RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION IN ACADEMIC SETTING: A FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS (FINDINGS)

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Abstract

Currently in Malaysia, the traditional, direct and overt racism might be nearly non-existent owing to the enactment of anti-discriminative law and introduction of 1Malaysia policy "harmony and unity in diversity". However, traditional racism has been replaced by racial microaggression – the contemporary, indirect and subtle form often performed by modern and educated population. Due to its controversial, sensitive and "taboo" nature, limited studies have been done in Malaysia and consequently, racial microaggression may pose as an insidious threat to multicultural society. Hence, this study was designed to explore undergraduates' experience of racial microaggression along with the types of, the reasons for, the origin of and the implication of racial microaggression on the undergraduates in a private institution in Malaysia

Keyword: *microaggression, modern racism, implicit racism, prejudice, discrimination, racism in Malaysia*

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

"National integration is a phenomenon as much as national disintegration" (Huntington, 1965, p. 392). Despite Malaysian government's effort to integrate the multiethnic groups in Malaysia under the "1 Malaysia"[41], Malaysia is a multicultural society where racial segregation still exists; therefore, racist gestures are relatively practiced among the different ethnic groups. For instance, the existence of vernacular schools for three different ethnic groups might have taught the young generations to maintain ethnic exclusiveness (Ricardo, 2010).

Since many young generations were brutally exposed to the concept of fragmented society in their living environments, the implementation of "1 Malaysia[1]" might be difficult to penetrate Malaysian societal barrier. This condition might attribute to either overt or covert racist gestures displayed by the youth. For some, racist gestures might be covert under the delusion of "colorblindness and neutrality of law" fostered by the "1 Malaysia" policy which may contribute to racial microaggression.

Although act of racism happens deliberately at certain situation, ideally, overt racism is no longer common especially among educated youth, such as university students, since racist act is deemed as unethical and socially unacceptable. However, many of them get away with acts of racial

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[41] 1 Malaysia integration policy was introduced by Prime Minister Najib to foster unity and sense of nationalism among different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Bahagian Penerbitan Dasar Negara, 2009)

microaggression because it is often covert and difficult to be detected. Or some others do not even realize they have performed racial microaggression, while many others are unsuspected victims or unsure whether they were victimized. As a result, these situations are not healthy for educated youth mental developments, where their subjective emotion might affect their judgments or even narrow it.

Racial Microaggression

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 et al., 2006 as cited in Sue, Buccheri, Nadal, Lin & Torrino, 2009, p. 88). It is a common and often undetected phenomenon that threatens individual's psychological well-being.

Due to its invisible nature to both the perpetrators and recipients, racial microaggression becomes a powerful tool in masking the perpetrators' alleged good morality and descent behaviors (Sue, 2005 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). Therefore, many people face difficulties in facing the truths that they might hold racial prejudice and might perform racist and discriminatory acts (Sue, 2004 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). Usually, racial microaggression acts can be explained with ostensibly valid and bias-free explanations. However, the recipients often experience bugging questions of whether they just experienced such act (Crocker & Major, 1989 as cited in Sue et al., 2007). Hence, it is difficult to detect the occurrence of racial microaggression, especially when other explanations seem credible (Sue et al., 2007).

Such invisibility often presents psychological dilemmas for both the perpetrators and recipients of microaggression acts. Sue et al. (2007, p. 277-279) broadly categorized these "dilemmas" into four types:
1. Dilemma 1: "Clash of racial realities". It poses conflicting questions: (i) Did the other person just perform racial microaggression toward me? versus (ii) Did I just misinterpret the action since racism has declined and everyone else has become less racist? It happens within the society where there are perceived minority's overall improved welfare, perceived reduction in racism, perceived intangible effect of racism in the lives of the other racial group, and perceived equality for all racial groups.
2. Dilemma 2: "The invisibility of unintentional expression of bias". It poses opposing questions: (i) Did the other people perform unconscious act of racism toward me? versus (ii) Is it more likely the person consciously did that for other reasons? Since racial microaggression often manifested in automatic actions, it is more difficult to be detected and the perpetrators can easily deny their actions are directed by racist intention.
3. Dilemma 3: "Perceived minimal harm of racial microaggression". Question perceived by the perpetrators: (i) Isn't what I have just done is trivial and why can't that person just "let it go"? versus the question perceived by the recipient (ii) Am I being oversensitive ? In fact, similar to the outward racist behaviors, recipients of racial microaggression

experience equally detrimental effects as found in Solorzano et al.'s (2000) study that snowballing microaggression experiences carry dire consequences. Such consequences, unbeknown to many recipients, often lead them to resort to "conspiracy of silence" to avoid more troubles.

