PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Understanding the impacts of racial microaggressions on British Asians

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ABSTRACT

Using a phenomenological approach this research explored racial microaggression experiences of British Asians. Eight participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. By employing the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), three superordinate themes were identified. This article focuses on the superordinate theme of 'impact of racial microaggressions' which encompasses four subthemes. Racial microaggressions were found to impact participants emotionally, personally, professionally, and socially.

There is a debate that an illusion of a 'post-racial' society within liberal democracies such as the UK exists, which is perpetuated by the portrayal of ethnic minority individuals in positions of power (Patel & Connelly, 2019). However, racism has not been eradicated, rather contemporary covert racism based on culture may be rising which aides this illusion (Patel & Connelly, 2019). 'Racial microaggressions' which fall under the contemporary racism umbrella have garnered significant attention within American literature. Meanwhile, in the UK contemporary racism literature is developing (e.g., Estacio & Saidy-Khan, 2014; West, 2019), and research on racial microaggressions specifically seems limited.

The term 'racial microaggressions' was originally defined as 'subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are "put downs"' (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66). The term was later re-established by Sue et al. (2007) to mean 'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults' (p. 271). Such

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exchanges encase demeaning racial messages which are transferred verbally, behaviourally, and environmentally by generally well-intentioned individuals. Sue et al. (2007) proposed a taxonomy of microaggressions which includes three distinct types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations.

According to the 2011 census data, the total population of England and Wales was 56.1 million of which 4.2 million people (7.5%) were from Asian ethnic groups. Asians were identified as the largest ethnic minority group within the regions (UK Government, 2018). As they make up a significant portion of the population it is important to understand their experiences within the UK context. However, academic literature on the British Asian experiences of racial microaggressions is scarce. Grey literature indicates that racial microaggressions are an experiential reality for British Asians which can negatively impact them in various ways. Therefore, this study aims to expand the current literature base by exploring the British Asian experiences of racial microaggressions in the contemporary UK context.

This study employs a critical race theory framework as it is claimed to be a driving force in highlighting the implicit racist norms/practices which are engrained in Western democracies (Flemmen & Savage, 2017). Furthermore, it moves beyond overt racism, acknowledges the damage contemporary racism can inflict, and recognises the importance of challenging such benign manifestations of racism (Yosso et al., 2009).

THE BRITISH CONTEXT

The daily lives of Asians in Britain changed around the early 1960s as anti-immigration campaigns, discrimination in housing and employment, and racial abuse became increasingly significant (Brah, 2006). Despite being 'cultural hybrids' who had managed to create a fusion of their Eastern and Western identity markers, British Asians were seen as victims of a 'culture clash' (Amin, 2003; Dey et al., 2017). This created a narrative where British and Asian identities were polarised and categorised as progressive and regressive (Ratna, 2014). British Asians' identities are still perceived as static, homogenous, and are considered backward and strange due to their Asian culture (Burdsey, 2007).

Asians were labelled 'model minorities' by opinion-makers in the 1960s who linked racial biology to cultural markers of identity and implied that certain aspects were inherent. Asians were perceived to be hardworking, non-threatening, and apolitical compared to African Caribbeans, who were stereotyped as lazy, criminals, and anarchists (Ratna, 2014). Such racial triangulation was said to be used to exert control over both groups as this warned Asians to remain subdued or else they would compromise their social and economic status and mobility opportunities like African Caribbeans, and it indicated to African Caribbeans that their inferiority was due to their deficiencies. This allowed those in power to have plausible

deniability about the existence of racism and promoted the idea of a colour-blind nation (Ratna, 2014).

It is important to note that everything mentioned thus far is related to South Asians. An analysis of the literature revealed that there has been a lack of acknowledgement of East Asians. Aspinall (2003) found that in the 2001 census, East Asians were not even classified under the 'Asian/Asian British' category; rather, they were classified as 'Chinese or other ethnic group'. A few studies mentioned East Asians, but even they tended to specifically focus on the British Chinese population (e.g., Yeh, 2014). This is concerning as perhaps a significant sector of the Asian community who may identify as 'British Asians' is being overlooked. Yeh (2014) suggests that perhaps the perception that British Chinese are model minorities gives the illusion that they are protected from racism, explaining their exclusion from such conversations. This explanation could apply to other East Asians too.

