The Lurking Racism: Exploring Racial Microaggression in the Malaysian University Setting

Lino, M.*, Hashim, I. H. M. and Ricardo, R.

School of Social Sciences office, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Does racism endure? Should it still exist in an open, liberal multicultural society particularly with the establishment of anti-discriminative laws and societal development? Racism should be minimal among the educated populace in a university where individuals are more likely to be motivated to act in an objective and non-prejudiced manner. Have the programmes and policies that stress on fairness and equality suppressed the manifestation of racism into modern racism? Racial microaggression is an indirect and subtle form of racism that happens in everyday life that may be intentionally and unintentionally executed by the perpetrators and often catch the recipients off-guard. This research aims to unearth the themes of racial microaggression experienced among Malaysian public university scholars. It also explores the reactions of people experiencing racial microaggression. A qualitative study involving personal, one-to-one in-depth interviews was conducted with 40 undergraduates, from 4 racial groups (Malay, Chinese, Indian and East Malaysian) recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data. Results indicated 11 common themes such as: (i) Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook, (ii) Differential treatment towards people from different race/ religion, and (iii) Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to race. The reactions include thoughts (e.g. disbelieve) and negative emotions (e.g. disappointment). The results of this research are important in revealing and understanding the phenomenon of racial microaggression. The present research may deliver informative insights into the reality of inter/ intra-ethnic interaction in a university raising awareness and helping to develop effective measurements to reduce such behaviours among scholars.

INTRODUCTION

Sue and colleagues (2007) defined racial microaggression as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially may cause harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group". The operational definition of this study is an indirect and subtle form of racism that commonly takes place in daily life, which could be manifested in a verbal or non-verbal form, often performed automatically and involuntarily by the perpetrators. In most cases, recipients are unaware that they have been the target of racial microaggression.

The racial situation in Malaysia could be illustrated by "National integration is a phenomenon as much as national disintegration" (Huntington, 1965, p. 392). In spite of the national integration efforts to eradicate the boundary that exists among ethnic groups in Malaysia (e.g. "1Malaysia"[1] policy) Malaysians are still compartmentalized into various ethnic groups. Each ethnic group predominantly practices unique culture and custom, as well as speaks its own mother tongue (Hashim et al., 2012). In the context of academic settings, one of the purposes

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

of vernacular public schools is using a mother tongue as the teaching medium. Consequently, students who use that particular mother tongue predominantly attend that particular school. Such example is students of Chinese and Indian ethnicity are more likely to enrol in a Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Public vernacular school) with Mandarin and Tamil, respectively, as the medium of language for teaching. This practice could be seen as an attempt to ensure cultural independence and preservation. However, on the other hand, it may create a communication and interaction barrier among people of different ethnicities, which may potentially segregate them since their tender age.

Consequently, all of the above-mentioned issues arguably may have contributed to "fragmented society" whereby racial stereotypes and prejudices might be latent and could potentially manifest into acts of racism. However, overt racism is not allowed to be publically expressed. In Malaysia, there are specific laws that regulate against direct racist acts or propagation of racist innuendo such as: The Internal Security Act 82 (1960), the revised Sedition Act 15 (1969) and the Printing Presses and Publications Act 301 (1984). On top of that, multicultural national campaigns such as "1Malaysia" has been widely introduced to encourage integration, "colour-blindness and neutrality of law" within the Malaysian multicultural society (Bahagian Penerbitan Dasar Negara, 2009). Such efforts may be effective in suppressing the manifestation

of racism but not in eradicating the more covert act of racism like racial microaggression.

Arguably, direct acts of racism are no longer acceptable among educated population in the university; the academic culture does not tolerate open acts of racism. In addition, the Malaysian anti-discriminative regulation under the Federal Government Gazette (section 8) specifies the prohibition of public acts of racial and religious discrimination in various level of university bureaucracy (Attorney General Chamber, 2011) and university guiding principles that emphasize on maintaining socio-cultural integrity and sensitivities (USM Official Web Portal, 2013). However, this may not be applicable for subtle act of racism that is covert and difficult to detect such as racial microaggression (Sue et al., 2007). There is also a limited awareness, understanding and studies on the subject of racial microaggression due to its hidden and subtle nature, which may further instigate its occurrence.

