitomized in the work of Ellis (2004; 2009; 2017) and Ellis and Bochner (2000; 2006), as well as that of Pelias (2004), Sparkes (2007), and Spry (2001) – is the tradition of autoethnography that represents the most radical response to the crisis of representation. As Ellis and Bochner (2000: 742) put it, this version of autoethnography 'is akin to the novel or biography' insofar as the narrative text refuses to abstract and explain.

Evocative autoethnography can usefully be contrasted with 'analytical' autoethnography (Anderson, 2006). In arguing for analytical autoethnography, Anderson objects to evocative autoethnography on grounds, in part, that it is modelled more upon novelistic lines than upon the received conventions of social science writing. Anderson calls instead for autoethnographers to retain a 'commitment to theoretical analysis' (2006: 378). For example, Anderson's (2011) analytical autoethnography of family, work, and serious

leisure provides a range of personal stories which are then analysed in a manner akin to Merton's autobiographical sociology, which 'utilizes sociological perspectives, ideas, concepts, findings and analytical procedures to construct and to interpret the narrative text that purports to tell one's own history within the context of the larger history of one's times' (Merton, 1988: 18).

We blend the evocative and analytical approaches. We want to retain something of the traditional concern of academic work with theoretically informed analysis. Yet at the same time, following Learmonth and Humphreys (2012), we wish to keep intact evocative autoethnography's ability to 'move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer' (Ellis and Bochner, 2006: 433). There are, of course, trade-offs involved in this blended approach. We recognize that, on the one hand, an overemphasis on analysis risks producing work that some might see as little different from a traditional academic article, in which any evocative power of autoethnographic vignettes is overwhelmed by analysis. On the other hand, to present our vignettes as akin to short stories (without analyzing them, that is) would be to depoliticize them. This is because they would then not be viewed through the lens provided by our reconceptualization of covering and accenting as forms of intersectional identity work. What we have produced, therefore, is a 'narrative sandwich' of empirical reflections critically interpreted by relevant theory (Kempster et al., 2008: 3). Since we use relatively short vignettes, our approach is possibly inclined more towards an analytical than an evocative autoethnography. Nevertheless, we believe that readers can find elements of both embedded within it.

Another aspect of our approach that we wish to draw attention to is the collaborative (Chang et al., 2013), co-constructed, co-produced and co-authored nature of our work (cf. Herrmann, Barnhill and Poole, 2013). Mario produced the vignettes himself from memory – they are not based on contemporaneous field notes because the pertinence of the events only

became apparent some time afterwards. The analysis of the vignettes, however, is the work of all of us. In designing the work in this manner, we share Chang et al's (2013: 12) approach to collaborative autoethnography in which expertise was pooled as an 'interdisciplinary team'. Each of us draws on our respective areas of expertise. Mario has a background in business ethics, James in the sociology of self, and Mark in organizational ethnography. However, unlike Chang and her co-authors, all of whom 'shared experiences as immigrants, women and *minoritized* faculty in the...academy' (Chang et al., 2013: 11, original emphasis), only one of us (Mario) is a non-white immigrant. The other two (James and Mark) are relatively privileged white men. Clearly, therefore, issues of power become pertinent.

Recognizing our status as majority men, two of us – James and Mark – will now provide some individualized reflections on collaborating with Mario. Writing this article traversed troublesome issues for Mario that we were only able to surmount by increasing our openness to understanding racio-ethnic inequality in all of its practical and methodological manifestations. Here is the story of how our collaboration with Mario came about.

### *Mark's story*

I first met Mario when I heard him present accounts of his experiences at a conference. It seemed to me that he may well have been missing a trick by trying to represent his experiences in a conventionally 'academic' style. As we chatted over coffee during the break between sessions we soon struck up a rapport, and it quickly became apparent that autoethnography might work for his stories. A few months later we met again when Mario was visiting my university – and our meeting then marked the real beginning of this article in autoethnographic form. We have continued to correspond regularly about the article of course, but also from time to time about other things – not least about our shared interest in cricket!



