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Ethnic diversity within Australian homes: Has television caught up to social reality?

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Inter-ethnic intimacy is on the rise in Australia, bringing an unprecedented level of ethnic diversity into our homes. Yet analyses of media representations of ethnic diversity have concentrated on the community level, neglecting the intimate sphere of family life. This paper explores the possibilities and limits of love within and across ethnic boundaries on fictional Australian television programmes. The results of a nine-week content analysis reveal a mixed picture. Inter-ethnic intimacy was regularly portrayed; but committed, long-term relationships across ethnic boundaries (marriage and co-habitation) were scarce. And although Australian television producers did not shy away from portraying physical intimacy across ethnic boundaries, emotional intimacy was often absent. Overt stereotyping of ethnic minority characters involved in inter-ethnic relationships was rare - instead, ethnic differences were downplayed or erased. Storylines were underpinned by the assimilation of inter-ethnic couples - in all their diversity - into the (white) mainstream.

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Abstract

Inter-ethnic intimacy is on the rise in Australia, bringing an unprecedented level of ethnic diversity *into* our homes. Yet analyses of media representations of ethnic diversity have concentrated on the community-level, neglecting the intimate sphere of family life. This paper explores the possibilities and limits of love within and across ethnic boundaries on fictional Australian television programs. The results of a nine-week content analysis reveal a mixed picture. Inter-ethnic intimacy was regularly portrayed; but committed, long-term relationships across ethnic boundaries (marriage and co-habitation) were scarce. And although Australian television producers did not shy away from portraying physical intimacy across ethnic boundaries, emotional intimacy was often absent. Overt stereotyping of ethnic minority characters involved in inter-ethnic relationships was rare – instead, ethnic differences were downplayed or erased. Storylines were underpinned by the assimilation of inter-ethnic couples – in all their diversity – into the (white) mainstream.

Keywords: intimacy**,** ethnicity, television, media, inter-ethnic, interracial, representation, prejudice

Introduction

The perceived 'whiteness' of Australian television has attracted sustained academic scrutiny over at least three decades (Bell 1992, Jakubowicz et al. 1994). Headlines chastising Australian television networks for adhering to a 'white Australia policy' (Bastow 2012), and implementing a 'casting whiteout' (Shun Wah 2012) re-emerged in early 2012. They were triggered when Australian actor of Samoan descent, Jay Laga'aia, used social media to accuse his former employer, *Home and Away*, of racism. Fellow actor, Firass Dirani, also expressed concern: 'When you walk down Sydney streets you see so many different cultures…Our TVs haven't reflected that yet' (quoted in Wilkins 2012). Yet analyses of Australian television casts and shows undertaken since the late 1990s have uncovered a marked *increase* in the regularity of ethnic minority representation, and a decline in overt stereotyping (Jacka 2002, May 2003). The significance of this shift is tempered somewhat by the ongoing under-representation of Indigenous Australians, first generation migrants and emerging migrant communities on Australian television screens (Jackubowicz 2002, May 2003).

This paper builds upon these existing empirical analyses. But instead of exploring representations of community-level diversity (as previous studies have done), I ask whether on-screen couples and families remain 'monochrome'. That is, does intimacy on television reflect the social reality of ethnic diversity *within* Australian homes? My rationale for doing so is threefold. First, the prevalence of inter-ethnic couples is growing rapidly in Australian society, constituting an important demographic shift and a change in the way diversity is constituted across space (Ang et al. 2002, Khoo 2004, Khoo et al. 2009, Tindale 2012). Second, inter-ethnic intimacy undercuts perceived ethnic boundaries (Owen 2002). The presence and acceptability of such 'mixing' in our society, and on our screens, is instructive about the nature of prejudice and limits of tolerance. Third, media representations of minority

groups have material implications for social cohesion, interpersonal relationships and the formation of identities and social norms (Mahtani 2001, England 2004, Deo et al. 2008). While the outcomes of harmful stereotyping for ethnic minority populations have been widely researched, media representations of inter-ethnic intimacy have received minimal attention. The following section contextualises this paper using demographic evidence of inter-ethnic intimacy in Australia. I then provide an overview of the nature and material significance of representations of ethnic diversity on (Australian) television, followed by an overview of existing media analyses of inter-ethnic intimacy. The empirical portion of the paper is framed around a systematic content analysis of intimacy on free-to-air fictional Australian television shows broadcast during two coding periods in 2011 and 2012.

The extent and significance of inter-ethnic intimacy in Australia

Inter-ethnic intimacy has become increasingly commonplace in western societies of immigration (Hollinger 2006, Caballero et al. 2008, Khoo et al. 2009, Wang 2012). The language used to describe such relationships is varied, but in Australia 'inter-ethnic', 'inter-cultural' or 'mixed-ethnicity' are generally preferred. This reflects the terminology of the Australian Census, which eschews broad racial categories. Throughout this paper, the terms 'interracial' and 'mixed-race' are only used when referring to US-based studies. While the ethnic diversity of the Australian population has long been recognised at the national and community level, it also exists *within* Australian homes and families. Based on 2001 Census data (latest customised data published), Khoo (2004) found that one third of all co-habiting[i] Australian couples were inter-ethnic: that is, distinct ancestries were recorded for the two partners. The majority of these couples involved combinations of Anglo-Australian and British or European ancestries. Only 12 per cent of inter-ethnic couples (or 4% of total Australian couples) involved one partner who was of Anglo-Australian or European ancestry,

