In the previous chapter, we found that there is often multiplicity, detailed specificity, and fluidity in the racial identifications of many mixed race young people in this study, especially if they are given the opportunity to respond in an open-ended fashion. But when asked to do so, are mixed young people in Britain willing to choose only one ‘race’ – the race they think best describes them? Such a ‘forced choice’ question has been used in the United States as an indicator of the identity options (and by extension, the sense of racial allegiance and membership) of disparate types of mixed people. Are there differences across specific types of ‘mixes’ in terms of whether they opt for their White or minority racial backgrounds or in their propensity to refuse to choose only one ‘race’? And if so, how do we make sense of such group differences? These questions enable us to explore how different types of mixed people may perceive and experience their ethnic options in a variety of ways.

Various American scholars, and Mary Waters (1990) in particular, have argued that minority people who are not White possess fewer or no ‘ethnic options’ compared with White Americans, who can exercise choice about whether they are ethnic, or whether they are simply Americans (though see Song 2003). While White Americans can enjoy a symbolic ethnicity without being subject to racial assignment by others (Gans 1979), non-White individuals are said to be unable to assert ethnic identities of their choosing, in a positive, costless way. Can this thinking be extended to mixed race people, many of whom do not appear White (and who can be racially assigned in ways which are beyond their control)? Their very mixedness, and the identity options available to them, presents an interesting and yet under-explored area of study, especially in the British context (though see Khanna 2011 for a study of ‘biracial’ options in the US).
The theoretical literature on ethnic options frequently invokes the concept of ‘agent autonomy’ or ‘agency’, the possession of which enables the subject to conceive and pursue projects, plans, and values. To exercise ‘options’ requires an awareness of one’s options and also that, in choosing, the knowledge that one is charting a course (Raz 1986). This core idea connects to debates about structure and agency: there has, in the first place, to be an availability of options and the possibility that such options can be validated by others (Nagel 1994; Song 2003).

Our choices are both constrained and constituted by social practices. As Charles Taylor puts it, a self only exists and an identity only emerges within ‘webs of interlocution’ (Taylor 1994:36, 39), that is, our actions belong to the practices that shape them and endow them with meaning. For example, individuals from disadvantaged social backgrounds may not perceive the same range of ethnic options to be available to them as someone with the privilege of material advantage (Fhagen-Smith 2010). Or a person living in an area with a high concentration of co-ethnics may be constrained in choosing an ethnic identity that diverges from the norm within that area (Holloway et al. 2012). In such ways the options that we are able to freely exercise are fundamentally shaped by the social matrix in which we live. If social practices give shape and meaning to talk about options, so too does the conceptual vocabulary of ethnicity.

Margaret Somers (1994) calls such practices ‘public narratives’. Thus, the options available may, in themselves, be the product of institutions and practices external to the self. In recognition of these external forces, Elster (1993) refers to the process of choice-making as ‘adaptive preference formation’. It is usual, therefore, for sociologists to talk of the mutually constitutive character of agency and structure and the recursive nature of their interactions. Appiah (2005:107) frames the issue thus: ‘...we make up selves from a toolkit of options made available by our culture and society’. We do make choices, but we don’t, individually, determine the options which we choose. What we endeavour to do in this chapter is to explore how this process of choice-making for mixed race individuals is constrained and enabled within these broader social practices, particularly when such individuals are asked to nominate only one race which best captures their sense of selves.

Standen (1996) termed this situation – the need to pick one identity or another – the forced-choice dilemma and it has been the subject of substantial empirical interest. How multiracial individuals respond when compelled to identify with only one component of their identity