

**RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION IN ACADEMIC
SETTINGS: A FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS**

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**RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION IN ACADEMIC
SETTINGS: A FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRT Critical Race Theory

IPA Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis

**KEAGRESIFAN MIKRO BERASASKAN PERKAUMAN DALAM
PERSEKITARAN AKADEMIK: SATU FOKUS KEPADA PELAJAR
UNIVERSITI**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka keagresifan mikro berasaskan perkauman, yakni satu jenis isu perkauman moden yang dilakukan secara halus, kerap kali tidak boleh dikesan dan kewujudannya mungkin tidak boleh diketahui oleh pelaku dan mangsa yang kebiasaannya ditemui dalam kehidupan seharian. Malaysia merupakan sebuah negara dengan pelbagai budaya yang menggalakkan keharmonian bersama antara pelbagai etnik yang berbeza dan mengkritik anasir-anasir perkauman secara terang-terangan. Oleh itu, penekanan terhadap tindakan perkauman yang dilakukan secara terang-terangan juga boleh berubah menjadi tindakan perkauman dalam bentuk yang tidak jelas dan tidak langsung. Kajian ini mempunyai tiga objektif, yang pertama ialah bagi mendapatkan tema keagresifan mikro berasaskan kaum. Objektif kedua ialah untuk meneroka ciri-ciri peribadi dan situasi di kawasan kajian. Objektif ketiga adalah untuk mengkaji tindak balas dan strategi yang digunakan oleh para pelajar di Malaysia untuk berdepan dengan situasi ini. Satu kajian kualitatif telah dijalankan terhadap 40 pelajar Malaysia daripada sebuah universiti kerajaan di utara Malaysia daripada 4 kumpulan etnik utama (Melayu, Cina, India, dan "lain-lain" - Sabah, Sarawak dan kumpulan etnik campuran) melalui kaedah pensampelan bertujuan dan *snowball*. Teknik temu bual dijalankan secara bersemuka, satu-sama-satu dan secara mendalam. Data yang diperoleh dianalisis menggunakan teknik *Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis*. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan, 16 tema keagresifan mikro berasaskan perkauman seperti "*Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook*",

“Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to ethnicity” dan *“Alien in own land”*. Konteks peribadi dan keadaan di mana tindakan keagresifan mikro berasaskan perkauman berlaku di dalam kelab universiti, majlis atau tugasan kumpulan. Tindak balas mangsa terdiri dari kedua-dua aspek positif dan negatif. Strategi yang pasif dan aktif digunakan oleh mangsa keagresifan mikro berasaskan perkauman. Kajian ini menyumbang kefahaman mengenai realiti interaksi antara etnik dan sesama etnik di dalam persekitaran universiti, dan seterusnya keperluan untuk meningkatkan kesedaran dan mendapatkan penyelesaian yang berkesan bagi mengurangkan tingkah laku tersebut.

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION IN ACADEMIC SETTING: A FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

This study explores racial microaggression - a modern type of racism that is subtle, often undetected and its existence may not be realized by the perpetrators and the victims but commonly found in everyday circumstances. Malaysia is a multicultural nation that encourages harmonious co-existence among different ethnicities and condemns the act of overt racism. Consequently, the suppression of overt racism act may sublimates into more subtle and indirect form. The present research objectives are to: (i) Draw the themes of racial microaggression, (ii) Explore the personal and situational characteristics and (iii) Examine reaction and coping strategies in among Malaysian undergraduates at a public university in northern region. Qualitative study was conducted through face-to-face, one-to-one, in-depth interviews with 40 Malaysian undergraduates of 4 major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian, and “Others” – Sabahan, Sarawakian and mixed racial parentage group) recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. The collected data was analysed using Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis. Results indicated 16 racial microaggression themes such as “Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook”, “Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to ethnicity” and “Alien in own land”. The personal and situational context whereby the racial microaggression acts took place including university club, event or group assignment meeting. Reactions comprise of both positive and negative aspects and passive and active coping strategies were mainly adopted by the recipients of racial microaggression. The present study provides educational insights into the reality of inter/ intra-ethnic

interaction in university setting and therefore, the need to raise awareness and to develop effective measurements to reduce such behaviours.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Racial microaggression is defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin, 2007). In a simple term, it is a modern type of racism, that is subtle, often undetected and may commonly found in everyday circumstances. In the present study, it is operationally defined as the subtle act of racism in everyday verbal and non-verbal communication and mostly automatic and often performed unconsciously, that both the perpetrators and targets often do not realize when it is taking place.