My location in the United Kingdom, however, meant that in some respects I viewed the development of Mario's story, and James's first attempt at analysis, almost as if from a distance. Given these dynamics between the three of us, as co-authors, I can confidently say that we are explicitly inspired by Pratt's (1992) approach – one of us telling our tales as if from colonized to the colonizer – but with reflexive awareness of this autoethnographic mode. Indeed, the very act of selecting autoethnography, I believe, signals an explicit resistance to dominant management and organizational research paradigms. In other words, the use of autoethnography is, in itself, a way that I hope to reinforce the message of our work.

#### *James's story*

Not only do I work in the same business school as Mario, we have been situated in adjacent offices for 14 years, and I spent several years as his line manager. Using my intimate knowledge of Mario's academic journey, in combination with my academic training, I sought to provide a different perspective on his experiences. Yet during my initial, tentative analysis of the vignettes, Mario told me he was reliving his identity struggles, albeit in microcosm. At one point I inadvertently implied that Mario's name change might have led to his publishing success. For Mario, this was just too instrumental. Lively discussion ensued, which threatened to revivify Mario's experiences of being misunderstood. What we share of the immigrant experience – in my case indirectly – gave me pause for thought. As the son and grandson of much misunderstood Irish immigrants, I confided in Mario, telling him about my mother changing her accent to stave off being teased at school. My family being cast into the Irish diaspora is part of who I am, as is growing up in an intolerant small community where any hint of difference invited ridicule. Worried that my tentative steps towards analyzing the vignettes risked reinforcing the misunderstandings we were trying to bring to light, I

redoubled my efforts to read the vignettes sympathetically. As I sought to achieve empathetic understanding while juxtaposing Mario's life experiences to theoretically informed analysis, a freer, culturally sensitive toing and froing ensued between the two of us.

Autoethnography entails risk to self and other alike. Mario's worry about the personal effects of certain disclosures was a continual topic of discussion with Mark and me, as was the whole issue of discrimination. On the one hand, Mario does not see himself as a discriminatee. On the other, it seems to me that many people would feel how Mario was treated is tantamount to discrimination, albeit unintentional. The resulting tension is the price paid for engaging in sociologically-inflected, collaborative autoethnography; but it is in my view outweighed by the benefits of this method. Ethical issues were also much discussed. From my perspective, pseudonymously telling about particular people in Mario's past who mislabelled him is ethically warrantable. Mario demurred: for him, the 'right' to tell one's life story does not negate the moral duty to care for others encountered along the way (Bhabha, 2004). With this in mind, in order preserve their privacy of the people who might have been singled out in Mario's vignettes, they are depicted as indistinctly as possible.

### **A non-white immigrant's journey to academia**

The following three vignettes (rendered in italics) are written from Mario's point of view. They are presented in the first person deliberately in order to accentuate identity-relevant tensions and nuances that only become evident when written in that mode (King and Learmonth, 2015). The analysis that immediately follows each vignette is provided by James and Mark, writing in the third person, with input from Mario so as to facilitate empathetic understanding. Before presenting and analyzing the vignettes, a brief comment on how they were chosen is warranted.

Mario writes: the manifold life events from which the vignettes were selected include my early interactions with locals in casual social settings in New Zealand, an encounter as a new migrant at a railway station in Australia, and being misidentified as a Maori (an indigenous New Zealander) while presenting at an international conference for the first time. I chose the three vignettes because they narrate particularly important turning points within my personal history. James and Mark reply: taken together, the vignettes seem to suggest a narrative arc that moves from Mario's discordant experiences first as a new migrant and organizational neophyte, and then as an established business scholar. Significantly, each vignette contains elements of both sensebreaking and sensemaking, of identity-related meaning first being sapped and then re-established.