BRITISH ASIANS AND RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

The power of racial microaggressions rests within their invisibility. These exchanges can sometimes be more detrimental to recipients than overt racism as their elusiveness can distress recipients and harvest psychological dilemmas leading them to question their occurrence (Sue et al., 2007). A single racial microaggression encounter can lead to short-term distress but the accumulated impact of racial microaggressions can be detrimental (Nadal et al., 2014). Racial microaggressions are important to examine considering that they are a daily reality for minority individuals, and hence the psychological toll on them could be substantial.

Per the authors' knowledge, only one study has specifically focused on the British Asian experience of racial microaggressions. Burdsey (2011) interviewed 12 British Asian cricketers and found that racial microaggressions were an experiential reality for them as they commonly experienced microassaults and microinsults. However, Burdsey did not focus on the impact of racial microaggressions, as often participants would dismiss the effects. Their dismissal was attributed to denial and/or uncertainty that racial microaggressions had occurred and to fear regarding the consequences of reporting them. This demonstrates that racial microaggressions have deep psychological impacts on British Asians as the colour-blind rhetoric is so entrenched that they deny their racial realities.

Burdsey (2011) employs the critical race theory counter-narrative tenant to highlight the voices of British Asians. However, his findings are limited as his sample mainly contained Muslims of Pakistani descent and the study is grounded within the context of first-class cricket. To better understand British Asian experiences, it is important to have a more representative sample and examine racial microaggressions in various contexts.

There have been academic studies which do not directly mention racial microaggressions but seem to investigate concepts which reflect themes present in Sue et al.'s (2007) racial microaggressions taxonomy. For instance, Wong (2015) interviewed British Chinese and Indian students to see the impacts the 'model minority' stereotype and expectations of academic success had on them. Findings revealed that these high expectations can cause students discomfort, insecurity, and anxiety. Not meeting expectations could also impact the support received by teachers and one's social identity as it is linked to this stereotype.

There is a wealth of grey literature which illuminates the impacts of racial microaggressions on British Asians. For example, Sohal (2015) explains how racial microaggressions provoke identity struggles as being English yet not White was a basis for them: 'Microaggressions still hurt like racism and they still make you feel as though you don't truly belong'. Similarly, Tranfield (2020) shares experiences of racial microaggressions where inter-ethnic differences amongst South Asian groups were dismissed and pathologising and mocking of her culture were masked as 'banter' and subtle comments. She explained that these microaggressions led her and her Asian friends to be ashamed and insecure about their culture. Moreover, she explains that this cycle of prejudice carried on as when racial microaggressions were confronted by them, their feelings were invalidated and they would be labelled as 'overly sensitive', which prevented future confrontations.

Although they are not academic research pieces these individual accounts are valuable. Critical race theory places value on the experiential realities of minorities regardless of the form it is presented in (Yosso et al., 2009). Therefore, these findings should not be dismissed as they are the means through which British Asians have conveyed their stories.

IMPACT OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

When racial microaggression literature is explored beyond the British Asian demographic a variety of literature is found on the impacts of racial microaggressions. Studies conducted on various minority groups have found that microaggressions can have various negative implications for recipients. For example, they can make individuals feel powerless, invisible, angry, and belittled (Sue et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2009).

Additionally, a recent literature review of 138 articles published on racial microaggressions between 2007 and 2020 found various harmful psychological and physiological effects of racial microaggressions (Spanierman et al., 2021). This included general psychological distress, stress, anxiety, headaches, stomach aches, and other somatic symptoms. Racial microaggressions have also been linked to other externalised behaviours such as substance misuse. However, a meta-analysis and narrative review conducted by Lui and Quezada (2019) found that microaggressions are more strongly associated with internalising problems like anxiety and depression than externalising problems or physical symptoms.

Considerable literature also discusses the relationship between racial microaggressions and racial trauma (Comas-Díaz, 2016). Race-based traumatic stress is said to differ from post-traumatic stress—the stressors are said to be persistent, subtle, and ambiguous, such as microaggressions. Although, the two share similarities they should be considered separately as they can produce different symptoms (Miller, 2009).

Racial trauma and microaggressions are considered acculturative iterations designed to reinforce racial positionality and the expectations from recipients which cater to the needs, status, and emotions of White people. It seems that acculturation also acts as a coping mechanism (Liu et al., 2019).

The existing literature highlights the importance of studying racial microaggressions, however, it fails to provide an in-depth account of individuals' experiential realities. Considering the implications of racial microaggressions, the main aim of the research was to examine how British Asians make sense of their experiences.

METHOD

Sample and data collection

Eight participants were recruited through various social media platforms, using volunteer and snowball sampling.