and one who was not; or a combination of two different non-European ancestries (Khoo 2004). This relatively small proportion belies dramatic increases in rates of inter-ethnic partnering across immigrant generations and among younger age cohorts (Ang et al. 2002, Khoo et al. 2009). For instance, while only six per cent of Chinese males and 13 per cent of Chinese females partnered outside their ethnic group within the first immigrant generation, 69 and 73 per cent of those in the third immigrant generation did so (Khoo et al. 2009). Similarly sharp upward trends exist amongst Lebanese, Vietnamese, Egyptian, Filipino and Indian Australians (Khoo et al. 2009). And, in 2006, more than half of all co-habiting Indigenous Australians had non-Indigenous partners (Heard et al. 2009). Demographic trends thus point toward a future in which Australian society is increasingly characterised by inter-ethnic partnerships.

Inter-ethnic intimate relationships are demographically and socially significant; they represent shifting cultural norms and weakening ethnic boundaries. They also have important implications for Australia's future ethnic composition and national identity. The social acceptability of inter-ethnic relationships has undoubtedly increased, and they have occasionally even been deployed as a 'national' strength[ii]. But they still evoke discomfort for some Australians (Klocker and Dunn 2011). Such prejudice is grounded in essentialist understandings of difference, whereby boundary crossing is 'unnatural' and an affront to racial/ethnic hierarchies (Perry and Sutton 2008). Inter-ethnic relationships have long been 'a highly charged, emotional issue' for these reasons (Owen 2002: 2). But not all inter-ethnic relationships have equal social and cultural significance across time and space. Prior to Federation, Australian states and territories actively prohibited marriages between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons without written permission from the Chief Protector of the Aboriginal people[iii]. Prejudice against these 'boundary-crossing' relationships was also

palpable in the experiences of the Stolen Generations – children forcibly removed from their

Indigenous families and communities between 1910 and 1970 (HREOC 1997). Children of

mixed ethnicity were institutionalised to assimilate them into 'white' society (Probyn 2003).

Legal barriers also inhibited marriages between Anglo-Australians and non-European

migrants. Under the 1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, Australian women who married non-

Europeans lost their citizenship (British subjecthood) until the 1948 *Nationality and

Citizenship Act* came into effect (Owen 2002). And, under the 1949 *War-time Refugee

Removal Act*, non-European refugees were regularly repatriated to their countries of origin,

even if they had married an Australian citizen (Owen 2002).

The growing prevalence of inter-ethnic partnerships has been interpreted as a 'definitive

measure' of dissolving social and cultural barriers, and a litmus test of social cohesion (Khoo

2007: 115). Yet prejudice against such relationships has long been used as an indicator of

social distance, following the groundbreaking work of Emory Bogardus in the 1930s. Such

prejudice has been stubbornly persistent even amongst groups that work, socialise and go to

school together. Attitudes towards inter-ethnic intimacy thus offer a unique insight into the

limits of tolerance and how these have been re-drawn over time. In a recent Australian survey

(Dunn et al. 2011), 11 per cent of respondents agreed with the proposition: 'It is not a good

idea for people of difference races to marry one another', suggesting a continued belief in

racial separatism among a substantial minority of Australians[iv]. Respondents were also asked

whether they would be concerned if a close relative married someone from a range of ethnic

backgrounds and religious faiths. Concern was most frequently expressed at the prospect of a

close relative marrying a Muslim (49 per cent of respondents), Indigenous Australian (28 per

cent), black African (27 per cent), Asian (24 per cent) or Jewish person (23 per cent) (Klocker

and Dunn 2011, Dunn et al. 2011). Far greater ease surrounded hypothetical marriages with

British and European persons. The media content analysis around which this paper is framed was designed to acknowledge this important distinction.

Ethnic diversity on (Australian) television: why does it matter?

Media images 'infuse ideological meanings into the societies in which they are produced' (Deo et al. 2008: 148), but their influence is not a 'one way monolithic ''push'' process' (Morgan et al. 2009: 37). Instead, society and media influence one another and audiences exercise varying degrees of agency in communication processes (Aitken and Zonn 1994, England 2004). This paper follows understandings of media effects gleaned from social cognitive theory, which attests that attitudes and behaviours are shaped by a confluence of personal characteristics, direct contact with immediate environments and consumption of media products (Bandura 2009). Although media influences are not all-pervasive, they do impact everyday life in tangible ways (England 2004). Media representations are particularly powerful when viewers have minimal direct contact with the group or issue being portrayed (Deo et al. 2008; Bandura 2009). They can create opportunities to forge connections and understanding across ethnic difference (Ang et al. 2008: 3), but they can also bolster stereotypes and inflame community tensions, fears and moral panics (Jakubowicz et al. 1994, Hall 1997, Mahtani 2001, Deo et al. 2008). Media can play an important role in 'enhanc[ing] an inclusive democracy' that extends to a wide range of ethnic groups (Ang et al. 2008:3). However, they can also circumscribe those possibilities by excluding and 'othering' minorities – 'perpetuating feelings of rejection', reinforcing hegemonic whiteness and fostering racism in the process (Mahtani 2001: 104). Media representations arguably have a responsibility to avoid causing such harm, even as they strive to entertain and/or inform – and this has been recognised in various legislative and policy frameworks, discussed on the following pages.