#### Vignette 1: A new life

*I am Sri Lankan by birth. In 2000 I migrated to New Zealand to study for my Ph.D. and to launch my dream academic career. Though it felt like my life started anew, I was daunted by the challenges that lay ahead. Portentously, I arrived in the country on Waitangi Day (6 February) – which commemorates the signing of treaty that affirmed colonization. Two days later, while meeting with senior academics, I discovered they couldn't pronounce my first name! It sounded like a female name back in Sri Lanka. Almost nobody asked me how to say my name. I didn't like it. I felt worried because I was just starting my Ph.D. and needed a lot of help from others. I didn't want to feel like a child! And I didn't want any barriers to my progress. Being seen as different, speaking funny and having a foreign-sounding name – it was embarrassing! So I decided to use my middle name as my first name – Mario. I asked people at the university, and even my friends, to call me by this name. At least they could pronounce it! Immediately, I felt more comfortable and fitted in better introducing myself to other people using this non-native-Sri Lankan, Anglo-Italian-sounding name. I could start*

*conversations with people more easily. I felt that Kiwis accepted me with this new name. I was more confident about using the name to apply for jobs and scholarships. I was comfortable with it. Because I was using one of my actual names I didn't feel guilty about deceiving anyone.*

In this vignette Mario experiences sensebreaking through a subtle but nevertheless emotionally taxing form of discrimination – name mispronunciation – which is not uncommon in ethnically diverse educational environments (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012). Hearing his name being mispronounced is a highly ‘discrepant’ (Pratt, 2000: 468) identity cue because he feels like he is being infantilized. As a challenge to his sense of self, this is a singularly ‘upending’ experience (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016: 118). Unsurprisingly, the vignette is imbued with a distinctly negative emotional tonality. Seeping through the text are emotions ranging from muted anger to acute embarrassment. In response, Mario employs a covering-based identity work technique: renaming. Whether his decision to rename himself reflected the reality of social closure or simply his own anxieties and insecurities is immaterial. The noteworthy point is that he experienced the mispronunciation of his name as highly embarrassing and, as a result, used a new name to cover his cultural difference.

There are strong reasons to believe, in point of fact, that the mispronunciation of non-Western/Northern names is discriminatory and that any resulting renaming is a form of identity work. For one thing, though the reasons for changing a birth name are historically and socially contingent (Emmelhainz, 2012), there exists a strong relationship between birth names and personal self-identity (Dion, 1983). Commenting on the U.S. educational scene, Payne et al. (2018: 565) argue that the experience of name mispronunciation as a form of discrimination, which in turn triggers a renaming response, ‘occurs at the daily, subtle level of academics.’ For another thing, in the case of immigrants in Global North countries,

renaming is known to spark intense identity work in response to assimilationist pressures (Pennesi, 2016). Indeed, renaming is one of the readily deployable ‘aligning moves’ by which a person can ‘conform to others’ expectations’ (Renfrow, 2004: 495). These effects are displayed in the vignette. Notice that, as a new migrant, Mario was not in a position to ask others to pronounce his name correctly, or to correct them. He decided instead to adopt a Western-sounding name. In line with the emphasis on ‘fitting in’ and being ‘accepted’, he adopts a name that he thinks others will feel more comfortable pronouncing, hearing and reading – a name that, as the next vignette shows, does not connote being a non-local person.

Mario’s initial efforts at sensemaking entail filling the meaning vacuum by using the moral language of self-justification. At the end of the vignette, Mario’s confidence in the practical effects of the name change is juxtaposed with a comment about guilt being allayed by the fact that his middle name was his to begin with, to do with as he pleased. By positioning his identity work ‘in moral space’ (Parker, 2007), Mario anchors meaning in a situation where he risked acquiescing to dominant cultural norms.

Vignette 2: Where are you from?