The researchers asked participants pre-screening questions and ensured that those recruited for the study held the belief that racial discrimination exists in the UK, as this guaranteed that the phenomenon of interest was present during interviews. Participants were not excluded from the study based on their gender as their intersectional identities may influence their individual experiences of racial microaggressions, and hence this is essential to the research topic. Only participants who were consenting adults were recruited for the study.

Moreover, the label of British Asian was not assigned to a specific community. Therefore, participants were not excluded from the study based on their ethnicity. Additionally, the sample included participants who were born in the UK and those who had lived here for at least five years or longer. It was thought that perhaps those who had lived here for five years or more would have fully engaged within the UK context and would have a better understanding of it compared to someone who had lived here for a shorter amount of time.

The demographic information of participants has been summarised in Table 1 using pseudonyms.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Ethnicity	Length of stay in the UK
Divya	Female	25–29	Indian	Born and raised in UK
Neil	Male	18–24	Chinese	9 years
Lucky	Male	30–34	Indian	Born and raised in UK
Salman	Male	50–54	Bangladeshi	Born and raised in UK
Kat	Female	35–39	Indian	Born and raised in UK
Ahmad	Male	50–54	Pakistani	Over 40 years
Josephine	Female	45–49	Filipino	9 years
Jamal	Male	40–44	Indian	Born and raised in UK

Procedure

Once participants expressed their interest in the study, they were sent a participant information sheet, and informed consent was gained before participation. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a refined interview schedule. Interviews lasted for 45–90 minutes.

Interview questions included: In what indirect ways do people treat you differently based on your race? How did these impact you? Could you describe an incident in which you felt uncomfortable or insulted as the exchange had racial undertones? What were your reactions and how did you manage the situation? Can you describe any instances in which you felt snubbed because of your cultural values or racial heritage?

Data analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed following the steps laid out by Smith and Osborn (2003). These were loosely followed and modified as IPA encourages flexibility and creative thinking (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

Step 1. Each interview was transcribed.

Step 2. Each transcript was reviewed and annotated with exploratory comments.

Step 3. Exploratory comments were converted into emergent themes.

Step 4. Themes were clustered together based on conceptual similarities.

Step 5. Each theme was given a descriptive label and placed within a table.

Step 6. Theme tables were created for each transcript.

Step 7. Theme tables were compared to identify master themes.

Step 8. Themes were consolidated into a master table.

Step 9. Three superordinate themes were identified each comprising of three to four subthemes.

Step 10. The main themes were written as an unfolding narrative.

Reflexivity

Throughout all stages of the research, it was important for the researcher to adopt a reflexive researcher position. The researcher is a British Asian female who has experienced several racial microaggressions. Due to this, it is possible that she could have been considered an 'insider' to participants. This may have been beneficial as it amplified empathy and understanding and may have allowed participants to talk more openly. However, it may also have been problematic as the 'seduction of sameness' could have led to presumptions of shared meanings which could have led to less probing questions being asked that allow richer data to be gathered (Hurd & McIntyre, 1996). To minimise influence on the data the researcher maintained critical reflexivity throughout the study. While it was not thought to be plausible for her to completely bracket out her preconceptions, the researcher did acknowledge how her biases may influence the data collection and analysis. This was done by maintaining a reflective journal, making reflexive notes while analysing transcripts, and reverting to original transcripts during the analysis and write-up.

FINDINGS

The themes explored in this article illuminate the unique experiences and impact of racial microaggressions for British Asians.

The narratives demonstrate the complexity of lived experiences of microaggressions where experiences can be negative and/or positive. It shows that individuals' sense-making processes are important in understanding the impact of exchanges, where seemingly harmless interactions can have long-term effects on one's wellbeing.

Participants described instances of direct, indirect, and environmental racial microaggressions, which tended to come from a variety of sources and within different contexts. For instance, one of the participants Kat reported encountering extreme stereotypes generalising British Asians and targeting their hygiene and physicality:

Yeah… Stingy, dirty, smelly… erm… well… eh it's weird you say that because… Well so those… are erm I guess… the most aggressive… the most racist kind of thoughts I've had… from people that are like 'oh, you know all brown people smell of curry'. (Kat).

While Neil described encountering direct mockery of his Chinese background during his time at school:

There were couple of like erm people they just say 'hi' in the hallway… and before I finish the hi sentence like even the one vowel syllable they just go 'ching chong ching chong ching' [chuckles] it just is… is so frustrating to talk to you know. (Neil).