Television, 'due to its constancy and pervasiveness', has been described as the 'medium with the greatest potential' to influence people's ideas' about unfamiliar ethnic groups (Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell 1997: 5). Despite rapid technological change, television remains the leading method for viewing on-screen content in Australia, with an average daily viewing period of three hours per person (Screen Australia 2011). Free-to-air television is viewed by 94 per cent of those aged 14 plus, compared to 19 per cent for subscription television (Screen Australia 2011). While Australian television networks air considerable international content, the special significance of domestically produced shows has been acknowledged in the *Broadcasting Services (Australian Content) Standard* (2005). Commercial television stations must adhere to a minimum Australian content quota[v] in order to 'develop and reflect a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity' (ACMA 2011: 3).

While all Australian broadcasters must comply with the *Racial Discrimination Act (Cth. 1975),* the media's more active role in representing and catering for ethnically diverse audiences has traditionally been assigned to the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) also has an explicit commitment to reflect Australia's cultural diversity enshrined in its founding legislation (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1983,* Part II, Section 6(1)). The responsibilities of commercial television broadcasters are more flexible: the *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice* (2010) includes separate notes advising that in scripting and casting 'management and producers should be concerned to reflect Australia's complex and culturally diverse society' and 'the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary Australia' (ACMA 2010). Compliance is voluntary and no diversity quotas have been imposed (May 2003).

Does Australian television (still) fail 'the diversity test'[vi]?

In the early 1990s, Bell (1992:59) reviewed popular television dramas and described the situation on our screens as 'cast blanche', in reference to the (white) monoculturalism he observed. Australian television shows not only under-represented the country's burgeoning ethnic diversity, but also suffered from tokenism and harmful stereotypes, parallel to an over-representation and privileging of the (white) ethnic majority (Jakubowicz et al. 1994). Contemporary studies have levelled similar criticisms at Australian news and current affairs programs (Phillips 2011) and television advertisements (Higgs and Milner 2005). However, the most recent analyses of fictional content on Australian television have demonstrated a marked increase in ethnic minority representation (Jacka 2002, May 2003). In a 1999 casting survey of commercial television drama, May (2003) found that 20 per cent of lead actors were from migrant backgrounds; and three per cent were Indigenous. Even the oft-maligned soap opera *Neighbours* had a proportion of second-generation migrant actors (of non-English speaking background) representative of the level of ethnic diversity in the community (May 2003). However, enhanced representation did not affect all ethnic minority groups equally. Despite a ten-fold increase in ethnic minority representation (from the 2% found by Bell in 1992 to 20% in 1999), much of this could be attributed to the increased screen presence of second-generation European migrants (May 2003). Actors from Asian backgrounds and first generation migrant actors with 'foreign' accents were underrepresented (May 2003). When Jacka (2002) reviewed 13 Australian television dramas in 2001, 26 per cent of actors (in guest and main roles) were from ethnic minority backgrounds. Asian actors appeared more regularly (4.4% of the total), but Indigenous actors were poorly represented and first-generation migrants remained near invisible (Jacka 2002). As surmised by Jackubowicz (2002: 67-68), producers were willing to cast 'Aussie lookalikes from immigrant parents' but not actors with '[d]istinctly different faces…and different accents'.

While a shift in ethnic minority representation is evident, questions remain over the manner in which ethnic diversity *ought* to be portrayed on screen, mirroring broader debates over the (in)capacity of everyday multiculturalism to move Australian national identity beyond its white frame (Schech and Haggis 2001). Television audiences have witnessed a shift, albeit a partial and contingent one, from 'performed' ethnicity (where ethno-specific issues are the primary focus when ethnic minority characters appear); to an 'everyday' portrayal (in which characters' ethnicities are not the focal point of storylines) (May 2003). Such a shift may be considered progressive: many television shows now portray ethnic diversity without fixating on difference or perpetuating troublesome stereotypes and problem narratives which pigeonhole ethnic minority actors into limited roles (King 2009). But, such everyday multiculturalism on-screen has simultaneously been criticised for *erasing* difference, and absorbing it into the (white) 'mainstream'. In the US, Brook (2009:348) found that difference was being dissolved on television drama shows, thus even when actors looked visibly different 'they tend[ed] to act the same'. Such representations have also been condemned for portraying ethnic difference as entirely unproblematic, thus rendering everyday experiences of racism invisible (Ang et al. 2008). The balancing act between overstating and problematising ethnic difference on the one hand, and invisibilising and sugarcoating it on the other (Brook 2009), is a difficult one to achieve in practice, and has particular implications for the portrayal of inter-ethnic couples.