There are three types of racial microaggression; micro-assault, micro-insult and micro-invalidation (Sue et al., 2007). Firstly, micro-assault is often conscious and performed openly, consisting of both verbal and non-verbal actions intended to offend the victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior and purposeful discriminatory acts (Sue et al.). On the other hand, micro-insult and micro-invalidation are often performed unconsciously; both of these microaggressions are often unintended by the perpetrators but perceived negatively by the recipients (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsult comprises of action or verbal comments that are rude, insensitive to humiliate the victim’s race or identity, while micro-invalidation consists of action and verbal comments that neglect, deny, or invalidate the thoughts, feelings and experiential reality of the victims (Sue et al., 2007).

For each categories of racial microaggression, there are common themes that emerged across different studies in the United States of America. According to Sue et al. (2009), under microinsult, they are: *ascription of intelligence* (assigning high or low intelligence to a particular racial group), *second class citizens* (treating other from a certain race as a lesser being or group). Subsequently, under microinvalidation, they are: *alien in own land* (assuming that racial minority citizens are foreigners), *color blindness* (denying or pretending not seeing skin color), and *myth of meritocracy* (insisting that success in life is achieved through individual effort and not race). This study aims to explore the three types of racial microaggression and discover themes of racial microaggression that are more pertinent to Malaysian context. This is because it can be argued that cultural and historical context may play a role in how people view individuals of different groups or races from them thus influencing how racial microaggressions are being expressed and experienced within a specific cultural environment.

So how different is racial microaggression as compared to the traditional form of racism? In the past, traditional form of racism encompasses direct, obvious act of prejudice and discrimination. Currently, the less direct, covert and often performed unconsciously act of racial microaggression is substituting the traditional form of racism, due changing societal values, norms and most importantly, the law that restrict the public expression of overt racial prejudice (Sue et al., 2007) . For instance, in the US, the changing norms and implementation of Civil Rights Act refrained the acts of discrimination in the utilization of public facilities based on U.S Civil Right Act 1964, Public Law 88-352¹. In the post-civil rights in the US, the

¹ U.S Civil Right Act 1964, 78 Stat, Public Law 88-352 provided injunctive relief against discrimination in the usage of public facilities, to “authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on

conscious democratic belief in equality for people of colors conflicted with long history of racism has transformed the façade of racism into a whole new level (Jones, 1997; Thompson & Neville, 1999 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). Similarly, in Malaysia, there are laws that prohibit the overt act of prejudice such as: The Internal Security Act 82 (1960)², The revised Sedition Act 15 (1969)³ and The Printing Presses and Publications Act 301 (1984)⁴. These laws may discourage racism from being expressed overtly but may not necessarily prevent the more subtle form of racism from happening.

The distinction of racial microaggression from the traditional form of racism also lies in its emotional effect on the victims. A victim of racism may attribute the racist situation externally (i.e the perpetrator's racial identity). On the other hand, a victim of racial microaggression is affected more negatively by attributing it both internally and externally. Based on the researches done on the emotional effect of racial microaggression, Wang, Leu and Shoda (2011) extrapolated that internalizing emotions (emotions resulted from internal attribution, such as low self-esteem and shame) may increase when one encounters situations perceived to be attributed to race. Despite the seemingly innocuous situations (such as a person who just boarded the bus chose not to sit with you) appears to be not intrinsically negative; however, when one appraises that he/she is treated differently because of his/her race can make

Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity”

² Internal Security Act 82 (1960): under chapter 3, clause 22 “Prohibition of printing, sale, etc., of documents and publications” number 1 (c) “is calculated or likely to lead to a breach of the peace, or to promote feelings of hostility between different races or classes of the population”

³ The revised Sedition Act 15 (1969), under clause 3 (1) *e* stated that a seditious tendency is a tendency to “promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Malaysia”

⁴ The Printing Presses and Publications Act 301 (1984). Section 298A “causing, *etc.*, disharmony, disunity, or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will, or prejudicing, *etc.*, the maintenance of harmony or unity, on grounds of religion”

this otherwise innocent situation painful. This condition is supported by Schmitt & Branscombe's (2002). finding that when one is reminded of his/her inferior status in the society, it may result in negative emotions. In addition, Asamen and Berry's (1987) research on racial microaggression experienced by Japanese Americans, also found a significant and negative correlation between perceived prejudice and negative self-concept among Japanese Americans. The higher the degree that a person rated such situation is related to his/her race, the higher the experience of negative emotion.