Most commonly these experiences held an undertone of an unwelcoming environment in which participants were excluded and made to feel like outsiders. Racial microaggressions where participants were treated unequally also commonly manifested in various forms. It was observed that direct racial microaggressions seemed to be mostly levied by strangers. Salman spoke about inequality related to housing where preferential treatment was given to those with Western-sounding names. The discrimination seemed prevalent as he described people having to adopt second names:

Yes, Mohammed? No chance. But if it's Mike. So, many of my friends have two names. (Salman).

Participants also described frequently encountering stereotypes, especially those regarding their intelligence and abilities. For instance, while at school baseless assumptions about Neil's mathematical abilities were commonly made which made people rely on him:

Yeah, such as, 'you must get A's in maths' [laughs] and 'you must be good at maths' and something like that, but I hate maths. I don't really like it. It's just what people think and then… people always come up to me at school er… 'eh can I do this? Can I do this?' (Neil).

Similarly, Josephine reported that without even asking her statements assuming her occupation are made:

We're being identified when you say, 'oh I'm from the Philippines' they conclude 'oh so you're a nurse'… without asking what I do… or they conclude that erm cause either you're a domestic… erm carer or cleaner or you're a nurse, they always conclude that… (Josephine).

Participants also described racial microaggressions where inter-ethnic differences were dismissed. In these experiences, there were subtle implications and assumptions of homogeneity regarding British Asian groups. For instance, Divya's school teacher was unable to differentiate between her and her other South Asian friends:

So, we all used to be in psychology together and every week we used to go around and reading you know we used to read a paragraph from this book… then when it came to us our teacher [chuckles] couldn't… she couldn't remember which one of us read last. Cause she was like 'which one of you' [laughs] 'which one of you girls?' cause we all looked the same… [laughs] so she was like 'ooo which one, whoever read last' we were like 'yeah yeah it's Neha's turn' because we didn't want to read but she couldn't tell the difference. (Divya).

Participants also spoke to various types of environmental racial microaggressions which tended to perpetuate stereotypes, create hostile political/social environments, and produce personal and/or professional challenges.

Ahmad discussed the role of television in normalising racism previously as the content had no boundaries:

> *I remember as a child watching TV and erm looking at some of these comedians and they were… blatantly racist … I think Berding… Berding Manning or someone like I can't remember his name anyway comes to mind you know, it was very, very racist, outwardly racist about… he used to use the P word, he used to use… you know every kind of thing you could think of he used to use erm… and… it was normalised… but it's putting people down again and again, it's putting Asians down all the time.* (Ahmad).

The impact of these microaggressions on participants seemed to vary depending on the situation; hence, this superordinate theme consolidates and generalises the effects of experiences described across interviews.

Emotional experience

Across the interviews, participants described experiencing a variety of emotions during racial microaggression incidences and after them. They spoke about emotions such as anger, hurt, frustration, shock, discomfort, and confusion. Emotions were not one-dimensional for all participants and some even described the range of emotions an incident could provoke. For instance, Jamal's reflections on his experiences reveal the emotional toll repeated microaggressions have had on him:

> *I would say all them incidences that I spoke about really. I feel… you feel insulted every time, that's part of the feeling. There's kind of a ingredient, sorry, mixture of feelings… erm so each and every time I feel insulted because… I, I like to think I am not in anyway prejudice, probably got some prejudices maybe you know… maybe I have. I certainly try not to have… and I would like to think everybody's kind of on the same page a bit.* (Jamal).

Jamal uses tentative language which suggests an internal conflict where he is struggling with his own values and societal realities. He appears to value equality and makes a conscious effort to remain unbiased. Therefore, when he experiences microaggressions, the feelings of being insulted may be amplified as they clash with his ideals. There appears to be a desire to externalise his feelings as when he is describing them, he shifts from saying 'I' to 'you' as if he is talking about someone else. His pauses and difficulties in articulating himself here may reflect the difficulties he faces when navigating these experiences and their emotional impact.

Emotional experiences also can last beyond the duration of racial microaggression incidences. Kat's reflections suggest that thoughts of her experiences intrude into her mind repetitively, despite her attempts to forget them which increases her emotional distress:

> *I'll just think about it again and again and there are times where I'm like I try not to think about it, and I can't help it. It just sits there and I… go over what happened, what I could have done, what I could have said erm… if I did anything wrong that could have diffused the situation… erm… I usually come up with a—actually they were in the wrong.* (Kat).