Media representations of inter-ethnic intimacy

While media representations of community-level diversity have received considerable attention, ethnic diversity *within* on-screen households has not. To my knowledge, there has never been a systematic content analysis of inter-ethnic intimacy on Australian television

screens; existing Australian research in this vein has mostly focused on cinema (Klocker and Stanes 2012, Robinson 1996, Khoo 2006, Smaill 2011). In the US, Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell's (1997) review of intimacy on soap operas found no 'interracial' couples in 132 hours of content televised over eight weeks. They explained this absence through producers' desire to avoid programs 'that ruffle sponsors and ostracise viewers' (Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell 1997: 6). Producers' concerns appear to be warranted. In Australia in the late 1990s, a female Asian doctor kissed an Anglo-Australian cast member on *A Country Practice* and the network was inundated with negative mail (May 2003)[vii]. When Bramlett-Solomon (2007) updated her research with a content analysis of US primetime media content over five weeks in 2004, interracial couples were no longer a rarity. Twenty-one per cent of the (76) shows aired featured interracial couples, but only one such couple was married and the degree of physical intimacy shown between partners was curtailed (Bramlett-Solomon 2007). For hooks (1995: 113), such representations have tangible consequences:

> White and black people learning lessons from the mass media about racial bonding are taught that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges.

Representations of interracial intimacy on television and in film have also been criticised for their tendency to portray such relationships as short-term, fraught, dysfunctional, problematic, doomed and counter-hegemonic (Perry and Sutton 2006, 2008). Another challenge is that the non-white partners in interracial relationships are regularly portrayed according to prevalent harmful stereotypes – such as the sexually potent, aggressive or even violent African American male; or the sexually promiscuous and submissive Asian female (Perry and Sutton 2006, 2008; Deo et al. 2008). Audience members with little 'real-life exposure' to such

couples may rely on media representations when making social judgements, and the media's mis-representations have the potential to contribute to 'ridicule, abuse and even violence' (Perry and Sutton 2006: 898). This is not merely an abstract concern. In Luke and Carrington's (2000:16) research with inter-ethnic couples in Australia, an Anglo-Australian man commented that his family sought to dissuade him from marrying his Filipina wife because they had bought into the oft-deployed media trope of the 'mail-order bride'. Yet parallel to these harmful stereotypes, an invisibilising process is also at work. When intimacy across ethnic/racial boundaries features on screen, it is made plausible by the immersion of the ethnic minority partner in (white) 'mainstream' society (Brook 2009). Amongst the interracial couples featured in Bramlett-Solomon's (2007) study, the non-white partners typically did not relate to, or engage with, other non-white characters.

In the only Australian study of its kind, King (2009) explored representations of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters on Australian television. Shows from the 1970s to the 1990s rarely showed such relationships, and when they did appear they were often exploitative or violent. While some relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters emerged in the 1980s, physical intimacy was not shown – for fear of controversy (King 2009). It was not until 1994 that Australia's first televised kiss between an Indigenous and non-Indigenous character screened, featuring Cate Blanchett and Ernie Dingo on the ABC's *Heartland* (King 2009). Both King (2009) and May (2003) positioned the late 1990s as a turning point, characterised by the emergence of a number of Indigenous characters who were not limited to ethno-specific storylines and problem narratives. Their 'everyday' portrayals provided opportunities for Indigenous sexuality to be incorporated into storylines, and examples of inter-ethnic intimacy emerged. On *Breakers* (Channel 10, 1998-99) 'Reuben' (played by Heath Bergersen) was involved in several relationships with non-

Indigenous partners; as was Deborah Mailman's 'Kelly' on *The Secret Life of Us* (Channel 10, 2001-04). Although heralded as particularly positive examples by King (2009), the everydayness of these portrayals arguably hid ethnic differences. Despite being Indigenous, these characters were largely absorbed into the 'mainstream'. Neither Reuben nor Kelly was portrayed as having regular interactions with Indigenous friends or family members. The same can be said of Mailman's more recent role as Cherie Butterfield in *Offspring* (Channel 10, 2010-present). Notwithstanding these persistent challenges, the apparently growing presence (and acceptability) of inter-ethnic couples on Australian television screens may be indicative of softening ethnic boundaries.

Methods

The content of all fictional Australian television shows broadcast on free-to-air networks was reviewed during nine weeks split over two coding periods (September 25th to October 29th 2011, and May 13th to June 9th 2012). Animations and children's shows were excluded. All shows were first release Australian productions, set in Australia. In total, 16 shows and 98 hours of television content were reviewed (Table I). The coding framework was designed to test some of the key concerns articulated in the previous section regarding media representations of inter-ethnic (and interracial) intimacy.

Table I: Information about shows included in content analysis

Show	No. of episodes	Genre	Total hours
ABC			
At Home with Julia	1	Comedy	1
Crownies	5	Drama	5
The Slap	4	Drama	4
Laid	4	Comedy	2
Mrs Fisher's Murder Mysteries	1	Drama	1
SBS			
Housos	1	Comedy	1
Swift and Shift Couriers	4	Comedy	4
Channel 10			
Rush	5	Drama	5
Neighbours	45	Drama	22.5
Bikie Wars: Brothers in Arms	4	Drama	4
Offspring	4	Drama	4
Channel 9			
Underbelly Razor	5	Drama	5
Tricky Business	4	Drama	4
Channel 7			
Wildboys	5	Drama	5
Packed to the Rafters	8	Drama	8
Home and Away	45	Drama	22.5
Total	**145**	**N/A**	**98**