Of all the victims of racial microaggression, some may react passively when confronted with the emotionally negative situation, while others find ways of coping when confronted with similar situation. Some ways of coping based on the study done by Steele's (2001) on Black students in a predominantly White institution in the US are such as: *self-censorship* (talk less or tone down resulted from the fear of confirming the Black intellectual inferiority stereotype), *proving them wrong* (intentionally performing well to disprove the negative stereotype), *reframing what it means to be an intellectual* (reframing their own schema that they have different aspects of intelligence otherwise prescribed in their university) or *challenging* (directly confronting the perpetrators of racial microaggression). The present study aims to discover the reactions and ways of coping that are pertinent to Malaysia context, which may be distinctive from the US context. Again it can be argued that cultural context may influence how people react and cope to certain events or situations that will be important to explore.

Malaysia is a multicultural society consisting of diverse array of ethnicities and races. The country's main ethnicities are the native, Chinese and Indian. Based on the latest Population and Housing Census Malaysia in 2010, the total population

was 28.3 million in which 91.8% are Malaysians and 8.2% are non-Malaysians. The Malaysian group is further divided into the native (Malay and orang asli), Chinese and Indian groups. Out of all Malaysians, 67.4% are native (indigenous) as the majority group, which consisted of the 63.1% Malay (dominant group) and remaining small number of “orang asli”. Subsequently, the second and the third largest ethnic groups are the Chinese 24.6% and the Indian 7.3% respectively (Department of Statistics, 2011). While the 0.7% minority (classified as “others”) consists of Eurasians, Thais, Europeans and others not included in the three major categories comprises small percentage of the population (Hirschman, 1987). The Chinese and Indian communities were immigrants from China and Indian subcontinent respectively.

In a plural society like Malaysia, the heterogeneous nature of its society translates into non rigid ethnic boundaries and meaning of ethnicity (Hirschman, 1987). There are crosscut of religions and languages even within a single ethnic category. For instance, the Indian population includes Hindus, Muslim, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians, whose mother tongues might consist of a variety of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan dialects. Similar with the Chinese community, they possess multiple of religions and languages. In addition to heterogeneity, interethnic marriage is quite common in Malaysia, which further blurred the boundaries and distinction of ethnic classification. For example, a minority of Malaysian-Chinese descents known as Peranakan or Baba/Nyonya Chinese, have been much assimilated into the Malay culture (Clamer, 1980; Tan, 1982:1983 as cited in Hirschman, 1987). The descents from interethnic marriage do not necessarily identify themselves belonging to their ethnic origin. Therefore, it is rather difficult to classify them into any major group.

While it is difficult to break the population into major groups, it becomes clear that Malaysia comprises of many different groups of people. In such a diverse society, it is not possible to interact without being aware of one's own group thus creating a ground for social categorization process to take place that can further enhance intergroup prejudice and conflicts including inter-racial of nature. Social identity theory by Tajfel (1974) proposed three mental processes that lead people to divide others into the "in-group" and "out-group"⁵ thus influencing how people react to those who they perceived as in-group and out-group. This process may be the basis of racial microaggression as likely to be experienced by the participants in this study. To understand this further, the contextual experience of racial microaggression is explored in the present study.

Due to the heterogeneity of Malaysian society, 1 Malaysia policy was introduced by Prime Minister Dato' Sri Haji Mohammad Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak to "foster unity and sense of nationalism among different ethnic groups in Malaysia" (Bahagian Penerbitan Dasar Negara, 2009). While the policy may be useful in fostering unity by promoting the value of harmonious society living under one nation⁶ and encouraging homogenous identity, it can potentially contribute to assumption of colorblindness and absence of racism. For instance, some people may work hard to conform to the egalitarian value as portrayed by 1 Malaysia policy in order to appear socially desirable (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996). While consciously working hard to be egalitarian, certain values pertaining to how people react to others outside their group or race may still be unconsciously adopted and can be translated into the act of racial microaggression.

⁵ In-group refers to inner circle members of "we-ness", while out-group refers to the members of the members outside one's inner circle or "they"

⁶ Famously known in Malaysia as "Keharmonian Kaum"

This is in accordance with aversive racism perspective, whereby people who consciously and sincerely support egalitarian values and convinced that they are unprejudiced; however, would unconsciously harbor negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks. Such behaviors may be based on cognitive information processing biases that resulted from in-group vs. out-group categorization, motivational (personal or group's interest), and sociocultural process (social learning) (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996). This concludes that racial microaggression flourished in an environment that strongly believes in egalitarian values and color-blindness. Malaysia as a multiracial country that emphasizes on the importance of egalitarian values and color-blindness can be a potential breeding ground for the occurrence of racial microaggression.