The unresolved feelings linger and demand attention from Kat. When she does engage with them it is in an analytical manner where she is dissecting the details of the situation indicating her struggle to make sense of her experience and her reactions. Rather than approaching this in a reflective manner which allows her to emotionally process the situation she looks for what she did 'wrong' which could induce feelings of self-doubt and blame for escalating the situation with her responses. She can bat those feelings away suggesting that microaggressions create a complex emotional experience where the recipient is dealing with various internal conflicts.

Like Kat, Divya struggles to navigate these experiences. The subtleness of the experience creates an emotional burden for her creating confusion. She oscillates between 'annoyed' and 'angry' and struggles to articulate her emotions demonstrating her challenge which has left her with unresolved feelings of injustice:

> *We didn't say anything you know we didn't say anything or we… We didn't confront it. We were just… I guess annoyed and angry or… Not, not even angry but just… it's unfair… erm not having an understanding of what, what actually happened…* (Divya).

This subtheme demonstrates the complex emotional experiences of participants concerning racial microaggressions.

Impact on identity, personality, and self-image

Across all interviews, participants discussed the impacts racial microaggressions had on their identity, personality, and self-image.

Divya reveals her identity struggles in her youth where her actions of avoiding parts of her culture were driven by her desire to 'fit in'. These aspects of her identity are perceived to go against social norms of her environment and are rejected to avoid being ostracised:

> *I think before I never used to watch them* [Bollywood movies] *because I was a bit… embarrassed… when you are younger you want to feel like you fit in? …and you want to do all the right things like everyone else like… and the… you are like 'oh but I still want to watch it' like you know I still want to be who I am… So, you watch a little bit of it, and then you hear those sort of things. But now it's come to a stage where you know you put yourself first. I don't know as you get older, erm, you do you.* (Divya).

In the extract above, Divya talks about her struggles with Bollywood movies, which are further complicated by her desire to enjoy these aspects of her culture. Divya speaks about wanting to do what is 'right', implying that embracing her culture would be taboo and going against perceived social norms. By enjoying these aspects of her culture privately she is highlighting their duality where externally these activities are wrong but internally they align with her. Divya's attribution of her experience to the vulnerability of her young age indicates that the impact of microaggressions on identity may be affected by maturity and level of confidence.

Salman attempts to create a harmonised identity by combining British and Asian values, but continues feeling 'stateless' due to skin colour; this indicates that microaggressions impact his sense of belonging. His conviction that 'nothing else' but his skin prevents him from fully feeling British implies that microaggressions have created a perception that being White equals being British:

I feel stateless… I feel stateless. I don't feel a hundred percent British and I don't think I ever will, because of my colour, nothing else. I feel British in in terms of my values, my values are very British. However, I have taken on some values which are the Asian values. (Salman).

These experiences were also said to impact participants' personalities. Neil recounts his ways of coping with microaggressions, which appear to have developed into prominent features of his identity. His use of headphones signifies a desire to withdraw, leading to self-imposed isolation as protection. His whispering and laughter during these descriptions convey a sense of discomfort and vulnerability:

Became very… I've become… very… in-introverted [laughs]. Don't want to talk to anyone just keeping to myself and just [whispers] put my headphones on [laughs]. (Neil).

Jamal's reflections and analogy of being 'in a box' shows that microaggressions have limiting effects, which impacts his sense of self and behaviour. He describes feeling pressured to conform, highlighting how powerful these experiences are for him, where despite his attempt to resist, stereotypes can become internalised and enacted to play out a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Erm, it makes me feel like I'm sort of judged, makes me feel like I'm in a box. It actually makes me feel to behave as that person in that box a little bit. (Jamal).

This subtheme has demonstrated that due to racial microaggressions participants tended to experience identity conflicts. The degree to which this conflict impacted an individual varied from participant to participant.

Impact on professional and personal life

Participants reported that racial microaggressions impacted their internal perceptions of their environment and their interactions externally.

Lucky described hostile interactions with his manager and being overlooked for a promotion over a White colleague. Lucky explained that although race was not directly mentioned there was a felt-sense that these actions were racially charged. He expresses the emotional toll these experiences had on him, creating internal defeat which led to loss of motivation and withdrawal:

Erm… it, it, it knocked my morale off, like I didn't have much motivation to do the job anymore… Erm… But I, I still continued work obviously, but in a just, just coming into work it didn't really feel like 'if I am not going to progress then there is no real point staying here'. (Lucky).