4. Dilemma 4: "The catch-22 of responding to microaggression". When responding to racial microaggression, the recipients usually experience attributional ambiguity and immediately respond (Crocker & Major, 1989): Did it really happen? Should I bring up the subject or just drop the topic? How should I respond? As racial microaggression happens, usually the recipients will undergo three steps; firstly, to determine whether it really takes place, secondly, the recipients' choice of reaction will result in varying consequences to both the perpetrators and recipients and thirdly, the recipients are faced with choices of action, either to (i) vent out the anger and (or) retaliate; thus, risking their expression to be dismissed or seen as oversensitive or (ii) suppress the feeling and suffer silently.

Classification of racial microaggression

There are three types of racial microaggression, which are classified as conscious and unconscious acts (Sue et al., 2007). (i) 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. (ii) Micro-insult comprises of action or verbal comments that are rude, insensitive to humiliate the victim's race or identity, while (iii) 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.). All the three types discussed above are apparent in the participants' experience of racial microaggression in this study, which were discussed in Results section.

Racial Microaggresion among college students

In University, among students and university staffs not only they frequently experienced overt form of racism but also covert form of racism known as racial microaggression. Although daily interpersonal conversation often contains subtle non-racist insults (such as jokes and sarcasm), racial microaggression is distinctive as such that it defines the reality based on historical power differences and status among races and ethnic groups (Sue, Capodilupa, Nadal & Torino, 2008). According to Boysen, Vogel, Hope and Hubbard (2009), the most common types of microaggression in colleges might comprise; ostracism, judgment of intelligence based on race and renunciation of the existence of prejudice. Microaggression directed at college students can be emotionally draining and result in detrimental effect in both social and academic life of the students (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Similarly, Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht, (2003) reasoned a student being assessed in a stereotyped domain can be easily evoked to give out typical responses related to stereotype

threat, such as diminished educational interest, higher anxiety and stress which eventually lead to underperformance (as cited in Tuitt & Carter, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Looking at the abovementioned explanations, various types and implications of racial microaggressions, starting from general context down to specific college context, the researcher is interested in looking for past studies to scientifically support the existence and implication of racial microaggression. Firstly, the researcher then examined studies done in clinical context between supervisor and supervisee relationship. Constantine and Sue's (2007) study aimed to investigate the perception of African American supervisees of racial microaggression in supervision with White supervisors, its manifestation and effects on the supervision. 10 post-doctoral supervisees who self-identified as African American were recruited through purposive criterion sampling for semi-structured interviews. Through IPA analysis, several themes emerged such as "making stereotypic assumptions about black supervisees", "reluctance to give performance feedback for fear of being viewed as racist" and "focusing primarily on clinical weaknesses" (Constantine & Sue, 2007, p.146-147). Since the power dynamic in supervisory relationship is such that the supervisors hold educational and evaluative power over the supervisees, the resulting supervisees' reactions were anger, shock and feeling of invalidation, while some of them tried to adapt with their supervisors' instruction which detrimentally affected their performance and service to the clients

Subsequently, in legal context, a meta-analysis paper done by DeJesus-Torres (2000) explored whether the study of racial microaggression, combination of color, ethnicity, privilege and power aids the discovery of whether or not discrimination and prejudice are the cause-factors. The researcher described that microaggression acts were often dismissed in the US court due to their absence in legal requirement of "intent" and were not the "jure" infractions of constitutional and civil right. Similarly, criminal justice system dismisses microaggression and uncertain in accounting discrimination or racism as one of the causes to unfair treatment, (such as arrests, unequal sentencing, death penalties and others), harsher treatment, indiscriminate stop and frisk, all towards Latina/o and Hispanics Americans. In the paper, she also pointed out the exclusionary practice that was supported by the stereotypical belief that Latinas/os jurors are not professional due to their inappropriate empathy towards the plight of minority defendants (DeJesus-Torres, 2000).

The above study and meta-analysis paper provide evidence that racial microaggressions are also apparent in other settings, such as clinical and legal contexts, which further strengthen the evidence of racial microaggression existence in everyday life.

