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Editorial

Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination

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Abstract

In 1991, Philomena Essed highlighted the importance of studying contemporary racism, focusing on the interplay between the macro-social dimension and its constant reactivation in everyday interactions. Later, psychologists redefined the pervasive experience of racism in everyday encounters in terms of racial microaggressions. Migrants and asylum seekers today constitute “ideal” candidates for this kind of experience. This is due to the persistent historical processes that harken back to Western colonialism and imperialism, as well as the growing hostility towards people migrating from the Global South. This hostility has been brewing for several decades in Western countries, and it manifests in both everyday informal interactions and institutional contexts, where migrants and asylum seekers constantly face racist attitudes.

Keywords

discrimination; everyday racism; migrants; racial microaggressions; refugees; social exclusion

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination” edited by Fabio Quassoli (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca) and Monica Colombo (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca).

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1. Introduction

It is well known that migrants and asylum seekers are exposed to numerous types of potentially traumatic experiences both in their home countries and during displacement (Steel et al., 2009). Overall, the same can be said of their post-migration experience, which is multi-layered and can be influenced by a complex and multifaceted set of factors (economic, social, cultural, and linguistic) related to departure and destination contexts (Hynie, 2018). Besides, increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum policies have been introduced over the last decades, both in Europe and North America: extended processing times, the implementation of temporary visas for refugees, more extended periods of mandatory detention for those without valid entry or residence permits, and so on (Brouwer, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020). Consequently, newcomers’ experience is often fraught with great uncertainty, requiring individuals to

navigate increasingly complex legal procedures and face numerous barriers to accessing fundamental rights and services (Fassin, 2011; Hasselberg, 2016). From the earliest stages, their journey is fraught with obstacles and characterized by resettlement stress, distrust of authority, and perceived discrimination and stigma: all factors that can feed on otherness (Hatoss, 2012) and a sense of exclusion (Ryan et al., 2008). The emergence of a kind of “belonging boundary” (Morrice, 2013) is also boosted by negative representations of economic migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees by mainstream media that fuel growing hostility towards them (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). They are defined not from their own personal/social characteristics, “but simply by the fact that they are ‘not one of us,’ and are, therefore, a threat to ‘our way of life’” (Kundnani, 2001, p. 52). This perception of threat fosters discriminatory attitudes and often results in a myriad of everyday episodes of ethnic and racial micro-aggressions that can strongly influence

migrants/refugees' well-being and feeling of inclusion (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2020).

In the destination countries of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, one can see a complex and pervasive boundary work that originates in the same categories used to draw distinctions between different kinds of human mobilities (De Genova et al., 2015). Defining those who cross national borders as mobile people, cosmopolitan/transnational people, expatriates, lifestyle migrants, mobile gentrifiers, economic migrants, asylum-seekers, *gastarbeiter*, and so on (La Fleur & Stanek, 2017) establishes relationships “by difference”—sometimes by similarity—between those who produce and use these labels and those to whom they refer, and has highly significant implications for the life chances of the latter. As with categorizations related to gender or ethnicity, their use allows distinctions to be drawn between those who have the right (and the power) to impose a specific label and those who come to terms with it, whether they consider it acceptable or a form of violence (Sayad, 1999). This process demarcates a symbolic border around which old and new inequalities can be (re)produced and reconfigure the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

According to Lamont and Mizrahi (2012), the manifestations of racism that dot the daily experience of racialized groups (Essed, 1991) can be described as a kind of relational boundary work through which people claim the right to be part of the in-group, define themselves by similarity or difference from other people, challenge and denounce the stereotypical representations they are subjected to, claim their rights in the face of discriminatory behavior, and denounce the more or less blatant or subtle offenses to their sense of dignity. Such a boundary work has two main characteristics: On the one hand, it constantly reactivates imaginaries which, following critical racial theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), we can define as systemic racism; on the other hand, it frequently manifests itself in ambiguous and unspoken forms and unfolds through seemingly innocuous actions which are based on stigmatizing implicit premises (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020).

For that matter, the importance of studying contemporary racism focusing on the interplay between its macro-social dimension (long-term historical processes that are still present in dominant political discourses and social institutions) and its constant reactivation in everyday interactions has been highlighted since 1991 by Philomena Essed. As far as the micro dimension is concerned, we think that the conceptual grid built around the concept of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010) seems particularly relevant because of the high level of ambiguity, pervasiveness, and vagueness that can characterize episodes of everyday racism. While it is true that microaggressions are subtle, covert acts that might appear harmless, it is also true that being repeatedly exposed to them can harm both the mental well-being of migrants and asylum seekers and their feeling of exclusion (Wong et al., 2014).

2. Overview of Contributions

However, we are also aware that focusing on everyday, ambiguous, implicit, and strictly interactional manifestations of microaggressions may risk obliterating the systemic character of racism and the institutional and structural foundations of white violence. This issue is exemplified by Williams and Embrick (2023), who argue that the term “microaggressions” has become a construct of white supremacy and, therefore, an ideological and discursive anti-black practice; its use as an analytical framework can create the false impression that changes in individual behavior alone can eliminate structural anti-black violence.

Under this premise, this thematic issue aims to present new and original research on how racial microaggressions and everyday racism shape the experience of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. As this topic has so far been little studied in relation to migratory processes (especially in Europe), we aim to offer a deeper understanding of how these processes unfold in various institutional contexts (workplace, detention centers) or daily encounters in various urban settings, how they can be linked to identity negotiations, ontological security and the experience of humiliation, which challenges they pose on the methodological level, and what forms of resistance they activate.

More precisely, three articles explore the experience of microaggressions in everyday life: Kwan Wong (2023) describes varied experiences of racial microaggressions directed at Chinese immigrant women before and during the Covid-19 pandemic; Quassoli et al. (2023) explore young people with migrant parents experience of everyday racism in Italy, reconstructing the overall dynamics of racial microaggressions, highlighting the boundary work and identity negotiation process carried out in everyday encounters and pointing out how an implicit reference to race is at the heart of the forms of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) through which a race-based conception of citizenship is affirmed; finally, Nicolson (2023) investigates the lived experiences of racial microaggressions faced by young adult migrants in everyday life from an ontological security perspective (see also Kinnvall, 2004). This author unpacks how migrants negotiate traumatic experiences of racism and manage their identities, employing coping mechanisms to minimize the daily trauma of racism and microaggressions experienced in Scotland.

The experience of everyday racism in institutional contexts is addressed in three other articles: Ortega-Jiménez et al. (2023) explore everyday discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace, gathering evidence of daily humiliation in the form of racial slurs, verbal abuse, and unequal treatment that leave Ecuadorian migrants feeling powerless and helpless; Low and Shah (2023) examine how refugee women of diverse backgrounds enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and social

exclusion; finally, Tural (2023) investigates the ways in which race operates, is experienced, and resisted by actors involved in everyday relations in detention centres, showing the centrality of racializing ideas of migrant “undeservingness” and “deportability” in shaping embodied, affective, and experiential realities of the visiting rooms of detention centres, and the various ways in which actors resist those identifications.

All six research articles cited above share the same methodological approach and are based on the analysis of either semi-structured or narrative interviews with victims of microaggression. The last article of this thematic issue, by Scheibelhofer et al. (2023), explores methodological reflexivity in the research process itself, highlighting a variety of discursive positioning strategies employed by interviewees to avoid anticipated discrimination.

Taken together, these articles show the pervasiveness and persistence of different forms of racism in various national contexts, even in those considered multicultural societies. Moreover, the choice to adopt a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the constant experience of often hidden and pervasive racist attitudes not only undermines the possibility of recognition and inclusion but alludes to a very problematic and partial decolonization process and signals the persistence of (neo)colonial relations between countries of the global north and those of the Global South.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

Moving Beyond Obfuscating Racial Microaggression Discourse

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that the concept of racial microaggression is a white supremacy construct that is an ideological and discursive anti-Black practice. We discuss how microaggressions' reduction of historical and hegemonic white supremacy to everyday relations that are merely performative, not integral to sustaining such larger forces, is an analytical shortcoming. We contend that without the adequate heft of historical white supremacy as a part of capitalist and colonial expansion, genocide, and Indigenous erasure, microaggression scholars will remain enthralled with the idea that individual behavior changes can eradicate anti-Black violence.

Keywords

microaggression; racism; systemic racism; white supremacy

Issue

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1. Introduction

Although the concept of racial microaggressions, which contends that racialized interactions among Blacks and "whites" are characterized by subtle forms of violence, is *en vogue* in the social sciences, its sociological soundness has yet to be critically evaluated. Such an assessment requires understanding whether the term racial microaggression is an appropriate concept for gauging how social relations grounded in white supremacy structure everyday life. Sociology's central concern is with explaining how large and small-scale social groups construct individuals; therefore, sociologists view micro/interpersonal actions as outcomes of social and historical forces rather than individual dynamics alone. As a concept, microaggression's emergence from psychiatry indicates its primary analysis involves studying the individual rather than society. Psychiatry studies the psychological and psychosocial characteristics of one person at a time to construct general principles for understanding mental health trends, human behaviors, or societal problems. By contrast, sociology looks beyond individuals

to study societal dynamics through specific social relations and social systems. Our analysis raises a variety of concerns about how the microaggression concept has been used to understand the everyday workings of white supremacy/systemic racism. Specifically, how do microaggression analyses under-theorize the structural sources of anti-Black violence? Does it serve our present and future efforts to eradicate anti-Black violence and racism?

In this article, we encase "white" in quotes because it is a biological fiction that people who believe themselves to be "white" use to reinforce a racially ordered society. As Nell Painter's 2010 *History of White People* reminds us, "white" is an idea, not a fact; it is a hegemonic idea. Europeans and their descendants worldwide accept it as a self-evidently suitable identifier and category. Further, it is a type of status in which "white" racial identity provides the basis for allocating societal benefits both private and public in character (Harris, 1993). We define systemic racism as a complex array of structured anti-Black practices and unjustly gained rights and political-economic power that are legitimated and naturalized by

the ideologies of “race” and whiteness (Feagin, 2006; Harris, 1993; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Systemic racism hinges on the concepts of “race” and whiteness—ideologies enforced by power and violence (Kivel, 2011). This power dynamic sustains white racism practices, policies, ideas, images, and stereotypes pervading every societal institution (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). Police power and its civilian proxy, white vigilante violence, constitute anti-Black violence and anti-Black racism that strips blackened people of their value through dehumanization and systematic oppression. We are also fully cognizant of the distinct differences between racism and anti-Black racism as articulated by scholars such as F. Fanon (1967), C. Mills (1997), and S. Wynter (2002). For these scholars and others, anti-blackness is centered on the historical and egregious markings of what constitutes humanity and human beings. Blackness constitutes a positionality and fixed point from which all other positionalities are deemed legitimate (and human). Anti-blackness is a logic that not only dehumanizes people identified as Black, but anything associated with blackness (Hesse & Thompson, 2022). Thus, whereas eradicating racism requires deep transformations in social practices and structures, eradicating anti-blackness and anti-Black racism requires a radical reimagining of the world altogether (Jung & Costa Vargas, 2021).

In what follows, we provide a brief overview of the racial microaggression concept to think with and through its conceptualization of anti-Black violence. Anti-Black violence includes both epistemic and discursive racial violence as well as physical violence. Epistemic violence is akin to Foucault’s (1970) idea of *épistémè* which posits that in any given culture the historical, non-temporal, a priori knowledge grounding truth and discourse define the conditions for the possibility for all knowledge, whether expressed ideologically or in practice. This intellectual and praxis typology is central to white supremacy (Mbembe, 2019; Mills, 1997). Because white supremacy pervades social life, social life is almost exclusively composed of common white beliefs, frames, and practices that are religiously adhered to by most people (Feagin, 2013). People’s devotion to anti-Black violence is an outcome of these daily engagements in the practice of racial terror; societal members come to recognize the power of white collective violence in creating a sense of superiority, and a mental and material advantage in exchange for their devoutness to white supremacy. Anti-Black violence then is an enactment of shared racist beliefs; it is through the everyday practice of anti-Black violence that the system of white supremacy affirms itself.

We argue that the concept of racial microaggression itself is a white supremacy construct that is an ideological and discursive anti-Black practice. In line with this proposition, we discuss how microaggressions’ reduction of historical and hegemonic white supremacy to everyday relations that are merely performative, not integral to sustaining such larger forces, is an analytical shortcoming. Contrary to racial microaggressions atom-

izing frames, we argue that anti-Black violence does not dissipate with a change in individual behavior. Rather it leads to a misdiagnosis of the cause of anti-Black violence. For anti-Black violence—in all its forms—is not an isolated individual action; it is a governing and ordering technique working to protect whiteness and white supremacy. Hence, we suggest that without the adequate heft of historical white supremacy as a part of capitalist and colonial expansion, genocide, and Indigenous erasure, microaggression scholars will remain enthralled with the idea that individual behavior changes can eradicate anti-Black violence. This is ironic, considering that, despite their claim(s) that individual behaviors are emblematic of structural forces, microaggression proponents’ failure to grasp this leads them to reduce eliminating anti-Black violence to making changes in individual behavior (Lilienfeld, 2017).

2. What Are Microaggressions?

Psychiatrist Chester Pierce developed the microaggression concept to explain how internalized feelings of racial superiority expressed by “whites” in countless intentional or unintentional, verbal and nonverbal, slights, snubs, or insults inflicted daily degrade the mental and physical health of “socially defined” Black people (a phrase used to indicate groups are blackened and whitened in the field of white supremacy) over time (Pierce, 1970; see also Domínguez & Embrick, 2020; Embrick, et al., 2017). Black people usually do not respond to every provocation. However, a response is forthcoming when the cumulative effect of racial microaggressions becomes too great to bear, usually in the form of cathartic release rather than a confrontation. Pierce (1970, p. 268) asserts that these affronts, or what he terms micro-offenses, are a collective effort by “whites” to keep Black people stigmatized and oppressed. Hence, these daily hostilities are networked through conscious and imperceptible “white” identity constructions created and sustained in institutions such as the educational system, which conditions “whites” into the default superiority of whiteness and ordinariness of anti-Black violence. Contrary to contemporary proponents’ interpretation of racial microaggressions, we argue these acts are not unconscious per se, given “whites” are obtusely conscious that their actions are enabling their whiteness. That is, many whites (and racialized others) are aware they can direct violence at Black folks because no one with power in a white supremacy context will doubt their narrative of events (Embrick, 2015). They know that institutions are designed to side with “white” people so they can escape punishment for their micro-violent assaults.

3. Under-Theorizing Structure

To best understand how the concept of microaggression is used in the context of a white supremacy society, it is necessary to make visible the power relations it obscures

through its processes of decontextualization and dehistoricization. Instead of operating at a deeper conceptual level, many current microaggression analyses impede the use of context and history in unpacking anti-Black violence as a construction of white supremacy power relations. To recognize this conceptual bait and switch, social scientists should be reflexive and wary about white supremacy rhetorical discourse deployed to divert attention from systemic racism. Normative white supremacy involves at least some degree of below-conscious complicity on the part of the subjugated that is made possible by the process of “misrecognition” (James, 2015). Misrecognition in this context refers to racially oppressed people’s pre-conscious acceptance of racial hierarchies as normal (Mueller, 2017). Consequently, it is important to consider how racialized scholars’ use of the prevailing conceptions of racial microaggressions as subtle, everyday forms of racism incline them to neglect exploring the systemic character of racism undergirding bigoted individual action. This aversion to viewing racial microaggressions as systemic contributes to its persistence thus contributing to the problem, not the solution.

Though Pierce (1974, 1995) recognized the importance of power and macro-structures in sustaining anti-Black violence, this part of his formulation of microaggressions is often ignored by many social scientists like Sue et al. (2007, p. 273) who individualize the microaggression concept by defining it as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral insults towards racialized “Others.” Their interpretation directs attention to the internalized racial ideas and assumptions driving bigoted insults to illuminate their role in assaulting the consciousness of racialized Others. Since this approach ignores how micro- and macro-structural processes interact to facilitate daily white violence, many scholars writing on the subject formulate racial microaggressions as devoid of a systemic essence to focus on individual acts of white terror. This interpretation, which is dominant in the social sciences, merely catalogs “white” people’s violence towards Black people in ways that lead to prescribed solutions and treatments to counteract the mental and physical degradation resulting from anti-Black violence—medicalizing rather than politicizing anti-Black violence. This shifts attention from the structural foundations of racial microaggressions to their symptomatic embodiment in the mind and body.

Pierce defines offensive microaggressions as “subtle, innocuous, preconscious or unconscious degradations and putdowns” “whites” use to ensure racialized Others “are ignored, tyrannized, terrorized, and minimized” (Pierce, 1970, pp. 267, 271, 1995, p. 281). According to him, these actions have a structural basis because:

[They are] the summation of *collective* micro-offenses [by “whites”] that permit police department after police department to tyrannize racially oppressed communities...which applies economic terror to [any racially oppressed person or group]

who have the temerity to demand what the law provides...and minimize the social importance of any [racially oppressed person, and their] achievements so they will [view] themselves as useless, unlovable, and unable. (Pierce, 1970, p. 268)

Pierce’s structural conception of microaggressions undercut current interpretation of racial microaggressions as unintentional. Further, Pierce’s microaggressions exegesis contextualizes anti-Black violence, unlike most current researchers whose overwhelming concern is with the psychic harm of microaggressions without accounting for the structural processes generating the injury. Neither anti-Black violence nor systemic racism is a consequence of the other; they have a shared duality.

Social systems of oppression are total phenomena whose logic extends beyond the level of social situations and interactive social order in which microaggressions exist. Systems of oppression structure social life and involve individual, interactional, and institutional levels of society. The assumptive logic emerging from these social and institutional processes is embodied by both oppressors and the oppressed as common sense which informs their ways of knowing, being, and interacting with people. As such, the logic of oppression engenders a sense of inferiority and fear among the oppressed that must be cleansed from their thoughts to ensure the emergence of new identities and meanings to confront systemic oppression (Cabral, 1973). This initial step in the struggle against white supremacy then is in the realm of ideas. Systems of racial domination produce beliefs, discourses, mental images, and contradictions fashioned within institutions to maintain a shared understanding of whiteness that people express to maintain racial oppression (Cabral, 1973). In doing so these institutions encourage people experiencing anti-Black violence to see it as both normal and acceptable, and amenable to individual redress. Individualistic explanations stall progress towards ending anti-Black violence by misdirecting people to tame racial microaggressions rather than eradicate their systemic source—white supremacy. By reducing systemic racism to individual acts of anti-Black violence, the prevailing conception of racial microaggressions is fatally compromised in charting a way forward. White aggression does not just materialize out of nowhere. It is not simply a plot on the part of isolated individuals to engage in anti-Black violence, but a material manifestation of an intense political and economic hostility, philosophically speaking, towards racialized Others; a hostility that manifests itself in a particular epistemic violent way (Mills, 1997).

4. Everyday Racism

Theorizing everyday anti-Black violence requires social scientists to clearly articulate the structural forces driving everyday bigoted behavior. Sociologist Philomena Essed’s concept of “everyday racism” generally seeks to

connect “ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of systemic racism in terms of the experience of everyday life” (Essed, 1991, p. 2). Like racial microaggressions, everyday racism is concerned with revealing the daily actions of anti-Black racism practitioners. However, everyday racism is not exclusively about individuals given it defines anti-Black violence as complex relations of acts (and attributed attitudes) in a social system. These primarily mundane white discourses and practices are experienced as amorphous and ambiguous rather than as extreme anti-Black violence (Essed, 1991).

Since human beings communicate mostly through symbols (e.g., language and images), the primary expression mode of everyday racism and anti-Black violence is visual and discursive. Nonverbal bigoted communication is conveyed via paralanguage or voice tone, body movement, gestures, facial expressions, and avoidance of eye contact (Essed, 1991). Such bigoted behavior is made ordinary through structures of white power, underscoring the importance of understanding how these structures constitute social scientists’ atomistic conceptions of anti-Black violence. Like racial microaggressions, everyday racism analysis starts with the individual but, unlike microaggressions, it aims to go beyond this point by explicating the link between micro and macro white violence. Everyday racism proposes microaggressions such as racial jokes, ridicule, patronizing behavior, and other attempts to humiliate and intimidate as actions in support of systemic racism (Essed, 1991). Everyday racism as coded discourse and action is tied to institutional practices (e.g., appointing friends of friends for a position, resulting in a workplace that remains “white”) as a part of the expected, the unquestionable, and what “white” people view as normal (Essed, 1991, p. 50).

Contrary to racial microaggressions, the everyday racism concept delineates a more dynamic interactive frame for deducing how everyday acts of anti-Black violence both construct and are structured by white supremacy. That is, anti-Black violence and white supremacy are productions of people in institutions and cultures, nurturing white predispositions and practicing whiteness. Though the concept of everyday racism assumes that anti-Black violence is a collaborative creation of structure and agency, it does not adequately demonstrate how white-controlled institutions (e.g., economic, social, political, or cultural) construct and perpetuate white power and racism. Everyday racism’s exploration of individual racist practices leads to an unevolved assessment of how the structures of white supremacy nurture racist beliefs and actions. All truly sociological perspectives of structures, interactions, and individuals are hand-in-glove, not glove without a hand.

5. Unconscious Individual Anti-Blackness? No.

Though recent scholarship on racism examines the experiences of racially oppressed people with everyday

racism (Coates, 2011; Dovidio et al., 2002; Sue et al., 2008), most do so through a micro-level/individualizing lens. For instance, Sue and colleagues build on Pierce’s (1970, 1995) individualizing the racial microaggression concept by defining it as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards [racialized Others]” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Like Pierce, Sue and colleagues direct most of their attention to the internalized racial ideas and assumptions behind bigoted insults to illuminate their role in assaulting the consciousness of racialized Others. Such analyses aim to help racially oppressed people “regain command or control over space, time, energy and freedom of movement” so that they can lessen their oppression (Pierce, 1995, p. 291). Rather than identifying and analyzing the structural facilitators of daily white violence, Sue et al. (2007) follow Pierce’s lead in using the racial microaggression concept as a therapeutic treatment to mitigate racially oppressed people’s encounters with white violence. Recognizing their structural theorizing shortcomings, the authors attempt to address it by asserting, without empirically demonstrating, that racial microaggressions are part of a racialized system of domination. They vaguely construe a lack of “inclusion” and representation within institutions as racial microaggressions without illuminating the policy regimes and components that lead to exclusion (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020). To further buttress his structural reclamation effort, Sue (2010, p. 25) coins the term “environmental microaggressions” to refer to “demeaning, threatening social, educational, political, or economic indications that are transferred individually, institutionally or societally to marginalized groups.” Although the term provides more elaboration about the workings of daily anti-Black violence, its omission of the link between violence and systemic white racism continues to reduce anti-Black violence to individuals, allowing scholars to discuss the politics of “race” without examining its systematic basis (Embrick et al., 2017).

Most social scientists ignore racial microaggression’s structural and material limitations since they are content to use it only to investigate how interpersonal interactions between the racially oppressed and “white” oppressors—characterized by “white” putdowns—are enacted in an individualistic programmed fashion. There are a few exceptions, such as sociologist Solórzano’s (1998) use of critical race theory to examine how societal institutional practices work to inferiorize racially oppressed people. Because Solórzano is a social scientist who specializes in education, he construes the racial microaggression concept as a critical race theory tool to investigate how white educational theory, policy, and practice activate everyday anti-Black violence to subordinate racialized Others. For Solórzano, racial microaggressions are intrinsically connected to institutional racism (i.e., structures and processes) and its

various ideological variants (race, whiteness, diversity, etc.; see also Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Although he conceptualizes racial microaggression and systemic white racism as interlaced phenomena, Solórzano does so in a way that does not fully reveal the workings of the white supremacy regime's onto-epistemic structure, fundamental for understanding the dynamics of routine anti-Black violence.