This study aims to explore racial microaggression in the academic settings of universities. More specifically, it explores the themes and reactions arising from experiences of victims and perpetrators of racial microaggression in the context of Malaysian university. We also argue that current understanding of racial microaggression is mostly guided by studies conducted in the western context. This study will contribute to a cultural-specific and deeper understanding of the issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As much as people are maintaining an egalitarian facade, they might either voluntarily or involuntarily, still hold some biases and prejudices when interacting with people outside their ethnic group (Essed, 1991). In their struggle to act and appear equal, there may still be some subtle form of inequality that can be interpreted as acts of racial microaggression. The struggle may occur more often in academic setting where people strive to be open and liberal. In an academic setting, racial microaggression may persist despite people's effort to be objective and socially desirable (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996).

Looking at the past literatures in the Western context, several themes of racial microaggression had been identified. Firstly, Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo and Rivera (2009) found that a difficult racial communication frequently occurred between the college student of colour and other white students or instructors in the US. In their study, they found several themes which were categorized into 3 major domains: (i) "Racial microaggressions as precipitators of difficult racial dialogues", (ii) "Reactions to difficult dialogues" and (iii) "Instructor strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues". Some examples of the themes from the first domain is "ascription of intelligence", where the victims of colour were perceived as being less intelligent compared to their white peers. Another theme is "denial of racial reality" where the victims of racial microaggressions reported their answers were often ignored

in the class. (The theme "alien in own land" refers to the situation when someone spoke slowly to an Asian-American student, assuming he or she could not speak fluent English when in reality, they are Americans and speak fluent English.

In addition, many African-American female students from McCabe's (2009) study experienced racial microaggression in the form of feeling invisible in the class. Their opinions were often disregarded as trivial or their presence was overlooked because of their race. One participant recounted that she often speculated her white peers' perception towards her; whether she was avoided because of her race or her body odour. Such doubt is attributed to the subtle nature of racial microaggression where the victims are often in a dilemma about the occurrence of microaggression or tend to dismiss it as being innocuous.

Ironically, many female African-American college students from McCabe's (2009) study experienced the "paradox of invisibility". Instead of being "invisible", they were also put under the spotlight on different occasions. Lecturers often picked them to be a spokesperson to represent their race, which was often the minority racial group in the class. Two participants recounted to be under the pressure because others misconstrued their opinion to be a representation of their race as a whole. In reality, no group of people thinks alike. The burdens intensified when the lecture was on racial topic, illustrating the covert verbal and non-verbal microaggression performed by the lecturers or peers that indirectly indicated the African-American students as being different. Consequently, they often felt anxious and isolated (McCabe, 2009). In this case, anxiety and isolation are the reactions to racial microaggression.

Outside the classroom context, "paradox of invisibility" also occurred in the form of assumption of criminality. An African-American participant in McCabe's (2009) study reported that he was stopped and checked by the police when he was walking towards his car at night after a party (McCabe, 2009). The most prominent evidence was the omnipresence of authorities on the dorm level whereby the African Americans were the major residents. The authorities imposed stricter penalties on African American male students as compared to other race committing the same offences. For an instance, one of the African American male participants was arrested for bringing in alcohol to the dorm. He described his experience as "paradox of invisibility"; the black men were either overlooked or closely scrutinized due to the negative stereotype attached to their race and gender (McCabe, 2009).

From the abovementioned past studies, it can be observed that each study examined a sample of participants from a homogenous group of ethnicity. The current study fills the gap by deriving balanced racial microaggression findings from participants of equally all ethnics representative in Malaysia. In addition, racial microaggression themes arose from

the past studies mainly represented the western perspective and culture. Due to the rarity of racial microaggression literature on eastern context, the present study offered racial microaggression findings pertinent to eastern perspective and culture, particularly from Malaysian context.

In Malaysia, people of different ethnicities live in close proximity which makes them conscious about their own ethnic identity when socializing with the people from different ethnic groups. Consequently, social identity and social categorization processes easily happen that may be prone to interethnic clash and prejudice. According to Tajfel (1974), social categorization and social identity process whereby people strongly identify and classify themselves into "in-group" and "out-group". Such process may be the underlying mechanism for racial microaggression and most probably shape the experience of the participants in racial microaggression situation. The present research looked into the possible racial microaggression experiences of university students in multicultural and multi-ethnic environment in Malaysia.