All intimate and/or sexual contact depicted was analysed and coded across the spectra from marriages to one-night stands and flirtations, and from consensual sex to sexual violence. It is thus not appropriate to uniformly adopt the language of 'relationships' or 'couples' when referring to the data. Throughout the remainder of this paper I adopt the terms 'sexual and/or intimate *relations'* (not relationships) and 'pair' (instead of 'couple') in an attempt to sidestep notions of emotional closeness, reciprocity and consent. The terms 'couple' and 'relationship' are only used when contextually appropriate. Pairs were tallied if both individuals appeared on screen *together*, and at least one partner had a speaking role. Characters' ethnicities were classified 'on the basis of what could be deduced by an average viewer' (Phillips 2011:25); ideally this was determined on the basis of the storyline. However, given the increasing

'everydayness' of ethnic diversity on Australian television (May 2003), characters' ethnicities were rarely stated outright. Deducing ethnicity on the basis of physical appearance alone was considered too subjective (May 2003), thus additional cues such as characters' names, information about other family members and shows' official websites were also used. Actors' ethnicities were only sought as a last resort as actors are often required to 'pass' as characters of an ethnic background distinct to their own. Pairs were coded into three broad categories on the basis of the respective ethnicities of the characters involved:

i.   *Ethnic majority pairs:* both characters were of Anglo-Australian or European background (e.g. Anglo-Australian/Anglo-Australian, or Anglo-Australian/Italian);

ii.   *Visible inter-ethnic pairs:* one character was of Anglo-Australian or European background and the other was not (e.g. Anglo-Australian/Chinese), or the characters were of two different non-Anglo-European ancestries (e.g. Nigerian/Chinese);

iii. *Ethnic minority pairs:* both characters shared the same (non Anglo-Australian or European) ethnic background (e.g. Chinese/Chinese).

While the term inter-ethnic incorporates all partnerships in which two individuals have distinct ancestries, this content analysis was framed around a narrower category: *visible inter-ethnic pairs.* 'Visible difference' is more commonly used in Canada (Mahtani 2001) – its application here was motivated by empirical evidence that inter-ethnic couples' experiences of prejudice hinge upon 'visible phenotypical differences that get noticed on the streets and in the shops' (Luke and Carrington 2000: 9). Of course, determining what constitutes visible difference is a subjective task. Here, Europeans were incorporated into the 'ethnic majority' category because of extensive evidence that historical constructions of Anglo-Australian*ness* have expanded to incorporate Europeans into an 'imaginary and centred' (white) Australian

'Self' (May 2003:67). Official immigration categories under the White Australia Policy changed in the Post World War II period from an exclusive focus on Anglo-Saxon/Celtic migrants, to include Northern and eventually Southern Europeans (Stratton 1999, Schech and Haggis 2001). But while the borders of 'whiteness' are fluid, there are limits to who can be incorporated into the expanding mainstream (Larbalestier 1999). To be of European background in contemporary Australia signals 'cultural compatibility and privilege' (Larbalestier 1999: 150), an experience which differs markedly from the 'othering' processes to which non-European migrants and Indigenous Australians are exposed (Hage 1998, Dunn et al. 2011). To this day, intimate relationships involving Anglo-Australians and those from British and European backgrounds present less of a challenge to social and cultural norms than those involving non-Europeans (Klocker and Dunn 2011, Dunn et al. 2011, Owen 2002). These discrepant experiences, and the attendant definitional complexity and ambiguity surrounding inter-ethnic intimacy, indicate that 'a new vocabulary is needed – one that captures difference within difference' (Luke and Luke 1999: 240). The broad label 'inter-ethnic' is of limited utility in this regard.

Results and discussion: the boundaries of intimacy on Australian television

In total, 152 pairs were observed during the nine week review period. Although ethnic majority pairs predominated (86.8% of total pairs); visible inter-ethnic pairs appeared regularly (10.6% of total pairs, see Table II). Their respective ethnic backgrounds are listed in Table III. Ethnic minority pairs were scarcely portrayed (2.6% of all pairs coded), and although not the focus of this paper, this is an important omission.

Table II: Pairs coded in Australian television shows, by ethnicity

Categories of 'pairs'	No.	% of total
Ethnic majority pairs	132	86.8
Visible inter-ethnic pairs	16	10.6
Ethnic minority pairs	4	2.6
Total	**152**	**100**

Table III: Ethnicity of characters in visible inter-ethnic pairs

The Slap (ABC): Hector (Greek) and Aisha (Mauritian); Bilal (Indigenous) and Shamira (Anglo-Australian); Connie (Anglo-Australian) and Ali (Lebanese); Harry (Greek) and Kelly (Lebanese)

Neighbours (10): Chris Pappas (Greek) and Aidan Foster (Filipino, mixed ethnicity); Callum Jones (Anglo-Australian) and Rani Kapoor (Indian)

Offspring (10): Cherie Butterfield (Indigenous) and Martin Clegg (Anglo-Australian)

Bikie Wars (10): Rua Rophia (Torres Strait Islander/Tongan) and three unknown (Anglo-Australian) women

Crownies (ABC): Andy Campbell (Anglo-Australian) and Lina Badir (Palestinian); Ben McMahon (Anglo-Australian) and Julie Rousseau (ethnicity could not be determined)

Rush (10): Christian Tapu (Maori/Islander, mixed ethnicity) and unknown female (Anglo-Australian)

Swift and Shift Couriers (SBS): Kiwi Kev (Maori) and Elle Whick (Anglo-Australian)

Housos (SBS): Kiwi Kev (Maori) and Vanessa (Anglo-Australian); unknown male (Pacific Islander) and unknown female (Anglo-Australian)