*When I migrated to New Zealand, Sri Lanka was in turmoil with a raging civil war. Media reports showed desperate refugees taking a perilous journey in rickety boats to avoid the conflict. I could sense that many New Zealanders I met, including my work colleagues, assumed I was a refugee who fled due to the conflict. People continually asked me: ‘which part of the country are you from?’ I felt they were trying to find out whether I was Tamil or Sinhalese, because Tamils mostly lived in the conflict-ridden North and East and the Sinhalese in the rest of the country. They thought I must be one or the other. In my new environment, I had no role models or mentors to turn to. The civil war risked colleagues seeing me as either a Tamil man fleeing from the conflict, due to the much-publicized*

*oppressive Sinhalese-Buddhist 'chauvinistic' regime in power at the time, or as a Sinhalese man abandoning the country for economic reasons. But I'm neither! I didn't leave Sri Lanka due to discrimination or oppression or because I had no options. I left to pursue a dream career, not to escape the fighting, or because I was down-and-out. I certainly wasn't looking for sympathy. I'm Sinhalese, so I'm from the majority ethnic group. But I'm a Christian too. Most Tamils in the country are Hindus and most Sinhalese are Buddhists. Being 'Mario' gave me a middle way; it showed my Christian heritage which I celebrate. But I could still cling to my culture, my country.*

Though it is brief, this vignette is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the sensebreaking evident in Vignette 1 is heightened by micro-racism. A member of a culturally dominant group asking a non-white immigrant where they are from is a micro-aggressive practice when the 'micro-aggressed' feels insulted or denigrated (Fleras, 2016: 8). For Mario, seemingly innocuous questions about his background were experienced this way, since the questioners wrongly implied that he was an economic or political casualty of the civil war. As Fleras (2016) clarifies, to be micro-aggressed in this manner is to experience micro-racism. Secondly, the vignette shows that, for Mario, a name change to avoid feeling feminized – due to his name being pronounced wrong – morphs into a full-fledged intersectional covering strategy. It operates to prevent others, whether consciously or unconsciously, from pinning discreditable social identities to him.

His comment about the lack of role models and mentors is noteworthy as it signifies an absence of organizationally supplied sensemaking procedures. When sensemaking is not organizationally 'encapsulated' (Pratt, 2000: 15), organizational participants can look for meaning outside the confines of the organization. Clearly, Mario was given few organizational resources to make sense of his discordant experiences. Given that social

category social identities are the source of the identity misattribution, it is no surprise that Mario responded by drawing on extra-organizational identity resources derived from a non-discrediting, religious social identity.

For immigrants, ethnicity and religious belief combine in a complex matrix of possible identity configurations (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). In Mario's case, the former is covered and the latter accented. Mario employs a Christian-Italian sounding name to accent his Christian religiosity over and against his Sinhalese ethnicity, which the name-change functions to cover. By covering and accenting this way, Mario slips out from under two misattributed social identities – that of the (pitiable) refugee and the chauvinistic Sinhalese-Buddhist – each of which, in that particular time and place, had the potential to discredit him, at least in the eyes of colleagues. Sinhalese-Buddhist is a distinct and widely known Sri Lankan social identity. In place of this particular social identity, he drew instead on the widely available (and to New Zealanders instantly recognizable) social identity of 'the Christian'. Though culturally and religiously diverse, the dominant religion in New Zealand in 2001 was Christian.<sup>1</sup> As Jacobson (1997) argues, albeit in a different context, drawing on one of main Abrahamic religions for purposes of self-definition implies an element of universalism that ethnic identity – which is tied to a particular locale – does not. Moreover, because 'Sinhalese-Buddhist' is a tightly coupled religio-ethnic social identity, drawing on the Christian social identity not only prevents the Sinhalese-Buddhist social identity from clinging to Mario. It reinforces the downplaying of his Sinhalese ethnicity.