Lucky's narrative highlights the conflict between his sense of duty and desire to disengage; his use of the word 'obviously' implies an obligation to keep working due to need rather than motivation. His hesitations and repetitions here convey his challenge in processing these experiences, highlighting their distressing effects.

Similarly, Divya explained how indirect racial microaggressions from her colleagues created a hostile work environment and made her avoid work:

Maybe, like, I didn't want to be surrounded by her, I didn't want to come into work cause I am… they're just negative people really. (Divya).

Divya's use of 'maybe' and hesitation demonstrates the challenge in articulating her emotional experience and justifying her actions. Regardless, Divya concretely labels her colleagues as 'just negative people' implying that she views their behaviours as fixed and that any effort to change or challenge them would be pointless. This could reinforce her sense of hopelessness and desire to avoid work. Divya's narrative demonstrates how microaggressions can influence her perspective on people around her and can shape her interactions.

For Neil avoiding other Asians was his response to racial microaggressions:

I want to I want to be immersed with… er in the Western culture more so I can fit in more… then I can, so I can get rid of any aggressions… that they might have towards me. (Neil).

Neil's desire to assimilate into Western culture is driven by his belief that hostility towards him would be mitigated if he was seen as less different. The repetition of 'I want' reflects Neil's immense drive to 'fit in', reflecting the deep internalisation of the belief that racial microaggressions occur due to how others perceive him. Neil appears to place responsibility onto himself, unlike Divya who has attributed her experiences to the fixed negativity of others.

Similarly for Ahmad, racial microaggressions strained his friendships as he felt unable to share his experiences:

Ah as I keep saying it's more damaging because… you don't know how to cope with that, you don't really know… what do you do with that? You can't really talk to anyone about it because as I said even my friends didn't understand when people, my friends, were White, they didn't understand that at all. (Ahmad).

An isolating environment is created for Ahmad as he perceives there to be no outlet to process these experiences, making coping with racial microaggressions even more challenging. He states that his friend 'didn't understand' and this implies that he made an effort to convey his struggles but felt unsupported or unheard. His distress is further underscored by his inability to process or cope with these situations alone due to there being no social protocol laid out. This highlights that the ambiguous nature of these experiences can cause internal confusion and strain relationships.

Learning opportunity and self-development

For several participants, racial microaggressions provided an opportunity for self-development and learning. For example, Salman explained how he has come to accept microaggressions:

> *Positively… Yeah, they made me stronger, they made, made me realise that you can't be everyone's best friend, they made, made me realise that… you can't make everybody like you. I've tried to overcompensate… by being Asian and an ex-Muslim… to… do things for people that I think might be racist… to make them, to basically say to them 'hey listen… I know you probably have these… deep-rooted… prejudices… But we are not all like that, I've, I've tried to do that… and in the past year or two I've… I've come to… the conclusion that… you know what I should stop doing this… If they're going to be racist, let them be racist… you're not a one man… global… You know, movement to eradicate racism or discrimination.* (Salman).

Salman's use of 'overcompensate' signifies that he used to believe that he needed to work harder to be liked or accepted, indicating an internalised sense of responsibility to challenge negative stereotypes regarding Asians. Recently, he has started to shift his view and has become more acceptant that these prejudices exist. His shift is evident in the statement 'if they are going to be racist, let them be racist'—it shows that he is acknowledging his limits and freeing himself of the burden of being the 'movement to eradicate racism'. His perspective shift reflects his understanding that prejudice is deeply rooted in society and that global systemic changes are needed.

Divya believed that her experiences shaped her as a person and helped her embrace her identity proudly:

> *I, I think they've built up on who I am. It's, it's become a part of me that it's made me feel more like, I think, over the years you become… I don't know, you're, you're proud of who you are.* (Divya).

> *It has actually made me want to learn more about my culture.* (Divya).

Divya's reflections on her journey demonstrate how microaggressions have influenced her identity, indicating a sense of growth and acceptance over time. Divya's initial discomfort and identity confusion due to these experiences shifted into genuine curiosity about her culture and an embrace of her identity. This shift shows us that the impact of racial microaggressions is not static and can evolve throughout a person's lifetime. Divya converts her challenges into opportunities for self-discovery; this demonstrates the role of microaggressions in the dynamic process of identity formation which is influenced by personal growth, individual experiences, and age.