The current study aims to explore the experiences of racial microaggression within student population from a public university in Northern region of Malaysia and to discover the victims' reactions to and ways of coping with racial microaggression. In a public university setting, this issue may be more prominent due to the environment that consists of students from diverse racial background, both local and international student and staff. Therefore, there may be high frequency of interaction among the diverse students and staff population, and possibly higher chance of racial microaggression occurrence. Looking at intergroup relationships from the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this study explores the experiences of racial microaggression of students from different groups. Academic setting may also put an extra emphasis on the egalitarian values and color-blindness and this contributing to making racial microaggression to be more likely to happen.

1.2 Problem Statement

The incidents of racial microaggression have increased over the last decades (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami & Hodson, 2002; Sue et al., 2009). According to Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami & Hodson (2002) and Sue et al., (2009), traditional form of racism has declined over time due to civil right movement and the legalized anti-discriminative laws in America. As overt expression of prejudice from traditional form of racism was frowned upon, more covert, ambiguous and subtle prejudice from contemporary forms, such as racial microaggression takes over and affects the lives of people in subtle but significant ways. Its effects are not just evident in everyday aspects such as employment opportunities, services and treatments towards people from different racial background, but also in academic setting that consists of diverse staff and student population.

As such, racial microaggression in academic settings may negatively affect various aspects of the victims' life due to stereotype threat⁷ and trigger emotional reactions. In the context of United States and looking at the relationship between Black and White students in the university, Tuitt and Carter (2008) believed that stereotype threat and racial microaggression are essentially related and collectively work to impede the academic performance of many Black students in university with predominantly White students. Many past researches suggested that the victims of racial microaggression may face stereotype threat in the learning institution with students from other races. For black students, being evaluated in a stereotyped domain may trigger responses commonly associated with stereotype threat, such as absence of enjoyment in studying, heightened anxiety and stress, and altogether may

⁷ Stereotype threat is defined as “the social and psychological sense of peril resulting from the possibility of negative racial stereotypes being unfairly applied to students solely because of their skin color” (Taylor & Antony, 2000 cited in Tuitt & Carter, 2008, p. 53).

result in low performance (Good, Aronson & Inzlicht cited in Tuitt & Carter, 2008). Other consequences that might follow include invisibility syndrome⁸, lowered self-esteem and others. Therefore, it is important to investigate into the affect and thought processes of the victims to further understand the effect of racial microaggression on the victims.

Although act of racism might still happen deliberately at certain situations in Malaysia, ideally, an effort to eliminate overt racism had been introduced through campaign such as 1 Malaysia. However, the same conclusion may not be true for microaggression because it is often covert and difficult to be detected. Due to its subtle and indirect nature, subtle racism is often overlooked and understudied, partly due to lack of awareness, negligence, discredit or even denial towards the issue on the behalf of both the victims and perpetrators.

To further illustrate this condition, the author highlights the research from investigating the prevalence of racial microaggression among university students in Kuala Lumpur (Lino, 2010). The findings suggested that many students were not aware of their experience with racial microaggression, whereas some of them even denied its existence. There were a total of seven themes of racial microaggression emerged from the study, in which one of them is “lack of awareness of racial microaggression”.

Thus, such situations (lack of awareness, negligence, or denial towards the existence of subtle racism, etc) might often impede the understanding of the topic and consequently, it will remain invisible and pose potential psychological hazard to the victims. The limited understanding on the situational and personal factors in

⁸ Invisibility syndrome is resulted when one encountered repeated racial slights and left feeling not being perceived as a person of worth. It is a subjective sense of psychological invisibility which involves a struggle with inner feelings and beliefs that personal talents, abilities and character are not acknowledged or valued by others and society due to racial prejudice (Franklin & Franklin, 2000).

which racial microaggression took place might prevent the perpetrators/ victims from:

- Confronting their complicity in creating/ experiencing psychological dilemma,
- Realizing their roles in creating/ accepting disparities in employment, education, and other opportunities for the target groups, and;
- Identifying their own underlying psychodynamic issues that act as the mechanism behind their experiences/ actions.

In addition, most academic literatures on racial microaggression are found in western context while little has been done in the eastern context. Therefore, the current understanding of the racial microaggression topic is prevalent to western context and has limited applicability on eastern context due to cultural difference.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of several reasons. Firstly, it focused on racial microaggression as a phenomenon that may be on the increase. Racial microaggression can be considered as a relatively new study in the field of racism. The findings of this study are important to reveal the phenomena of racial microaggression and therefore understanding of the topic instead of focusing on traditional form of racism which are plenty in the existing literatures.