By covering and accenting Mario signifies that, in relation to the Sri Lankan civil war, he is neither oppressor nor oppressed. By covering his Sinhalese ethnic heritage, Mario avoids being labelled an oppressor. By accenting his Christianity, he avoids being labelled a refugee and, in so doing, staves off being positioned by others as a vulnerable – and potentially pitiable – subject. In the vignette, vulnerability is tied to one particular emotional

response: sympathy. Being seen as vulnerable is one risk of sympathy, which, as an emotion, can be bracketed with compassion (Nussbaum, 2013). Compassion and sympathy can all too quickly slide, in turn, into the pity of the ‘reluctant spectator’ (Boyd, 2004). By tacking between social identities in his identity work, such that he presents himself as a person apart from the Sri Lankan fray, Mario not only forestalls pity, he avoids crossing the boundary from being discreditable to being actively discredited.

### Vignette 3: Dilemmas of (un)covering

*After about 10 years into my life in Australia, a very close relative commented that I seem to act more naturally with Sri Lankans who live there. When I asked what he meant, he said that I am much freer and relaxed in the company of Sri Lankans. I am more outgoing, easier to get on with, humorous and relaxed – my natural self. I am willing to take more risks with my jokes. With others, I still put up a front, almost a contrived persona that is not natural to me. I rarely let my guard down in professional settings. Being told this was a bit of a shock, but perhaps it took someone near to me to point out that I am not myself in Australia. His astute observation reminded me of an incident that happened several years earlier. I was in Colombo, Sri Lanka to attend my father’s death anniversary church service. After the mass was held, the family gathered in the lawn of the church. Then I heard a female voice calling my native name. I looked back to see it was one of my wife’s best friends. We chatted for hours as we have not seen each other for a while. Later, reflecting on that incident, I told my wife that when I heard my name being called aloud across the church yard in the heat of Colombo, I felt at peace, at home and at ease. I remember telling her I felt so light and almost liberated, and that I must make frequent visits to Sri Lanka. It was a beautiful moment that is hard to describe. At times in Australia, though, I sometimes feel I have to defend having a Western name. I feel obliged to explain having a Western name in a brown-coloured*



*body to people I meet for the first time – like students. I try to balance this with being a role model to my students, by helping them to understand what it takes to be successful despite being a non-white in a predominantly white community. I ended up developing a digital story summarizing my life, my experiences, where I got my name from. I used to show it in the first lecture of every class I taught. It was almost like therapy for me.*

Covering can help the multiple-identified persons to achieve their life-projects, in contexts where skin colour, ethnicity, name, accent and so forth are all discriminable markers of difference. Yet it can also have significant personal and emotional costs (Evans, 2017). Covering risks bolstering ‘the normalcy of dominant, unequal social norms that minorities must navigate’ (Myrdahl, 2011: 142). By acceding to – and thus conforming with – specifically assimilationist norms, the person who covers is not just subject to social structures of oppression but arguably is complicit in reproducing them (Yoshino, 2007). Recognizing this dual-edged nature of covering has led some scholars to propose ‘uncovering’ as a potentially cathartic and liberatory strategy of identity work (Branfman, 2015; Evans, 2017). In the foregoing vignette the personal and emotional downside of covering is writ large; so too are the dilemmas involved in uncovering.

It has long been known that name changes can destroy personal meaning and elicit ‘identity struggles’ (Falk, 1975: 655). Evoking a memory, the observation by Mario’s relative speaks to how he (Mario) mutes (i.e. covers) aspects of his identity by ‘putting up a front’; clearly this realization troubles him. Despite by this stage having been a successful and career-minded academic for a decade, this is another sensebreaking moment. Mario recognizes the sheer ‘unhomeliness of migrancy’ (Bhabha, 2004: 26). His ensuing flashbulb moment of self-reflection leads to sensemaking in the form of increased self-knowledge. He realizes that covering has become habitual. Describing the experience of visiting Sri Lanka

and hearing his native name as liberatory hints at Mario's awareness of how covering draws him into structures of oppression. Feeling 'light' is significant. A 'sense of lightness' is associated with the transcendent experiences while travelling, especially when the traveller successfully escapes sociocultural forces that seek to 'capture and locate the self' (Fullagar, 2000: 63). By travelling back to his home country Mario seeks just such an escape; it is a veritable respite from covering.