Solórzano's (1998) uncritical incorporation of racial microaggression as a component of critical race theory is also problematic because he does not consider how the concept's claim that subtle racial bigotry is unintentional, and unconscious underwrites anti-Black violence. No one in a white supremacy society is free of racism's influence given it is a social system of oppression that predates us, and one into which we are consciously socialized and knowingly practice every day. This oversight is related to the fact that the prevailing iteration of critical race theory proposed remedies or correctives for anti-Black violence—inclusion, legal and legislative protection, and greater access to opportunity—do not profoundly challenge structures of white supremacy or its constitutive normativity but seek to secure equality, liberation, and recompense for racially oppressed people within white supremacist regimes (Anderson, 2021; Mocombe, 2017).

This type of racial microaggression iteration provides "white" with cover by theorizing it is possible to scrub clean anti-Black violence by removing or exposing the error of it all to its perpetrators—a pretension that reveals it as a bourgeois white supremacy construct. "White" people are collectively vested in the fallacy that they are individuals first, and only members of a group secondarily and accidentally, circumventing any recognition of the advantaged dominance their group exhibits (Woods, 2018, p. 642). Racial microaggressions then uphold the individualistic unintentional character of routine anti-Black violence as the only understandable way out for "white" positioned as members of the "white" violent collective. The violent outcome of systemic racism is not unconscious, but a collective anti-Black endeavor structured as anti-blackness. Indeed, there is no simple distinction between the conscious and unconscious act (Bourdieu, 2002). As Slors's (2019) research reveals, conscious and unconscious processes connect and work in partnership to produce action. People's behavioral dispositions are constructs of a conscious societal effort to direct their unconscious actions (Slors, 2019). The point is that societal institutions are purveyors of habitual modes of interaction wherein human subjectivity has concrete implications, and in turn is shaped by tangible societal events.

Many social scientists using the racial microaggressions interpretative narrative know on some level that the term is of little value in understanding the structural sources of anti-Black violence. This is not to say their *obscured awareness* surfaces in calculated decisions to draw upon the concept, but it translates into

a misrecognition shrouding the systemic everyday workings of white supremacy. This misrecognition is a "functional" part of the racial microaggression concept rather than an anomaly given its failure to empirically connect racism as a regime of control to "race-related" stress (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020). Neglect of racial microaggressions' structural dimension leads to the misrecognition of the objective structural fact of anti-Black violence. Consequently, the way the microaggression concept is currently used ensures the structural roots of anti-Black violence disappear, so it remains unaddressed.

6. Academic and Political Antecedents of the Microaggression Concept

The truth claims of racial microaggressions and everyday racism are not new but part of a familiar global intellectual tradition theorizing how Black lives are shaped by systemic racism. This scholarship, which remains largely ignored by contemporary scholars, micro and macro social scientists alike, offers a deeper historical and political analytical way of understanding the dialectical relationship between structure and agency driving anti-Black violence (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020). Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois sought to understand both the socio-historic conditions facing Black people in the twentieth century and the impacts of those conditions on the consciousness and "inner world" of Black people subjected to them (Du Bois, 1903/1989). He coined the term "double-consciousness" as a conceptual frame for interpreting how Black people experience psychosocial conflict within oppressive and devaluating white supremacy societies. Double-consciousness specifically refers to how Black people as dehumanized outcasts within white supremacy societies retain a sense of self within this context. Generally, the concept seeks to explain how a person's sense of self is necessarily constructed in a dialogue that is continually subject to implicit raced power relations (Meer, 2019). In this regard, double-consciousness sees the self-other relationship not as benign but one suffused in domination, such as the refusal of "whites" to acknowledge Black people's humanity (Meer, 2019, p. 52). This denial of their humanity creates an internalized echo of white racist judgments among blackened people. Du Bois did not conceive the Black self as a reflection of an atomistic self, it is conceptualized as a culturally embedded and socially mediated construction. As such, Du Bois argued that self-recognition is a form of cultural recognition where one's identity is linked with the cultural identities of other members of one's community (Meer, 2019, p. 52). In short, Du Bois's double-consciousness concept alerts us to the fact that interpersonal anti-Black violence is a central component of systemic white racism, taking the form of both overt and covert structural hostilities.

Likewise, Fanon (1963, 1967) analyzed how colonialism and white supremacy structural mechanisms work together to construct a Black self that is amenable to

domination and exploitation. Specifically, he asserted colonial white supremacy engenders a superiority complex in “whites” and an inferiority complex in Blacks through language and culture. Similarly, Martinican scholar, Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (1955/1972) examined French racism’s impact on the daily lives of Black people. He assessed how the everyday racism processes of colonialism condition Black people to sing the virtues of its brutal effort to decivilize (dehumanized) them (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 13). Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde intellectual, Amílcar Cabral also scrutinized how everyday racism processes secured racial domination through the organized control of Black people’s historical understandings and culture (Cabral, 1973). He argued that colonial states facilitate anti-Black violence in and through civil society (i.e., culture, education, religion). Like Césaire, he established that “white” Europeans’ projection of their history and culture as the norm conditioned Black people into “white” ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting to ensure their complicity in their own oppression. In a word, Cabral argued that the mental rehabilitation of racially subjugated people occurs on the terrain of historical consciousness—understanding the temporality of the connection among past, present, and future experiences. For Cabral, the victims of white supremacy “reenter history” only when they disavow white ways of knowing and being in the world.

These scholars approached white supremacy as a hegemonic force, reproducing raced social relations and concealing contradictions. Herein lies the danger of the prevailing individualized conception of racial microaggressions in that it obfuscates the enactment of historical consciousness. It does not place anti-Black violence in a broader historical and political context before trying to develop solutions to resolve it. As Du Bois, Fanon, Césaire, and Cabral rightly suggest, though white supremacy is experienced through micro-interactions, it is not merely performative of systemic racism processes. These micro forces were part of the development of colonial white supremacy and racial capitalism, expansion, and exploitation (Dolgon, 2018).

The preceding scholarly conceptions evolved further in Carmichael and Hamilton’s (1967) institutional racism concept (i.e., systemic racism). A concept that links the daily reality of anti-Black violence with systemic racism in terms of covert and overt racism. These racism practices interface:

Individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community....The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property....The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive to human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces

in society, thus receiving far less public condemnation than the first type. (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 4)

Furthermore, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967, p. 5) maintain:

Institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group position prevails: Whites are “better” than blacks; therefore, should be subordinated to whites. This is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly....Thus, the acts of overt, individual racism may not typify the society, but institutional racism does—with the support of covert, individual attitudes of racism.

Institutional racism empirically illuminates the relationship between systemic racism and the daily lives, actions, and attitudes of both Black and “white” people. Although theorists of everyday racism make a distinction between individual and systemic racism, unlike institutional racism researchers, they spent virtually no time explaining how the two synergize to (re)produce white supremacy. Contrary to theorists and researchers of everyday racism and racial microaggressions, institutional racism proponents do not take people’s experiences with racism alone as a basis for analysis. As we discuss later, racial microaggression researchers typically encourage people to look past anti-Black violence efforts to control racially oppressed people and to ignore white collective culpability, institutional processes, and structural realities through their effort to convince “whites” to acknowledge their covert racism without requiring them to act to eliminate the white supremacy regime (Costa Vargas, 2018). The theorizing of institutional racism is not directed at staving off daily “white” brutality and violence but towards empowering Black people to organize and terminate the structural source of their oppression through the development of a historical consciousness. Because racism is centered in the context of colonialism and its “wake,” institutional racism approaches the struggle against systemic racism as a global fight for liberation. Institutional racism is a theory of interpretation and praxis that seeks to empower racially oppressed people to end “white” global control over social and material forces (i.e., cultural, historical, political, and economic factors) responsible for structuring and reproducing racialized relations. This is in stark contrast to prevailing usages of racial microaggressions which enable perpetrators of white violence to deny any knowledge of knowingly engaging in racist behavior, making it acceptable for purveyors of anti-Black violence to glory in racial ignorance. Such ignorance “involves not just ‘knowing’ but also not knowing what one does not know believing that one knows” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 39). This subterfuge allows microaggression proponents to frame

anti-Black violence as individualized events as opposed to a systemic reality.

Institutional racism offers a more useful dynamic conceptual frame for grasping how structure and agency interact to sustain anti-Black violence through its assertion that white violence is more akin to systemic micro-level oppression or micro-level white supremacy. It frees anti-blackness from racial microaggressions' presentation of itself as an isolated rather than systemic practice. Routine anti-Black violence does not precede systemic racism. It comes into being simultaneously with it. The systemic micro-level oppression concept returns us to Pierce's (1970) effort to explain anti-Black violence as "structuration"—a synthesis of structure and agency. This conceptualization, unlike prevailing notions of microaggressions, directs us to account for anti-Black violence as institutionalized (forming a structure as well as a culture) expressions that affect people's lives whether they want it to or not (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 473). Microaggressions enacted through everyday interactions are often the most resistant to analysis and political challenge because they are unremarkable in the sense that they emanate from the taken-for-granted substance of ordinary human life. According to Oliha-Donaldson (2018), people engaging in systemic micro-level oppression typically claim they understand the harmful effects of white supremacy and call for its destruction, yet their discourse and actions mute or silence pushback against anti-Black violence by suggesting the racial microaggression problem is a figment of Black people's imagination because they see white racism where there is none.

A systemic micro-level oppression analysis can expose how micro-oppressive behavior delimits possibilities for structural and social change by allowing those waging everyday anti-Black violence to cloak their behavior with "good intentions" and "goodwill" (Oliha-Donaldson, 2018, pp. 439–140). Because this kind of oppression is ordinary, it is one that a systemic micro-level oppression analysis is uniquely suited to making visible and (thereby) accessible to deconstruct as a component of systemic racism. It helps to reveal how policies and institutional changes in racially oppressive contexts are designed to ensure anti-Black violence continues. For instance, organizations' preoccupation with securing "diversity training" to ameliorate racial microaggressions is popular because they do not seek to structurally eliminate anti-Black violence and white supremacy but to solve their systemic anti-Black problem without confronting it.

7. Implications for the Struggle: False Promise, False Remedy

Prevailing microaggression conceptualizations thus ignore the earlier scholarship of Frantz Fanon centering white supremacy structure as the catalyst for anti-Black violence. Fanon (1963) never assumes "white" animus

alone drives white violence. He contends that white violence is a product of colonial societies that condition "whites" to inscribe Blacks with ideas of backwardness and sub-humanness (Fanon, 1963, p. 61). "Whites" accept such "dehumanization" of Others as common sense, predisposing them to disregard their use of white epistemic and physical violence to discipline and control Black people (Fanon, 1963, p. 42). From a Fanonian perspective, racial microaggressions are not unintentional or atomistic but connected to the displacement of "white" people's recognition of their violent anti-Black actions and attitudes. This displacement is an outcome of a dynamic social process where whiteness (say, a situation, process, or action) is misrecognized for what it is because the white supremacy culture in which people are immersed is characterized by a range of dispositions and propensities confounding their making-sense of it (James, 2015, p. 100; Mueller, 2017). That is, anti-Black violence is attributed to another realm of meaning so that the process, interests, inequities, and other harms of systemic racism are sustained while remaining concealed (Mills, 1997, p. 18).

The racial microaggressions concept stymies political struggle with its contention that daily anti-Black violence is an unintentional individual act. From the perspective of systemic racism, racial microaggression analyses are synonymous with universities empaneling committees—consisting of one or two racially oppressed individuals—to study what we already know about anti-Black violence to avert taking substantive action to eliminate it. Moreover, this calls attention to the fact that Black people's experiences within the structures of white supremacy usually remain opaque until "white" or whiteness-immersed racially oppressed people who possess a modicum of institutional power, validate their understandings. Because researchers in academia accept the racial microaggressions concept as a useful means for understanding anti-Black violent proclivities, most Black and other racially oppressed academics uncritically use it as an analytical tool.

Racial microaggression discourse is a pseudonym for Black suffering that disappears the structures of white supremacy driving anti-Black violence. Racial microaggression as a concept of whiteness routinizes racial terror to obstruct liberation from anti-Black violence (Hartman, 1997). No "remedy" deriving from a racial microaggression interpretation will eradicate the intransigence of anti-Black violence since it re-instantiates racial violence. The concept maintains anti-Black violence as an unintended action and advocates for micro solutions to redress the anti-blackness evident in institutions promoting it. For example, racial microaggressions proponents promote using boycotts, strikes, and protests at racially hostile institutions to encourage them to implement cultural sensitivity training and policy reforms to make anti-Black violence tolerable for racially oppressed people working within them (Sue et al., 2019). Racial microaggressions and the diversity education they

promote as a remedy for anti-Black violence leave historical and contemporary white supremacy structures and their epistemological common sense intact. The efforts of racial microaggression proponents to educate “white” offenders about their anti-Black violent behavior and attitudes are thus not effective at ending anti-Black violence. A more efficacious way of understanding and contesting anti-Black violence is to interrogate the linkage among pervasive white supremacy ideologies and structures constructing and perpetuating it, the routine violence that helps to maintain it, and the anti-white supremacy theorizing and practices necessary to dismantle it.

Calls for educating anti-Black practitioners thus miss the basic point of what anti-Black violence is about. It is a racial and political construct that is not enacted by individual “whites” alone but in concert with societal racialized structures. These structures are the edifice and anti-black violence is the executor of societal anti-blackness. During slavery and Jim Crow, it was common for “white” people to use violence to control Black people. Their policing power, like those of “whites” today, is secondary to that of white-controlled economic, political, and cultural institutions. “White” commoners do not wield power of their own (except situationally); theirs is merely an expression of systemic micro-level oppressions nurtured through white supremacy institutions (Woods, 2018). They are an appendage of white power relations, not power itself. Therefore, we need to move beyond the cul-de-sac of racial microaggressions to delve critically into how the social structures of white supremacy are involved in individual subjectivity.

With this more complete understanding of hegemonic whiteness and historical processes, we can begin laying the groundwork for moving beyond coping with white supremacy towards collectively dismantling it. Because institutional racism seeks not merely to understand but also to counteract entrenched white supremacy ideas and practices structuring everyday life, it allows us to perceive daily anti-Black violence as a micro-oppression tied to white supremacy structures. This concept allows us to understand how almost any anti-Black violence can be explained if we examine real-world conditions and apply the context of history. Systemic micro-level oppression as concomitant of institutional racism directs us to consider how white supremacy as a complex system of power can be successfully overcome by taking control of and transforming the institutions producing and perpetuating white racism: economic, social, political, or cultural. It identifies these institutions; analyzes the way they work to sustain white supremacy and devises strategies to transform them. This is contrary to microaggressions which aim to “reform” white supremacy institutions through training to diminish acts of subtle violence against Black and other racially oppressed people. Such training supposedly empower racially oppressed people to speak up about the transgressions inflicted upon them so that harms are addressed, but this only occurs in ways that

enable white institutions to present themselves as “safe spaces” for racially oppressed people. Consequently, both workers and employers are given the false impression they are executing fundamental structural change through training. People’s awareness of microaggressions is meaningless if we do not change the logic and praxis of systemic racism. “Diversity,” white fragility workshops, and reading lists are not going to create justice and abolish systemic white racism and anti-Black racism. Acknowledging anti-Black violence will not address it. Awareness is certainly an important part of the pre-conditions for change, but on its own is not enough to eradicate anti-Black violence. A different approach is needed.

Systemic micro-level oppression offers a different way even though it too, like all approaches to oppression, is partial. It makes clear that establishment changes happen when macro-scale, root-cause mobilization threatens institutional sources of white power. The large-scale massive social movements of the 1960s linked the struggle against anti-Black violence with anti-colonialism to make its approach to fighting white supremacy more internationalist and racism more understandable as a historical process nourishing global capitalism. To return to such an understanding requires people to break with how white supremacy settler colonialism defines and shapes their condition. This questioning is important, not as a resting place, but for making the connection between *what is* and *what ought to be* (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970). By making this break, scholars eschew the atomism of racial microaggression discourse regulating how we make sense of anti-Black violence. We can latch onto the counter-discourse of systemic micro-level oppression to help us begin to grasp how the central institutional mechanisms of white supremacy condition and induce us into replicating it as a living system of oppression. The systemic micro-level oppression conceptualization of anti-Black violence reminds us to discard individualism for collectivism so that racially oppressed groups are enabled to collectively “come to voice,” to challenge and subvert hegemonic systems of white power and domination (Fanon, 1963). Furthermore, the systemic micro-level oppression frame compels us to focus on the interdependence and interrelatedness of “race,” gender, class, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and other categories that serve as potential areas for oppression. Along with directing our attention to “race” and racialization processes, systemic micro-level oppression’s internationalist approach encourages us to interrogate how everyday systems of power and domination interlock, how oppression is reproduced and maintained, and how the disempowered are violently subjugated and kept under constant control.

8. Conclusion

If we start with the perspective that racial microaggressions and white supremacy co-construct one another,

we can start to address anti-Black racism and anti-Black violence as they work, not as we wish they work. White supremacy is insidious. It is powerful because it is neither hatred nor personal. It is comforting routines and unthinking expectations of a social order that feels like the natural order of things. In this article, we detailed how racial microaggressions' characterization of anti-Black violence as individual actions results in neglecting how it unfolds together with white identities, discourses, and institutions that give practical effect and meaning to anti-blackness. Social science analysis must move towards understanding this dynamic in the way long articulated by scholars in Black studies. The omission of this scholarship is a part of social science's long history of treating blackened scholars and Black studies as marginal rather than central to understanding and eliminating systems of domination (Morris, 2015). We highlighted Du Bosian and colonial/post-colonial theories about everyday anti-Black violence as institutional racism because, unlike dominant notions of microaggressions, everyday white racism, and critical race theory, they clarify the interplay between the white supremacy regime and anti-Black violent discourse and action. Their theorizing illuminates how throughout history, systemic micro-level oppression and state agencies, institutions, and organizations work in tandem to terrorize blackened people. This racial terrorizing dynamic continues to the present.

The assumptions of white priority, domination, and importance underlie the racial microaggression concept. The thought, realities, and attitudes of white supremacist ideologies are deeply embedded in micro-aggression theorizing about anti-Black violence. To appreciate why white supremacy remains such an integral part of social science thought and interpretation of anti-Black violence, we need to recognize and acknowledge its embeddedness in these disciplines at their founding. The social science of "race relations" typically isolates the study of "race" from structural concerns to evade sustained engagement with sociology's colonialist and imperialist past (Magubane, 2016). Because the anti-blackness evident in the racial microaggressions concept is inseparable from white supremacist structures, we must create other means for explaining routine anti-Black violence through interdisciplinary and grassroots work to remake the terms for understanding it as an interactional process. This requires that social science understandings take note of the debates and feedback from racially oppressed communities. In these communal spaces, misleading concepts and ideas about anti-Black violence cannot survive (Andrews, 2020). People in these spaces are inclined to see the academics' individualistic conceptualization of anti-Black violence and its use of white pedagogy and discourse to make sense of Black suffering as obfuscations of liberation. Scholars should practice thinking beyond the constraints of racial microaggressions by building on, not bypassing, the marginalized scholarship of their predecessors. If we

do this, we will acquire a better grasp of how to cleanse society of anti-Black racism structures and frames of reference, identities, aspirations, and scholarship that thwart rather than aid resistance and struggle against systemic racism.

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Article

Exploring Racial Microaggressions Toward Chinese Immigrant Women in Greater Boston During Covid

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Abstract

This study was an initial qualitative exploration to (a) capture varied experiences of racial microaggressions directed at Chinese immigrant women before and during Covid and (b) investigate different forms and levels of microaggressions based on socioeconomic status, age, and other characteristics. Racial microaggressions were examined by interviewing 12 foreign-born, Chinese immigrant women aged 23 to 80 years old, with most of the participants identified as middle class or above. Building upon previous scholarship on racial and gendered microaggressions, an analytical framework was developed using 12 major themes to identify and interpret discriminatory behaviors. Our main findings suggest that the research sample encountered more blatant hate incidents and expressed heightened concern over their physical safety in the post-Covid period. Young women, compared to their older counterparts, were more inclined to report microaggression episodes and distinguish more subtle forms of discrimination. These findings could serve as preliminary evidence for future research.

Keywords

Anti-Asian; anti-Blackness; Chinese immigrant women; Covid-related stigmatization; internalized racism; model minority myth; racial microaggression; racism; scapegoating; yellow peril

Issue

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Area and Significance

Since the outbreak of Covid, reports of xenophobic and racist incidents directed at Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) have raised substantially. A total of 10,370 anti-Asian hate incidents were documented from March 2020 to September 2021, according to two national reports published by Stop AAPI Hate (2021). Verbal harassment (62.9%) and shunning (16.3%) were the most common types of discrimination, followed by physical assault (16.1%) and online harassment (8.6%).

Against this backdrop, many studies have been conducted since March 2020 with a specific focus on the impact of stigmatization of people of Asian descent during Covid. Past research such as Haft and Zhou (2021) saw an increased perceived discrimination and consequently

a rise in self-reported anxiety symptoms among Chinese American college students during Covid. However, these measures on discrimination and racial microaggression examined the AAPI communities as a broad racial group and, as a result, dismissed the gendered aspects unique to Chinese immigrant women. These studies were also restricted to Asian Americans born in the US, who are relatively well-educated and work as young professionals. This study, thus, aimed to address the gaps in the current literature by exploring and assessing racial microaggressions experienced by an even more invisible subgroup of Chinese population in America—foreign-born, Chinese immigrant women.

The research population was specific to foreign-born, Chinese immigrant women in Greater Boston for a number of reasons. Firstly, Chinese nationals are particularly vulnerable in the context of Covid, largely because of former President Trump’s rhetoric concerning the “Chinese

virus.” His remark has reignited the historical scapegoating and othering of the Chinese communities during a public health crisis such as the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, and channeled fear of and rage against East Asian-appearing persons (Eichelberger, 2007). Secondly, a disproportionate number of microaggressions or attacks have been directed at Asian women: Reports published by Stop AAPI Hate (2021) show they reported more than twice as many anti-Asian hate incidents as men. Lastly, this study exclusively focused on immigrant women born outside the US because they might possess different interpretations of microaggression incidents, emotional responses, and coping strategies when compared to native-born. It is therefore crucial to capture the experiences and narratives of this subgroup of the Chinese population during Covid.

1.2. Research Questions and Working Propositions

This study was an initial qualitative exploration utilizing ethnographic research and in-depth interviews to investigate if Chinese immigrant women living in Greater Boston experience an increase in racial microaggressions as a result of Covid. Thus, an analytical framework was developed to identify and compare different types and levels of experiences in microaggressions before and during Covid. Similarly, perception of safety and changes in behaviors during Covid are relevant to understanding how Covid-related anti-Asian discrimination might impact the day-to-day life of the affected population.

Additionally, this study also explored how microaggressions vary among Chinese immigrant women based on socioeconomic background, age, and other contributing factors. Even though the sample size was too small to allow for intergroup comparison, information gathered could serve as preliminary evidence to document the subject’s experience with microaggression, the emotional impact it had on them, and the strategies they employed to deal with it before and during Covid. Hence, this part of the research held lightly the conceptional framework, leaving room for participants to report and interpret their experiences attributed to gender, race, etc., or the intersection of any of these characteristics.

Furthermore, the research population was specific to foreign-born, Chinese immigrant women aged 18 years old or older who had lived in the US for at least five years (to allow for comparison before and during Covid). Based on previous studies and recent data, two research questions and a working proposition were formulated:

RQ1: To what extent, if any, do Chinese immigrant women in Greater Boston experience an increase in racial microaggressions as a result of Covid?

Our first working proposition (WP1) is that Chinese immigrant women living in Greater Boston experience an increase in racial microaggressions as a result of Covid. Whilst the stigmatization during Covid is not limited to

Chinese immigrant women, this subgroup of the Asian population is facing a potentially greater risk of marginalization. Among a total of 10,370 anti-Asian hate incidents documented by Stop AAPI Hate from March 2020 to September 2021, Chinese people were the most frequently targeted group, accounting for 42.7 percent of the total incidents (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). On top of that, Asian women were more than twice as likely as men to report incidents. Sadly, the 2021 Atlanta shootings that led to the death of eight people, including six women of Asian descent working at massage parlors, have further exposed the marginalization and violence against Asian immigrant women involved in low-wage work (Jeong, 2022).