Moving on to classroom context, the following two journals were produced by Sue and Constantine (2007) and Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo and Rivera (2009) to discuss the relationship between racial microaggression and difficult race-related classroom dialogue. The first one was an article regarding racial microaggression as initiator to difficult race-related

dialogue and the reasons for difficulty in discussing racial issues among White Americans. They found four different precursors of difficult dialogue from the White's perspectives, such as: (i) "fear of appearing racist", (ii) "fear of realizing their racism", (iii) "fear of confronting White privileges", (iv) "fear of taking personal responsibilities to end racism" (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 136-143).

While the first study discussed the reasons for difficult dialogue, the second study by Sue et al. (2009) scientifically tested the attributing factors to the same topic. It aimed to explore four aspects related to microaggression and factors attributing to difficult dialogue in multiracial classroom: (i) identify and categorize different forms of microaggression in classroom from the viewpoint of students of color, (ii) explore how microaggression often triggers and leads to difficult dialogue, (iii) identify strategies that help teachers to mediate a difficult dialogue and (iv) derive basic principles the education and training of educators to utilize difficult dialogues as a learning platform to learn and recognize the various racial perspectives. They recruited a total of 14 students from Teachers College, consisting of eight Blacks, three Asians or Asian, two Latinos and one biracial individual. This qualitative study was conducted using focus group using semi-structured interview. The resulting three main themes were identified; "(i) racial microaggressions as precipitators of difficult dialogues, (b) reactions to difficult dialogues, and (c) instructor's strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues."(Sue et al., 2009, p.186-188). The results also suggested that the people of color readily point out the triggers and dynamics of difficult dialogue in classrooms as compared to their White counterparts (Sue et al., 2009). The findings from this study aid the researcher to discuss the possible reasons for "denial in racial reality" of some participants under Discussion section.

After looking at various racial microaggression studies in various contexts, the researcher explored the same topic specific to the present study, which is in university context. Solorzano et al. (2000) and Sue et al. (2009) employed focus group method in their studies, while McCabe (2009) used multi-methodological approach that included one-to-one interview and focus group. All studies recruited college students through purposive sampling; Solorzano et al. (2000) recruited African American, Sue et al. (2007) recruited Chinese American and McCabe (2009) recruited Americans from various races: Caucasian, African, Chinese, Latin and Indian respectively. Solorzano et al. (2000) found the types of, reaction to and effect of racial microaggression such as in college classroom, with negative effect of racial microaggression on the students' academic performance, creation of counter-spaces to ensure supportive environment for studying. While Sue et al. (2009) found various microaggression themes such as "alien in own land", "ascription of intelligence", "denial of racial reality". Similarly, McCabe (2009) discovered several themes such as "views of black men as threatening" and "views of Latina as sexually available and exotic".

The abovementioned studies done by Solorzono et al. (2000) and Sue et al. (2009) used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework in their studies. Since the civil right movement in the US, CRT has challenged the Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies that disguise the reality of racism towards the minority groups such as Asian Americans, African

Americans and Latin Americans. These studies used counter-story telling, evaluated the narratives provided by the minorities, explored the permanence of racism and inequality of law, all to reveal the reality of racism experienced by these groups. As the present study shared many similarities with the studies mentioned above, the researcher, too, employed CRT as theoretical framework for this study.

Critical race theory

CRT provides excellent framework for the present study as it discusses the areas related to prolonged existence of racism and unequal treatments towards the minority. CRT was initially developed to address the issue of racism and White Supremacy on meritocracy in America. It aimed to promote change that will bring social justice (Crenshaw, 1995 as cited in De Cuir & Dixson, 2004). Some CRT concepts applicable to this study are (De Cuir & Dixson, 2004):

1. Counter-storytelling, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), aims to question the existing myths, reveal and critique conversation that propagates racial stereotypes; hence, challenging the privileged discourse of the majority and giving the minority the right to voice. The result from this study can be used as counter-storytelling to reveal hidden racial microaggression; thus, raising awareness among the Malaysian society.
2. The permanence of racism or known as "a realist view", according to Bell (1992), suggests the domineering role of racism, both consciously and unconsciously, continues to govern various aspects of Americans' life. Similarly, this phenomenon can be found in Malaysian context; for instance, Malaysian Malays receive special privileges from New Economic Policy (NEP).
3. Critique of liberalism. The CRT scholars criticize the notions of liberal legal ideology; "the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law and incremental change" (De Cuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). The notion of colorblindness is delusional because neutrality of the law is inapplicable to Malaysian context as the law is unfair to the minority group, for instance, the indigenous group has better opportunity for higher education, property subsidy and manufacturing ownership. As for incremental change, the gains of the racial minority are at slower pace to give way to the majority.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims to discover the types of, the reasons for, the origin of and the implication of racial microaggression on undergraduates in a private institution in Malaysia

METHODOLOGY

A pilot study was conducted with a group of seven Chinese Malaysian participants through focus group discussion. Each focus group session lasted approximately 120 minutes

Sampling technique
A total of seven participants, both males and females Chinese Malaysian Psychology undergraduates from a private institution in Malaysia were recruited for the pilot study through convenience sampling from the website http://ipsy.help.edu.my/experiments.