Previously, the first author had also conducted a research at a university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Despite all the participants being Psychology major students, the experience of racial microaggression was found to be rampant among the participants, whether in verbal or non-verbal form, especially when openly discriminatory behaviours were condemned (Lino, 2010). All types of racial microaggression, i.e. micro assault, micro

insult and microinvalidation were reflected in the participants' experiences. Currently, the number of published studies in this area and on Malaysia is still small. In addition, victims of racial microaggression can experience negative emotions following the experiences. According to Solorzano et al. (2000), microaggression directed at college students can cause negative emotional consequences and hampered both of their social and academic life. Through interviews she also discovered such impacts on the African American and Latin American minority students from the majority of the Caucasian American campus who experienced negative experience with racial microaggression. In addition, according to McCabe (2009) and Hurtado et al. (1999), African American and Latin American students who were often subjected to racial jokes felt lonely, isolated and invisible. Consequently, they experienced negative emotions and declined academic performance (McCabe, 2009). Such latent threats may impede victims' well-beings but not known to many, as opposed to the obvious effects of traditional racism. Therefore, in addition to the experiences of racial microaggression, the present study intends to explore the corresponding recipients' reactions towards their racial microaggression experiences in Malaysian university context.

METHODOLOGY

The present study had been approved by the Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia (Ethics Committee for Human Research).

It complies with the ethical standards and procedure in conducting research. The present study adopted qualitative method, particularly one-to-one, in person interview. The interview transcripts were interpreted using Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique whereby the research took into account the participants' perspective and worldview from their racial microaggression experiences.

Forty Malaysian students had been selected from a public university in the Northern part of Malaysia. They were 12 male and 28 female undergraduates who had been studying for at least two years in the university. The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling form a university-wide course. There were 10 Chinese, 10 Indians, 9 Malays, 7 Sabahan and Sarawakians and 4 mixed racial parentage students. These students were from across 22 different majors and 12 different schools to represent a thorough demography of the university population.

Participation in the current study was completely voluntary. They were briefed on ethical procedure and instructed to complete a simple demographic information forms. Permission was acquired from the participants prior to audio recording of the interview sessions, which took approximately 40 minutes. After the interview, the participants were given debriefing statement to ensure minimal psychological impacts of the study to the participants.

The first author's status as a non-Malaysian was beneficial in maintaining neutral perspectives when interviewing the participants and analysing the interview data from third party's perspective.

An example of interview questions:

1. Every day, you come into contact with people such as friends, room-mates, classmates, lecturers and other staff in the university. What were some of the subtle ways that these people treat you differently because of your race? Would you mind providing some examples? (who, what, where, when, how)

2. What were your reactions when you experienced the abovementioned event?

The data gathered from the interview was analysed using Interpretational Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. The researcher interpreted the participants' account through the participants' worldview and generated themes based on the participants' subjective and contextual experiences of racial microaggression. Altogether, very rich and in-depth information could be extracted to improve the understanding of racial microaggression experiences in Malaysia.

RESULT

Table 1
Themes of Racial Microaggression

No.	Themes	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others
1.	Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Differential treatment towards people from different race/ religion	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to race	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Insensitivity towards the existence of other races	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	In-group exclusivity	✓	✓	✓	✓
6.	Alien in own land	✗	✓	✓	✓
7.	Language barrier as a precursor to racial microaggression	✗	✓	✓	✓
8.	In-group benefit	✓	✓	✓	✗
9.	Second-class citizen	✓	✓	✓	✗
10.	Denial of racial experience	✓	✓	✓	✗
11.	Preferential interaction with other races	✓	✓	✗	✗

Table 1 listed all of the general themes generated from the participants' interview transcripts. The following are the explanation of each themes of racial microaggression.

Theme 1: Paradox of scrutiny/ overlook

The recipients of racial microaggression experienced contradicting situations whereby they were either being the focus of attention or ignorance of others. Due to their racial or ethnic identity, their behaviours were closely scrutinized by others, usually the negative behaviours. Conversely, the recipients may also be ignored, avoided or ostracized to be included in many events. Therefore, many of them believed that they cannot lead a normal live due to their ethnic identity.

Theme 2: Differential treatment towards people from different race/ religion

The participants had subtly treated others differently or being treated unfairly due to their race or ethnic identity.

Theme 3: Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to race

Others often had skewed impressions of the participants; they were judged to be either more superior or inferior in various aspects of their life, especially intelligence due to their racial or ethnic identity. They were incorrectly judged due to the stereotype given to them. As a result, they had to work harder to disprove others' opinion.

Theme 4: Insensitivity towards the existence of other races

The perpetrators may unconsciously say or act in insulting manners that offend or neglect people from other ethnicities. This may be due to their insensitivities/ lack of understanding towards the needs and feelings of people from other ethnicities.

Theme 5: In-group exclusivity

The participants observed that usually people preferred to stick with their "in-group"; members of perceived similar ethnicities and ignored or neglected the "out-group": members of different ethnicities outside their inner circle.

Theme 6: Alien in own land

Members of the ethnicities outside the indigenous groups were believed to be perpetual foreigners despite their legal status as Malaysians. Only participants from non-Malay group came across such experiences.