The visible inter-ethnic pairs portrayed during the coding period all involved one ethnic majority character (Anglo-Australian/European) and one ethnic minority character. No visible inter-ethnic pairs were comprised of two characters with distinct non-Anglo-European ancestries (e.g. Lebanese/Chinese). The ethnic majority members of visible inter-ethnic pairs were predominantly Anglo-Australian (not European). The ethnic minority characters were usually of Pacific Islander or Maori background (4 of 16); Indigenous (5 of 16, although 3 of these pairs involved the same character, Rua Rophia on *Bikie Wars*); or of Middle Eastern background (3 of 16). In contrast to the Australian films reviewed in Klocker and Stanes (2012), the visible inter-ethnic pairs portrayed on television rarely incorporated Asian characters, despite high rates of intermarriage within Australian society between some Asian migrant groups and Anglo-Australians (Khoo et al. 2009). Most ethnic minority characters of

migrant background appeared to belong to the 'second plus' generation (i.e. children or grandchildren of original migrants); as indicated by their Australian accents.

The overall frequency with which visible inter-ethnic pairs were portrayed was higher than that observed in overseas studies (Bramlett-Solomon 2007). Here, half of the television shows reviewed (8 of 16) featured at least one visible inter-ethnic pair. However, the proportion of visible inter-ethnic pairs varied substantially by channel. The public broadcasters featured substantially more visible inter-ethnic pairs than commercial television stations (Table IV). Only 6.5 per cent of total pairs on commercial television were visibly inter-ethnic, compared to 20.5 per cent on public television.

Less screen-time was devoted to visible inter-ethnic pairs than ethnic majority pairs throughout the coding period (Table IV). On average, each visible inter-ethnic pair appeared in 7.3 scenes[viii] over nine weeks, compared to 12 scenes per ethnic majority pair. Ethnic minority pairs featured in an average of just two scenes each. In total, 1768 scenes featuring pairs of any description were counted. Of these, 93.0 per cent involved ethnic majority pairs, 6.6 per cent portrayed visible inter-ethnic pairs, and 0.4 per cent ethnic minority pairs. Public broadcasters devoted considerably more screen-time to visible inter-ethnic pairs than their commercial counterparts. Although 79.4 per cent of the 1768 scenes coded appeared on commercial television, only 26.7 per cent of scenes incorporating visible inter-ethnic pairs appeared on commercial television. The low screen-time devoted to visible inter-ethnic pairs (and ethnic minority pairs) overall – and on commercial television in particular – shows that they rarely occupied central positions in storylines.

Table IV: Key characteristics of pairs coded on Australian television

	Ethnic majority	Visible inter-ethnic	Ethnic minority
Frequency of representation on commercial versus public television (%)			
Public television (n=44)	75.0	20.5	4.5
SBS	63.6	27.3	9.1
ABC	78.8	18.2	3.0
Commercial television (n=108)	91.7	6.5	1.9
Channel 7	95.3	-	4.7
Channel 9	100.0	-	-
Channel 10	84.8	15.2	-
How often did the pair appear during the coding periods?			
Average number of scenes per pair	12.5	7.3	2.0
Nature of relationship or encounter (%)			
Cohabiting/married/engaged	33.3	18.7	50.0
Dating	29.5	31.3	50.0
Fling, one-night-stand	7.6	25.0	-
Flirting, crush	14.4	18.7	-
Affair	3.8	6.3	-
Transaction[a]	7.6	-	-
Other	3.8	-	-
Did the pair have children? (%)			
Yes	17.4	18.7	25.0
Nature of *most* 'intimate' physical contact shown for each pair[b] (%)			
Sex/sexual touch	28.8	50.0	-
Intimate kiss	31.1	12.5	-
Casual kiss	6.1	-	-
Casual touch	19.7	18.7	75.0
None	14.4	18.7	25.0
Was the pair together at their last appearance during the coding period?[c] (%)			
Together	59.0	87.5	100.0
Not together (break up)	30.1	12.5	-
Not together (death)	6.0	0	0
Unclear	4.8	0	0

[a]Prostitution and 'therapeutic' sex.
[b]'Sex' also included sexual touching and intimated sex; 'intimate kiss' referred to a mouth kiss; 'casual kiss' referred to a kiss on the forehead, cheek, hand etc; 'casual touch' referred to all non-sexual touching.
[d]Percentages calculated on the basis of pairs who were in a relationship for at least part of the coding period.

The manner in which visible inter-ethnic pairs were portrayed also differed, depending on channel. Across all channels (except SBS), visible inter-ethnic pairs were rarely shown interacting with other ethnic minority characters. Thus Hage's (1998: 191) prognosis rang

true: the 'field of power' in Australian public space (including on television) remains an 'Anglo-looking phenomenon' in which ethnic minority persons can 'accumulate Whiteness' through their engagements with white (Anglo-European) Australians. With the exception of the two SBS comedies, none of the programs observed depicted 'multicultural realities in which white people are not the overwhelming occupiers of the national space' (Hage 1998: 19). The ethnic minority characters were, for the most part, absorbed into (white) Anglo-European Australian culture, and their families (parents, siblings) were usually absent. This runs counter to evidence that visible inter-ethnic couples in Australia usually have ethnically diverse family and friendship networks (Luke 1994, Luke and Luke 1999).