For Jamal, these experiences have developed his mindset, made him more aware of his biases, and allowed him to challenge them:

The positive of it is that it has challenged me, challenged my mindset to kind of… ensured me to not be prejudice and not be erm… yeah… be racist or have unconscious biases and try and challenge some of them. (Jamal).

Jamal's description, especially his use of the word 'challenged' multiple times, reflects that he is on an active journey of self-reflection where he is trying to achieve personal growth and enhanced self-awareness. His experiences of microaggressions have been thought-provoking and they have held up a mirror, leading him to consider his thinking and behaviours. This highlights the profound impact of these experiences, which can be eye-opening for individuals. His reflections indicate that these experiences have allowed him to engage deeper with his identity and biases.

DISCUSSION

Using a critical race theory framework, this study aimed to highlight the voices of British Asians. Their experiential knowledge was considered legitimate and important to understanding racism (Carrasco, 1996). The findings of the current study demonstrate that racial microaggressions are an experiential reality for British Asians. Participants in the study spoke about the short-term and long-term impacts of racial microaggressions which could be negative and/or even constructive sometimes. As found in previous studies (e.g., Sue et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2009), participants reported feeling emotional distress due to racial microaggressions. In discussing the emotional impacts of microaggressions, participants would frequently act avoidantly, hesitantly, or try to minimise them—indicating that acknowledging and expressing emotions was perhaps challenging and uncomfortable.

Participants reported that racial microaggressions provoked negative emotions, impacted their identity and relationships, and some participant descriptions of impacts of racial microaggressions seemed indicative of racial trauma symptoms (Carter et al., 2013), such as intrusive memories, avoidance, hypervigilance, low mood, anger, and low self-esteem. It was also found that the severity of impact depended on individuals' subjective experiences of microaggressions (Comas-Díaz, 2016).

The current study identified racial microaggressions to have a significant impact on the identities and personalities of British Asians. Participants stated that racial microaggressions caused identity conflicts, reluctance to embrace their cultural identities, diminished their confidence, provoked feelings of not belonging, and led some to alter their personalities. However, for some participants, racial microaggressions helped them develop their cultural pride, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness. Interestingly, those who described racial microaggressions as aiding their self-development reported this as more of a general impact of their experiences. So, in essence, each racial microaggression experience may have had negative effects on them, but the overall impact was constructive. However, this was not the

case for all participants; it is unclear if this is due to individual differences. Nevertheless, it seemed that participants who reported self-development were eager to take control and turn negative situations into positives. This demonstrates that the impact of single microaggressions and the collective impact may vary depending on the individual.

British Asians have been dubbed as 'cultural hybrids' (Amin, 2003) by some scholars and victims of a 'cultural clash' by others (Brah, 2006). Curiously, both the identity descriptions mentioned above were found in this study. Some participants even reported experiencing both identity confusion and harmony over their lifetime. Their identity development was often spoken about in relevance to age, where some described feeling uncomfortable with their cultural identity growing up in a Western country but as they matured, they had learnt to embrace it. However, this was not the case for all participants, where some, even in their adult lives, reported having problems with their cultural identity which they attributed to racial microaggressions.

These unique insights seem to highlight the complexities of identity within a bicultural context and that the impact of racial microaggressions is not the same for even a homogenous group. This variation could be due to individual differences, such as differences in home environments, residential areas, and/or the schools individuals experienced growing up. For example, perhaps someone who grew up in a more traditional Asian home and went to a majority White school may find it harder to find that bicultural balance as they may have experienced more racial microaggressions at school compared to someone who went to a school where there were other Asian children around. Nevertheless, the findings seem to correspond to past literature on British Asian identity to a certain extent (e.g., Brah, 2006). However, it is important to note that in this study identity was discussed in relation to racial microaggressions and seems to highlight the underlying mechanism which could contribute to the development of the British Asian identity (i.e., racial microaggressions).

The current study also found racial microaggressions to have impacts on the professional and personal lives of participants. For some participants there seemed to be a knock-on effect where racial microaggressions would lead to negative thoughts, emotions, and impact their behaviours. These behaviours for some may be avoiding their friends or colleagues, wanting to escape their environment, and/or challenging microaggressions. For some participants, retaliation manifested as a means to negate the assumptions of the racial microaggression levied against them. Intriguingly, there was only one participant who reported that sometimes racial microaggressions made him want to act according to the assumptions made. This seems to resonate with the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1948), where a fatalistic approach is almost taken—where the person believes that people will assume things about them anyway so they might as well behave accordingly. Behaviour varied though from situation to situation for all participants. This chain reaction of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours seems to foreshadow cognitive behavioural theory's claims of the three being

interlinked (Wills, 2015). This perhaps could explain why, for some participants, impacts of racial microaggressions persist.