Theme 7: Language barrier as a precursor to racial microaggression

The participants believed that racial microaggression occurred through communication barrier in group activities due to others' refusal to communicate in the common language understood by everyone. Only participants from non-Malay group came across such experiences.

Theme 8: In-group benefit

Participants believed that only the member of a certain ethnic or race will only benefit from others of the same ethnicity as themselves.

Theme 9: Second-class citizen

Participants believed that due to their racial or ethnic identities, they were treated less favourably in certain events, everyday situations or activities.

Theme 10: Denial of racial experience

Participants' accounts on racial microaggression were often considered as petty issues and brushed off due to the subtle and covert nature of racial microaggression.

Theme 11: Preferential interaction with other races

The participants preferred to interact or form relationship with members outside their ethnicity or race because they have negative stereotype against members of their own group.

The following is Table 2 that lists down reactions of the participants when encountering the experience of racial microaggression. They are divided into thoughts and emotional reactions.

Table 2
Reaction of participants towards their racial microaggression experience

No	Themes	Reactions (Thoughts and Emotions)
1.	Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook	Thoughts: Couldn't believe it's happening in the society, felt unfair, felt others to be inconsiderate, felt it's normal, felt lazy to contribute her opinion in future, and in dilemma Emotions: Sad, ashamed, angry, emotional, disturbed & disappointed, agitated, frustrated, neglected, whether it's her fault or others', and kept quiet.
2.	Differential treatment towards people from different race/ religion	Thoughts: Inappropriate behaviour. Emotions: Disappointed, dissatisfied but helpless, sad, and mad.
3.	Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to race	Thoughts: Did not know how to respond and in dilemma. Emotions: Angry, felt neglected, inferior, disappointed, frustrated, offended, and lonely.
4.	Insensitivity towards the existence of other races	Thoughts: In dilemma because was unsure if some people want to protect their privacy vs. something that lead to racial segregation, felt unsure about the intention of friends who spoke in their own mother tongue, felt they are hiding something Emotions: Upset, frustrated with heavily accented lecturer, neglected, felt uncomfortable.
5.	In-group exclusivity	Thoughts: Thinking & accepting that is normal. Emotions: Upset, deeply affected and disturbed.
6.	Alien in own land	Thoughts: Felt unfair Emotions: Angry, annoyed, lonely, offended, uncomfortable, sad, lonely, homesick, and frustrated.
7.	Language barrier as a precursor to racial microaggression	Thoughts: In dilemma and misunderstood Emotions: React passively, sad, uncomfortable, and felt like not needed.
8.	In-group benefit	Thoughts: Unfair and thought the other parties are so racist. Emotions: Angry, frustrated, upset, disturbed, uncomfortable, disappointed, offended, stressed
9.	Second-class citizen	Thoughts: Felt unfair and waste of space, inoculated with enduring discrimination policy. Emotions: Ashamed, sad, disturbed, distressed and aggravated, angry.
10.	Denial of racial experience	Emotion: Angry.
11.	Preferential interaction with other races	Thoughts: Did not trust his own race after got betrayed once, bad experience mingled with own race, preferred to mix with other races Emotion: Upset

DISCUSSION, FUTURE IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Racial microaggression is still prevalent among the academic population in a public university in Northern Malaysia, regardless of the expected egalitarian behaviours among the educated population. As shown in Table 1, there are several themes extracted from participants across all ethnicities such as the "Paradox of over-scrutiny/ overlook", "Differential treatment towards people from different race/ religion", "Assumption of superiority/ inferiority/ intelligence due to race", "Insensitivity towards the existence of other races", and "In-group exclusivity". These themes highlight the area of concern associated with ethnic relations in Malaysia. People are still experiencing differential treatments associated to their race and this is especially related to assumptions about their 'intelligence'. This suggests stereotypes about people's intelligence based on their ethnic group, among others, are still widely believed and used and therefore must be addressed accordingly. More efforts should focus on eradicating racial stereotypes across different themes including inferiority or superiority of intelligence. The other area of concern is insensitivity towards other races. More efforts should focus on identifying practices that may be considered as insensitive in order to address the issue.