In keeping with observations from the US (Bramlett-Solomon 2007), visible inter-ethnic pairs on Australian television were substantially less likely to be married, co-habiting or engaged than either ethnic majority or ethnic minority pairs (18.7% versus 33.3% and 50.0% respectively). They were considerably more likely to have a one-night-stand or 'fling' (25.0%) than either of the other groups. However, visible inter-ethnic pairs and ethnic majority pairs were similarly likely to have children (18.7% versus 17.4%). Indeed, all of the co-habiting visible inter-ethnic pairs shown during the coding period had children including: Kiwi Kev and Vanessa on *Housos* (who were portrayed – albeit in comedic fashion – as irresponsible, drunk parents); as well as Hector and Aisha, and Bilal and Shamira on *The Slap*. But, these long-term, committed relationships and visibly inter-ethnic families all appeared on public television. The ethnic diversity of Australian households and families was not reflected by commercial broadcasters during the coding period.

Although visible inter-ethnic pairs were rarely portrayed in actual 'relationships' (married, co-habiting or dating), almost all of those who were remained in those relationships until the end

of the coding period (87.5% compared to 59.0% of ethnic majority couples). Of course this only provides a partial insight, as the coding period was merely a snapshot in the longer-term life of programs. However, the data do suggest – contrary to Bramlett-Solomon's (2007) findings and hooks' (1995) observations – that these relationships were not inherently doomed, and longevity was not impossible for visible inter-ethnic pairs on Australian television. The only visible inter-ethnic couple to break up during the coding period was Chris Pappas and Aidan Foster on *Neighbours*, whose relationship ended because of Chris' reluctance to reveal his homosexuality to his family. Ethnicity was not mentioned as a factor in the relationship.

The content analysis also explored the level of physical intimacy portrayed on fictional Australian television during the coding period. While US television shows are reluctant to portray interracial sexual intimacy (Bramlett-Solomon 2007), the opposite was true here. Visible inter-ethnic pairs were far more likely than either ethnic majority or ethnic minority pairs to have a sexual encounter (50.0% versus 28.8% and 0% respectively). But many of these were one-night-stands (Kiwi Kev and Elle on *Swift and Shift Couriers*, Rua Rophia and three unknown partners on *Bikie Wars*) or affairs (Harry and Kelly on *The Slap*). Emotional intimacy was more rare and only occurred on public television.

A tendency to downplay or erase ethnic differences between individuals involved in visible inter-ethnic pairs was apparent in almost all of the shows reviewed. Ethnic differences were rarely even acknowledged, and the challenges of being in a visible inter-ethnic relationship were side-stepped in most storylines. Whether this is a positive or negative outcome is linked to broader debates about 'everyday' versus 'issue-based' multiculturalism on-screen, as outlined earlier. Whilst overstating the challenges of being in a visible inter-ethnic

relationship would potentially entrench perceptions that such relationships are problematic –

visible difference *does* shape the everyday lives of inter-ethnic couples (Luke and Luke 1998,

1999; Owen 2002). Numerous visible inter-ethnic couples not only face societal racism, but

also the opprobrium of their families (Luke 1994, Owen 2002). To ignore this on television is

not only inaccurate, but further marginalises and trivialises those experiences.

Unselfconscious portrayals of 'relaxed, feelgood' everyday multiculturalism run the risk of

excluding important issues for ethnic minority communities: racism, prejudice and white

privilege (Ang et al. 2008:162). Exceptions to this general trend were the two SBS comedies

(*Housos* and *Swift and Shift Couriers*), which deploy ethnic stereotypes as a comedic tool[ix].

Two additional exceptions to the erasure of ethnic difference were Andy Campbell and Lina

Badir in *Crownies*, and Hector and Aisha in *The Slap*. Lina was of Palestinian background

and Muslim faith and her brother wanted her to date a Muslim man; while Hector's Greek

mother was critical of his wife's Mauritian background. These two programs (both aired on

the ABC) portrayed the nuances of these relationships: ethnic difference was *acknowledged* as

part of the lives of the couples portrayed, but it was not the sum of their experiences.

Concluding remarks

If we acknowledge that media representations impact the 'real world', then decisions about

who and what are included (or excluded), as well as the manner in which people, issues,

places and things are portrayed, are important areas of scholarly inquiry (Aitken and Zonn

1994, England 2004). Representations of visible inter-ethnic intimacy on television are thus

significant – particularly for 'real-life' inter-ethnic couples, whose visible differences affect

their (and their children's) experiences of discrimination. Exclusion and mis-representation in

the media can exacerbate racism and further marginalise and disenfranchise this rapidly

growing demographic group. The extent to which visible inter-ethnic pairs are portrayed on

screen also provides an indication of how social and cultural boundaries and norms have shifted (or not) over time. A key aim of this study was to explore the meanings and legitimacy endowed upon different types of relationships on Australian television. In doing so, it sought to shed light on the dominant ideologies of intimacy articulated and sustained (whether consciously or not) through fictional Australian television content. Evidence of sustained societal prejudice against visible inter-ethnic pairs in Australia underscores the social and political significance of this task.