RQ2: How do racial microaggressions vary among Chinese immigrant women based on socioeconomic background, age, and other contributing factors?

We don’t present a working proposition, but keep it open to generate and explain the intersectional experiences of Chinese immigrant women based on their demographic background.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Historical Context

Sinophobia has emanated from a historical resentment against Chinese immigration since the California Gold Rush in the late 1840s. Chinese workers would later come to be exploited for cheap labor, most notably in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad (Kaur, 2021). Anti-Chinese sentiment continued to rise when the US underwent an economic depression in the 1870s and Chinese immigrants were blamed for taking away jobs traditionally held by White Americans (Zhang, 2021). This belief was eventually translated into a racist metaphor of “yellow peril” that perceives Chinese as dishonest, diseased invaders, viewed culturally and politically inferior to Whites, and framed as a great threat to Whites (Del Visco, 2019). As a result, the “yellow peril” discourse played a significant role in justifying the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882—the first restrictive immigration law that prohibited Chinese nationals from emigrating to the country for ten years (Gover et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, Chinese communities, alongside other minority groups, have long been subjected to scapegoating and othering when a public health crisis erupted. Muzzatti (2005) argued that fear often drives the public to place blame on some “other,” or “some group external to their own national, religious, or ethnic identity.” For instance, in an ethnographic study carried out during the 2003 SARS epidemic, Eichelberger (2007) indicated that people living in New York City’s Chinatown experienced heightened anxiety and fear of stigmatization. The community was identified as a site of contagion and risk, which subsequently resulted in

a tremendous drop in business and tourism even without a single reported SARS case. This study also determined that fears that recent immigrants would spread the disease represented a larger othering discourse that blamed SARS on Chinese cultural practice, which was in line with media reports at the time. While this article recorded a sum of individual narratives during the SARS epidemic, the author recognized language barriers and distrust of researchers as obstacles to recruiting participants from a wider socioeconomic background. The current study addressed this limitation since the author was fluent in the target population's native languages and encountered fewer trust issues due to her identity as a female Hong Konger. Additionally, the sampling strategy was designed to diversify the informants' socioeconomic status and age group to produce a more nuanced account of microaggressions toward Chinese immigrant women from all walks of life.

2.2. Analytical Framework: Racial Microaggressions Toward Asian Women

This study developed an analytical framework based on pioneering research on racial and gendered microaggression. Broadly speaking, Sue et al. (2007, p. 72) defined microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" because they belong to a racial minority group. This group of psychology scholars proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that divided these experiences into three types: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Microassaults are "explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 73). In other words, it is more deliberate and conscious, and close to our understanding of old-fashioned racism such as telling people of color to go back to their country.

Microinsult and microinvalidation, on the other hand, are often unintentionally committed by the perpetrator, but they generate a negative experience in the eyes of the recipient. Microinsults are indirect behaviors or communications that "convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demeans a person's racial identity or heritage" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 73). For example, when a student of color is told that their parents must be very proud of them for attending a prestigious college, the speaker might suggest that they must have been admitted through some affirmative action instead of their ability. Microinvalidations are actions that "exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 73). When people say "All Lives Matter" in response to the Black Lives Matter movement it has the effect to negate the systematic racism imposed on Black Americans. Figure 1 in Supplementary File 2

explains the categories of and relationships among racial microaggressions.

In addition, in an in-depth qualitative study, Sue et al. (2009) summarized eight microaggressive themes experienced by Asian Americans specifically: (a) alien in their own land, (b) ascription of intelligence, (c) exoticization of Asian women, (d) invalidation of interethnic differences, (e) denial of racial reality, (f) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, (g) second class citizenship, and (h) invisibility. This study was the first of its kind that detailed the hitherto-neglected Asian American experience and had the strong implication that the types of microaggressions faced by Asian Americans might be different from other minority groups. Yet, it mainly focused on native-born Asian American and was therefore not general to all Asian groups, and especially not applicable to first-generation immigrants.

Furthermore, Mulkamala and Suyemoto (2018) captured two types of experiences unique to Asian American women: (a) type one was the racism against Asian Americans shared by Asian American women that included, for example, tokenist representation of all Asian Americans, mislabeling, and so forth; (b) type two included gendered racism, including assumptions and expectations for Asian American women to be "exoticized" and fetishized, invisible and silent. This finding is pivotal to the framework due to its robust intersectional analysis of microaggression experiences directed at Asian women based on gender, geographical location, professional identities, and age groups. However, similar to Sue's study, this article had restrictions on diversifying the study sample, which largely excluded older Asian immigrant women who are not born in America.

To address the gaps in the literature, this study developed an analytical framework using the taxonomy presented in Figure 1 (Supplementary File 2) as the basic structure and modifying it to incorporate different themes proposed in the other two studies—one is more pertinent to the unique experiences of Asian Americans, while the other focuses on Asian American women. The new framework illustrated (see Supplementary File 2, Figure 2) removes two original themes—"assumption of criminal status" and "myth of meritocracy"—that are left out in the study of Asian Americans specifically and are thus deemed as irrelevant to this group. Secondly, under microinsult, "exoticization of Asian women" is added as a new theme and amalgamated with the other two themes derived from the Asian American women study, which are "cute and small" and "assumptions and expectations for Asian American women to be exoticized and fetishized." In addition, "pathologizing cultural values/communication styles" and "culture-based discrimination," alongside "ascription of intelligence" and "smart and inevitably successful," have merged respectively due to similar denotation. Thirdly, microinvalidation is expanded with an additional theme of "invisibility" which is supplemented by sub-topics such as "submissive and passive." Like microinsult,

themes under microinvalidation that share close meanings are combined or utilized as sub-themes. The original theme of “color blindness” is replaced by “invalidation of interethnic differences” as the latter one is more relevant to Asian Americans. Lastly, four new items are added to supplement microassault, which are verbal harassment, physical assault, online harassment, and shunning respectively. These themes are informed by Stop AAPI Hate data and match the definition of microassault. In short, this framework aimed to better analyze and understand the interlocking forms of microaggressions faced by Chinese immigrant women due to their foreign-born, Chinese, and female identities. Figure 2 in Supplementary File 2 indicates the analytical framework used in this study through modification of the original taxonomy structure.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Method

This study drew on a qualitative method to (a) capture varied experiences of subtle racism directed at the target population before and during Covid and (b) explore different forms and levels of racial microaggressions based on socioeconomic background, age, and other characteristics. Between November 2021 to February 2022, 11 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with 12 Chinese immigrant women in Greater Boston, including two local NGO workers. One interview involved two participants, as the interviewees felt more comfortable sharing experiences in the presence of their peers. The rest were individual interviews. An interview protocol was developed and modified from the above-mentioned study conducted by Columbia University on racial microaggressions toward Asian American. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Supplementary File 1 (Appendix A).

3.2. Sampling Strategies

Due to a lack of a sampling frame of the target population, a respondent-driven sampling was applied, as Chinese immigrant women often relied on networks to find work and accommodation. To build trust and relationships with the Chinese immigrant communities, the author volunteered at a Boston-based Chinese elderly center once a week for two months prior to the data collection phase. Additionally, a brief text message and a posted flyer were created in both simplified and traditional Chinese for recruitment purposes. The recruitment materials are enclosed in Supplementary File 1 (Appendix B).

3.3. Procedures

Ten out of a total of 12 interviews had to be carried out on Zoom due to the surge of Omicron cases in early

2022. Each interview lasted for at least 45 minutes and was conducted in Chinese-Cantonese, Mandarin, or/and English to minimize misinterpretation and ensure that this study covered individuals who had relatively lower English proficiency. No interpreters were present in the interviews since the author was native in both languages, which also averted confidentiality issues. Throughout the interview, the author took notes and used a recorder simultaneously to ensure accurate transcripts and thorough data analysis. A field note template is enclosed in Supplementary File 1 (Appendix D). Finally, the author revised the field note by using the recordings for precise quotes and missed details, and eventually generated the field note write-up (see Supplementary File 1, Appendix E) for further analysis.

4. Analysis

4.1. Participants

Between November 2021 to February 2022, a total of 12 individuals took part in the current study. All participants were Chinese immigrant women born outside the US and ranged in age from 23 to 80 years. Chinese immigrants referred to in this study are people of Chinese descent, and the study does not distinguish the nationality or country of origin of the participants. In terms of educational attainment, nine out of 12 participants had a college or graduate degree while two individuals had a secondary school diploma and one received primary education only. The majority of the sample identified as middle class or above with only one individual describing herself as lower class and residing in subsidized housing. Time spent in the US was varied: The sample included five recent immigrants (from five to eight years living in the US) and seven experienced immigrants (from 14 up to 58 years living in the US). All of them were native in Cantonese or Mandarin or/and a Chinese dialect, and only half of them spoke English fluently. Table 1 in Supplementary File 2 provides complete demographic information on the participants.

4.2. Analytical Approach

First, the author read the text line by line and color-coded the experiences into three major types of racial microaggressions according to the analytical framework illustrated in Figure 2 (Supplementary File 2): **Microassault** was coded in yellow, **microinsult** in blue, and **microinvalidation** in green. Second, each incident was further analyzed and coded with a theme of the respective microaggression such as “**microassault—verbal harassment**.” During the coding process, two new themes under microassault emerged that were not previously identified when developing the analytical framework, i.e., staring and Covid-related incidents or other types of street harassments. As a result, these two themes were added to supplement microassault in

addition to the existing four themes i.e., verbal harassment, physical assault, shunning, and online harassment. Simultaneously, other initial codes relevant to the respondent's before-and-after perception of safety, changes in behaviors, emotional response, and coping mechanisms were identified through memoing in the field note write-up. The completed field note write-up must be kept confidential due to privacy and ethical reasons. Finally, the author compared the codes both before and after Covid and among different sub-groups to discover theoretical concepts and map the connections between the categories. Three tables were generated as a result: Tables 2 and 3 in Supplementary File 2 summarize the types of microaggressions documented before and after Covid respectively, and Table 4 in Supplementary File 2 contrasted discrimination experiences between older and younger Chinese women.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Findings Corresponding to RQ1

5.1.1. Main Finding 1: From Subtle Racism to More Overt Microaggressions During Covid

While the findings did not support a significant increase in anti-Asian discrimination, the types of racial microaggressions experienced by the informants changed from **microinsult** to a majority of **microassault** during Covid—which tends to be more overt and conscious with a deliberate intent to hurt the victim in comparison with the other two types of microaggressions (microinsult and microinvalidation), according to the definition proposed by Sue et al. (2007). Table 2 in the Supplementary File indicates that **microinsult** (19 of 41 total incidents) was the most common microaggression directed at the participants prior to Covid, followed by microassault and microinvalidation—each accounted for 11 pre-Covid incidents. On the contrary, 16 out of a total of 21 anti-Asian hate episodes reported during Covid were categorized as **microassault**. The antagonism toward the study sample was therefore found to be more explicit and intentional in the post-Covid era.

5.1.1.1. Narrative of Anti-Asian Discrimination Before Covid: Subtle and Confusing

The different levels and intensities of racial microaggressions before and after Covid could be illustrated through the informant accounts and narratives. Their names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Anti-Asian prejudice was relatively subtle, indirect, and often confusing in the pre-Covid period. Two major themes categorized under **microinsult** were identified before Covid, namely (a) “pathologizing cultural values or communication styles” and (b) “invisibility.” The former microaggression is defined as “the perception of cultural values and communication styles other than that of the White

majority as being less desirable or indicators of deficits” (Sue et al., 2007, pp. 76–77). This bigotry links to the deep-seated “yellow peril” trope that views Chinese as “uncivilized, barbaric others” who are the sources and spreaders of disease and have an appetite for dogs, cats, and other animals outside the norms of the Western worldview (Zhang, 2010). One Hong Kong woman's experience living in a predominately White neighborhood demonstrated a typical example of this biased discourse. Catherine was suspected of eating her neighbor's cat when she was living in Whitfield. She felt even more insulted when the neighbor looked through the trash outside her house to search for the missing cat:

Not every Chinese person eats cat. If American parents are telling their kids that all Chinese eat cats, these children would grow up believing in harmful stereotypes of our communities.

Secondly, it is even more challenging to determine whether a microaggression with the theme of “invisibility” had occurred. This theme refers to a situation that involves “the experience of being overlooked without the conscious intention of the aggressor”—which is often harder to distinguish and address due to its ambiguity. Zhang (2010) pointed out that Asian Americans are the most likely to be neglected in the socialization process and rejected by peers due to their negative stereotype of lacking apt social and communication skills and having low levels of warmth. This perception about Asian Americans and immigrants partially explained a young Hong Kong informant's unpleasant social interactions during undergraduate studies. Cathy remarked that her American peers living in the same dormitory showed little interest in getting to know her but were eager to mingle with other non-Chinese students. She struggled to make sense of these encounters and discern the motives of the person:

My roommate at the time was a half-Japanese American and half-French girl. Everyone would come to our room and ask her to hang out while nobody was giving me any attention. It was probably due to our appearances as well—she was a lot more attractive than me. But it was a different kind of treatment. They were still polite but never included me in their social circle.

5.1.1.2. Narrative of Anti-Asian Discrimination During Covid: More Overt and Aggressive

Microaggression targeting Chinese immigrant women has become more apparent and hostile during Covid, shifting from **microinsult** to overwhelmingly **microassault**, especially in the form of verbal harassment and Covid-related incident. Even though verbal and other street harassments were also common before Covid, several informants had never encountered explicit

racist comments directed at them on the street or public transportation until after Covid. For instance, a woman waiting in line asked one informant to move further away even though she was already standing six feet apart. The informant felt singled out due to her race as Chinese because the woman was standing close to other non-Asians in front of her.

This alarming rise in blatant forms of microaggression could stem from a growing tendency that prejudiced people will act upon their prejudices during Covid. Rather than reflecting an overall surge in anti-Asian hatred, a survey conducted in California suggested that Covid stigmatizations might cement xenophobia among individuals who already held biases toward Chinese and other Asian groups, and thus warrant their discriminatory actions acceptable (Daniels et al., 2021). The same informant recalled another troubling yet telling incident that demonstrated this trend. When Teenie moved away from a man on a train because he was not wearing a mask, the man started yelling at her: “You just don’t like our people. You Asians never like us. If I have a gun, I will shoot you and we all bleed the same red blood.” It is important to note that this incident occurred when Covid cases peaked in Boston and statewide mask mandate was strictly implemented on the train. Even though Teenie clarified that her avoidant action was only a preventive measure from getting Covid, the man did not stop the harassment and became more belligerent. She felt threatened and unsafe and eventually had to move to another cart:

Everyone was sitting away from each other. Out of all these empty seats, he decided to sit right next to me. It’s like he saw me and picked up on me as I was the only small Asian woman on the train.

5.1.1.3. Reasons Behind Increasing Microaggressions During Covid: “Yellow Peril,” Mass Media, and Political Discourse

Similar to the stigmatization of Asians that occurred during the SARS pandemic, American society associated Covid with China and the Asian populations. Such narrative reignited the long-standing “yellow peril” stereotype mentioned above. Obsolete videos of Asian people consuming bats and mice resurfaced and went viral on social media in the early stages of the outbreak. Though those video footages were irrelevant to the origin of the virus and some did not even take place in China, it attracted massive scrolls of sinophobic comments and further dehumanized the Chinese communities and their culture (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

Furthermore, mass media and political leaders played a central role in exacerbating anti-Asian hostility. On one hand, mainstream liberal media such as *New York Times* and *Forbes* constantly propagated images of masked Asian figures in their news coverage of Covid, and therefore perpetuated the view of per-

ceiving Chinese or other Asians as the symbol of Covid (Zhang, 2021). Conservative media outlets such as *Fox News*, on the other hand, circulated popular conspiracy theories that Covid was designed as a bioweapon by the Chinese regime (Nerozzi, 2022). To conclude, this repeated visualization of Chinese bodies as “special vectors of disease transmission” (Wallis & Nerlich, 2005), coupled with the dissemination of conspiracy theories and false claims, served to reinforce existing prejudices against Chinese and the broader Asian communities (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

In addition to skewed media coverage, politicians have had an equally profound influence on “othering” Asians in the post-Covid period. President Donald Trump and other US officials deliberately referred to Covid as the “Chinese virus,” “Kung Flu,” “Wuhan virus,” and other derogatory nicknames. An Anti-Defamation League study revealed that Trump’s first tweet with the term “China virus,” in March 2021, corroborated with a spike in anti-Asian languages on Twitter (Shalvey, 2021). Li and Nicholson (2021) noted that when the US authorities linked Covid with Chinese people, they conveyed the message that “Covid is a Chinese problem—the other’s problem,” explicitly permitting xenophobia against Chinese immigrants from the top down. In sum, the findings partially supported our WP1: While Chinese immigrant women in this sample did not report a substantial rise in anti-Asian hate incidents, they encountered more blatant racial microaggressions—mainly **microassaults** in the form of verbal harassment and other Covid stigmatizations.

5.1.2. Main Findings 2: Intensified Fear for Physical Safety During Covid

Nine out of 12 participants expressed heightened concerns for their safety compared to the pre-Covid period, even though some of them have not encountered any Covid-related discrimination events. The informants attributed the newfound fear of their lives to widespread reports of anti-Asian assaults on social media and news coverage, as well as their personal accounts of overt racism. This shared reaction of fear is consistent with other studies on the impact of Covid stigmatization, confirming that these hate incidents have exacerbated the anxiety of Asians and Asian Americans during uncertain times (Tessler et al., 2020) and might even have deleterious effects on their mental health (Williams, 2018). One elderly participant remarked that she felt terrified after reading massive coverage of violent attacks against Asian senior citizens in California and was deeply disturbed by the Atlanta spa shooting:

It wasn’t that scary before Covid. Since Covid hit the country, I’ve had to pay attention to my surroundings and observe if people are staring at me almost every second and every minute when I am walking down the street.

Many of them are now self-conscious about “coughing while Asian” (Eichelberger, 2007), a reference to “driving while Black,” and are worried about being targeted for attacks and direct discrimination. All of these reactions resembled that of SARS stigmatizations against Asian communities back in 2003. This apprehension also immobilized older informants from leaving home for everyday chores and using the subway in fear that they may encounter violence. In conclusion, almost all participants described how Covid stigma imposed an additional burden on feeling unsafe and subsequently changed their behaviors in public spaces. The strategies they adopted to cope with this heightened risk of safety ranged from being alert to their surroundings and avoid walking alone at night to staying home, particularly among elders. More examples of the informants’ coping strategies are as follows:

Teenie: I’ve become more cautious on the street since the Covid outbreak. I feel more guarded when interacting with people and try to distance myself from strangers to prevent similar incidents from happening again [referring to the above-mentioned train incident]. I definitely feel more insecure now.

Catherine: I’m scared of coughing or sneezing in public as Americans blame Chinese for bringing the virus to the country. Like, one time after coughing at a dental clinic, I immediately apologized and explained to people around me that I didn’t have Covid.

5.2. Findings Corresponding to RQ2

5.2.1. Main Finding 3: Different Interpretations of Discrimination Between Younger and Older Women

In-depth interviews showed that there was an abyss between younger and older Chinese informants concerning their microaggression experiences and perceptions of those encounters. Table 4 in Supplementary File 2 reflects that younger women reported more anti-Asian incidents than older women in both pre- and post-Covid periods. Additionally, younger informants also tended to identify and describe more indirect forms of microaggressions, while their older counterparts were more sensitive to blatant racism only.

5.2.1.1. Older Informants’ Approach to Microaggressions: Avoid Troubles At All Costs

One possible explanation is that older women might be less aware of the negative climate that Chinese immigrants are confronted with in the context of Covid. Both NGO informants witnessed that most Chinese elderlies were oblivious to racial tension in the US and prejudices against them. When Cathy was using a common room at an elderly center with a Chinese resident, a White woman kept staring at them outside the room.

The Chinese resident then asked Cathy to ignore her and even apologized to the aggressor when they got out of the room. This case reflected a common response to microaggressions among older immigrants—to avoid troubles at all costs—a phrase repeatedly came up during the interviews. Rather than speaking out, the older generation usually opted for approaching inequity with “a positive and understanding mind” and “denying being racially discriminated against” (Zhou & Yang, 2022, p. 928). Three middle-aged immigrants, for example, described several incidents that could be interpreted as racially motivated. Yet, all three of them denied being discriminated against on the basis of their race or gender and seemed to normalize those behaviors. One of them argued that prejudice against minorities was almost inevitable in any country and sinophobia was understandable because of cultural differences and the uncivilized manner of some Chinese immigrants. Another older participant noted that many of her Asian peers were unwilling to speak up against workplace discrimination. When Tung and her Asian colleagues faced persistent wage gaps compared to other non-Asian employees holding the same position, they were reluctant to engage in a conversation with the supervisors and chose to accept this unfair treatment.

Moreover, older generation expressed more confusion when a suspicious event took place largely due to language barriers. An 80-year-old participant who spoke little English recalled an incident when a passenger yelled at her on a platform. She was perplexed about what happened until a Chinese bystander told her that she was verbally assaulted. All in all, it is plausible that older women were less likely to recognize a discrimination incident as a result of their lack of awareness of this topic, avoidant coping mechanisms, and language barriers.

5.2.1.2. Contrasting Worldview Shared By Younger Informants: Active Engagement

In contrast to the older generation, young participants might be more informed and vocal about racial justice given their university education in the US. In a similar study conducted in Germany, Steinmann (2019) revealed that higher-educated immigrants had a greater chance of reporting discrimination events compared to the lower-educated. Their interpretation is that higher-educated migrants usually acquired a better understanding of the destination country’s language, absorbed more information from mainstream media, and were more engaged in local politics, which in turn made them more aware of unequal treatment. The same explanation could be applied to this group of highly educated young women who, too, were more exposed to American media and generally displayed greater interest and knowledge on this topic. Consequently, having a higher education, combined with possessing stronger awareness of racial issues, rendered the possibility to distinguish more subtle yet equally unacceptable forms of microaggressions.

On the positive side, a few young informants saw this heated debate on anti-Asian sentiment as an opportunity to educate themselves and turned their negative experiences into positive changes to advance diversity and inclusion. One Taiwanese postgraduate student showed unwavering support for the Black Lives Matter movement and was curious to learn more about systematic oppression against Asian and Black communities in the US. As a prospective urban planner, she strived for incorporating racial equity lens in zoning policies and housing programs to eliminate ongoing residential segregation.

5.2.2. Main Finding 4: Internalized Racism and Anti-Blackness Among Older Chinese Immigrants

One recurring theme that emerged in numerous interviews was internalized racism and anti-Black attitudes deeply ingrained among older informants. First of all, most middle-aged and elderly participants faulted the Black communities for a spate of assaults against Asian elders—a popular belief based solely on widely-circulated online news reports and social media posts. Those sensational images and videos perpetuated the idea that anti-Asian hate crimes were committed mostly by Black men (Lee & Huang, 2022), which has no factual basis. For example, an analysis conducted by the University of Maryland indicated that the majority of offenders in anti-Asian hate incidents were Caucasian (Wong, 2021). This inaccurate narrative, however, led to a common perception among older informants that Asians were targeted by Black people. One Hong Kong immigrant woman refrained from going to Dorchester, which is a predominately Black community, after Covid because she was scared of being assaulted there. Tung, another Mainland Chinese informant, shared the same concern and considered all Black Americans inherently violent and dangerous:

I am particularly scared to see a Black person on the street now. I recently saw a young Black man smashing a window in my neighborhood. Ever since that incident happened, I've always brought a crutch with me for self-defense in case a Black person attacks me.