Uncovering in educational venues apparently has the same therapeutic effect. Mario does not accede to situational demands to explain the apparent disjunction between his (non-white) appearance and the Westernized name he covers his Sinhalese identity with. Instead, he turns these demands into an opportunity to challenge others' unwarranted assumptions about him. He does this by using what Warren and Toyosaki (2012) aptly call a 'pedagogy of interruption' to uncover himself. To paraphrase Bardhan (2012: 151), by showing his life-story video to students, Mario endeavours to interrupt their sedimented notions of what someone with a Western-sounding name should look like. This provides the opportunity to expose and morally critique dominant cultural norms – the 'weight' of which he has himself experienced while covering. Educationally, therefore, Mario partakes of a liberatory pedagogy (Shor and Freire, 1987).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Our study has wide-ranging implications for identity work theory, for emancipatory practice, and for methods. In conjunction with theorizing the process of identity work, it addresses the relationship between the oppression of minorities and the subject's interior and exterior experiences. On identity work as praxis, it explains how being multiple-identified can function as an identity resource, enabling the individual to draw on congenial social category-based social identities to reconstruct a wrongly attributed and discreditable identity. With

regard to methods, it demonstrates how collaborative autoethnography can be useful for understanding the social situatedness of identity work by transnationally mobile persons who are positioned between crosscutting lines of difference. These points are elaborated below. A note on which of us is communicating under each of the headings will undoubtedly be helpful to readers. In the next subsection, the three of us – Mario, James and Mark – write together. In the two subsections after that (‘Misidentification and intersectionality’ and ‘Autoethnography’), James and Mark express their views. In the fourth, concerning directions for future research, Mario provides a suitably personalized reflection that serves to round the article out.

#### *Minoritized subjects and identity work*

By relocating the concepts of covering and accenting to the new ground of intersectionality, we have shed fresh light on the connections between identity work and wider social structures of oppression that work organizations channel and reproduce. In so doing, we have made two theoretical contributions to the identity work literature. The first lies in how our conceptual repositioning of covering and accenting, as types of intersectional identity work, accommodates both agential and structural forces. The concept of intersectional identity work is eminently suited for showing how members of ethnic minorities ‘draw on their identity facets with agency’ (Atewologun et al., 2016: 241). Yet, as Van Laer and Janssens (2017) note, studies of identity work by ethnic minorities are susceptible to overemphasizing human agency to the detriment of structural constraint. Our theorization on the interplay between social identity and intersectional identity work finds the mean between the two poles. As ways of resisting ‘Othering’, by negotiating and enacting a resistant identity at the crossroads of categorical social identities, covering and accenting are ‘agentic strategies’ (Van Laer and Janssens, 2017: 200). At the same time, though, the concept of covering’s origins in the study

of stigmatized identities underscores the forcefulness of oppressive structures. By yoking together covering and accenting, and drawing on the offshoot concept of uncovering, we have established a theoretical framework that is flexible enough to grasp the anti-oppressive role of intersectional identity work and its limits alike.

Our second contribution to theory lies in the reciprocal relation we afford to the inner life and relational context of the minoritized subject. As self-presentational identity work strategies, covering and accenting have a strong ‘external focus’ (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016: 117). By showing how sensebreaking processes trigger intersectional identity work, and also how sensemaking develops through this work, we have emphasized the subject’s interiority. Simply put, we regard the identity of the subject of intersectionality as emergent between the external social relations in which the minority individual is embedded and the processes of ‘internal meaning-making’ (Atewologun et al., 2016: 227), through which they make sense of themselves. To understand the subject this way is to admit of the possibility of self-understanding and self-transformation, as the vignettes amply illustrate. This functions to offset the tendency to see the subject as merely the sum total of the external relations in which they are immersed – a view that is prominent within contemporary Western social thought (Harman, 2016). In summary, our conceptual synthesis has put a deeper layer of theory beneath recent attempts to conceive of identity work by minoritized persons as occurring at the point where ‘the subjective and the structural’ intersect (Rodriguez et al., 2016: 204).

