“This is New Zealand, you wouldn’t think that it’s like that here”:
Constructions of racial (micro)aggressions by Indian adults in interethnic relationships in the New Zealand context

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PhD research: takes a feminist-poststructuralist approach to examining experiences of Indian adults in interethnic relationships in NZ
Interethnic relationships – a brief intro

- Important social issue – supposed to lessen social distance (Torngren Osanami et al. 2016)
- Barometer of race relations
- Most research from US

- Interethnic relationships: romantic relationships between people from different ethnic groups
- Contact theory: the more contact and interaction between different ethnic groups, the more accepting and peaceful those interactions become. Literature supports this theory
- Interethnic relationships: barometer of race relations because you can work out social proximity/distance of different ethnic groups based on their rates of intermarriage with each other
- BUT, literature tells us that interethnic couples receive lots of backlash from strangers AND families. Exposure to interethnic relationships heightens salience of race in social contexts → makes these couples more vulnerable
- Despite ethnic diversity in NZ, only 6 studies looking at impact of interethnic marriage here. Only Schäfer (2007, 2010) hints at challenges faced by interethnic couples (including racial discrimination)
- My research: Indian focus. Indian culture traditionally has strong social prohibitions around marrying non-Indians
This study

- Aim: to explore experiences of Indian adults in interethnic relationships
- Reflexive photography
- Photo-interview
- 12 participants (8 women, 4 men)
- Discourse analysis

- Recruited 12 Indian adults in interethnic relationships, and asked them to take photos that represented/told stories about their experiences of being in an interethnic relationship
- One-on-one interviews to talk about stories behind photos. Photos used as stimuli for participants to reflect and think deeper.
- Initial observation in data analysis: participants’ experiences of racial microaggressions
What is a racial microaggression?

- “verbal, nonverbal, or environmental messages that contain hostile, derogatory, or negative racial messages” (Iwasaki et al., 2016)
  - Subtle and covert
- Lots of psychological literature on the subject
- Several types
  - Micro-insults
  - Micro-invalidations
  - Micro-assaults

- Racial microaggression: subtle form of racism. Arguably more harmful than obvious racial attacks because they seem innocuous on the surface but contain implicit negative messages about certain ethnic groups.

- Hard for people of colour (PoC) to justify feeling hurt/harmed by racial microaggressions—they’re often dismissed or told that they’re being oversensitive. This silences/erases narratives about subtle forms of racism

- Interethnic intimacy literature: recent study of racial microaggressions (Iwasaki et al., 2016) looked at experiences of racial microaggressions in Japanese American women married to White American men. The researchers identified 3 types of microaggression (supporting previous research).

- Initial support of these 3 types in my data
Micro-insults: Staring

“I just feel like sometimes people, like if Jack and I are holding hands and someone stares at us, they look at Jack, like they'll look at me, they'll look at him, they'll stare, but when they look at Jack they like give him the evils, I feel like they just like why, why are you with her, like you shouldn't be with her, you're not, you're not up to it, you know?”

Anna, female, 22

- Most common type of insult: being stared at. Participants sometimes thought stares were out of interest/curiosity, but most of the time perceived stares as hostile, judgemental, or disapproving.
- Photo and quote from a participant (pictured here). Photo represented how visible she felt with her boyfriend in public spaces. Quote illustrates the unpleasantness of the experience.
- Most participants felt uncomfortable when being stared at – in some cases they felt it limited the places they could safely go to because they were worried about stares.
- Gender difference: women more likely to report being stared at, compared to men.
Micro-assault

“she was literally like, like put her hand on Scott’s head and was like, you know like being really rough, like sort of like, she wasn’t very nice, like, and then she was like oh you stay away from her and stuff like that, she kept saying to him. And he, she put his, ah her hand on his neck… and he’s like can you please get your hands off me. Don’t touch me, you know? And I said stop touching him, I, I said that to her. And um, she was like, oh you all are the same anyway… and I said he’s not, you know, and he’s a good man you know, so she said oh that’s what they claim.”

Sameera, female, 25

- Micro-assault: usually a conscious, verbal discriminatory attack. Here, it also includes act of physical aggression.
- Context of quote: Indian participant (Sameera) was with her boyfriend, Scott at a bar. They were approached by a middle-aged Pakeha woman who began verbally harassing Scott, making racial slurs about men of his ethnic group.
- Escalated into physical aggression (see the quote).
Coping strategies

- Couple debriefing
- Humour
- Post-racial discourse

- Coping strategies used by participants to deal with microaggressions
- Couple debriefed to rationalise the incident. Also helped to bring them together.
- Likewise, humour used to minimise the impact of the microaggression
- Use of post-racial discourse to undermine threat of the microaggression – not observed elsewhere in the literature
Post-racial discourse

- Dissolution of racial stereotypes – “gone beyond race”
- Achievement of equality
- Colour-blindness: colour no longer matters
- Dismissal of race as a site of inequality or discrimination

Ikuenobe (2013); Visintin et al. (2017); Yogeeswaran et al. (2016)

- Post-racial discourse: the idea that society has achieved racial equality and transcended concerns about race. Race/skin colour no longer matter (colour-blindness)
- E.g., “I don’t see colour”, “racism isn’t huge in NZ”
- Positive effects: speakers asserting that they treat everyone equally regardless of uncontrollable phenotypical attributes. Acknowledgement of common humanity
- Negative effects: speakers may not realise that they’re denying/dismissing that race continues to be a site of oppression/inequality for PoC
Rationalising with post-racial discourse

“I was even more traumatised because this whole time I was telling him not to think that about New Zealanders 'cause they're nicer, you know, if you were in Australia maybe, you know because they can be quite racist, like, you know, but they're nicer here and stuff like that, and you know, not all of them are like that and stuff... And it was really horrible and it was like, I, I couldn't believe I was seeing that. You know because here this guy has been telling me this whole time that you don't see it but the people, they show it towards me and that's how I know.”

Sameera, female, 25

- Example of participant using post-racial discourse to undermine threat (returning to Sameera, who is now reflecting on the incident described on Slide 6).
- Sameera and Scott had previously argued about racism. Scott said it existed in NZ, Sameera denied it (see quote).
- Sameera draws on construction of NZ as utopia for PoC and for race relations. Only when visually confronted by physical aggression towards Scott does she realise that she might be wrong.
- Pattern observed across participants: juxtaposition of discriminatory experience with post-racial discourse. Post-racial discourse used to minimise the racist incident as a one-off, something that usually doesn’t happen in NZ – racism isn’t “business as usual” in NZ
Implications

- Exposure of post-racial discourse
- Mental health & therapy

- Still in middle of data analysis so no detailed implications
- But the data exposes the potential harms of post-racial discourse – it has the ability to suppress/silence racial discrimination that continues to occur.
- Implications for mental health of interethnic couples and PoC – these groups might feel that their experiences of racial discrimination are being ignored or denied.
- Important to address such issues in therapy with sensitivity, but also without making assumptions that all interethnic couples/PoC have experienced discrimination
References