5.2.2.1. Reasons for Higher Levels of Anti-Blackness Among Older Chinese Immigrants

These anti-Black prejudices reflected an age-old racial division between Black and Asian immigrant communities, stemming from the model minority myth that serves as a legitimizing ideology to uphold White supremacy by pitting Asians and Blacks against each other and discounting the existence of structural racism (Kim, 1999). Building upon this theory, Yi and Todd (2021) found that Asians who internalized the model minority myth were more likely to hold anti-Black attitudes and discourage affirmative action. Asians who embraced the model minority myth also tended to minimize their own disad-

vantages and were more inclined to believe the world is fair and overlook institutional discrimination against minority groups. In this sample, a highly-educated and accomplished Chinese informant embodied this form of pervasive internalized racism. While Fang recognized the glass ceiling faced by herself and other Asians throughout her career at several international firms, she still adamantly opposed the use of racial quota for college admission and recruitment for senior positions. In her perspective, people should not see race and focus only on ability. As predicted in the mentioned theory, it is not surprising that Fang harbored anti-Black attitudes by assuming that most Black people are not friendly to East Asians and condemning the Black Lives Matter movement for disrupting law and order. She saw the growing call to defund the police as the primary reason of increased hate-fuelled crimes against Asians:

Without the police presence, we are basically defenseless....I struggle to understand why they [Black Lives Matter activists] would demand the defunding of the police force. These Americans are too liberal, and it crosses our line!

Another possible explanation is that stigmatized communities might resist discourses that put them at risk of discrimination and instead redirect these same discourses toward other marginalized groups to prevent themselves from further prejudices (Eichelberger, 2007). These findings are backed by the fact that three older informants mentioned, who did not report any hate incidents in both pre- and post-Covid periods, exhibited signs of model minority myth and attempted to undermine a discrimination experience if it was coming from a White person. The same thought process, however, did not apply to a Black aggressor. Although Fang affirmed that Blacks bore malice toward Chinese immigrants, she was uncertain about the true intention of White Americans. She noted that even if White people held negative views of the Chinese communities, they would not be forward about it. Another participant described some overt racist episodes perpetrated by Whites, though she interpreted their discriminatory actions as more subtle compared to Black Americans.

5.2.2.2. Reasons for Lower Levels of anti-Blackness Among Younger Chinese Women

On the flip side, it is reasonable to associate lower levels of anti-Black sentiment among younger women with their active socialization in American schools and mainstream society (Tokeshi, 2021). All of the younger informants received higher education, even postgraduate degrees, in the US. It is plausible that given their exposure to liberal values and a more diverse social environment, not a single young informant showed a clear indicator of model minority myth and therefore may be less likely to possess anti-Black prejudice and more

inclined to engage in solidarity-building across racial lines (Liu, 2018). Nancy, one of the young informants, despite having to deal with anti-Asian animosity both at work and in her daily life, demonstrated the openness to rally for the Black communities and denounced biases coming from her own community:

Actually Chinese people are pretty racist too, especially toward other racial minorities....If we want to build a community that is fair and free from discrimination, we should start [by] educating and deprogramming ourselves.

Nevertheless, many of the young participants felt betrayed, frustrated, and unrecognized as racially-motivated incidents aimed at Asians were put aside compared to discussing anti-black racism. Two young informants, both frontline workers serving Chinese elders, were disheartened by the US government's indifference to the growing hostility toward Asians. And they did not anticipate any follow-up actions taken to ensure the safety of Chinese elders:

Nancy: It isn't fair. We stand in solidarity with BLM, yet anti-Asian hate crime is severely overlooked. My feeling is hurt. It just isn't fair!

Cathy: We are actually doing work for Chinese senior citizens. It is ironic that nobody is reaching out to us and providing support and resources to keep our elderly safe.

6. Conclusion

This study sets out to record and understand varied experiences of racial microaggression targeting foreign-born, Chinese immigrant women before and during Covid, and how age and socioeconomic background might impact their perception of racially-motivated incidents and coping strategies. In particular, one of the major findings shows that Chinese immigrant women in this sample encountered more blatant hate incidents in the post-Covid time. In addition to the historical scapegoating of Chinese and Asian communities during a public health crisis, inaccurate media coverage and politicians blaming China as the source of Covid might cause an increase in anti-Asian discrimination during Covid. These same anti-Chinese discourses could also incite fear among Chinese immigrants: this partially explains why almost all informants, regardless of their demographic background or personal experiences of stigmatization, expressed heightened concern over their physical safety during Covid. Moreover, the intersectional analysis of microaggression experiences reveals contrasting views between different age groups: Young women, compared to their older counterparts, were more inclined to report microaggression episodes and distinguish more subtle forms of discrimination. The oblivious reaction shared by

older informants might stem from the lack of understanding of racial tension in the US and the prejudice against them, as well as their more reserved approach to dealing with any kind of conflicts, microaggressions included, by avoiding trouble "at all costs." Younger participants, however, were generally more exposed to the topic of racial justice through socialization and their higher educational attainment. They, therefore, held a more nuanced interpretation of discrimination and lower levels of anti-Black biases. Similarly, internalized racism and anti-Blackness were found more widespread among older informants. This observation reflected different coping mechanisms employed by these two age groups: That is, older participants tend to redirect racial hatred toward Black communities as a strategy to protect themselves from further stigmatization.

Nevertheless, several limitations in this study serve as cautions for future research. First, this study consisted of only 12 participants living in the Greater Boston area and was limited to participants with a relatively high level of education and socioeconomic status, which likely means that experiences of microaggression that intersect with social class were not well represented. The findings, therefore, can in no way be generalized to Chinese immigrant women across the US and other Asian ethnic groups. Second, the more vulnerable subgroups of Chinese immigrant women such as undocumented migrants were unlikely to have access to health care during the Covid pandemic and that might have discouraged them from engaging in any in-person community events. It could be the explanation as to why this study did not capture the experiences of undocumented immigrant women who might be the most impacted by Covid. Despite these drawbacks, this exploratory study provides anecdotal evidence and indication for future research with a larger sample size and a wider range of socioeconomic status, especially for undocumented immigrants and other marginalized groups. A diverse account of microaggression experiences and multifaceted analysis of the impact of anti-Asian prejudice could inform meaningful intervention programs and policies that best serve the Chinese and broader AAPI communities.

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grandmother whose resilience has continued to inspire me every single day; my strong-minded mother who has taught me to work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve; and my sweet little sister who is not only my best friend and biggest champion, but also brings me warmth and joy when I am far away from home.

Conflict of Interests

The author is employed at the non-profit organization Chinese for Affirmative Action, which is the fiscal sponsor of Stop AAPI Hate. Research data and reports from Stop AAPI Hate are mentioned in this article as the basis for formulating research questions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

“I’m Told I Don’t Look Like a Foreigner”: Everyday Racism in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract

In our article, we aim to explore the experience of everyday racism of young people with migrant parents in Italy. Drawing on the analysis of 20 interviews, we seek to reconstruct the overall dynamics of racial microaggressions, highlighting how the context in which microaggressions occur and the interplay between ethnic background, gender, and somatic features influences the interpretations and reactions of the victims. We highlight the boundary work and identity negotiation process carried out in everyday encounters. We also show that participants’ experience oscillates between the claim of not-taken-for-granted citizenship, the feeling of being confined within ethno-cultural imaginaries, and the experience of overt manifestations of racism. Finally, we highlight both the process by which victims come to recognise racial microaggressions and the obstacles they face in coping with them.

Keywords

everyday racism; intersectionality; Italy; racial microaggressions; second-generation migrants

Issue

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1. Introduction

Philomena Essed introduced the concept of “everyday racism” in her seminal text of 1991, defining it as “the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioural) that activate underlying power relations” (Essed, 1991, p. 50). At the centre of her reflection is the relationship between the macro-social dimension of racism—understood as the result of long-term historical processes that tend to crystallise according to specific spatiotemporal modalities in a system of structural inequalities, legal norms, and institutions—and the micro-social dimension, where the constant reactivation of this system is seen at work in everyday interactions and routines. Even if everyday racism manifests itself as a contingent phenomenon, it plays a central role in reaffirming pre-existing relationships of power and domination. According to Essed (1991, p. 39), “specific practices are, by definition, racist

only when they activate existing structural racial inequality in the system.”

The dynamic character of this relationship constitutes an invitation for scholars to focus on the social and political processes of racialisation—which are always linked to the specific historical and cultural context and emblematic of the power relations existing between different social groups—opposing a static and essentialised view of identities (Frisina, 2020; Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013).

According to Lamont and Mizrahi (2012, pp. 366–367), manifestations of everyday racism can be described as a kind of relational boundary work through which “ordinary people claim inclusion, affirm their distinctiveness, contest and denounce stereotyping and claim their rights in the face of discriminatory behaviour and other more subtle slights to their sense of dignity.” It permeates different spheres of experience, from public spaces (Chou & Feagin, 2015) to workplaces (Showunmi

& Tomplin, 2022; Wingfield, 2013), from classrooms (Tyson, 2011) to sports practices (Long, 2000).

When analysing manifestations of everyday racism, at least three aspects should be considered. First, as critical race theory reminds us, “racism is ordinary, not aberrational” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 20). One of the reasons why, despite being widespread, racism is underestimated stems precisely from its ambiguous, insidious, not easily recognisable character. We are not referring, in fact, to overt discriminations such as those present in the labour market (Platt et al., 2021), in housing (Pager & Shepherd, 2008), in the criminal justice system (A. Goffman, 2014), but to seemingly innocuous actions which are based on stigmatising implicit premises.

Secondly, the reference to racial difference *latu sensu* is often intertwined with social class, gender, and age, highlighting the importance of adopting the perspective of intersectional analysis (Collins & Bilge, 2019).

Finally, the power relationship between those belonging to the dominant (racialising) group and those belonging to the dominated (racialised) one can manifest itself in various ways. By comparing the experience of everyday racism suffered by African-American women in the USA and those of Surinamese origin in the Netherlands, Essed highlighted how, in the former case, boundary work is based on the explicit reference to race (white vs. black); whereas in the Dutch context, definitions centred on cultural differences prevail. We see at work here a kind of racism without race (Barker, 1981), a differentialist and culturalist reconfiguration of racist discourse based on enduring processes of de-historicisation, essentialisation, and stigmatisation (Balibar, 2008), which implies a worldview punctuated by cultural, ethnic, or religious differences, always hierarchically ordered, closely linked to physical and moral traits, and embodied by migrants from the Global South, i.e., the former colonies of the West, as well as their offspring.

A second conceptual repertoire to explore and analyse racialisation practices emerged in clinical, cognitive, and social psychology in the same period. Developed by Solorzano in the 1990s (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020) from Pierce’s (1980) observations and later developed by Sue et al. (2007), it centres on the concept of “racial microaggressions.” This concept refers to the set of racist episodes that manifest themselves in everyday experience in an indirect form, tending to be unintentional, through verbal and non-verbal moves. Microaggressions can be divided into three subtypes: microassault, which refers to direct and explicitly racist verbal or non-verbal attacks; microinsult, which refers to statements or allusions that do not contain anything intentionally aggressive but are perceived as irritating and embarrassing by the recipients; and microinvalidation, which tend to deny the feelings and, in general, the experiential reality of minority groups.

The concept of microaggressions is particularly relevant because of the high level of ambiguity, pervasive-

ness, and vagueness that can characterise microinsults and microinvalidations. Indeed, it can be difficult for the victim to identify them and equally difficult for the perpetrator to recognise the implications of such practices (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Essed, 1991; Pierce, 1980). As Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015, p. 302) write:

Microaggressions allow us to “see” those tangible ways racism emerges in everyday interactions. At the same time, they have a purpose. For instance, whether conscious or not, microaggressions perpetuate a larger system of racism. Microaggressions are the layered, cumulative and often subtle and unconscious forms of racism that target People of Colour. They are the everyday reflections of larger racist structures and ideological beliefs that impact People of Colour’s lives.

A third relevant theoretical and epistemological perspective is that of everyday multiculturalism (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), which invites us to consider a kind of “multiculturalism from below.” It embraces an ethnographic approach to analyse the interaction strategies through which cultural diversity is defined, invoked, experienced, and negotiated in specific situations and meeting places in super-diverse urban settings. As Essed has pointed out, to analyse everyday racist practices and racial microaggressions in highly culturally differentiated contexts in Western Europe, a definition of racism that is not self-confined to race is needed. Instead, the concept of racism should refer to the broad repertoire of “othering” devices through which differentialist racism (Taguieff, 2001) is practised and experienced in a web of references to “race,” ethnicity, cultural diversity, gender, citizenship, and social class.

In our article, we will adopt these three perspectives to explore the experience of everyday racism among second-generation youth in Italy. As we will see, this experience oscillates between the claim of not-taken-for-granted citizenship, the feeling of being confined within colonial ethnocultural imaginaries, the denial of the “right to indifference” (Delgado, 1999), and explicit racism. More specifically, we will show how being *de jure* Italian but not being recognised as such by the “real” Italians is a “normal” experience for second-generation youth. From this point of view, inquiring into their experience can reveal how hetero-self-identification and boundary work allow establishing who should be considered part of the in-group and who should be placed outside based on representations that exalt common (national) belonging and how “othering” devices allow for the legitimisation of exclusion and discrimination.

The article is organised as follows: Drawing on the most relevant studies in this field, we will first outline an overview of the main features of public discourse on immigration in Italy and then present the research design and the methodology. The results will be reported concerning two macro-themes: the function

of microaggressions in identity negotiation processes and the resistance strategies adopted by youth with migrant parents when confronted with everyday racism. The results will be discussed in light of two key aspects: the ambiguity that often characterises microaggressions and that makes a gradual problematisation of social reality necessary (Essed, 1991) and the still neglected relevance of the racial issue in Italy.

2. Immigration and Racism in Italy

Many studies over the last three decades have highlighted how, except for the five years between 2009 and 2014, immigration has been central to the public debate in Italy (Bonsaver & Faloppa, 2015). The dominant frames in immigration narratives and migrant representations to date have been two: a first, less important one, in which immigration is presented as a social, economic, and cultural problem that refers to the complex and risky process of integration/assimilation of foreign citizens into Italian society; a second, decidedly dominant in quantitative terms, in which migrants have been represented as a threat—both physical and symbolic—to native citizenship, and immigration is inextricably associated with the issue of security (Palidda, 2011; Richardson & Colombo, 2013).

The consolidation of largely negative discourses on foreign immigration has gone hand in hand with the introduction, at the national level, of policies that, in addition to focusing on controlling and limiting human mobility, have made the legal entry of citizens from non-EU countries increasingly difficult and the legal status of foreign citizens residing in Italy increasingly precarious (Ambrosini & Triandafyllidou, 2011; M. Colombo, 2013; Fontanari, 2019).

The issue of the recognition of different forms of international protection and reception policies for asylum seekers has remained firmly at the centre of the political debate since the 2011 “Arab uprisings” and has seen increasingly bitter confrontations between pro-refugee NGO coalitions, public administrators, high-level officials, left- and right-wing movements, political leaders, and public intellectuals (Ambrosini, 2021; Anselmi et al., 2023; Cuttitta, 2018). This constant sort of fibrillation of the political-media discourse paved the way, in November 2018, for the approval of a “security decree” (Decree No. 133/2018, later to become Law No. 132/2018), by which the weakest form of protection under Italian law—humanitarian protection—was repealed and the most effective and innovative reception system for asylum seekers and refugees (Sprar) was dismantled (Campesi, 2018).

The hegemony of a strongly negative interpretation of migratory phenomena and the emergency nature of policies to govern them is also reflected in relation to the opportunity to revise the citizenship law introduced when Italy was one of the main countries of emigration to central-northern Europe and fundamentally based on

the principle of *ius sanguinis* (Einaudi, 2007). The regulatory framework has not only prevented or discouraged first and second-generation migrants from applying for Italian citizenship (young people born in Italy to foreign parents number over 1 million, and of these only 22.7% have acquired Italian citizenship) but it has also consolidated an image of “Italian-ness” substantially based on a genealogical and ethno-racial conception of national identity (E. Colombo et al., 2011).

In this context, it is not surprising that racism in its various manifestations—as a dominant media and political discourse (Palidda, 2011), a widespread practice within public institutions (Quassoli, 2013), a set of violent behaviours and explicitly negative attitudes that dot the everyday experience of foreign citizens (Lunaria, 2020; OSCAD, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2019), as well as a feature of a non-negligible part of popular media production (Bordin & Bosco, 2017)—is not only widespread but widely tolerated (Frisina, 2020; Levy, 2015).

3. Research Design

The research is based on twenty semi-structured interviews, recorded and transcribed in full. The participants, homogeneous in age (from 18 to 31 years old), were selected to balance gender (12 males and eight females), the national origin of the parents, together with some somatic traits that we assumed could expose the interviewees to racial micro-aggressions to a greater or lesser extent.

Contact with the respondents was made through both personal relationships and social networks. An additional consideration that, for reasons of space, we cannot go into here concerns the positioning of those who conducted the interviews concerning those who were interviewed. Despite the common generational belonging, a palpable boundary emerged between the interviewer and interviewees. The latter were willing to share their experience of racism and discrimination within the framework of a research project while simultaneously recognising the former as a member of the dominant in-group who, as such, could not have directly experienced microaggressions. The interviews were analysed from the triple subdivision of microassault, microinvalidation, and microinsult. In presenting the results, we will focus on microinvalidation and microinsult. The analysis is divided into three phases:

1. We begin with the identification of typical incidents from the nine recurring themes identified by Sue et al. (2007; see also Sue, 2010): aliens in one's own land, the ascription of intelligence, colour blindness, criminality, denial of individual racism, the myth of meritocracy, pathologising cultural values, second class citizen, and assumption of abnormality.
2. We analyse the victims' perception of the event and the reactions typically put in place as an

immediate response to the incident based on the distinction between cognitive, behavioural, and emotional reactions (Sue, 2010).

3. The interpretation of the event follows, as well as its development over time to show how the interpretative work that leads second-generation boys and girls to recognise the microaggressions of which they are victims should be read as the outcome of neither straightforward nor linear pathways of awareness acquisition thanks to constant intra- and intergenerational confrontation.

4. Microaggressions and Identity Negotiation

Before examining the cases of microaggression connected to the processes of self and hetero-identification, let us see how “objective data” and subjective perception create a crucial tension for the very definition of microaggression. As we mentioned earlier, central elements in the definition of racial microaggressions are the ambiguity and the halo of uncertainty that characterises them, from which derives the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the event and the tendency not to react on the part of those who suffer it. The interviewees repeatedly emphasised the dilemma of identifying the kind of veiled racism that can manifest itself, even in a gaze:

The looks of people who notice that you are different, who notice that you are not Italian, made me reflect and change the way I behave with people. At one point, I decided to shave off my beard because I didn't want to look Egyptian....Now I ask myself: “So what?” But at the time, I didn't....I noticed that people always asked me: “Where are you from? I hear you speak very good Italian, but where are you from?” They always look at me like that....Is it natural that they look at me like that? Or is it because they have xenophobia towards me? (26-year-old male, born in Italy to Egyptian parents)

In the interviewee's experience, the gaze that expresses the perception of a difference starting from somatic clues is often accompanied by the question about the place of origin that makes explicit the underlying process of negotiation of belonging to the in-group: a belonging that, by definition, implies the coincidence between the national and ethnic/racial group. It is a very persistent experience, as signalled by the adverb “always” and inscribed within the processes of self and hetero-identification that take shape in everyday interactions. This type of event falls into the category of *microinvalidation* (Sue, 2010), i.e., those messages that deny the experiential reality of minorities and which, once decoded and interpreted, produce a clear perception of alienation. The sub-category *alien in one's own land* clusters those situations in which those who recognise themselves as “Italian” because they were born in Italy and acquired

Italian citizenship when they turned eighteen are perceived as a foreigner:

Ah, an event, I don't know whether to call it racist, it happened on my first day at university. I was terrified because I'd already been to Milan, but I'm really a country girl as they say....Coming to Milan, here in Bicocca: Wow! Everything is so big and amplified. First day of university, business administration course, I sit at the end of the desk, the last seat near the door, ready to escape, and this girl asks me if the seats near me are free. So far so good, but it was the way she asked....I think I laughed for three hours. Gesticulating she says: “Sorry, is this seat free?” [spelling and gesticulating]. I said: “Everything's fine.” And she says: “Ah, sorry, I didn't think you spoke Italian.” (28-year-old female, in Italy since she was eight, Cameroon)

The interviewees did not expect that her presence in a university lecture hall could be perceived as “out of place” and that someone might address her differently than they would have done with a subject unequivocally recognisable as a member of the in-group (“we Italians”). Again, the underlying ambiguity that pervades the account does not allow the interviewee to state with certainty that this was an explicitly and intentionally racist episode.

Furthermore, being addressed in a language other than Italian generates the feeling of being out of place, of being identified as a person one does not expect to meet in a certain context:

When I go to a restaurant it often happens that they speak to me in English as soon as I enter because they take me for a foreigner. If they address you directly in English it is because they assume that I actually shouldn't be in the restaurant, not because I can't go there but because it doesn't fit the norm...and it makes you understand a lot of things actually, because [the waitress] automatically excludes that a black person can speak directly to her in Italian. From the moment she saw me, she must have thought “eh, this must be a foreigner coming from who-knows-where” because they are not used to seeing someone black who can enter certain environments. (27-year-old male, in Italy since he was 10, Togo)

In the three aforementioned cases, skin colour in itself triggers the dynamic that leads the interviewees to question the meaning of an event that initially produces a surprise reaction. An Italian citizen is perceived as an outsider through an interactional move that puts him/her outside the boundaries of the in-group based on somatic traits revealing that for the “perpetrators” being Italian implies by definition being white. A criterion—whiteness/Italian-ness—that would most likely not be invoked explicitly but that nonetheless operates as a

taken-for-granted assumption by which membership based on the colour line is reaffirmed (Morning & Maneri, 2022).

Such a cognitive short circuit often manifests itself through the verbal and non-verbal modalities used to address those placed in the out-group. The involuntary perpetrators assume, in fact, that the Italian language is spoken and understood with sufficient competence only by those who are Italian citizens.

Here another type of micro-invalidation manifests itself, which includes all the situations in which the perpetrator is surprised by the fluent knowledge of the Italian language on the part of those who, although born in Italy, is considered to be of “foreign origin” either concerning the nationality of their parents or, as in the following example, simply because they are “African in appearance”:

But this thing here is something that happens to you often even when maybe you are shopping at the supermarket and someone says: “Ah, but how well you speak Italian! Since when is it that you are here?” Look, I was born here. And they go on saying: “Ah, but how good you are.” At that point, I say “yes, yes thank you” and act like nothing. I mean, it’s these kinds of questions when maybe they hear you talking. For instance, when you go also to public offices you can always get this question (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ivory Coast)

Astonishment at one’s competence in the use of the Italian language depends on the fact that the speaker is automatically classified as a foreigner. This can happen in two ways: first, regarding somatic features; second, concerning ethno-cultural descent. In both cases, the otherness associated with the alleged foreign origin is automatically shifted to linguistic competence, as a marker of national belonging, even in the presence of objective elements that should or could suggest otherwise, as narrated in this interview excerpt:

An episode that hurt me a lot happened in high school. My Italian was always perfect, and I was also one of the best at writing essays....Once it happened that we were doing an essay in social sciences and I passed my draft to a classmate. In the end, she got an eight and a half and I got a five [grades go from zero to 10]. Obviously, I asked the teacher for an explanation. He couldn’t give me an explanation for the bad mark, so he told me: “Well, it’s because being Albanian, you have difficulties with the Italian language.” I was furious and I told him: “Excuse me, but in Italian, I’m one of the best.” But that’s not the point because you think: I can speak Italian very well, I can have done primary, middle, high school, and university in Italy but, still, I’m always labelled as a foreigner. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

This last episode introduces the *second-class citizen* sub-category of micro-invalidation (Sue, 2010), which refers to situations in which the message is conveyed that minority group members are less able to cope with difficult and prestigious paths and should be treated differently regardless of an assessment of individual merits. This is an important aspect fraught with consequences that can to some extent explain both the less brilliant performance and the preference for shorter and more vocational courses of study of young people of foreign origin compared to their “Italian” peers:

When I was in middle school, the teacher advised my mother not to send me to high school. She was amazed because she could not understand why the teacher would advise someone who had excellent marks not to follow a difficult path. (27-year-old male, arrived in Italy at the age of 10, Togo)

In this last case, it was easier for the interviewee to clearly recognise the discriminatory and racist meaning of the event since the somatic difference is associated with an inability/inferiority that invalidates the objective factual data (the excellent grades). This episode highlights how pre-existing structural racial inequality is constantly re-activated in everyday interactions (Essed, 1991).