Secondly, this study aimed to examine victims' reactions to racial microaggression. From these observations, the author foresees that the present study may provide educational insights into the reality of inter/ intra-ethnic interaction in university setting and therefore, able to raise awareness and help to develop effective measurements to reduce such behaviors. Findings from this study may also be useful

to help those who had ever been victims of racial microaggression, by teaching them ways of coping. Understanding racial microaggression from the victims' perspectives can empower them by making the "the invisible, visible," i.e. by acknowledging their experiences and providing them with a language to describe their experiences.

Thirdly, this study aimed to reveal the issue of racial microaggression in a public university in the Northern region in Malaysia. In a multiracial and multi-group society like Malaysia, exploring this issue will be important to contribute a greater understanding; thus can help to improve Malaysia as a multi-group society. This is especially applicable in the university where values of equality is exceptionally important to maintain healthy daily interactions with multi-cultural and multi-national population.

1.4 Research Objectives

The current research carried the following aims:

- To understand the experience of racial microaggression in academic setting and within interpersonal context by looking into the experience of university students in the following elements:
 - To draw the themes of microaggression as experienced by the university students
 - To explore the personal and situational characteristics of both the reported perpetrators and victims of racial microaggression in interpersonal context as experienced by the university students
 - To examine reaction and coping strategies with interpersonal microaggression as experienced by the university students

1.5 Research Questions

The current research carries the following research questions.

- What are the university's students experiences of racial microaggression in interpersonal context and within academic setting? Especially in terms of :
 - Themes of microaggression as experienced by the university students
 - Personal and situational characteristics of both the reported perpetrators and victims of racial microaggression in interpersonal context as experienced by the university students
 - Reaction and coping strategies with interpersonal microaggression as experienced by the university students

1.6 Scope of Study

This study focused on the racial microaggression occurrence as experienced by the participants. The author focused only on personal account of participants who encountered racial microaggression experiences before; they can be perpetrators, victims or observers of such acts in the past. Interviews were conducted with the participants to explore the themes, situations, reactions and coping of racial microaggression. Participants were students from a public university in northern region. They comprise of members from four different ethnic groups so that the author can equally obtain balanced views from all the ethnic groups representation.

1.7 Organization of Chapter

Chapter 1 (Introduction) consists of 6 major sections. The first section consists of the brief background information on racial microaggression, brief explanation on the differences between racial microaggression and racism, and brief overview of the racial situation in Malaysia. This is immediately followed by the second section that presents the problem statement as the intellectual puzzle of this

study. The fourth and fifth section consists of the research questions and their corresponding research objectives. The chapter concluded with the scope of the present study.

Chapter 2 (Literature Review) consists of 6 major sections. The first section presents the concept of race and racism, racism in Malaysia, racial microaggression and the detailed explanation of the differences between traditional racism and racial microaggression, theories supporting the existence of racial microaggression, past literatures on racial microaggression in various contexts, including the academic context and theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 (Methodology) consists of 3 major sections. The first section presents the research design, participant, recruitment, research procedure, ethical consideration, interview questions, and participants' confidentiality. The second section discusses the pilot study and how it has improved the procedure of the present study. The chapter concludes with the data analysis technique utilized in the present study.

Chapter 4 presents (Results) consists of 4 major sections. The first section presents demographic information of the participants. Afterwards, the results are listed according to the order of the research questions. The second section lists the details of themes of racial microaggression. The third section lists the details of situational and contextual factors whereby racial microaggression took place. The chapter concludes with the details of reaction and coping strategies employed by the the victims of racial microaggression.

Chapter 5 (Discussion) consists of 6 major sections. The first section starts off with the summary of findings. The second section details discussion, and analysis of the findings. The third section presents the practical and theoretical implication of

findings. This is followed by the fourth and fifth sections that consist of the limitation of the present study and its corresponding direction for future study. The chapter closes with a brief conclusion of the present study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview

This chapter begins by presenting the explanation of the concept of race and racism, racism in Malaysia and racial microaggression. This is followed by the differences between traditional racism and racial microaggression to highlight the distinctiveness of racial microaggression from racism. Afterwards, the chapter explores past literatures on racial microaggression to discover the existing researches on racial microaggression, explore their research methodology and research gaps that can be fulfilled in the present research. In addition, the chapter also presents different perspectives of racial microaggression by discussing the critics of racial microaggression from other researchers.