### *Misidentification and intersectionality*

At a practical level, multiple-identified persons can use the two intersectional identity work techniques, in tandem, to reconstruct their identities in response to sensebreaking cues that stem from being unfairly ‘misidentified at work’ (Meister et al., 2017). To respond this way,

however, is to walk the fine line between challenging and reproducing sociocultural inequalities. On the one hand, covering and accenting enable these persons to tap into their intersectional sociocultural location to obtain identity materials that are consonant with one or more of their possible bases of identification. Through this identity work, multiple-identified immigrants, in particular, have the opportunity to deflect efforts by locals to impose on them what xenophobes might regard as a discreditable (social category) social identity. Examples include the automatic and unambiguous labelling of a non-white person as 'a Muslim' and a voluntary economic migrant as 'a refugee'. Furthermore, as our analysis of the three vignettes shows, in the context of such an identity misattribution, covering and accenting can prevent the individual from being pushed across the social boundary that separates those who are potentially discreditable from those who are completely discredited.

On the other hand, to the extent that the person who covers and accents fails to challenge the identity misunderstandings and threat of stigmatization, to which covering and accenting is a response, they risk perpetuating oppressive social structures. To cover a cultural identity by Anglicizing one's name, for example, can just as readily function as a vehicle of cultural assimilation as it can a means of combating ethnocentrism (Yoshino, 2006). In Mario's case, the resulting tension led him to feel like he is caught between two worlds. This experience is indicative of the challenge of forming and maintaining coherent intersectional identities in an era of transnational migration (Rodriguez et al., 2016). As self-presentational identity work strategies, covering and accenting render non-white immigrants susceptible to mimicking, and thereby reproducing, Western cultural stereotypes (Bhabha, 1984). Yet our study shows that, in higher educational settings at least, the development of liberatory pedagogies can offset the personally disorienting and potentially system-reproducing effects of covering and accenting. In this connection, the pedagogy Mario deployed interrupts students' culturally supplied expectations of naming and non-white

persons. By drawing attention to the instantiation and replication of Western-centric assumptions and practices in micro-social situations within educational organizations specifically, it exemplifies teaching ‘intersectionality intersectionally’ (Rodriguez et al., 2016: 209, emphasis omitted).

To summarize, covering a discriminable identity attribute and accenting an attribute drawn from a less threatening external social identity are in one sense efficacious ways of making sense of – and springing back from – the sensebreaking effects of discrimination. This is especially the case for newcomers in organizations (as Mario was in Vignettes 1 and 2), who have few internal organizational resources on which to draw for identity materials. Yet in another sense, covering and accenting is a double-edged sword. As Vignette 3 suggests, over time these identity work techniques can result in the experience of a double-life that, in epiphanic moments, itself is sensebreaking and, as such, serves as a trigger for further identity work.

### *Autoethnography*

Mario’s vignettes suggest that there is room for further inquiry into stigmatization and subtle forms of discrimination in academia. We are delighted to report that others are also conducting studies similar to our own. For example, Cruz et al (2018: 1) offer their own collaborative autoethnographic stories about intersectionality through an examination of how their ‘experiences of “foreignness” in the academy are intertwined with other markers of difference, including race, gender, sexuality, national origin, and age.’ Autoethnography is, as we have illustrated, a method well-suited to investigating these micro-social processes because it enables us, as scholars, to both explore and analyse our own experiences. Furthermore, it enables us to do this in ways which remember what is often occluded in academic writing. Namely, as Humphreys (2005: 851) puts it, that as academics we are still

human beings ‘experiencing fear, laughter, sweat, and perhaps most significant, uncertainty and ambivalence’.