From many interview excerpts, it emerges how the “black = foreigner” equivalence possibly characterises, with different implications and nuances in terms of racism, every everyday situation, signalling that skin colour constitutes an element that is difficult to assimilate, sufficient to sanction the non-membership of the in-group:

I went to a dinner where a lot of jokes were being made. But you think about it before you make a joke because you think I will be misunderstood. You are only seen when you smile. And so you’re not comfortable, they don’t make you feel that you’re one of them, that you’re part of the group, they always make you feel, at least here in Italy I’ve always felt that way, that you’re not Italian, you can never be Italian because Italian always has to be of Italian blood and white. (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ghana)

As Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop (2013) point out, the social construction of the “foreigner” often implies a simultaneous depreciation of specific social groups (the minorities) and the implicit enhancement of the in-group:

A “race-free” whiteness is emerging in Italy that denies being racist and at the same time naturalises both the other and its cultural (and colour) difference as inferior, and itself, its own historical and cultural characteristics, reinvigorating the idea of an obvious

(“natural”) whiteness that is all Italian. (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013, p. 12)

It is primarily a question of ethno-national imagery linked to the whiteness-blackness opposition, as is revealed by another episode involving a girl of Brazilian origin, who, in addition to not corresponding to the stereotypical image of *carioca* culture (football, dancing, and Carnival), often provokes a reaction of surprise among her acquaintances because she is “too white”:

I am often told: “Ah, you’re Brazilian, but you are light-skinned.” If I were not, would I have been treated differently? I don’t know. Maybe my experience wouldn’t have been as good....Should I consider myself lucky to be a white Brazilian? (26-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age 13, Brazil)

On the one hand, being “too white”—and therefore somatically distant from the widespread stereotype—does not spare the interviewee the embarrassment and annoyance of often being the object of undue attention and questions; on the other hand, it in itself gives her a superior social and cultural status that prevents her from the risk of suffering discriminatory treatment.

Equally emblematic is the experience of a girl born in Italy to Albanian parents who mentions a kind of suitability test she is not infrequently subjected to:

People often look at me and tell me that I don’t look Albanian, meaning it as a compliment, and in reality I never know how to respond: I mean, should I say thank you...? Probably because I speak Italian fluently and I feel integrated into the life of my community...but I don’t understand why they want to cancel that part of my identity by telling me that I don’t even vaguely resemble an eastern girl....Their intention is anything but offensive, they want to pay me a compliment, but I never know how to interpret it, so I usually say “thank you” and try to cut it short. (25-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of three, Albania)

A test with three possible outcomes: When the comparison is congruent with the widespread stereotypes, one is included in the out-group; when, on the other hand, there is a discrepancy, one can be classified as an atypical foreigner or promoted in full in the in-group, implying that “being Italian” is an advantage. Moreover, precisely those who deviate from widespread imagery of a strongly racially hierarchical society are more frequently exposed to micro-aggressions, while those who are in the right place on the scale of prestige may simply not be noticed:

A friend of mine, who is a beautician and has had a lower level of education than me, has not experienced racism so strongly. She is never asked her surname, she goes and makes a massage, and that’s it....If you talk to an Albanian guy who is a worker, no

problem, no racism. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

5. Recognising and Resisting Everyday Racism

The excerpts above highlight the fundamental ambiguity and opacity of micro-insults and micro-invalidations. The references to the hierarchical character of the in-group/out-group relationship constitute an implicit premise: It is generally taken for granted and is hardly ever stated directly. The vocabulary used also refers to differences defined in terms of cultural stereotypes: You are different from what you should be as an Albanian, Brazilian, Togolese, and so on, and this is why I recognise you as similar to me. Ethno-racial hierarchy is taken for granted and is invisible because the situation is perfectly consistent with what is expected.

As a result, those who suffer a microaggression may have difficulty recognising it and successfully attributing a racist meaning to it; an aspect that may affect the possibility of an immediate reaction:

I was always considered different, so how can you react, if someone doesn’t invite you to a birthday party because you are a foreigner? You can’t say you have to invite him, you can’t even make requests because they can simply tell you: “I’m not inviting you because we are not friends.” On the other hand, I was also younger, so I felt bad because, obviously, you feel bad. These are all experiences that you carry inside you. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

Many aspects of everyday experience that for the majority may be taken for granted because they are unproblematic—and which for that very reason denote an implicit condition of privilege—become for those who are subjected to inappropriate attention and often feel out of place a constant source of anxiety and frustration.

Not only that: The frequent feeling of unease makes the racialised subjects much more aware of how the meaning of social experience depends on the ability to recognise a series of implicit premises and to activate specific interpretative frames (E. Goffman, 1974).

In this regard, Essed (1991) emphasises the importance of understanding how a subject builds up a set of information, practical and theoretical, regarding racism. By distinguishing “racist ideas” from “ideas about racism,” Essed highlights that understanding racism involves a problematisation of social reality. A common theme in the interviewees’ narratives is learning from direct experience what can be interpreted as racism. The repeated exposure to different forms of microaggressions reveals a discriminatory reality that not everyone expected or was prepared to cope with:

I began to realise certain things....Here is a trivial example: I went into a café I used to go to every day

to have a coffee. The waitress was always talking to old people who usually were there early in the morning. She never gives the slightest shit about me, but I'm in a hurry, I have to go to work, I'm in a hurry, I only have 10 minutes to drink coffee and have a brioche, but she would not care about me, she would make me the coffee when she decides to, she never [respects me]. Even if I'm buying coffee and I'm paying, she doesn't behave with me the same way she does with other people. (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ghana)

The possibility of recognising microaggressions is the outcome of a gradual process ("I began to realise"). The interviewee reports that, over time, he started perceiving a difference in treatment and, based on repeated exposure to similar incidents ("I went every day"), finally traced it back to the discriminatory purpose of his interlocutor.

The formal learning opportunities provided by the school and the media seem to have little relevance to this process. All the people interviewed reported how racism is seldom spoken of at school and when it does happen, it is always in connection to the Italian colonial past.

The two spheres in which they experienced the possibility of learning how to recognise and deal with microaggressions are the family and the friendship circle. The case of Me (31 years old, arrived in Italy as a child from Morocco) is significant. He told us that, as a boy, he was teased by his peers with "impertinent" nicknames and that he did not care because no one had ever told him they were derogatory terms until, after witnessing the violent reaction of one of his friends towards the person who was insulting him, he realised that it was a way of insulting him for his different origin: "I had not given it the weight that word should have."

As far as coping strategies and tactics are concerned, Sue (2010) distinguishes three levels: (a) cognitive, concerning the thoughts that are developed about the incident, its nature, and the questions about a possible reaction; (b) emotional, concerning what the individuals involved feel (such as anger, frustration, fear, impatience); and (c) behavioural, concerning the response. In general, the reaction is strongly intertwined with the severity of the episode, and the latter depends on recognising intentionality attributable to one's interlocutor. Non-reaction is reported as the most frequent response by our interviewees:

I let it pass because, in the end, I have nothing to hide, it's not like I can argue about it because you say he [the policeman] has more power than me in the sense that he could denounce me, do something to me, create trouble. So you say, ok, I'll give him the document even if you believe that I am a criminal only because of my skin colour. You try for a moment to go along with it also because you see these videos in America where black men are killed just because they are black. So, you try to protect yourself and not

clash with the police force. (31-year-old male, arrived in Italy at the age of three, Morocco)

The reasons for not reacting are diverse: from the ambiguity of the situation that does not allow a clear interpretation to indecision in the response, from the perception of having limited time available (so the incident is over before even the possibility of reacting) to denial (convincing oneself that nothing bad has happened), from a sense of powerlessness whereby reacting or not reacting does not change the outcome to fear of the consequences. Even to the point of "self-aggrandisement" in order to prevent the most embarrassing situations, as this interviewee recounts:

The ugliest thing that happened to me is when this year I offered to tutor some middle and primary school kids....Initially, people contacted me a lot and I didn't think I had to specify that I don't have Italian parents. I mean, I didn't think it was a problem. [When] this boy even came to my house the first time, his mother asked me: "But are you Italian?" I replied: "I was born here, but my parents are not Italian." And she said: "Don't worry, I don't have a problem with this." From that [point] on, I never saw her again. From that moment [on], I started to specify that I am not Italian, in the sense that I study here, I live here, I was born here, but my parents are of Tunisian origin....I didn't think it was a problem. (18-year-old female, born in Italy to Tunisian parents)

6. Discussion

The analysis of the interviews revealed that all participants have repeatedly been victims of different types of racial microaggressions but that, in most cases, they preferred not to react. Our interviewees learnt from their direct experience the fundamental ambiguity of many manifestations—daily, colour-blind, and politically correct—of contemporary racism. In the absence of a direct attack that could substantiate the accusation of racism, the offender may have a good game in denying any offensive intention. As Sue (2010, p. 110) reminds us: "We do not want to be racist—so much of the time we go around trying not to be, by pretending we are not." In agreement with Bonilla-Silva (2012), one can speak of racial grammar that shapes our common sense and proceeds by naturalising and hierarchising differences to the point that, in some cases, the opacity of the situation and the difficulty of anticipating the reactions of possible witnesses can lead victims even to question their own capacity for judgement.

If giving a voice and a name to experiences of discrimination is the first step to combat them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), awareness of their pervasiveness represents the outcome of a long and complex learning process that involves the acquisition of a set of knowledge thanks to which one can problematise

the common-sense interpretative schemes that make widespread racism invisible. A kind of knowledge that is not static and acquired once and for all:

[It must always be] consistently adapted and modified to include new information. New experiences are tested and interpreted in terms of earlier acquired notions of racism and add to or (partly) replace parts of previous representations of racism. In other words, knowledge of racism is a process of constant intake, testing and interpretation of new information and remodelling of previous representations. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 74)

Finally, the acquisition of this awareness has a substantial impact on the identity level, which can translate into a more intense affirmation of one's being Italian and a claim to one's right to participate in collective life, which benefits from the innovative use of the vocabulary and grammar of citizenship.

Finally, our analysis highlights how often microaggressions are perceived regarding a visible difference, which relates to physical appearance and is therefore traceable, albeit without naming it, to race. Difference defined in ethno-cultural terms is also a way of establishing the boundaries of national belonging. However, when skin colour causes one to be automatically labelled as a foreigner or when one is told that he or she is too white to embody the *carioca* culture, it is again the colour line that defines diversity. This feature, not surprisingly, is relevant because it shows how the racial question is still very important in Italy and that an interpretation of contemporary racism in a differentialist or cultural key (Barker, 1981) is not able to account for its multifarious manifestations. While it is unquestionable that difference defined in ethno-cultural terms today performs a discursive function homologous to that which race played in race theory, legitimising discrimination and social exclusion, the issue of race, though muted, has by no means disappeared in contemporary Italy.

7. Conclusion

It seems appropriate to dwell on some specificities of the Italian case, which can help us connect the everyday experience of racism, as perceived and narrated by those who are racialised, with the more structural dimension that microaggressions reactivate.

In Italy, there is a lack of awareness of racism as a system of reproduction of inequalities that is substantiated not only by widespread physical violence against members of minorities but also by a common sense steeped in stereotypes that, by racialising or ethnicising others, implicitly imposes whiteness as a standard of reference.

Racism, says the dominant vulgate, as a system of thought is a relic of the past: The categories on which it is based—that of race above all—are without foundation; it is sometimes manifested explicitly and brutally by

a fanatical minority, etc. Seen from another angle, however, it constitutes a kind of blind spot in national culture. To realise this, one only has to think of the difficulty with which only in recent years has one begun to reflect on the Italian colonial experience. As Igiaba Scego, an Afro-descendant writer, recounts in her novel *The Colour Line*, Italy seems to have a clear problem with its colonial past and with the twenty-year fascist period (Filippi, 2020, 2021). As Morning and Maneri (2022) show, the reference to a past in which racism manifested itself as anti-Semitism together with the consideration of the connection between racism and slavery as an eminently American issue may explain the difficulty in recognising how the colour line constitutes a well-present element in today's Italian society.

There is basically no glimpse either on the part of those who in the stories and experiences of our interviewees often unwittingly feed inferiorising and stigmatising representations of otherness or on the part of the protagonists of the public debate (politicians, experts, public intellectuals columnists) an awareness of the fact that if the differences that constituted the core of racist ideology until the end of World War II are by no means objective, nevertheless the consequences that this ideology—and the policies that have been legitimised by it—has produced are still very much present and relevant in Italian society.

In this sense, we agree with those who assert that there is nothing more artificial today than a non-racist perception of society and that the colour line manifests itself as much in the way in which a political response to the challenges posed by international migration has been attempted so far as in the light-heartedness and unawareness with which the dominant position of a white, Italian subject is continually and implicitly reaffirmed in everyday interactions.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

Racial Microaggressions and Ontological Security: Exploring the Narratives of Young Adult Migrants in Glasgow, UK

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of racial microaggressions faced by young adult migrants in everyday life in Glasgow, UK. The personal stories reported in this study are a direct challenge to the dominant political narrative that Scotland does not have a racism problem. When faced with this discord between narrative and reality, young adult migrants in Scotland must negotiate both their own lived experiences and biographical narratives to achieve a sense of security. A narrative enquiry methodology is used to explore mundane and everyday interactions for four young adult migrants who have settled in Glasgow over the last 10 years. These accounts of daily life offer a unique view into the everyday racism and racial microaggressions faced by this group. Additionally, the opinions of selected Scottish politicians have been collected to gather an additional viewpoint on racism in Scotland. A theoretical perspective stemming from ontological security theory contributes to the racial microaggressions literature in unpacking how individual migrants negotiate traumatic experiences of racism and manage their identities. The analysis explores how migrant individuals may employ coping mechanisms and adopt distinct behaviours to minimise the daily trauma of racism and microaggressions experienced in Scotland. This study, therefore, highlights the potential for interdisciplinary research on racism, narrative, and security studies, and the opportunities for bringing together these distinct perspectives.

Keywords

identity; microaggressions; narrative; ontological security; racism; Scotland

Issue

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1. Introduction

How can the experiences of young adult migrants in Glasgow deepen our understanding of racial microaggressions and processes of social inclusion? What are the mechanisms used by individual migrants to establish a sense of security in the local environment? How may ontological security theory contribute to scholarly debates on racial microaggressions? These are the key research questions that this study will address.

This article explores the narratives of four young adult migrants living in Glasgow, UK. The study unpacks how everyday experiences of racial discrimination and microaggressions impact individual young adult migrants in this setting. While one would expect these traumatic experiences to lead to feelings of social exclusion, I dis-

sect the processes through which these lived experiences are re-evaluated, re-told, and negotiated in a manner that seeks to deflect the significance of the discrimination faced. I argue that this is part of an on-going effort, on the part of the study participants, to establish an individual sense of (ontological) security which places a strong emphasis on social trust, routines, and the predictability of everyday interactions.

2. Context

2.1. Scotland and Immigration

Scotland is a small nation, and the total population was estimated to be 5,479,900 in mid-2021 (National Records of Scotland, 2021). In the year ending June 2021,

there were around 397,000 non-British nationals living in Scotland (National Records of Scotland, 2021). Of all non-British nationals in Scotland, 231,000 (58%) were EU nationals and 165,000 (42%) were non-EU nationals. Of all non-UK-born people living in Scotland, 258,000 (49%) were born in the EU and 265,000 (51%) were born outside the EU. Polish was the most common non-British nationality (62,000). The council areas with the largest proportion of residents born outside of the UK were the City of Edinburgh (24%), Aberdeen City (22%), Glasgow City (14%), and Dundee City (12%). Glasgow is the largest city in Scotland with a population of 635,130. It has the highest percentage of non-white ethnic minority population of all of Scotland's urban areas. Walsh (2017) predicts that by 2031, one-fifth of Glasgow's total population (and one-quarter of children under 16 years) will belong to a non-white minority group.

Political actors and elites have helped to frame Scotland as an open nation-state which welcomes migrants (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009). The governing Scottish National Party (SNP) has often described Scotland as "open, welcoming and outward-looking" (SNP, 2019) and has stressed that a Scottish civic national identity is open to anyone moving to the country. Scottish Government public campaigns, including One Scotland, Many Cultures, are exemplar of a civic nationalist ideology that seeks to promote diversity and cultural understanding in Scotland while furthering nationalist political sentiment (Penrose & Howard, 2008). In Glasgow, the slogan "People Make Glasgow" has been adopted to promote a city-level narrative of tolerance and inclusion. Scotland's perceived pro-immigration stance is often compared with England and other parts of the UK to construct a narrative of Scottish distinctiveness (Nicolson & Korkut, 2022). The Scottish Government (SNP and Scottish Greens coalition) have also been successful in gaining electoral backing from some ethnic minority groups, specifically from Scottish Pakistanis and young Scottish Muslims (Finlay et al., 2017). However, research (Leith, 2012) has also shown a discrepancy between the civic nationalist vision of Scotland shared by politicians and the views of Scottishness shared by the majority (white) population.

Ethno-centric attitudes continue to guide public perceptions of national belonging and Scottishness, with a focus on birthplace and ancestry guiding public opinion on Scottish identity (Leith & Soule, 2011). Furthermore, everyday racism and islamophobia have been found to destabilise the Scottish government's attempts to establish a civic Scottish national identity (Davidson et al., 2018). These findings suggest that the Scottish public does not have such a welcoming attitude towards migrants, or relaxed approach to national identity, as the political rhetoric would suggest. The present study investigates the individual narratives of young adult migrants who have settled in Scotland to understand the challenges and daily realities they face from a first-hand, bottom-up perspective. The study is informed by the extant literature on racism in Scotland.

Davidson et al. (2018) have described everyday racism as a debilitating structural force on people of colour in Scotland. Nonetheless, racism in Scotland is often "downplayed as banter" and understood as a less critical social concern when contrasted with England (Botterill et al., 2016, p. 128). Ethnic minorities in Scotland face discrimination in all aspects of life, including in education, healthcare provision, and in searching for accommodation and employment (Netto, 2018). While Hussain and Miller (2006, p. 49) found that "Islamophobia is significantly lower in Scotland than in England," Hopkins (2016) has identified an increase in islamophobia in Scotland, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York. Young males who displayed characteristics of Muslimness through clothing choice or having a beard were most likely to face persecution.

On-going comparisons with England and Anglophobia also play an important part in Scottish national identity constructions and have been shown to reflect in the social inclusion processes of migrant groups in Scotland. Hussain and Miller (2006, p. 198) reported that racialised minorities in Scotland "adopt Scottish identities, Scottish attitudes, Scottish Nationalism and even some degree of Anglophobia...as tools of integration." Furthermore, the vis-à-vis relationship with England has been identified as integral to Scottish national identity ascriptions (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2015). Comparisons with England and the English therefore carry significant weight in Scottish identity constructions and have been found to play a role in shaping the experiences of migrants in Scotland. There is, however, debate in the academic literature over whether negative Scottish attitudes towards England and the wider English population should be construed as racism (Liinpää, 2020).

3. Theoretical Considerations

3.1. *Racial Microaggressions*

Within this study, racism is conceptualised following Essed's (1991, p. 11) definition as the "attribution of inferiority to a particular racial or ethnic group and the use of this principle to propagate and justify the unequal treatment of this group." Racism scholars have expanded on this definition to consider the social systems and categorisations that have been used to implement racial hierarchies and produce inequalities in life opportunities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Racism is often manifested through small-scale actions, termed racial microaggressions, in everyday life which often help to reproduce systemic and institutional inequalities.

The literature on racial microaggressions has been developed most prominently in the United States. The term was first used by psychiatrist Chester Pierce to describe covert forms of racist aggression that are "subtle and stunning" yet unimaginably harmful (Pierce, 1970). Pierce made a distinction between covert,

micro-actions, and overt, macro-structures, of racism. Solórzano and Huber (2020, p. 2) have described racial microaggressions as forms of “systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place.” Sue et al. (2007) proposed a nine-category framework for analysing racial microaggressions and how these may be categorised. Williams et al. (2021) examined the existing racial microaggressions literature and expanded on the taxonomy by identifying sixteen variables of microaggressions. These perspectives and themes of analysis are helpful as anti-racism scholars continue to develop the microaggressions framework and foreground the testimonies of individual victims to better understand how both everyday racism and racial microaggressions operate in everyday life.

There are significant overlaps between scholarly work on racial microaggressions and the literature on everyday racism. Essed (2008) has stated that everyday racism is not about large-scale incidents but rather incorporates mundane, routine events that enable structural or institutional racism. These small, micro-level, disruptions to everyday life have a detrimental impact on the sense of belonging and security of individual victims, particularly migrants. Racism and racial microaggressions negatively impact individual-level feelings of security and undermine efforts to achieve a sense of belonging. The present study adopts a theoretical perspective analysing the processes through which individuals attempt to securitise their own identities considering these instances of racial microaggressions. Explicitly, ontological security theory is used to trace the subjective process of security-seeking for a marginalised social group, young adult migrants living in Glasgow, UK.

3.2. Ontological Security Theory

Ontological security was first developed by Scots psychiatrist R. D. Laing to detail how his patients lost touch with reality through an absence of social trust and routine social interactions. While Laing was predominantly interested in the analysis of individual, micro-level, ontological insecurity in his seminal book *The Divided Self* (1960), it has latterly most frequently been used in the field of international relations to analyse macro-level, inter-state, relations and conflicts. Giddens (1991) incorporated a sociological perspective in his reconfiguration of the theory, whereby he described ontological security as a person’s sense of existential safety in society. He argued that this sense of safety is dependent upon feelings of social trust and the predictability of everyday routines. Being able to predict the outcome of everyday social interactions and having a strong self-narrative, knowing where you are from and the story you have, are important prerequisites for ontological security. Furthermore, the ability to predict the outcome of banal social interactions, such as small conversations with a local shopkeeper or taxi driver, can help to provide a sense of security to individuals. Conversely, disruptive,

or unexpected interruptions to daily routines would have an adverse effect on ontological security.

Giddens suggested that a breach of daily routines and social interactions would give rise to an individual-level existential crisis and result in the experience of ontological insecurity, an unbearable condition of anxiety. Racial microaggressions are an example of a disruptive event which can undermine the sense of social trust and ontological security for individual victims. Following this perspective, I believe there is potential for examining the influence of racial microaggressions on ontological security-seeking subjects and the potential impact that these have on individual victims. For Giddens, security-seeking strategies are used by individuals to “bracket out” the existential anxieties that would lead to ontological insecurity. These security-seeking strategies are conceptualised in the literature as coping mechanisms.

Giddens (1991, p. 46) stated: “Since anxiety, trust and everyday routines of social interaction are so closely bound up with one another, we can readily understand the rituals of day-to-day life as coping mechanisms.” Coping mechanisms can include the adoption of new routines, negotiated self-narratives, and behaviours which reduce the possibility of such a disruption. Following the ontological security literature, this study analyses everyday routines and mundane actions as detailed by participants, paying close attention to disruptive events which put social trust in jeopardy. This makes it possible to identify instances of racial microaggressions and any resulting coping mechanism(s) which may be used to deflect the significance of these disruptions. Another key requirement for ontological security at an individual level is a strong conceptualisation of home and feelings of comfort in one’s social environment.

Kinnvall (2004) has stressed that a strong sense of home is the starting point from which all identities are developed. When there is confusion over where one feels at home or a threat to the home environment, anxieties and insecurities will come to the fore. One example of a group experiencing a loss of home is asylum seekers or undocumented migrants whose biographical self-narratives have been transformed through the, often distressing, events through which they have lived (Vaquera et al., 2017). Feelings of comfort in everyday life form another key component of the ontologically secure individual. However, as Noble (2005, p. 108) states, “the capacity to be comfortable is unevenly distributed amongst the population.” This means that migrant groups are more likely to experience ontological insecurity than other sections of the population.