Furthermore, racial microaggressions also had external impacts, including halting participants' career progression, normalising racism, and interfering with friendships. This demonstrates that the impacts of racial microaggressions are not just limited to the internal experiences of British Asians but, rather, they widely impact their lives too. For example, one participant explained how being constantly ignored and shut down at work made those at lower levels think that White members of staff held more power and value than Asian members. Therefore, it seems that racial microaggressions are not only sending messages to British Asians but to others too about who has power. It seems that in some unconscious way the racial hierarchy stays intact, while giving people the illusion that meritocracy and equality exist. From a critical race theory standpoint, this seems to echo interest convergence—where White individuals support racial justice and equality if it serves them in some way (Yosso et al., 2009). Participants who described instances such as the one mentioned here may have sensed these false narratives of equality, but their uncertainty makes it seem that they did not feel empowered to label them in such a way or acknowledge how they maintained the status quo.

The current study has wider societal implications where findings could be used to inform sensitive content development for various media platforms and raise awareness for the public regarding their behaviours which could seem offensive. These findings could also be used by educational and/or corporate organisations to aid the development of effective racial sensitivity training programmes and help create dialogues within these organisations about racial microaggressions. If such organisations are aware of the complexities of ambiguous racial microaggressions they could perhaps create better infrastructure for reporting and handling them where recipients feel safe and validated. The results could also be used to inform recruitment and promotion processes where if these organisations acknowledge these environmental microaggressions perhaps initiatives can be created to prevent them.

These findings could also be used to help support dialogue and narratives about existing racism against British Asians. Perhaps by disseminating these findings on social media or other media platforms, a realistic reflection of British Asian experiences of covert discrimination can be seen by social scientists and the public. Launching these findings into the social media realm can also perhaps help create a social media campaign which gives voices to other British Asians who have experienced racial microaggressions. It can also empower others to challenge racial microaggressions and give them the language to name these ambiguous experiences they could not call out before.

The study may also be useful to mental health practitioners as it attempts to exhibit the racial realities of British Asians and get their voices heard. This is thought to potentially help develop practitioners' cultural competencies and aid them in working effectively with British

Asians. Comas-Díaz (2016) argues that acknowledging a client's exposure to historical discrimination and racial microaggressions is important, and ignoring these aspects may lead to the underdiagnosis of race-related stress and trauma. Hence, by highlighting British Asians' daily experiences and histories of discrimination this study hopes to help practitioners create a holistic understanding of the British Asian experience. This could help them enhance interventions used for this demographic and ensure that they are treated appropriately.

However, these findings should be interpreted with caution as the study sample was small and mostly consisted of South Asians with only two participants being of East Asian descent. Therefore, perhaps the findings are more representative of the South British Asian experience and the applicability of findings to all British Asians could be questionable. The British Asian identity is complex, and while common themes were found it may be more beneficial for future researchers to study South and East Asians separately. In the study, we advertised for 'British Asians' with no other specifications, and this led to the sample being mostly South Asians who self-identified as 'British Asians'. Therefore, perhaps future researchers should try different sampling methods to recruit East Asians and gain a more representative sample.

Additionally, all participants were recruited from London, which is considered significantly more multicultural than other parts of the UK. Hence, experiences of British Asians living in other parts of the UK may vary considerably. Another potential limitation could be that the sample included participants who were born and raised in the UK and those who had migrated here. The length of stay of participants may be a crucial factor in determining their racial microaggression experiences because those born in the UK may have had more time to adopt coping strategies to deal with microaggressions. Perhaps future researchers may want to compare the experiences of those who have been born in the UK and those who have migrated here. The two groups may not be completely homogenous and disparities in experiences may be useful to identify.

The study also employed semi-structured interviews which could be vulnerable to demand characteristics and desirability biases. Furthermore, the findings relied on the retrospective recollection of participants' subjective experiences, and therefore their description of events may not be accurate representations of events. However, the study aimed to understand how participants made sense of their experiences rather than trying to gain reflection on the reality of events, and hence the retrospective approach was appropriate.

To expand the UK-based literature on racial microaggressions future researchers may find it beneficial to apply other research methodologies and also consider the impact of recent events, including the COVID-19 pandemic and increased police brutality, on the manifestation and maintenance of racial microaggressions in the UK context.

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