The chapter concludes with the discussion of key theories supporting the present study: Social identity theory as the main theory, Allport's theory of racism and Critical Race Theory as supporting theories followed by the conceptual framework as the backbone of the current research

2.2 The Concept of Race and Racism.

2.2.1 Race

It is important to begin the study of collegiate racial microaggression by first exploring its predecessor, classical "racism". In order to understand racism fully, we have to explore the meaning of its root "race". According to Smedley (1999) "race" was originated from Latin word "ratio", meaning "classification" (Carter & Pieterse, 2005). Afterwards, "ratio" developed into Italian "razza", which was used to categorize animals and group with

common features, descents and origin. Eventually, the concept of “race” evolved to describe humans in the 17th century (Carter & Pieterse, 2005).

However, the definition of race that is solely based on biological and species categories alone is not sufficient in explaining race in modern day context. Smedley (1998) also contended that race is a social category, not a biological one, which was used to differentiate the “superior” European colonies from the “inferior” non-Europeans native inhabitants with different skin colors. This category then became a focus of stereotypes to prove the non-Europeans inferiority and justify the colonies dominance and laws limiting the freedom of non-Europeans. Over time, due to the compelling needs to classify individuals into groups based on visible markers, such as phenotypical racial factors that are easily spotted, the remnants of this category remained as a persistent social classification and basis on how people think and relate with others (Smedley, 1998).

Race can also be seen a part of a person’s social identity. Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel in 1974 views race as part of the categorization people used to divide themselves and others and it can be an important identity to describe a person. The mechanism behind racial classification is that people exaggerate the intergroup distinctiveness to differentiate themselves from one group to another, while minimize the similarities among the different groups.

In summary, the definition of race for the purpose of the present study is beyond looking solely on biological mark of certain group in society, but it

entails the social status and social identity of the group in comparison to the other group in the said society.

2.2.2 Racism

While the definitions of race were vehemently debated on either biological or phenotypical basis, the definition of racism is more complex as it depends on the contexts that it entails. The concept of racism can be defined by the ideology and attitudes of racial superiority (individual racism), established laws, customs and practices that constantly portray and result in racial inequalities in a society regardless of whether the people who practice them are racists (institutional racism) or the belief that a certain society's cultural patterns and practices, as reflected in economics, arts, religious system, are more superior than those of other racial groups (Carter & Pieterse, 2005)

According to Feagin and Vera (1995, p. 7) claimed “racism is more than a matter of individual prejudice and scattered episode of discrimination; it involves a widely accepted racist ideology and the power to deny other racial groups the dignity, opportunities, freedoms and rewards that are available to one's own group through *“a socially organized set of attitudes, ideas, and practices that deny African Americans and other people of color the dignity, opportunities, freedoms, and rewards that this nation offers white Americans”* (Feagin & Vera, 1995).

While Feagin and Vera's focus on racism was more on the societal, a nation's ideology and structure in shaping the development of racism, Sociologist Chesler (1976) succinctly incorporated both institutions and ideology in his conceptualization of racism, arguing that racism is “whatever

acts or institutional procedures that help to create or perpetuate sets of privileges for Whites and exclusions or deprivations for racial minority groups. This usually requires an ideology of explicit, implicit superiority or advantage of one racial group over another, plus the institutional power to implement that ideology in social operations” (p. 22). This concept of racism is closely linked to development of racial microaggression, whereby it took place at the advantage of one group and at the expense of the other, which is closely related to the nation power structure of Malaysia that may create inequality and status difference among different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

In addition, a perspective of racism based on the in-group and out-group distinction was formulated by Tajfel (1974). He suggested that in old or new type of racism, the racist ideologies were typically based on the formation of common bonds of an “innate” or “instinctive” nature that justify the natural predisposition of each group that is unchanged and immutable from other groups. This theory suggests the distinctiveness between in-group and out-group as a precursor to racist behavior, which the author borrowed to examine if similar mechanism exists in racial microaggression phenomena in the present study.

2.2.3 Racism in Malaysia

Malaysia comprises of multicultural society with population of different ethnicities. As previously discussed in chapter 1, in an environment with diverse population such as Malaysia, whereby people of different ethnicities adopt different customs, language and religion, it is inevitable for a person to interact without being aware of one’s own group thus creating a ground for group differentiation to take place in social context that may

contribute to interracial disparities. This may be a precursor for racism to occur in Malaysia.