Taking the example of migrant groups in Australia, Noble (2005) explains that not only do migrant groups face social stigmatization and political persecution but they are also prevented from feeling at ease in the new home environment because of the perceived threat they are seen to pose to the nation-state. Croft (2012) has highlighted how ontological security is reliant on a sense of belonging, in terms of group alignment and

nationality, feelings of comfort and, also, how perceived threats can work towards eroding feelings of security. While feelings of being at home and comfortable may be taken for granted by the majority population, those who are excluded from these feelings are left in a state of perpetual insecurity. Harris and Karimshah (2019) report that Australian Muslims have expressed that they feel the need to perform their normalness, and qualities of good citizenship in public spaces and during routine social interactions, to mitigate their perceived difference. Additionally, scholars have highlighted that sub-state nationalist political contexts, including Scotland, UK, and South Tyrol, Italy, present their own challenges for young adult migrants seeking to establish ontological security (Carlà & Nicolson, 2023).

Following the perspective of Kinnvall (2004), I subscribe to the idea that ontological security is a fundamentally unachievable state and that individuals engage in on-going security-seeking practices to deflect existential anxieties (Krickel-Choi, 2022). Through this theoretical perspective, it becomes possible to unpack the coping mechanisms which individual migrants may employ when faced with disruptive everyday events, including instances of racial microaggressions. Due to its focus on social trust, everyday routines, and social interactions, this study argues that there is scope for using ontological security theory to deepen our understanding of the everyday lives of young adult migrants and how individual victims respond to instances of racial microaggressions. This is explored through a narrative enquiry research design.

4. Methodology

The methodology used in the study builds on narrative enquiry interviews conducted with four young adult migrants in Glasgow and four elected Scottish politicians. It was decided to interview politicians to gain an additional, macro-level, perspective on issues of diversity and racism in Scotland. This adds a further dimension of analysis to the study and allows for comparison between data sets. Young adult migrant participants were selected through involvement in the EU AMIF-funded research project VOLPOWER. They were aged between 18–27 years old at the time of interview and comprised both EU and third-country nationals. Participants had lived in Glasgow between two (shortest period) and 10 (longest period) years. A gender balance between interviewees was established. Pseudonyms have been used for all young adult migrant participants, and all identifying data has been removed to protect anonymity. Interviewed politicians represented the three largest political parties in Scotland: SNP, Scottish Labour, and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party (politicians gave formal consent for their names and data to feature in the study; full interview transcripts were reviewed and approved by all study participants, in acknowledgement of the risk of identifica-

tion, before their inclusion). Interviews were conducted between September 2019 and April 2020.

4.1. Narrative Enquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) explain how stories can act as a portal through which to enter the social world of research participants, with a focus on lived experience and interpretation, to examine a particular phenomenon. Narrative enquiry has been used to study identity through an analysis of how storytellers position themselves and others (Chase, 2005; Davies & Harré, 1990). Through the “new narrative turn” (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006), researchers have shifted the focus to concentrate on the small stories that narrators share. This has been conceptualised as experience-centred research (Squire, 2013). A narrative enquiry technique works best with small participant numbers, as interviews are typically lengthy and in-depth. In episodic-narrative interviews, narrators share the details and their interpretation of everyday life events to explore a specific phenomenon (Mueller, 2019). In my study, the interviews took on an episodic style whereby both experiential and semantic knowledge is shared through the recounting of events (Flick, 2007, p. 181).

Episodic narrative interviews are based on an interview guide in which the researcher asks the narrator to reflect on personal lived experience, provide concrete examples, and describe how these have influenced the narrator’s worldview (Flick, 2007, p. 182). Mueller (2019) sets out a nested approach to episodic narrative interviews in a three-step process. This involves asking for a description of the phenomenon, e.g.: Have you ever experienced racial discrimination during your time in Scotland? Second, there is the request for stories using probes and prompts to encourage the sharing of longer narratives, e.g.: Can you give me an example of a time that you felt excluded in your social environment? Finally, in concluding the interview, the interviewee should be asked if they would like to add or amend anything in the narratives they have shared. Wrapping up the interview, the original definition of the phenomenon should be revisited to check if their views have altered or if they would like to add anything to their statements.

4.2. Data Analysis

I applied a mixed process of thematic analysis when analysing the interview data. Nvivo software was employed to code the gathered data in a systematic manner, which allowed for comparison between transcripts and establishing recurring themes in the dataset. A deductive thematic analysis was then carried out to group findings under the themes of racial microaggressions, belonging, and identity negotiations. Finally, interview data were coded under the themes of racial microaggressions and negotiated biographical narratives. Reports were generated in Nvivo whereby it was possible

to view the collected results from all interviews under these thematic categorisations, before their inclusion in the project. An ethics application was made prior to commencing the study (as per Glasgow Caledonian University guidelines, an ethics application for this study was submitted and approved in advance of commencing the investigation; ethics approval was granted by Glasgow Caledonian University Ethics Committee in 2020 and a risk assessment of the project was also carried out and approved prior to starting the investigation; no data was collected before the approval of the ethics application and risk assessment was complete).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Racial Microaggressions

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, who grew up in the south side of Glasgow (in the 1980s and 1990s) described how racism in Scotland has taken a shift in its characteristics during his lifetime, from an outwardly violent physical racism to one that is more systemic and insidious in nature. In the following extract, he details the everyday threat of violence he faced growing up as an ethnic minority teenager in Glasgow:

I went through a period where I thought we'd turned a corner [and] that our political discourse, our society, was changing in a way where I thought my kids would grow up in a world where people saw past race, ethnicity, and religion...but I don't believe that any more. I think now racism has changed to become a much more insidious form of racism which is a lot more behind the scenes....When we were growing up racism was a lot more in your face, confrontational....You would get shouted P*** B*****d on the streets....My friends and I had glass bottles thrown at us in the city centre...there were streets that you knew you couldn't go down if you were not white...because you would be assaulted.

Following this example of the physical racial violence he witnessed in his youth Sarwar went on to detail an example of a microaggression he had faced as an ethnic minority MSP in the Scottish parliament. In the interview extract below he describes how a colleague suggested that he consider debating non-race related issues:

Myself and Humza [Yousaf, Scottish Cabinet Minister for Health and Social Care, currently in the running for leadership of the SNP] would probably agree on this. Talking about race and our faith was a really difficult thing to do. I was elected for the first time in 2010, him in 2011. In that time, we probably spent the first five years avoiding talking about race because we wanted to be accepted in mainstream politics. Now we've done it....I'll give you an example of isolation. I published a report about the percentage of eth-

nic minorities in the public sector. I'd asked a series of questions in parliament about islamophobia and racism. After the session one of my colleagues in the parliament came to me and said: "You maybe want to think about asking some other questions? You don't want to get pigeon-holed." See, whilst I've got to be the one that always asks the question about brown-folk [people of colour], we're always going to have a problem. So, it is isolating.

The above can be viewed as an example of a microaggression at the elite level of Scottish political life and illustrates how ethnic minority politicians are subject to silencing tactics when attempting to confront issues of racism in parliament. Silencing has been described as a form of racial microaggression, whether conscious or unconscious in the mind of the perpetrator (Williams et al., 2021). Glasgow City Councillor Graham Campbell, who is a British national with Jamaican heritage, also spoke of his frustration with everyday racism:

I suppose my daily experience of racism is a bit more along the lines of the Bob Marley thing [being labelled Bob Marley in public] that annoys the hell out me. It's something I don't get when I'm not in Glasgow. In Glasgow it's bloody annoying.

While describing incidents of racism, the politicians interviewed did not offer any attempt to divert attention away from the incident or detract from the seriousness of these microaggressions. When analysing from an ontological security theory perspective, the racism these politicians are subjected to is not negated or bracketed out through coping mechanisms (Giddens, 1991). Rather, there is an acceptance of the prevalence of racism in Scotland, which is manifested through microaggressions, such as the advice given to Sarwar from his party member colleague. The lived reality for both Sarwar and Campbell is a Scotland where racism and racial microaggressions permeate everyday life. However, these instances do not appear to disrupt their individual sense of ontological security. The findings from the politician interviews helped to form a question guide and line of enquiry to be used with the young adult migrant participants in the study. It served to guide the line of questioning towards exploring mundane social interactions which included experiences of travelling on public transport in Glasgow.

During narrative interviews, many participants discussed their experiences of using the bus while moving around Glasgow. Abina detailed the everyday experiences of exclusion she faces when travelling by bus in the city:

I've been in the situation where I'm sitting next to an empty seat and that's, like, the only empty seat on the bus and no one comes. People would rather stand than sit next to you which is a shame because

you're just wondering....I had other people of colour who said to me that they gave up their seat, but no one would take it. (Abina, 26, Ghana)

While the situation may not appear an overt example of racism, it is nonetheless an isolating incident for the narrator which gives rise to the experience of heightened anxiety and ontological insecurity. This situation highlights tactics of avoidance and distancing from racial minorities which is a racial microaggression (Williams et al., 2021). Abina went on to give a further example of a microaggression, which a colleague had experienced when traveling by bus in the city:

There was also one instance where I was getting on the bus with a colleague, and they had a [travel] card, and they placed it on the top thing [travel card reader] and the bus driver goes [says]: "That's not you!" My colleague said: "It's me, I used this card in the morning." They took it upon themselves to take the driver on [challenge the behaviour] but you know that sort of thing shouldn't happen.

The bus driver, in stopping access to people of colour in these mundane public spaces, is reinforcing racist attitudes. In this example, it can be seen how young adult migrants are subject to a greater deal of scrutiny and suspicion in daily interactions than their white counterparts in Glasgow (Peterson, 2020). From an application of ontological security theory, these everyday experiences of microaggressions can be seen to undermine efforts to achieve a sense of security for migrants living in Glasgow as they erode social trust and present a disruption to daily routine. Furthermore, the refusal on the part of the bus driver to allow travel gives rise to anxieties which can lead to ontological insecurity, an incapacitating sense of perpetual dread, which would make everyday existence impossible (Steele, 2008). However, when recounting their lived experiences, the study participants would often discount the significance of the racism they had suffered.

One study participant, Ali, told me that he had been stopped from travelling on a bus and had his identity verified by the police when the driver did not believe that he was entitled to a discounted child fare:

I don't know [if] it [is] because of my skin colour, or I don't know what it is....I put money [paid the fare]. The look that he [the bus driver] gives me, like, you know it's not pleasant, I would say....When the police came, I just told them my age and my details, and then the driver had to let me be on the bus....That happened more than once, like, you know, when I go on the bus, like, bus drivers are nice. Some of them know me, they just let me go. But sometimes, when I pay money, they go: "Nope, you're not a child, you have to pay extra money," but I never pay extra money, so the driver would stop the bus or phone

the police....I was just....trying to go on the bus, trying to go home, but gives it some kind of notion of the scary looks...ah, feel like drivers, they give more hassle to more, like, coloured people...that's what, ah, [I] think. But not all of them, just only some of them. It's good and bad, at the same time y'get nice drivers that won't even look at you sticky! (Ali, 19, Somalia)

While his older-looking friend boarded the bus without issue, Ali was stopped, and he reflects on whether it was his skin colour that had contributed to the bus driver's reaction. The bus driver does not have the legal permission to demand identity documentation and so calls the police to verify Ali's identity. His narrative draws attention to the suspicion and perceived threat he is seen to pose when he describes how the bus driver viewed him with scary looks. Perceived threats prevent individuals from achieving a sense of ontological security as it is a breach of trust and provokes anxiety (Croft, 2012). However, at the end of his narrative, Ali makes an assertion that not all bus drivers are bad, and not all eye him with suspicion. Ali summarised his view of racism in Glasgow in the following short extract:

Like, of course you get some bad people that don't like, y'know, my colour and stuff, but most people are like absolutely nice.

In the example above it can be seen how the participants seek to minimise the significance of the racism experienced. Ellefsen et al. (2022) have emphasised that denying the significance of traumatic life events can be used as a form of resistance and countering the debilitating effects of racism and racial microaggressions. This strategy can include the downplaying of the seriousness of disruptive or hostile events and can be seen as a coping mechanism for mitigating feelings of ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991). As illustrated in the example above, the preparators of racist attitudes in Scotland are often attributed to a small minority of actors. However, police records on race hate crimes present contradicting evidence for this claim. In the year 2021–2022, a total of 3,107 charges relating to race hate crimes were reported to the Crown Office in Scotland (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, 2022). These figures suggest that Scotland has a significant problem with racism, particularly as most race hate speech encounters go unreported.

During an interview with Esther, I asked about her life experiences since arriving in Scotland four years prior. She told me about her time spent attending a college course in Glasgow, where she was the only person of colour. Esther detailed how she was able to overcome the initial exclusion she felt in the classroom. Her choice of language offers a revealing insight into her own position in relation to her peer group:

It was basically, like, an all-white room, and I had no problems with that, but the only problem I had was actually making friends....I just found it difficult because I felt like they didn't actually want to speak to me because of my skin colour or whatever....Not everyone will be open to a foreigner, not everyone will be open to *aliens*....But as long as they realise that you're no harm, you're not threatening them, or take anything from them, they're one hundred per cent open. (Esther, 20, Nigeria)

Esther draws on the perceived threat she was seen to pose to her college coursemates and positions herself, a migrant, as an alien that stands out in the Scottish environment. Belonging in Scotland, for Esther, is contingent on not posing a threat to the wider population. Her use of the word alien is exemplary of the exclusion she is made to feel as a person of colour in her majority-white college class. This is another experience of a racial microaggression, which Esther attempts to minimise "as simple cultural missteps or racial *faux pas*" (Williams et al., 2021, p. 992). Coping mechanisms are employed to deflect the seriousness of disruptive or unexpected events, including instances of racism and discrimination.

Through these coping mechanisms, young adult migrants can confirm the macro-narrative of Scottish openness and fulfil the expectations that the narrative places upon them. For young adult migrants not to adhere to the macro-narrative, alluding to the prevalence of racism in the country may position these individuals as "disloyal" to the nation-state as scholars, as Botterill et al. (2019) have highlighted. This confirmation of the macro-narrative allows the participants to stabilise their on-going process of becoming secure and establish both their sense of place and space in Scotland with enhanced feelings of ontological security. Giddens (1986, p. 218) has stated that "nationalist sentiments rise up when the sense of ontological security is put in jeopardy by the disruption of routines." In other words, when people face extreme doubts about their existence and right to exist, they turn to a collective sense of belonging to overcome their anxieties.

Ontological security scholars, including Kinnvall (2004) and Mitzen (2006), have stressed how the state-level use of shared narratives is often intertwined with movements for national self-determination and/or the political ambitions of the ruling class. This is particularly the case in Scotland where a pro-immigration macro-narrative has been adopted within the discourse of the governing SNP party (Nicolson & Korkut, 2022). Through an invocation of the open Scotland narrative, the participants were able to deflect some of the existential anxieties they are faced with in their daily lives. Narrative interviews also considered how participants described their self-narratives and how these were negotiated in reference to accent, appearance, and expectations.

5.2. Negotiated Biographical Narratives

Another of the fundamental prerequisites for ontological security is a continuous biographical self-narrative. As Croft (2012, p. 250) states, "to be ontologically secure an individual must have a sense of biographical coherence, a sense that the individual can comprehend and communicate." In interviews, I explored the theme of biographical self-identity through the narratives shared by my participants, their conceptualisations of self, and how they position themselves in wider societal framings. Self-narratives can reveal the everyday pressures and identity negotiations that are often more complex than may first be anticipated.

A distinct Scottish accent was considered essential to make claims to a Scottish national identity. Ahmed outlined the importance of accent to his observation of being perceived as a newcomer, or outsider, in daily interactions:

When you have a Scottish accent, people think that you've lived in Scotland for [a] very long [time compared to when you don't have [an] accent. For me, people assume [I] am new to the country, you know...like, I don't have a Glasgow accent, so I think people think I'm a bit weird as well, they ask me where I'm from. They know that I'm not from here. (Ahmed, 23, Sudan)

I know from my own constituents and individual cases that people miss out on job opportunities down to their accent. (Anas Sarwar MSP, Scottish Labour)

For Ahmed, having a distinct Scottish accent is associated with having lived in the country for a long time and his lack of an accent identified him as different or other. Being identified as "the other" prevented participants from identifying as Scottish and therefore led to a negotiation of biographical self-narratives to establish security. Again, Esther described how she, as a person of colour, would feel uncomfortable claiming a Scottish national identity because of her appearance:

Legally, you can identify as Scottish, but, you know, obviously racially or whatever you can't identify as Scottish, you know....There are some people that are actually Scottish and they might get offended that someone from another country is, themselves, Scottish....People are not going to say: "Why are you calling yourself Scottish? You know, you're black!" That's very offensive! People might not want to say that. But I'm that kinda person, I'm very cautious of wherever I am.

Esther highlights her interpretation of an unspoken intolerance even if people would not be forthcoming in their attitudes toward her perceived difference. Esther has significant anxieties in relation to her appearance and her

narrative reveals how she continuously negotiates her identity dilemma in relation to how she is perceived by others. As a young person of colour, Esther describes herself as an “internal other” (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011) in the Scottish environment. Her internal dialogue stands in contrast to the current Scottish government’s civic nationalist political ideology and publicity campaigns such as One Scotland, Many Cultures which have sought to promote a civic Scottish national identity and promote the inclusion of migrants in Scotland. Furthermore, this is also an example of shame management, which is another strategy that has been identified in ontological security-seeking practices. Steele (2005) has stated that individuals will go to great lengths to circumvent undesirable attributes or characteristics which would give rise to disapproval or the condemnation of others.

Anas Sarwar detailed his history in politics and the challenges faced by individual ethnic minority MSPs in Scotland:

There is a stigma, people say oh there he goes again playing the race card. Undoubtedly there is a stigma. There is also a stigma on individuals. It’s easier for people to pay more attention to someone of a particular faith talking about religious hatred or someone of a specific race speaking about racism. But actually leaving it to those individuals is not going to solve the problem....At the moment I feel like it’s left to those individual groups. People just say: “Oh, he would say that.”

Interviewer: Scotland has only had four ethnic minority MSPs, why is that?

Yes, all male, all from Glasgow. We [Scottish society] are great at talking the good game but not following through. We’ve had those four by personal perseverance, it’s not down to political parties. I don’t credit it to either political party. If we left it to the Labour party, it would never have happened. We don’t have a single ethnic minority MP in Scotland.

Stereotypes and the acceptance or refusal of the expectations that wider society puts upon migrants in Scotland were another important consideration in the identity negotiations of the participants. These perceived expectations led to participants facing an obligation to perform as what has been termed “the good migrant” in earlier research (Findlay et al., 2013). This gives rise to the phenomenon of constantly feeling under surveillance during routine daily interactions and activities, including in the sphere of Scottish politics. Harris and Karimshah (2019) have described this process of “being on,” acting out and displaying qualities of supernormalness to the wider society. Esther describes how she felt a pressure to act in a certain way based on preconceived notions of how society interprets her:

I try not to follow, you know, the norms and stuff because, like, they think as like a black person you’re like more reserved, or like you have more manners or something like that, which obviously, like, older generation of Africans that’s what they would expect in the first place. But *I’m trying not to follow those norms*, and trying to let them [society] know that I’m not like that, I’m not like what you think I am. *I am African, that doesn’t necessarily mean I am like every African*. Do you understand me?

Esther explains how she tries to reject the stereotyped notions of “African” behaviour. In this example she is taking on the identity of the African continent, rather than her country of origin. This could suggest that the label of African is one she has been confronted with in Scotland and is another example of microaggression in the local context. From analysing Esther’s case, her reflection of stereotypical characteristics leads her to assert that she has a different mentality from other migrants. She is therefore negotiating a precarious space between identities, unable to adopt either a Scottish or African identity. However, despite her attempts to reject stereotyped notions of African behaviours, Esther believes that she, as a person of colour, is under an obligation to represent the wider migrant community in a positive light. As she goes on to explain:

If I wasn’t exactly like a good person, if I was a bad person...they [the wider Scottish population] would think, you know, all people with my skin colour, you know, are the same thing. Because, like I said, you know, people are ignorant at first, but until you let them know that you’re not the person they think you are, then that’s when they’re obviously open to you becoming friends with them, you know, all that stuff. So, I obviously had to make them understand that.

This example illustrates how migrant individuals, who are perceived as threatening, are under pressure to adjust their behaviours to uphold feelings of ontological security which illustrates how insecurities are typically borne by migrants (Botterill et al., 2019). Furthermore, as Croft (2012, p. 252) has described: “The ontologically secure individual seeks to behave in accordance with the sense of what is acceptable and appropriate in his or her ontological security structure.” In the above extract, it appears that Esther is using reductionist categorisations of race and is emphasising the distinction between the Scottish general population and the migrant “other” that she claims to represent. Esther’s own ontological security structure is shaped by other people’s preconceptions surrounding people of her perceived skin colour. If she were to behave inappropriately this would work against the foundations of her ontological security-seeking structure, to present migrants of colour in Scotland in a positive light.

6. Concluding Remarks

The data presented in this article highlights the everyday racial microaggressions faced by young adult migrants in Glasgow, UK. The article is complemented by perspectives from leading ethnic minority politicians in Scotland who highlight that racism has changed from overt to covert, practices of racial microaggressions, in the last decades. Overall, the participant testimonies contradict the dominant political narrative that Scotland does not have a racism problem. When analysing the participant narratives through an application of ontological security theory it becomes possible to detect specific coping mechanisms which are employed to deflect the seriousness of these instances, maintain stable identities, and continue with the process of security-seeking in the new environment.

An individual's construction of ontological security is dependent upon societal trust and the predictability of everyday routines. When these are disrupted, through racial microaggressions, there is potential for greater existential anxieties, and ontological insecurity would be the resulting condition. It is argued that individual migrants are more likely to face ontological insecurities than the wider, majority-white population. One way in which these anxieties can be countered or minimised is through the adoption of specific coping mechanisms and modified behaviours.

One of the main coping mechanisms identified in the study is the downplaying of the seriousness of racism and everyday racial microaggressions in the re-telling of experiences of discrimination. I argue that acknowledging the wider existence of racism in Scotland would be debilitating to participants and lead to an untenable state of ontological insecurity. Second, the evidence suggests that migrant individuals may adopt certain social behaviours and negotiate their own biographical narratives to meet societal expectations and reduce the risk of causing offence. Finally, participants have highlighted the potential for resisting damaging stereotypes and performing good citizenship as tools of social inclusion. While this study has been conducted with a small sample size, it has illustrated the potential for interdisciplinary research in the field of racism studies which can help to shed light on complex processes of social inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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About the Author



Marcus Nicolson is a final year PhD candidate in social sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University, UK. Marcus' study investigates the lived experiences of young adult migrants in Glasgow, UK, using a narrative enquiry research design which incorporates creative arts research methods. He uses ontological security theory to analyse processes of identity formation and (im)migration politics.

Article

Processes of Discrimination and Humiliation Experienced by Ecuadorian Immigrant Workers in Spain

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Abstract

The workplace is currently one of the main places of discrimination for socially vulnerable groups such as immigrant workers, who are often required to take on highly stigmatized, menial jobs under supervisors who subject them to daily mistreatment and racism. This study adopted a qualitative approach to 42 semi-structured interviews of Ecuadorian immigrant workers residing in Spain to explore the processes of discrimination these laborers feel in their everyday workplaces. The findings clearly indicate that immigrant workers can be victims of daily discrimination, which is evidenced by the higher degree of scrutiny and lower levels of trust they suffer compared to their Spanish counterparts, and by their supervisors' lack of compliance with contractual agreements. As these immigrants are obliged to take on less qualified jobs, they suffer from a lack of recognition and a sense of being undervalued. This analysis also gathered evidence of interviewees' daily humiliations imparted by their supervisors—and even, at times, by work colleagues—in the form of racial slurs, verbal abuse, and unequal treatment, leaving them feeling powerless and helpless. Most of our respondents in fact find themselves in a predicament they do not know how to confront and cannot reject. All of these factors lead to feelings of humiliation and lack of independence.