These concerns lend themselves to the sort of autoethnographic approach we have tried to exemplify in this article. It should not be forgotten that many business school academics have experience of a wide variety of careers in other occupations prior to becoming academics. In other words, a potentially rich well of data exists among at least some business academics (and doubtless also among academics in other applied social sciences) concerning their own personal, insider accounts of many aspects of working life. We hope this paper will encourage others to share and analyse their personal stories in similar sorts of ways to ours.

One piece of advice we offer is to avoid being drawn into what one critic pointedly labels ‘the cult of autoethnography’ (Atkinson et al, 2008: 219) and falling into narcissism and navel-gazing personal introspection for its own sake. At least for us, autoethnography is not about the self per se; rather it must construct and interpret narratives which enable us to further understand how our ‘personal predicaments relate to the broader structures and historical circumstances in which they arise’ (Watson, 2008: 121). In other words, this method has limitations – not least of which is the difficulty of using descriptions of lived experiences to establish theoretically adequate explanations, for example, of how experiences of misidentification, micro-racism, and identity work interrelate. An important methodological lesson we learned is that casting co-authors in an interlocutory role can retain autoethnography’s first-person standpoint qualitative richness, while providing an analysis that reconstructs the autoethnographer’s experiences so that conceptual insights can be derived.

*Future research directions*

Since our study draws on the situated particularity of my experience of having been misidentified and confronting the risk of being unfairly discredited, it is fitting that I – Mario – draw our discussion to a close with some suggestions for further research. I cannot tell at this stage the extent to which the life-narrative vignettes I provide in this article resonate with the stories similar others might tell. Nevertheless, I believe that the identity work I have retrospectively disclosed is highly likely to be symptomatic of conditions in which ‘double-lives are led in the postcolonial world, with its journeys of migration and its dwellings of the diasporic’ (Bhabha, 2004: 306), especially by other transnational academics (Kim, 2010; Cruz et al., 2018). An interesting question to pose concerns how multiple-identified immigrants outside higher educational settings reconcile their sense of being split between two worlds. Similarly, I wonder if immigrants and members of other minority groups, who are not persons of colour, cover and accent in response to identity misunderstandings at work. If so, one avenue that warrants exploration is how much minority persons draw from external social identities, in a resource-like manner, in their own identity work. More widely, is my experience of misidentification shared by multiple-identified incumbents of blue-collar occupations within diverse organizations that house workplaces less collaborative than universities? One might anticipate that more overt discrimination and stigmatization occurs in such contexts. These questions and issues of experiences in other workplaces, it seems to me, are best addressed through forms of life-writing and narrative inquiry that enable and encourage the misidentified and disadvantaged to tell their stories. Whichever qualitative research method is chosen, respect and collaboration is paramount.

Finally, writing as a minoritarian, I do not claim epistemic privilege. Yet I cannot help but feel our article lends support to Bhabha’s (2004: 7-8) thesis that the ‘truest eye’ belongs to ‘the migrant’s double vision’. As a man of colour, having experienced the negative emotional impact of discrediting identity mistakes first-hand, I see things in a way others



perhaps do not. Considerably more autoethnographic work by non-white immigrant business scholars from countries in the Global South is needed to reflect back, to socioculturally privileged persons, their organizational experiences of misidentification and stigmatization in the Global North. Furthermore, I encourage greater use of autoethnography in general, and collaborative autoethnography in particular, in order to challenge the power relations inherent to management and organizational scholarship in which statistical analysis, rather than emplaced and embodied personal storytelling, is often arguably the methodological gold standard (Morrell and Learmonth, 2015). By rendering persons of colour (and other minorities) down to quantifiable attributes and attitudes, the dominance of statistical methods can easily silence us. As opposed to being reduced downwards to a quantitative 'loose paraphrase' (Harman, 2016: 7) of who we are, autoethnography holds much promise for us to express ourselves, in our phenomenological fullness, as respect-worthy experiencing subjects.

## **Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-culture-identity/religion.aspx>