However, racism is deterred to be overtly expressed in public in Malaysia due to its sensitive nature. For an instance, gatekeeping process is commonly performed by the local newspaper editorial team for the interethnic conflict news coverage, primarily due to political reasons (Yang & Ishak, 2015). This may be contributed to the limited researches in Malaysia that focus on racism. The author also discovered that academic articles related to Malaysia were found to be not discussing on racism per se, but topics that are related to interethnic relation. For an example, a study was conducted by Hashim, Zaharim and Khodarahimi (2012) on 200 Malaysians interethnic friendships at work place. They found out that the majority indicated highest satisfaction when befriending others of the same sex and ethnicity (Hashim et al., 2012). When asked to rate for similarity, they also reported more similarities of working style with peers of the same ethnicity. Thus, despite living in diverse society, many Malaysians still prefer to mingle with people of their own ethnicity.

In addition, there was another study conducted by Pue and Kaur (2014) that found out that not many Malaysians were aware of other ethnic groups in Malaysia, especially the minority ethnic groups. In the case of the study, the said ethnic groups were the Kelantan Chinese Peranakan and Sikh Punjabi. They frequently received stereotype of the mainstream; however, in reality, their ethnic identities were starkly different from the mainstream. The findings from this study suggested that many Malaysians have the tendency to be ignorant about the minority and inclined to stereotype the minority to fit

into the mold of the majority group. Overall, in both studies, albeit not portraying examples of overt racism, they are closely linked to racial microaggression. Examples of racial microaggression themes that share such resemblance are “in-group exclusivity” whereby people prefer to associate and mingle with members of their own ethnicity, and “ignorant about situation of ethnic minority”.

2.2.4 Racial Microaggression

After an elaborate discussion on racism on the previous section, the current section moves on to racial microaggression. The transformation of racism after the post-civil rights era in America, whereby the democratic belief in equality clashed with the long history in the society, has given birth to the more subtle form of racism, such as modern racism, symbolic racism and aversive racism⁹. Despite the differences in the terms, all of them share similarities, such as: racism is more likely to be concealed and covert and racism has evolved from traditional form of overtly displayed hatred and bigotry into more subtle form that is trickier to be identified (Sue et al., 2007). Even with the emergence of written literatures on modern form of racism, many studies conducted on different fields such as healthcare, education, mental healthcare and others described difficulties to identify, quantify and define “aversive racism” or implicit racism due to its abstract, subtle and unnamed nature. Without sufficient identification and understanding of such issue, it will remain invisible and detrimental to well-

⁹ Modern racism and symbolic racism are mostly linked to political conservatives, who mostly deny the personal bigotry by strong and rigid adherence to traditional American values such as individualism, self-reliance and hardwork. Meanwhile, aversive racism is more related to White liberals whereby its people are more likely to be motivated by egalitarian value and antimorality sentiments (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996)

being and self-esteem of the victims, while prevent the perpetrators in realizing and confronting their role in creating psychological dilemma and disparities in employment, education, healthcare opportunities (Sue et al., 2007).

Therefore, the term racial microaggression was created to identify and define such everyday phenomenon. The term was first coined by Pierce and colleagues, which refers to “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1977, p. 66). Racial microaggression has also been defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano et al., 2000). In its essence, racial microaggression is a brief, everyday communication that carries a message that degrades certain people because of their membership from particular racial group, which is often unconsciously conveyed in a form of snubs, dismissive looks, body language, gestures, tones and others. Such acts are common and often automatic in daily conversation, which are often overlooked and dismissed as innocuous acts (Sue et al., 2007).

Racial microaggression does not just happen within human interaction; environmental settings can carry such message as well. For an instance, one’s racial identity can be made insignificant by mere exclusion of decorations that are associated with certain cultural symbols. Racial microaggression can be classified into three types, whereby all classifications can be classified into environmental form as shown in the following figure 2.1.