The overall proportion of visible inter-ethnic pairs portrayed on Australian television during the coding period was higher than rates observed in comparable overseas studies, although this occurred parallel to the drastic under-representation of ethnic minority pairs. Moving beyond the numerical, the nature of these representations was also significant – and it is in this respect that the findings of this study were more ambiguous. Of course, while the present study provided some insights into the manner in which visible inter-ethnic pairs were portrayed vis-à-vis ethnic majority and ethnic minority pairs, its ability to provide nuanced insights was limited by the quantitative methodology chosen. Sustained discourse analysis of intimacy on Australian television would offer further crucial insights in this regard. Nonetheless, this study did provide strong evidence that Australian media representations do not yet reflect the changing ethnic composition of Australian households and families. In Australia today, ethnic diversity not only exists at the national scale and within communities, workplaces and schools; it is also increasingly common *within* households. Whilst 'visible difference' is an increasingly common experience amongst co-residing Australian couples – particularly in younger age cohorts – this study has shown that such household-scale diversity remains largely absent from our television screens. On television, visible inter-ethnic pairs

regularly flirt and have casual sex with each other – but they rarely move in together, get married or form families.

This paper also asked how visible inter-ethnic couples *ought* to be portrayed, in the context of wider debates over 'everyday' representations versus ethno-specific storylines. There is a tension between the potential to exaggerate ethnic differences and exacerbate harmful stereotypes on the one hand, and to gloss over and erase them on the other. While the latter scenario appears more benign, it runs the risk of further entrenching white hegemony on our screens – *despite* an increase in the number and range of ethnic minority characters being portrayed. It also functions to deny the very real experiences of racism that continue to shape the lives of ethnic minority persons and visible inter-ethnic couples in Australia. A trend towards downplaying difference was clearly apparent in this study. Most visible inter-ethnic couples' lives were situated firmly within mainstream (white) Australia. The lives of the ethnic minority partners in these relationships had – for all intents and purposes – been assimilated into those of their Anglo-Australian/European partners. The majority of the shows broadcast during the coding period did not make ethnic difference part of the storyline. Instead of engaging with it, they ignored it entirely.

Media representations can perpetuate racism and stigmatise visible inter-ethnic couples – or they can do the opposite. When television shows extend the horizons of possibility for inter-ethnic intimacy, they 'demonstrate the ability to change the nation's most personal sense of itself' (King 2009: 49). The findings presented throughout this paper were mixed, and audience research with visible inter-ethnic pairs will be needed to gather firsthand insights into the impacts of media representations on their lives. Visible inter-ethnic pairs were portrayed with some frequency throughout the coding period, and a diverse range of ethnic

groups were 'permitted' to participate in these encounters – although Asian Australians were drastically under-represented. This study found that Australian television has overcome taboos surrounding the portrayal of inter-ethnic sex, but emotional intimacy was often lacking. Representations of visible inter-ethnic couples in committed relationships – particularly those involving marriage and co-habitation – were scant. And, the amount of screen-time devoted to visible inter-ethnic pairs (and indeed to ethnic minority pairs) was meagre compared to that devoted to the ethnic majority. This may work against the normalisation of these relationships in popular imaginings. In addition, the potential for visible inter-ethnic pairs to unsettle ethnic boundaries, and the privilege accorded to white Australians (on and off screen), was undermined by the extent to which the ethnic minority characters were 'assimilated' into their partners' (white) mainstream social networks and neighbourhoods. Australian television screens are, for all intents and purposes, still plagued by whiteness – but not because of a lack of ethnically diverse bodies on screen. Rather, their whiteness rests upon the ongoing centring of white characters and storylines, and the discounting of other possibilities – even amongst visible inter-ethnic pairs.

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Notes

[i]Figures refer to formally married and de facto couples, same-sex and heterosexual.

[ii]Australian Foreign Minister, Senator Bob Carr, alleged his wife's ethnicity helped Australia to win a temporary UN Security Council seat: 'it was an advantage for the Australian Foreign Minister to be accompanied by a wife…born in Malaysia of Indian and Chinese parents' (Harrison 2012). For Senator Carr, his inter-ethnic marriage symbolised Australia's progressive multiculturalism.

[iii]Each state/territory had an Aboriginal Protection Board, which exercised extensive paternalistic control over Indigenous Australians. The 'Chief Protector' acted as a legal guardian to make decisions in their 'best interests' (Probyn 2003).

[iv]Sample size 12,512.

[v]The standard requires Australian programs to constitute at least 55% of programming between 6 am and midnight (ACMA 2011).

[vi]Phrase borrowed from Phillips (2012).

[vii]Such racism persists. When the Kapoor family was introduced to *Neighbours* in 2011, racist comments appeared on the show's online fan forum (Thorne 2011).

[viii]A scene was defined as 'a continuous situation that takes place in the same setting. A scene ended only when interrupted by another scene or by a commercial break' (Bramlett-Solomon and Farwell 1997: 7).

[ix]Produced by Paul Fenech, these programs share with their predecessor, *Pizza,* a 'defiantly politically incorrect' and 'brazenly lowbrow' approach (Ang et al. 2008: 168). They exploit, confront and re-appropriate sensitive issues and ethnic stereotypes through comedy (Ang et al. 2008). An important contribution of *Pizza*, shared by its successors, is the inclusion of Anglo-Australians 'within the cultural diversity of the nation', a departure from standard portrayals of Anglo-Australians as lacking ethnicity (May 2003: 222).