Keywords

discrimination; everyday racism; humiliation; workplace; Ecuadorian workers; Spain

Issue

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1. Introduction

In spite of the vast body of research on the daily discrimination and humiliation encountered by immigrants throughout Europe, an aspect that remains largely unexplored is the link between discrimination and labor market precariousness. The current economic situation, and in particular the labor markets of high-income nations, benefit enormously from the “capture” of immigrant workers (Fouskas, 2018; Markova et al., 2016). Bryson and White (2019) point out that three out of ten workplaces comprising five or more employees tend to hire

immigrant workers and that the probability of engaging them increases with larger businesses.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018), there are approximately 258 million immigrants throughout the world, of which an estimated 164 million are workers. About two-thirds live in high-income countries, forming a key labor resource. Large-scale immigration in the case of Spain did not begin until the 21st century and the proportion of these workers among the total working-age population was practically insignificant at that moment. Their number since then has risen exponentially due to a growing

demand, particularly in the construction, agriculture, and services sectors (Camacho et al., 2020), which has provoked an increase in the degree of precariousness and occupational segregation among Spanish workers (Díaz-Serrano, 2013). The majority of the immigrants to Spain are from outside the European Union, notably Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2019), which has led to coining the term “Latin Americanization” to describe the immigration flows in Spain (Hierro, 2016).

The most recent Spanish economic crisis led to a deterioration of immigrant working conditions, triggering an increase in the processes of discrimination especially directed toward South American nationals. This group, together with workers from Sub-Saharan Africa, accounts for most cases of racism and discrimination (SOS Racismo, 2017). Llácer et al. (2009) point out that one-fifth of the Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain who participated in their investigation stated that they experienced continuous discrimination.

1.1. Discrimination and Precariousness

Different theories have attempted to explain processes of discrimination. According to Fibbi et al. (2021), these can be grouped into individual (due to personality differences and negative attitudes towards minority groups), social, and organizational levels. Social and organizational theories suggest that inequalities do not stem from attitudes and beliefs, but from organizational structures (Fiske, 1998).

One of the many types of discrimination affecting immigrants relates to the precariousness of their working conditions, circumstances that are further enhanced by the deregulation of labor relations and the fragmentation of markets. This aspect is even greater among specific vulnerable groups such as immigrants, which can lead to a devaluation of their professional expectations upon arrival in a new destination, obliging them to redefine their migratory project (Bretones, 2020; Jørgensen, 2016; Schierup et al., 2015).

In 2015, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights identified several factors that affected precariousness among immigrant workers. Certain factors relate to personal circumstances (e.g., language barriers or low levels of education) while others are connected to their workplace (e.g., working in isolation or with little contact with the outside world, which renders them “invisible”; working in specific economic sectors). As these factors can interrelate, working in isolation can compromise language proficiency.

The issue of language as a factor in workplace discrimination has been addressed by various authors (Buchanan, et al., 2018; Koopmans, 2015). Their findings suggest that language plays a key role in the sense that less proficient immigrants encounter greater discrimination. More recent studies (Schmaus & Kristen, 2022; Spence et al., 2022), on the contrary, have determined

that accent as opposed to linguistic competence or even a foreign surname plays a fundamental role in discrimination. Accents can thus be linked to a negative categorization and evaluation of immigrant workers. Hence foreign or non-standard accents have implications in job development, leading many immigrants to attempt to reduce their foreign accent to minimize discrimination and job segregation (Cocchiara et al., 2016).

In any case, inequality also paves the way to a “twofold discrimination”: In the workplace, this is manifest by employers who pay immigrant workers less than their native counterparts on the one hand and, on the other, by an antagonizing rhetoric triggered by market complications that places immigrants as the cause of reduced wages and a decrease in employment opportunities. This places the focus of the problem on the immigrant workers rather than the employers who determine working conditions, turning the victim of discrimination (the immigrant) into the perpetrator of unemployment among native workers, an argument often used in anti-immigration rhetoric (Bellovary et al., 2020).

A consequence of this precariousness is the hoarding, by native workers, of certain positions, leaving immigrants access only to menial low-paid positions (Drange & Helland, 2019) perceived as unpleasant or demeaning (Ahmad, 2020; Moyce & Schenker, 2018). This situation is further aggravated for immigrants from low-income countries (Bratsberg et al., 2014), resulting in them being, as a whole, negatively stigmatized—which in turn has detrimental consequences for their health in the form of stress, anxiety, and depression (Koseoglu et al., 2022).

These socioeconomic and labor conditions thus transform immigrant workers into “prisoners of their own destiny” since, in addition to the worsening of their labor conditions, their planned project of immigration in many cases becomes a social and family failure back in their country of origin. This is especially the case of unskilled workers in Spain in sectors marked by a higher unemployment rates (Hellgren & Serrano, 2017). To these different aspects one must also add attitudes and behaviors of rejection in host societies manifested through various, often subtle, forms of harassment and discrimination (Krings et al., 2014).

1.2. Discrimination and Humiliation

Processes of discrimination and everyday racism suffered by immigrant workers can often take the form of extensive and continuous episodes of humiliation and explicit or subtle aggressions on the part of their supervisors and native work colleagues. The findings of a review by Sterud et al. (2018) of 82 scientific articles indeed highlight a prevalence of discrimination and harassment aimed at immigrant workers. Moreover, the European Working Conditions Surveys (Eurofound, 2010) also emphasize that immigrant workers experience discrimination and harassment more often. Similar results can be gleaned from other national studies such as that by Bergbom et al.

(2015) in Finland reporting that the risk of being intimidated is almost three times higher among immigrants than nationals. Similarly, evidence from New Zealand shows that immigrants are much more likely to report cases of workplace discrimination than individuals born in the country (Daldy et al., (2013). Krings et al. (2014) likewise identify subtle discrimination and workplace incivility in Switzerland, especially directed towards qualified immigrants perceived to be highly competitive.

The different theories on discrimination share a common feature, notably that it upholds the privileges of specific groups over others and, as such, bolsters the existing relations of power between groups, thus perpetuating ethnic and racial hierarchies (Fibbi et al., 2021). This social construct leads to their subordination (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014), generating a greater probability of mistreatment by their supervisors and other native employees (Hanna & Ortega, 2016). This likewise exposes them to greater exploitation: Though there are social protection mechanisms for workers in Spain, these are sometimes symbolic (not real) in the case of immigrants, either because the latter are often unaware of this protection system or because they are afraid to denounce their employers (Caparrós Ruiz, 2014; Murphy, 2013).

Discrimination and inequality in many cases entail systematic practices and expressions of disrespect and contempt that also form part of a process of humiliation and personal degradation. For Parekh (2009), this type of humiliation is based on an ideology that legitimizes an assault on groups considered inferior based on race or ethnicity. In this sense, humiliation also entails an internalization of the degradation process on behalf of the immigrants who tend to accept their supposed inferiority.

These different circumstances, in addition to the great number of challenges and negative aspects that immigrants face on a daily basis, especially in the workplace, lead to higher levels of anxiety (Doki et al., 2018; Roura et al., 2015) and a predisposition to depression (Nadim et al., 2016).

All of this suggests that the immigration experience, especially in its early stages, is associated with high levels of stress, which explains why immigrants tend to resort to social networks to cope and connect with people with whom they share cultural ties; these are mechanisms that can easily assist in reducing levels of stress, loneliness, and psychological distress (Ward & Styles, 2003).

In any case, confronting these daily events of discrimination and humiliation requires taking into consideration the personal resources of the immigrants themselves (Bulut & Gayman, 2016), which differ greatly between unskilled and highly skilled workers, especially as the latter will certainly benefit from greater emotional, cognitive, and economic resources (Gheorghiu & Stephens, 2016). It is in personal and intimate spaces, linked to a perception of closeness and social support, that the immigrant worker will enrich their personal and social situation, thus reducing stress, loneliness, and anguish levels (Ward & Styles, 2003). Support and social relation-

ships with co-workers also have a buffering effect on psychological distress, contributing significantly to psychological well-being (Bretones et al., 2020; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006). But these means of assistance, although generating initial psychological comfort, can also hurt their social integration as they can potentially play a role in perpetuating racial segregation, exclusion, and, hence, vulnerability.

Focusing on the Ecuadorian immigrant population in Spain, the objective of this study is to analyze processes of labor discrimination and humiliation encountered by immigrants occupying menial positions. This is a group that benefits from knowledge of Spanish as their mother tongue, but whose occupations are mostly limited to low-skilled jobs in the agriculture, domestic services, and construction sectors.

2. Methodology

To achieve the objective, this study applied a qualitative approach consisting of in-depth interviews with Ecuadorian immigrant workers residing in Spain. Adopting this method of interviews is potentially more beneficial than applying a quantitative design as they offer deeper insight into the character of discrimination and how it affects those who directly suffer from it rather than quantifying those who experience it. The approach also allowed the garnering of other general conclusions stemming from respondents' opinions and workplace experiences. On the other hand, summoning these unacceptable experiences of discrimination and humiliation entailed recalling troubles and traumas, which made it difficult, in many cases, for respondents to "tell their story" (Shuman, 2005).

The study therefore applied a non-probability and convenience sampling method focusing on Ecuadorian immigrants who gather on a weekly basis in the southern area of the city of Granada. This technique was particularly useful as it was possible to recruit participants with different demographic characteristics employed in different economic sectors.

Interviews lasted 43 minutes on average and were conducted face to face in Spanish following a semi-structured script drafted by a team of experts from the Universities of Granada (Spain) and Guayaquil (Ecuador). The scripts consisted of questions concerning sociodemographic aspects, working conditions, work environment perception, evaluation of workplace discrimination, and job expectations.

Prior to each session, the interviewees signed an informed consent form and adhered to the norms of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation required them to have been born in Ecuador, speak Spanish, be at least 18 years of age at the moment of their departure from Ecuador, have resided in Spain for at least five years, and be employed. There was no economic incentive.

The final sample consisted of 42 active Ecuadorian immigrant workers based in Granada, Spain. The choice

of this province is due to it having one of Spain's highest unemployment rates, at 21.67% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020).

The average age was 42.4 years and the average residence in Spain was of 14.83 years. Most respondents occupied low-skilled positions in the domestic services and cleaning sectors (43%), construction (31%), agriculture (14%), and others (12%). The sample was balanced as to sex (48% females; 52% males). Finally, all participants were *mestizos*, Ecuador's predominant ethnic group (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2020).

All interviews were transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 8). The analysis began with substantive coding (both open and selective) before proceeding with theoretical coding until achieving theoretical saturation through constant comparisons. To increase the validity of the results, two experienced PhD researchers took part in the analysis and coding processes. Among the different themes and sub-themes that emerged, only those linked to discrimination processes were retained.

This approach applied a template analysis to organize the data by identifying a list of codes determined in two stages: a priori, before conducting the interviews, and a posteriori, after the analysis. Applying the methods of discourse, analysis was based on a search for new means to explore other sources of knowledge from the field of psychology and far from the dominant ideologies of positivism and scientism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012),

being closer to oral exchanges. Adopting this method is even more in keeping with immigrant research, where it is necessary to avoid subtle forms of cultural hegemony as well as a persistent Eurocentrism in the epistemological framing of the mindset of the researchers, even from the perspective of decoloniality (Grosfoguel et al., 2015). The authors have thus attempted to counteract these drawbacks by assembling a team of researchers from different countries and by avoiding the pitfalls of previous studies applying this method (Aragón & Bretones, 2020; González-González et al., 2019).

3. Results

By examining the content of each of the interviews and applying the method described above, we were able to identify the main issues related to inclusion and discrimination encountered by Ecuadorian immigrant workers in Spain. The following three codes (Table 1) were put to use to assess the transcripts of the interviews through the lenses of discrimination and precariousness.

3.1. Discriminatory Working Conditions

The sample thus indicates that the workplace is one of the main settings of discrimination and denigration expressed in the form of a workload surpassing that of their Spanish colleagues. The abuse is likewise evidenced by breaches in contractual agreements and regulatory

Table 1. Themes, subthemes, and open codes of the study.

Themes	Subthemes	Open codes (quotes)
Work conditions	Conditions of mistrust	"The boss didn't trust my word, and controlled my work, and made me do it again."
	Work overload and schedule	"I'm working seven days a week." "I work from Sunday to Sunday."
	Disrespect of labor accords	"They did what they wanted with me." "The contract was for four hours, but in the end I worked more."
	Work insecurity	"I was afraid that they would kick me out." "The boss said, 'I'm sorry, no more work.'"
	Task repetition	"I had to do it again and again."
Every day racism through social interactions	Excessive supervision and control	"I watched the boss standing there looking at his watch as I ironed and he said: I'm timing what you are doing."
	Verbal aggressions	"Foreigner, go back to your country." "They yell at you, they offend you."
	Dehumanization	"I was treated like a dog."
Psychoemotional consequences	Feeling of helplessness Sensation of helplessness	"I begged them to pay me, and they said there was no money." "I cried tears of helplessness."
	Social pressure from home country	"Because I wanted to return to my country with millions." "Where can I get the money to successfully return to Ecuador."
	Nostalgia	"There are days I feel bad, nostalgic, depressive." "I think of my parents, my child."

conditions by the employer, who takes advantage of their position to impose unpaid extra hours:

The contract was for four hours, but in the end, I was also taken to clean the house of her parents, and to help out in a sewing shop owned by her husband. (interviewee no. 7, female, cleaning services)

Here immigrants are very useful to business, right? Spanish businessmen prefer immigrants because they can exploit them a bit more. (interviewee no. 14, female, domestic services)

This labor exploitation also appears to occur more frequently in the agriculture and domestic services sectors, where the immigrant laborer works alone:

I was treated very well at the construction site. But when I went to work in the fields, I was treated very badly; they often took advantage of the situation. I never liked that job because they paid very little and demanded very hard work. (interviewee no. 9, male, construction)

The interviews also point to discriminatory actions when compared to Spanish workers reflected in terms of salary:

At more than one place they wanted to pay me less. (interviewee no. 19, male, construction)

Inequalities, although recognized in all of the sectors of the study, especially concern females in domestic services since their work is solitary, lacking any control by the state:

Spanish people in the company always earn more....They paid them 1000 euros while they paid me only 750 euro. Yes, the Spanish don't have the same type of contract. (interviewee no. 14, female, domestic services)

Look, Spaniards in the company always earn more....They always pay us a little less...we earn less and work more. (interviewee no. 25, male, domestic services)

These cases reveal the vulnerability of immigrants who fear losing their jobs and accept excessive demands and hours surpassing the number indicated in the job description. The interviewees describe long daily hours, occasionally up to 12, and sometimes every day of the week without breaks. They are obliged to accept these conditions due to the scarcity of jobs and their perception of labor insecurity:

They hire you for a specific number of hours, but you have to work more hours, or they say that there are

other things to do such as care for their mother and other things....They don't want to pay for it, and if one demands what [one is owed], they say they don't need you anymore, so one loses everything, you lose it all. (interviewee no. 10, female, cleaning services)

Well, in the last job, I worked from nine to nine, 12 hours of work. (interviewee no. 13, female, domestic services)

I work from Sunday to Sunday. (interviewee no. 17, female, construction)

It is obvious that extending their working hours beyond the limit stipulated in the contract interfered with the amount of time they could devote to their own families. Moreover, unpleasant workplace experiences can have pernicious effects on family life as irritation generated at work tends to extend to the home:

One goes to work in the morning, leaves at night and comes back at night, never being able to see the children. (interviewee #33, male, construction)

Abuse of contractual agreements by their Spanish employers is a factor that further deepens immigrant insecurity and vulnerability, producing sentiments of defenselessness:

They did whatever they wanted with me, they hired me for eight hours but only paid the social security charges for two or three, and they didn't pay me....They didn't pay me. (interviewee no. 32, female, domestic services)

Well, they say that if you want to work, you have this schedule, and if not, then leave it and that's it. (interviewee no. 2, female, cleaning services)

The interviews reveal recurrent uncertainty and unease accompanied by insecurity and fear of dismissal. It is a type of anxiety that surges when witnessing the dismissal of colleagues, leading them to wonder if they are the next to go:

I always recall when the boss told us all to come, as he had to tell us something....Well, I trembled, everyone trembled. He said that he was very sorry but that the job was over for some of us...but even though it didn't affect me personally, my heart was racing as I watched my colleagues leave. (interviewee no. 1, male, construction)

3.2. Humiliating Social Interactions

Work insecurity is also often accompanied by abuse of power and humiliation in the form of discrete, more or less subtle, and/or explicit verbal aggressions. These at

times can attain a point where the worker almost feels like a slave. These types of microaggressions by native employers can range from extreme supervision and control to verbal assaults:

One day...I saw him standing there looking at the clock as I ironed. And then he said: "I'm timing you and you're taking too long." I felt humiliated, I felt like a slave, [like] if I didn't do it, well, it wasn't long before they would flog me, at least that's the way I felt. (interviewee no. 34, female, domestic services)

She asked me if I had done the job and I answered yes, but she didn't believe me and began to check and then made me do it again. (interviewee no. 10, female, cleaning services)

They see us differently, they think that they are above us, and so, in that sense, I feel there is discrimination because they can yell at a foreigner but not at a Spaniard. (interviewee no. 15, male, agriculture)

These humiliations at times turned into explicit verbal abuse and racial slurs from both supervisors and Spanish co-workers:

The bosses are bastards, they have bad temper, they yell at you, they offend you, they think that because you are a foreigner that they can treat you however they want. (interviewee no. 3, male, construction)

A co-worker who was always giving me a hard time was saying: "Foreigner, go back to your country," "you shitty *sudaca*" [a derogatory term for Hispanic Americans], things like that. (interviewee no. 9, male, construction)

This type of discrimination also manifests itself through a sense of superiority among certain individuals based exclusively on nationality:

Since we are foreigners they see us differently, they think they are above us. (interviewee no. 6, female, military)

Sentiments of humiliation and inequality by a supervisor are also transmitted through senseless repetitions of the tasks due to an absolute lack of trust. This affects both males and females regardless of their jobs:

She did not trust me and wanted to make sure it was done correctly...and made me repeat it. (interviewee no. 35, female, domestic services)

They look at you after work to see if you are hiding something in your bag, or if you have something in your hands...they look at you badly. (interviewee no. 4, male, construction)

Furthermore, these processes are also at times reproduced by Ecuadorian nationals themselves appointed as supervisors who assume a style and manner imitating their local Spanish bosses:

There are people, compatriots, put in charge...and as I tell you...it is the worst thing there is because, as they say, we at times try to hurt each other...we trample each other, that is the worst thing there is. (interviewee no. 28, male, construction)

Ecuadorian workers likewise signal microaggressions and humiliations from local Spanish co-workers. Although often subtle and expressed as jokes, they evidence inequitable social relations and an underestimation of immigrants:

He said that it's not because I'm a *sudaca*. Of course, even if they say the word as a joke, they are still saying it. (interviewee no. 16, male, street salesman)

In the army, when practicing shooting, they say: "Don't use the rifle, get a bow and arrow...just kidding." (interviewee no. 39, female, military)

All these events obviously prompt a sense of dehumanization and undervaluation. Several interviewees in fact expressed that they felt treated worse than an animal, noting that pets received better attention and care:

A dog, in fact, is better treated and is better seen than an immigrant. (interviewee no. 16, male, street salesman)

He treated me like a dog, come on, like a slave. (interviewee no. 17, female, construction)

This dehumanization is also identified by other authors. The study of Filipino female domestic workers in Hong Kong by Ladegaard (2015), for example, reports they were treated like animals as they were fed the leftovers of the employers.

3.3. Emotional and Affective Consequences

All daily expressions of racism or microaggression, including those in the workplace, have strong emotional consequences. The anguish of immigrants, particularly those subjected to poor treatment, is not only a source of stress but causes anger and helplessness as well, sensations with which they do not know how to cope:

And I cried tears of helplessness, I didn't know what else to do. (interviewee no. 36, female, domestic services)

Their great distance from family, combined with discrimination and precarious conditions, can induce nostalgia

and depression. This especially concerns an immigrant's early life in a host country, when reminiscing about the social and family networks left behind is paramount:

There are days when I feel bad....Nostalgia and depression overcome me, everything is overwhelming and I want to go back to my country and leave everything behind....I think of my parents, of my son, I think about times in the past, probably even those that were bad, as good. (interviewee no. 7, female, cleaning services)

Immigrant workers however are willing to suffer almost any level of humiliation to preserve their project and continue sending money home. Yet the social and family networks of their native country also represent a factor of pressure, a type of stress that not only emerges when reflecting on returning to their homeland but in their daily existence as well, as society imposes attaining a stable or even high socioeconomic level:

The stress is caused by the lack of sleep....We have to work, we have to pay the rent, we have to pay the mortgage, I have to work to buy a bigger car. (interviewee no. 12, female, cleaning services).

4. Discussion

The interviews with Ecuadorian immigrants clearly evidence that they experience workplace discrimination. In general, this is linked to precarious working conditions and their relationship and interaction with their Spanish supervisors.

Unfortunately, discrimination research often entails an ethnocentric component (especially in the discipline of psychology) due to its quantitative empirical methods. These studies resort to questionnaires which, although validated by more or less sophisticated statistical techniques, are developed and tested in national samples yielding findings impaired by interpretative dehumanization (Held, 2020) as they exert a certain epistemic violence by suppressing the knowledge possessed by the participants (Colombo, 2020). This is accentuated even more in immigrant research where, unfortunately, colonial knowledge continues to prevail through positivist ideologies. In this sense, the current study "gives a voice" to immigrants by adopting a qualitative approach and integrating the subjective components of their experiences.

The immigrants interviewed in the course of our study testify to various types of discrimination and humiliation, especially to women employed in private households where conditions of isolation render inspection and control impossible. Regarding working conditions, this study highlights the issue of precariousness as well as abuse by employers. The latter is expressed in different ways, through uncertain labor circumstances, breaches in contractual agreements, and lack of security, elements

that coincide with the conditions identified by Leão et al. (2017) in a study of Haitian immigrants in Brazil.

It is necessary nonetheless to take into account that, as in the case of most other immigrants from Latin America, the Ecuadorian community in Spain for the most part occupies low-skilled positions in the domestic services and the construction and agriculture sectors, which are often characterized by poor contractual conditions and high physical demands. Their concentration in these sectors is conducive to a stigmatization which in turn leads to an even greater discrimination and segregation.

It is likewise noteworthy that although certain authors suggest that discriminatory processes stem from language barriers, the Ecuadorians in this study report this type of abuse despite their mother tongue being Spanish as well, the language of their host country. This situation resembles that identified in other studies (Schmaus & Kristen, 2022) where subtle and veiled elements of differentiation and discrimination are linked to a different accent.

A second series of discriminatory actions affecting the Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain fall into the realm of social interaction. These include distrust and excessive supervision, humiliation, and abuse of power evidenced by imposing the repetition of tasks and even, in certain cases, verbal contempt.

This findings of this study ratify those of Cayuela et al. (2015) as they reveal that Ecuadorian immigrant workers in Spain are a vulnerable population characterized by unsafe workplace conditions and events of daily discrimination. On many occasions, this prejudice emerges when the immigrant laborer works in isolation or environments with little social contact. These situations are also reported when describing episodes of humiliation and subtle microaggressions often masked as jokes. Other research, notably the articles by Dias et al. (2013) and Džurová and Drbohlav (2014), corroborates that similar discrimination and microaggressions are also directed toward immigrant populations elsewhere in Europe.

These types of work environments aggravate feelings of precariousness, a condition that can also be understood as a form of oppression leading to psychological distress. This is worsened by the social burden they feel imposed on them by family in their country of origin, who pressure them to remain abroad in order to enhance the "success" of their migratory experience. The Ecuadorians interviewed for this study in fact report various effects of this type of pressure on their health, particularly in the form of mental and emotional strain, sadness, melancholy, and low self-esteem.