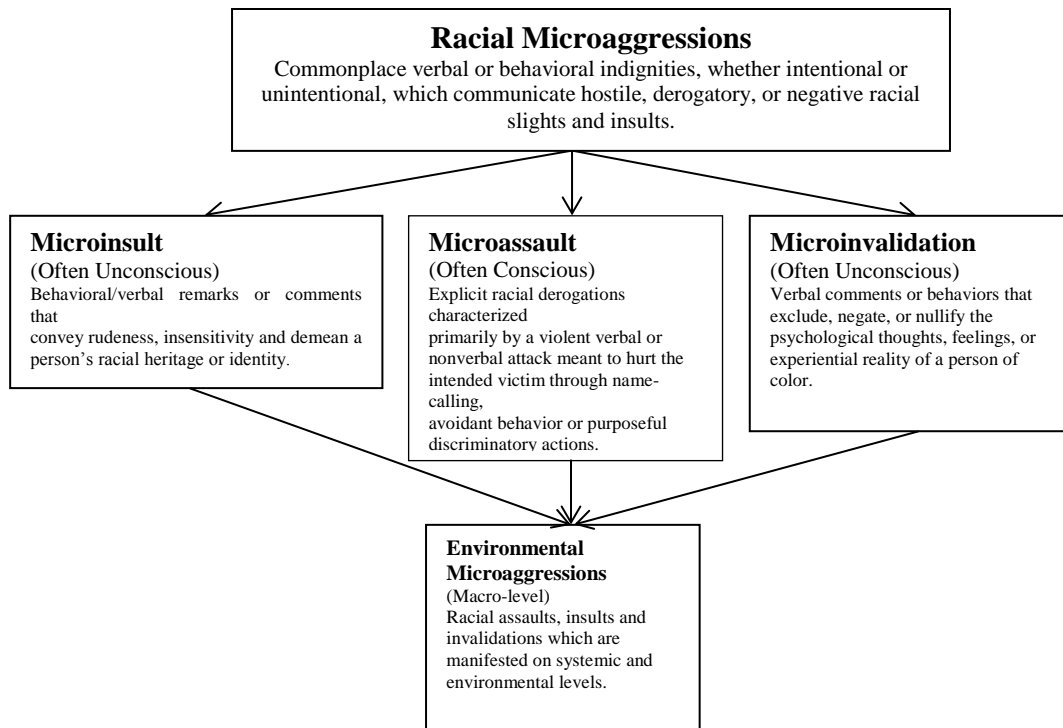


Figure 2.1. Flowchart of the classification of racial microaggression (Sue et al., 2007)

Sue, et al. (2007) has provided the key conceptual understanding of racial microaggression through extensive outline of racial microaggression, including the definition and different classifications of racial microaggression. According to Fig 2.1, the first classification is Microinsult. It is often characterized by subtle snubs, can be both verbal or non-verbal, sometimes performed unconsciously by the perpetrators, that are often unknown to the recipients but clearly convey a hidden insulting or demeaning message that is pertinent to their races or racial identity (Sue et al., 2007). For example; when a person of color gained top position in a company, he/ she was asked “How did you get the job?” The underlying message may be: the person of color is not qualified or the person has obtained the position through affirmative action or quota system and not because of his/ her ability.

The question by itself is not necessarily insulting, but the context whereby the message is conveyed can translate a neutral question into a microinsult (Sue et al., 2007). Aside from the verbal form, microinsult can manifest in non-verbal form, such as when students of color were repeatedly ignored when raising their hand or contributing ideas in a classroom. Such incident relays the message that the contribution or rights of the person of color is not important.

The subsequent classification as indicated in Figure 2.1 is microassault. Microassault is akin to the old-fashioned racism that comprises explicit verbal, non-verbal, actions or avoidant behaviors, which are performed consciously and intended to attack, insult or hurt the victims (Sue et al., 2007). However, it differs from the old-fashioned racism such that it takes place in a private situation where the perpetrator can maintain a certain degree of anonymity. For instance, an online user may have launched an anonymous blog saturated with written derogatory insults and name-calling about people from other races. In short, people may keep to themselves the notion of inferiority about other race and will display publicly when they lose control or find a perceived “safe” outlet to perform microassault (Sue et al., 2007).

The final classification based on Figure 2.1 is microinvalidation. Microinvalidation is an act of dismissing, underestimating, ignoring or excluding the psychological thoughts, feeling and experiential reality of people from other race (Sue et al., 2007). When some Asian Americans were complimented for speaking fluent English or repeatedly asked where they come from, it carries a message that they are perpetual foreigners and not

American citizens. Some others may have quickly dismissed or underestimated the racial experience of people from other race, by giving them a snide comment, being cynical or claiming that they are being over-sensitive when they are denied facilities or services that are supposedly equal for everyone. When encountering microinvalidation, the experiential reality of people from other races is usually not acknowledged and validated (Sue et al., 2007).

Consequently, due to its invisible nature (especially for microinsult and microinvalidation), racial microaggression can become a potent tool in hiding the perpetrators' alleged good morality and decent behaviors (Sue, 2005 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). As a result, many perpetrators of racial microaggression face difficulties in accepting that they might be prejudiced and racist because their acts are often dismissed as innocuous (Sue et al., 2007). Usually, racial microaggression can be explained with ostensibly valid and bias-free explanations. However, the targets often experience bugging questions and dilemmas of whether they just experienced such act (Crocker & Major, 1989 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). Hence, due to the difficulty to detect the occurrence of racial microaggression, especially when other explanations seem plausible, racial microaggression has become the main interest in the present study. The author intends to uncover its occurrence in Malaysia whereby an open discussion of racism is usually discouraged in public spaces.