Materials
Each participant was given letter to participants, informed consent and demographic information forms. The researcher used video camera, audio recorder and self-generated semi-structured interview questions sheets. Both video and audio recordings were used to ensure ease of transcription, integrity of the data and thorough data collection to identify themes for phenomenology data analysis. Recording was conducted upon participants' consent and permission.

The researcher used two formal steps of collecting data: (i) demographic information forms and (ii) semi-structured interview questions.

The pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of the materials and procedures, particularly to test the ability of the self-generated semi-structured interview questions to generate responses that fulfill the research questions of this study. It also serves as a training avenue for the researcher who had no prior experience as a moderator in a focus group.

RESULT

The collected data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It is highly interpretative that allows elaboration of participants' experience and phenomenology (attitudes, beliefs and general reflections) about the topic (Langdrige, 2004).

The following (Table 1) is a summary of master themes that emerged from the participants' response regarding racial microaggression in the real study, which was analyzed using IPA. The themes emerged from pilot study resembles exactly to those in real study.

Table 1

Table of Master Themes of Real Study

No.	Theme	Microaggression	Message & Types of racial microaggressions
1.	Racism as a deep-rooted, unavoidable and ongoing problem	The portrayal of racism on the media (including the ones by the authority) is rampant and the origin of racism can be traced from history	Racism is a very complex and tough issue to be reduced or eradicated in Malaysia. *Type: Not classified. It is just the nature of racism.*

2.	Second-class citizen	• A Malay photographer treated Malay customer better than Chinese customer • The government did not give everyone else the same privileges as Malay Malaysian • Indian students who got 7 As 8As, but they can't get into public university, unlike the Malays who could get in.	Preferential treatment against the non-bumiputera in Malaysia elicits resentment and perforates in different dimensions of Malaysians' everyday life. *Type: Microinvalidation*
3.	Blame other races for racist occurrence	• Blame the physical appearance and communication style of African student for her ostracism • Other people who do not understand the language of the mainstream group should instead learn the language	The cultures of minority groups are invisible to the majority groups; therefore, the minority should be acculturated to the mainstream culture. *Types: Microinsult & microinvalidation*
4.	Lack of awareness of racial microaggression	The person initially denied the existence of racism, which was followed by account on racial microaggressions	Two possibilities: (i) the person followed "social protocol" that does not encourage the discussion of racism in public or (ii) the person is just unaware of racial microaggression *Type: Microinvalidation [only for condition (i)]*
5.	Ethnocentrism within different racial groups	Name-calling towards Indians as 'felda' and Malays as 'pig'.	The negative name-calling implies that the perpetrators' groups as more superior than the recipient's groups. *Type: Microassault*
6.	Perceived and maintained ethnic exclusiveness	• The existence of different race-based parties: UMNO, MCA and MIC. • Refrainment to admit one's race due to fear of	People prefer to stay in the same racial group as theirs to maintain status quo and familiarity (according to value difference

		being excluded by the other racial group • The 'banana' and 'non-banana' groups are in conflict and do not mix.	hypothesis); which could cause more segregation, lack of understanding and animosity and eventually leads to racism and racial microaggression. *Types: Microinsult and Microinvalidation.*
7.	Ascription of intelligence	• People spoke Malay to students who are wearing tudung. • Other racial group perceived Malays as "lazy and less smart", Indians as "not much progress"	• One's intelligence as stable and is prescribed since birth instead of merit. • It is uncommon for Malays and Indians to be intelligent. *Types: Microassault, Microinsult and Microinvalidation*

Implications for future research & conclusion

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.

The present study can act as precursors to future study of education, training skills (for the recipients) and prevention skills (for both the recipients and the perpetrators) in the field of racial microaggression. The idea of making the invisible becomes visible can be one of the useful survival strategies for the recipients to cope with racial microaggression and the perpetrators to realize their actions to prevent future re-occurrence of racial microaggression acts.

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