In addition, several themes from Table 1 were not experienced by the Malay participants, such as "Alien in own land" and "Language barrier as a precursor to racial microaggression". This is because Malays are regarded as the indigenous citizens whose mother tongue is Malay language, the Malaysian national language. Therefore, they did not experience communication barrier and were not regarded as foreigners. This finding highlights how the experience of racial microaggression may be different for different groups of people. Theory on racial microaggression must try to explain how societal context and background shape people's racial microaggression behaviour and consequently experience. Despite the shared similarities between the themes generated from the current study with the themes found from previous literature, there are differences in terms of the context where themes occurred. An example would be the theme "Alien in own land" that happened in the U.S whereby the racial microaggression recipients who are of non-Caucasian descents were regarded to be foreigners. However, in the context of current study, the perpetrators knew that the non-Malay were Malaysian citizens, but they were treated and regarded as if they are Chinese originating from China and Indians from India. In reality, the non-Malay Malaysians have been residing in Malaysia for three or four generation. This again suggests how societal context and background not only shape people's experience but also determine the kind of themes that are more likely to surface.

Several themes emerged from the current study that are only applicable to the Malaysian context such as: "Differential

treatment towards people from different race/ religion", "Insensitivity towards the existence of other race", and "In-group benefit". Based on participants' observations, they received unequal treatments when dealing with university bureaucracy, such as unfair distribution scholarships, university admissions and other. Such experiences may have been attributed to the unseen barrier between the "in-group" and "outgroup". They may also be the outcome of certain policy practiced within the context of Malaysia.

The present study found negative reactions in the form of negative thoughts and emotions. This is consistent with findings from previous studies (Hurtado et al., 1999; McCabe, 2009).

The present study is significant in exploring the racial microaggression experiences across different ethnic groups in Malaysia and it is essential to continue to study this topic. This study also highlights the important role of insights of the in-group and out-group interactions which may contribute to a person's experience of racial microaggression. More studies are needed to further understand the underlying mechanism of in-group and out-group interactions and perceptions and how they contribute to a person's experience of racial microaggression.

The present study only explored the themes and emotional reactions of racial microaggression among public university population from one of the universities in Northern Malaysia. The findings from this study should not be generalized into wider demography of Malaysian population. Future studies may focus on other communities beyond academic setting and Northern Malaysia.

In conclusion, the study has provided one of the first efforts in unravelling the situation of racial microaggression in Malaysia. It invokes awareness and promotes understanding on the issue related to racial microaggression in Malaysia. Subsequent studies on the issues can be conducted on a wider demographic population and different settings to further deepen our understanding on this issue. It is essential for more research to be conducted in this area.

REFERENCES

Attorney General Chamber's of Malaysia. (2011). *The Constitution of the Universiti Sains Malaysia*. Retrieved from http://legal.usm.my/phocadownload/perlembagaanusm.pdf

Bahagian Penerbitan Dasar Negara. (2009). *1Malaysia: Rakyat didahulukan pencapaian diutamakan*. Retrieved from http://www.kpkk.gov.my/pdf/Booklet_1Malaysia.pdf

Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (1996). Affirmative action, unintentional racial biases, and intergroup relations. *Journal of Social Issues, 52*(4)*, 51-75.

Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory. Sage series on race and ethnic relations* (Vol. 2). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.

Hashim, I. H., Mohd-Zaharim, N., & Khodarahimi, S. (2012). Factors predicting inter-ethnic friendships at the workplace. *Interpersona, 6*(2), 191-199.

Huntington, S. P. (1965). *Political development and political decay in world politics*. New Jersey: Cambridge University Press.

Hurtado, S., Milem, J., Clayton-Pedersen, A., & Allen, W. (1999). *Enacting diverse learning environments: Improving the climate for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lino, M. (2010). *Racial microaggression experienced by Malaysian college students in HELP University College, Malaysia* (Unpublished undergraduate thesis). HELP University College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

McCabe, J. (2009). Racial and gender microaggressions on a predominantly-white campus: Experiences of black, latina/o and white undergraduates. *Race, gender and class, 16*(1-2), 133-151.

Solorzano, D. W., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 60-73.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271–286. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*(2), 183–190. doi: 10.1037/a0014191

Tajfel, H. (1974). Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information, 13*(2), 65-93. doi:10.1177/053901847401300204

The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia. (2006). *Laws of Malaysia: Act 82.* Internal Security Act 1960. Retrieved from http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%202/Act%2082.pdf

The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia. (2006). *Laws of Malaysia: Act 15.* Sedition Act 1969. Retrieved from http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%201/Act%2015.pdf

The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia. (2006). *Laws of Malaysia: Act 301.* Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984. Retrieved from http://www.agc.gov.my/Akta/Vol.%207/Act%20301.pdf

USM Official Web Portal. (2013). *Thrusts & Guiding Principles.* Retrieved from https://www.usm.my/index.php/en/info-gateway/2013-07-03-07-57-25/thrusts-guiding-principles