Finally, combating the workplace predicaments experienced by Ecuadorian immigrants in Spain implies adopting strategies designed to avoid—or cope with—difficulties (Alvarado, 2020), especially in the initial phases of the migratory experience. Research has established that adopting skilled management strategies can serve as a means to cope with the undesirable effects

of discrimination and microaggression (Noor & Shaker, 2017; Van Der Ham et al., 2014). Future research should therefore delve deeper into these issues by adopting qualitative methods and intrapersonal experiences that can pave the way toward a more far-reaching and exhaustive understanding of immigrant cognitive and emotional processes.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Reinscribing Migrant “Undeservingness” and “Deportability” Into Detention Centres’ Visiting Rooms

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Abstract

Despite a growing literature that addresses racial connections in detaining immigrants for deportation purposes, research on how race and race-making operate in detention centres remains scant. This research draws on interview data collected from volunteers visiting detention facilities across the UK and bridges a Foucauldian analytics of power with a relational perspective on race and racism to explore ways in which race operates and is experienced and resisted by actors involved in everyday relations of the space. Findings illuminate everyday workings and interactional dynamics that characterise detention centres and varied interpretations of visitors about race and race-making in those spaces of confinement. Despite differences in interpretations, visitors’ accounts commonly point to the centrality of racialising ideas of migrant “undeservingness” and “deportability” in shaping embodied, affective, and experiential realities of the visiting rooms of detention centres, and various ways in which actors resist those identifications.

Keywords

everyday racism; immigration detention; racialisation; power

Issue

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1. Immigration Detention and the Impossibility of Race

Immigration detention is an important mechanism of the UK’s “hostile environment” policy aimed at deterring those who might arrive in the UK in the future (Mainwaring & Silverman, 2017) and encouraging those already in the region to return (Schuster, 2005). Over the years, the neglect, forms of violence, abuse, and migrant deaths inside British immigration detention centres, officially termed immigration removal centres (IRCs), have increasing news coverage in connection with racism. Yet, despite racist language and abuse being exposed, issues of race and racism have often been downplayed in public discussions about immigration detention and deportation, and have not been adequately recognised within the critical scholarship on border(ing) practices (exceptions include Bhatia, 2020a; Lindberg, 2022; Singh Bhui, 2016; Turnbull, 2017). One possible reason for this neglect has been that there is no skin colour, religion, or language that unites the population that IRCs hold

and racism is often defined very narrowly as an intentional and mostly colour-coded act of discrimination, a line of argument that continuously occupies a central place in justifications of race-neutrality in bordering practices (de Noronha, 2019).

Today, British immigration detention facilities hold certain groups of migrants such as asylum seekers, noncitizens who have already served their prison terms, or those without documents who are increasingly being criminalised as a result of policy changes making previous immigration-related civic offences criminal ones (Aliverti, 2012; Bhatia, 2020a). These groups are being represented as “dangerous” offenders or as “unknowable,” and therefore “ungovernable” “aliens” who pose a welfare and security risk to the nation-state (Malloch & Stanley, 2005). Like those offenders, asylum seekers are also being depicted as a “threat” by politicians and in the media, with words like “bogus,” “economic migrants” arriving without authorisation, “abusers” of the system, and “illegal” people “deserving” of punishment

(De Genova, 2002; Sales, 2002). Therefore, until their cases are decided, all asylum seekers are also being treated with suspicion and targeted by policy measures under a hostile environment that degrades people by removing their rights and protection (Webber, 2019), thereby causing mental health-related and social harms.

Against this political background emphasising the “dangerousness” and “undeservingness” of some migrants, detention has been a system increasingly being used by governments to sort those deemed “bogus,” “undeserving,” and “must-be” criminals, from the “deserving” refugees. Currently, the UK is the only country in Europe without a time cap for detention. Immigration detention is institutionalised as an administrative and executive power, a legal formation that enables detaining people as long as the administrative process continues, indefinitely in some cases, without requiring any criminal conviction. Detained persons are being confined in facilities similar to prison estates which hold them in spaces distant from society, marking detainees’ criminality through physical arrangements like fences, barbed wires, walls, and gateways underscoring the restriction of mobility, and through day-to-day operations such as locking and unlocking doors, headcounts, solitary confinement, security cameras, strip searches, or incentive systems (Bosworth & Turnbull, 2014). But unlike prisoners, detained persons do not know when and if they will be released, nor can they utilise penal law. Thus, they have no recourse to procedural safeguards accorded to criminals such as fair procedures, the proportionality of the punishment to the crime, or judicial review. Hence, despite denied punitive connections, detaining migrants exerts punitive power over detainees by confining them to the status of “legal non-personhood” with no access to law (De Genova, 2016, p. 4), and perpetuates criminality by suggesting that those detained are criminals from whom the public should be protected (Bourbeau, 2019).

The literature indicates that the prospect of indefinite detention and unannounced transfers between detention facilities (Gill, 2009) serve a disciplinary function in detention centres (De Genova, 2021) that is often characterised by waiting, loneliness (Griffiths, 2013), and mental health issues (Li et al., 2016). Still, except those (Boochani, 2018) who have experienced immigration detention and write how dehumanising rationalities like reducing people to numbers serve a punitive function inside these spaces of confinement, very few have been able to gather data about the operations and effects of power from inside detention centres. Exceptions include Bosworth’s (2018) work where the author points to the centrality of national stereotyping in the everyday workings of detention centres and the meaning-making processes of staff about themselves, their work, and detainees. Furthermore, Amit and Lindberg’s (2020) work documents conflicting techniques of coercion and over-recording of cases in Israeli, and deliberate ignorance of cases in Danish detention facilities serving a

similar symbolic function in both cases, of constituting unwanted mobility as a security threat and the state as the cohesive, moral authority that guards the social order for its citizens.

A developing scholarship (Armenta, 2017; de Noronha, 2019; Garner, 2015; Kalir, 2019; Menjivar, 2021; Menjivar et al., 2018), on the other hand, has made more direct connections with race and the criminalising rationale of immigration control by highlighting policies and measures that establish certain migrant groups as racial others and targeting them through techniques of “denigration, punishment, and banishment” (Bhatia, 2020a, p. 38). This is in line with arguments (Cole, 2009; Fekete, 2001) stressing that not all racism(s) are “colour-coded,” and that new forms of racism(s) can be enacted based on a range of identities other than skin colour, including political status, i.e., asylum seeking, religion, or poverty (see also Singh Bhui, 2016; Sivanandan, 2001). For Fekete (2001, p. 24), governments have enabled “new structures of discrimination and, in the process, provided the ideological space in which racism towards asylum seekers becomes culturally acceptable” by politically labelling some migrant groups with negative connotations and by making deterrence of those groups a main policy objective. Drawing insights from this scholarship delineating the logic of how race-making operates in the public domain by differentiating some migrant groups through racialised ideas of “undeservingness” and “illegality” and rendering them “deportable subjects,” I focus here on the everydayness of racial experience in sites like detention centres where those deemed “undeserving” and “illegal” are confined.

Throughout the analysis, race is conceived through a social constructivist perspective, that acknowledges “racialized identities are produced, sustained, and sometimes transformed through social beliefs and practices and yet that race is real, as real as anything else in lived experience, with operative effects in the social world” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17). Racial construction pertains to placing one group below the dominant one, and power is always the key part of this formation by establishing systems of how racialised groups’ presence will be organised, perceived, and reacted to (Goldberg, 1993). In that sense, racialised ideas of migrant “undeservingness,” “illegality,” and “deportability” are central in making race and constituting everydayness of racial experience in sites where the “unwanted” is held and managed, yet race is lived through the body and experienced in everyday encounters with others (Ahmed, 2002). The research draws on the perspectives and experiences of volunteer visitors to British IRCs, who are among the few actors having access to these facilities to explore everyday practices and encounters through which the violence of racialisation is exerted and performed, as well as experienced and contested in the visiting rooms of detention centres. Incorporating visitor perspectives into the analysis both highlights intersubjective dynamics of race-making in detention centres’ visiting rooms and provides an

avenue of research that can shed new light on the violence of the detention and deportation regime upon which public knowledge and research remain scant.

The article is divided into five sections. The next section situates the argument within the existing literature on racialised constructions of migrant “undeservingness,” “illegality,” and “deportability” and outlines the theoretical framework that will inform the analysis. I then explain the methodology and situate myself within the discussions about race and race-making. Findings are separated into two subsections that detail visitors’ experiences and interpretations of ways in which detained persons are constituted as objects of control and subjugation, and thereby racialised within everyday workings of detention centres, how race is experienced by various actors, and how actors resist racialised ascriptions that characterise the everyday interactions in detention centres. In the conclusion, I discuss the significance of my findings for debates on race and racism in the immigration detention and deportation system.

2. Racialised Constructions of “Undeservingness” and the Lived Experiences of Racialised Embodiment

As in most Global North countries, the UK government(s) have also foregrounded the distinction between “genuine” refugees and “bogus” asylum seekers in its response to the migration “crisis,” and at the centre of much of the public debate has been this opposition between the “deservingness” of refugees and “undeservingness” of asylum seekers or other irregular migrants (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). The latter group is increasingly associated with “illegality, racketeering, and disregard for sovereign borders” (Harding, 2000, p. 57), and thus excluded from accessing decent employment and welfare, and targeted through criminal justice measures (Hirschler, 2021, pp. 51–94) like policing, surveillance, and detention amongst other everyday practices and processes of bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Scholarship in critical migration and border studies (Bhatia, 2020a; de Noronha, 2019; Menjívar, 2021; Provine & Doty, 2011; Walker, 2019) has addressed the racialising effects of those institutionally sanctioned exclusions, and detention has emerged in those analyses as the ultimate spatiotemporal device to govern the “undeserving,” “unruly,” “illegal” migrants who, by virtue of their detention, “must” have broken the rules and, therefore, “deserve” the punishment.

Today, British detention centres hold bodies that are criminalised simply for being out of the “national order of things” (Malkki, 1995, p. 513), racialised through their reduction to disposable, deportable subjects kept outside the law (De Genova, 2002) and punished (Hasselberg, 2016) although their punishment is being presented as “an utterly routine and mundane recourse of states “holding” (De Genova, 2016, p. 3). Such a formation of power/knowledge constituting its object has been described most compellingly in Foucault’s analysis

of institutions such as prisons (Foucault, 1977), where power is not always legal in character, organised effectively, or exercised homogeneously across sites, but it produces coherent effects of setting a particular relation with its object by disciplining them into certain capacities, rights, and into a certain recognisable nature. Power is dispersed into multiple networks and works from the bottom-up as much as it is exerted from the top down, and is examined through positive characteristics producing its objects as much as negative or punitive ones (Foucault, 1977). A Foucauldian analysis of power enables attending to the ways in which racialised identification of groups becomes an instrument of the economy of power in sites where those groups are being held, but also to how those ascriptions are resisted by actors involved in those power relations. Therefore, although Foucault himself does not focus on race, his analysis of power is useful in examining race as a “technique of power” making and remaking of the other (and self) through everyday workings of spaces like detention centres where those deemed “illegal” and “undeserving” are held. In this article, I argue that the detained body is the object of the detention centre within which race operates, is reproduced and resignified through everyday workings of the space constituting detained bodies as objects of control and subjugation. Thus, the workings of racist violence can be analysed by attending to how race is experienced in both everyday embodied existence and resistances of actors involved in power relations that characterise detention centres.

A similar perspective can be found in Fanon’s (1967, p. 82) account where he analyses the scene in public transportation in France where a white boy points at him saying: “Look, a negro! Dirty nigger!” In this scene Fanon experiences his “otherness” being fixed onto him through his blackness, as something to be frightened of. He feels as if he was an “object in the midst of other objects” (p. 82) identified via a white boy’s fearful gaze and cries, and he goes on to describe it as “non-being” or a “being through others” (p. 82). Fanon suggests that his access to or experience of blackness is filtered through whites constructing him as a physiological self, localising him and calling him a name. He provides a detailed account of violent processes of othering experienced through a body that is objectified and controlled by the white gaze that reinscribes racialised difference in and through everyday micro-interactional dynamics. Those experiences often generate bodily reactions such as anger and anxiety felt by victims of racist violence, and, much in the same way, fear and disgust are felt by those exposed to racialised moral panic (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). In both cases, the body is the key site where racialised meanings are ascribed, experienced and lived. Yet, it is also important to note that such sites of truth or meaning-making may also be sites of resistance to and contestation of established meanings.

In the abovementioned scene, the white boy ascribes blackness to Fanon, thereby exercising domination by

subjecting Fanon to a particular truth that he has no say in. Yet, there are three positions involved in this racialising interaction: the first person (the speaker), who is ascribing the racial qualification; the second person, to whom the racial qualification is ascribed; and the third person who observes and accounts for the racial interaction (Fassin, 2011). This third position is particularly important to investigate the experiences and meanings involved in racialised embodiment as the observer witnesses, narrates, and gives meaning to racialisation either by applying pre-established racial classifications or by proposing new meanings that might resist racialised ascriptions. Either way, it brings a moral judgement that either degrades or empowers the body being made a “being-for-others” (Fanon, 1967, p. 82) and either way it includes “power over” individuals who are the objects of judgement. Additionally, the presence of a third party makes racialisation performative by revealing the relationship between the subject and the world, thereby providing an interpretive context for the objectification of the body (Ngo, 2017). Surely, actors may engage in intersubjective meaning-making from different embodied positions mediated by their own histories and lived experiences, and therefore, contradictory interpretations may emerge. But this multiplicity may also contribute to forming a coherent understanding of the embodiment of racialisation by revealing relationships and realities that might be unseen, even by the victims of racism or discrimination.

Foregrounding this third position, I examine the interpretations and experiences of volunteer visitors to detention facilities to explore how bodies are racialised within the everyday intersubjective relations that characterise those centres. Following Essed’s (2008, p. 448) conception of “everyday racism,” which places racism in a relational perspective by highlighting its varied effects depending on subjects’ positions within relations of power, I attend to three interlocking processes: (a) that of “the marginalization of those identified as racially different,” (b) “the problematization of other cultures and identities,” and (c) “symbolic or physical repression through humiliation or violence” to illuminate the varied effects of racialised embodiment and ways in which those effects are being contested. It is important to note here that I am not concerned with the intent or motivation of people exerting control within immigration detention centres, but the workings of power at the level of subjugation and in processes that subject bodies, govern gestures, or dictate behaviour in ways that respond to racialised formulations of detained bodies as “undeserving” and “deportable” subjects. The major concern is to illuminate processes and operations through which objects of the detention system are being made and remade within relations of power specific to detention centres, thereby challenging ideas of race-neutrality of institutions involved in immigration control. The next section details methodological considerations on the research process and analysis.

3. Methodology

The article draws on data collected in 2020 through online, semi-structured interviews with six volunteers visiting multiple detention facilities across the UK for at least 18 months. The method has been useful in collecting the experiences and perspectives of visitors who are located across the country and made the research possible during the course of a global pandemic. The interviews took at least one hour and, beforehand, participants were informed about possible challenges associated with online interviews such as technical problems creating pauses during the interviews and measures they can take to mitigate those challenges. Cognizant of the difficulty of collecting nonverbal cues, or creating intimacy online, I contacted participants several times through email before the interview to ask them questions about themselves and their roles. This outreach aided in building rapport before the interview and helped shape interview questions.

Participants in this study were recruited by seeking administrative consent from the visiting organisations they are registered with. They are selected from two charities (Anonymous Visitors and Anonymous Friends) and one grassroots organisation (Friends of Detainees), with both participants’ and organisations’ names anonymised for ethical purposes. This selection reflects the diversity of visiting groups in the UK and illuminates the impact of different institutional obligations on the capacities and strategies different groups can develop. For instance, members of the grassroots organisation do not disclose organisational ties when visiting detention centres and this organisation prioritises assigning a visitor of the same nationality/ethnicity who often visits as the detained person’s friend or relative. Other groups’ access, on the other hand, is enabled through negotiations between visiting organisations’ administrators and detention facility management, and visiting group administrators are responsible for incorporating expectations of detention facility management into visitors’ training and handbooks outlining the code of conduct.

Participants were asked about their experiences of visiting detention centres and the power dynamics that characterise those spaces. Their accounts have been analysed with an interpretive lens by foregrounding processes and practices that subjugate bodies within detention centres, but also focusing on questions of what do struggles of volunteer visitors say about the workings of power inside detention centres, by whom or from which subject positions those struggles are engaged with, what are their guiding principles, and what are their means. Throughout the analysis, I followed grounded theory methods (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) and developed thematic explanations by comparing participants’ accounts to each other, to the broader context they have referred to and to the codes being used in the analysis. This comparative focus allowed for establishing

connections and contrasts between subject positions, as well as diverse forces of power and resistances involved in the detention system.

I conducted this research and wrote this piece as a female, Turkish postgraduate researcher based in an “elite” UK institution. Whilst this institutional privilege eased access, my ethnic/racial identity has been highlighted by some of the participants as they construct meanings during our interviews. Whether a Turk is white, an East-European, West-Asian, or Middle Eastern is a debate elsewhere (Gökay & Hamourtziadou, 2016), but as a person who looks “white enough,” I have been considered white especially by some visitors who embody non-whiteness, whilst some white-British visitors considered me a Muslim-outsider. Those different positionings often generated the need for participants to explain the reasoning behind their interpretations, and it opened up a space of reflection for me.

4. Findings

Findings explore visitors’ accounts of visiting detention facilities, interactions they engaged in those facilities, and meanings they draw from those interactions. Drawing on volunteers’ interpretations, the analysis highlights everyday practices through which the violence of racialisation is exerted and performed, as well as experienced and contested by various actors inside detention centres.

4.1. Navigating Racialised Relations of Power in the Immigration Removal Centres Visiting Rooms

Most visitors interviewed for this study explained what they do as similar to prison visits but for those who “haven’t committed a crime or been to court” (Robyn, Anonymous Visitors), and addressed similarities between prison estates and detention facilities. They expressed their sympathy towards those detained by referring to injustices inflicted on people just because their nationality does not fit the criteria, and some presented religious reasons when asked for their reasons for visiting. Commonly, volunteers visiting detention facilities stressed what they do as “radical listening” to stories of people inside detention centres, of abuse and torture, and of people being re-traumatised inside IRCs. Many mentioned visiting people they describe as “suffering,” having mental health issues including “anxiety,” engaging in forms of self-harm including “suicide attempts,” and reflected on the deteriorating state of detainees’ mental health during the term of their confinement. One visitor explained in frustration that “all they are being given is paracetamol” (Lianne, Anonymous Friends) and maintained that detained persons are neither able to access proper health care nor legal support.

Alongside the stories of psychological and physical abuse, visitors mentioned bearing witness to some of the technologies being used against detained persons

such as not heating the “cells” during winter, even though the visiting area was heated. However, all of them stressed that an official complaint was never an option if they wanted to continue visiting. Most mentioned taking issues to the administrators of their visiting organisations and hoping their administrators resolve it with the detention centre management. Visitors’ accounts underlined some of the new configurations of punishment (Aas, 2014; Bosworth, 2012) that might emerge in spaces like detention centres where a government deflects responsibility to private companies, placing those who are “to be disposed of” at the mercy of authorities responsible for their management (De Genova, 2016). Whilst the involvement of private companies in the management of “unwanted” bodies allows the state to avoid unpleasant and potentially aggressive implementation of the policy, those companies guided by macroeconomic concerns such as cost-effectiveness or performance often perform state violence through negligence and abandonment (Menz, 2013). Companies perpetuate the restrictive policy direction by constantly responding to it, and the state grants them spaces of expansion for further monetary accumulation. In that sense, detention centres operate in a legal grey zone that lacks scrutiny and accountability, where capital and sovereign state manage detained bodies as a resource for their overlapping interests. With these concerns in mind, many visitors explained their motivation as to “check-in in spaces where there is no accountability” (Lianne, Anonymous Friends) and stressed that they are worried because detainees “will be even more invisible” if people don’t visit them. Their accounts underline the way exclusion from basic rights and services reconstitutes detained persons as bodies to be dismissed, and, as the following quote from Anonymous Visitors’ Sarah illustrates, those practices are often coupled with harsh treatment inside detention facilities:

I sense a level of hostility and potential violence, not towards me, but as in a situation when various guards were coming off the wing at the end of their shift and the sheer negative testosterone feeling in these enclosed spaces. They were banging on the door to go out at the end of their shift. It was frightening, not to me personally, but I just thought this has just been on the wings here. You know, I’m not at all surprised by the Brook House Panorama program [see Plomin, 2017].

The majority of visitors stressed feeling a general hostility towards detainees inside detention facilities, but visitors from the grassroots organisation who share the same ethnicity as the person they visit expressed that hostility was also being directed at them. From Friends of Detainees, Meaghan’s experience is one such case where she made connections to sexism and racism when explaining the hostility she experienced that was distressing her during her visits. She remarked hearing a lot of

condescending expressions in her interactions with staff and framed the gaze of male staff as a source of harm. She explained that the way staff “stare” or “smirk” at her often makes her feel “intimidated” and, by connecting with me on the basis of our shared gender identity, maintained that:

I think you, as a woman, too would probably understand, you can’t really report anything unofficial because they didn’t explicitly say anything to harass you or there wasn’t hard evidence that they....But it was just more of a dynamic in that space that made me uncomfortable.

She, then, reminding me of our differing racial identities explained why she takes long pauses and adjusts her tone of voice when talking to staff, even if she always gets passive-aggressive responses, or why she is scared to react in her interactions with staff. She described feeling that staff project racialised ideas of “undeservingness” and “illegality” inscribed onto detained bodies onto her body as well, thereby transforming her into an object of suspicion, and also pity:

I feel like [staff] thought we are like relatives or you know or a couple...but if, let’s say, you are visiting my detainee I think the whole dynamic would also be different....I think generally it might be advancing their stereotype of the foreign, you know, foreign people visiting other foreign people in trouble because you know, they came into our country “illegally.”

When white-British volunteers are asked a similar question, they often refrained from connecting it to race and racism; some victimised the detention staff and some raised their doubts by saying those held in detention facilities “might-be” criminals, aligning with the “crimmi-gration” rationale. They addressed the logic differentiating those outside from inside, “us vs. them” (Anderson, 2013), in explaining how detention staff understand their work as “doing something to help people” and maintained that they felt “like some of the staff are [also] anxious about anger, about keeping control....So when they’re like that, when they’re tense...you don’t want to make them worse” (Robyn, Anonymous Visitors). Participants’ accounts resonated with research on detention staff elsewhere (Amit & Lindberg, 2020; Borrelli, 2021) where “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010) of detention and deportation policy respond to the policy both in physical terms by establishing a coercive environment, but also by acting on and re-enacting categories of exclusion through everyday practices. Without much clarity on role expectations, these officers exercise a great deal of discretion and they rely heavily on informal “training-on-the job and peer exchange” (Borrelli, 2021, p. 593) that aid in managing tasks by enabling a shared understanding and meaning-making strategies. However, those informal education processes may also be based

on racialised ideas that are aligned with the “racialized and exclusionary logics” of the law and policies (Kalir, 2019, p. 32) and therefore, regardless of whether those officers bear racist animosity or not, racist violence is exercised through assumptions they hold as they engage in daily practices and gets approved within the “social life” of detention and deportation regimes.

The interviews reflected two distinct ways of explaining the violence and oppression embedded in the everyday functioning of British detention centres: on one side, the group of volunteers who are (mostly) non-British and people of colour who have experienced racism before, therefore being able to recognise racism and race-making inside detention facilities; on the other, white-British volunteers who made (almost) no reference to racism in explaining the power dynamics characterising the space. What is common sense for one group was not there for the other; although perhaps the parameters structuring the racialised violence experienced by some visitors were different than those being experienced by detained persons. But the focus here is not to look for objective similarities in the effects of race, but to capture “multiple manifestations and hidden epistemic effects of how race is lived and its power over collective imaginations” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 15), in particular how detained bodies are imagined and managed in detention centres. The racial experiences some visitors reflect on are linked to their historical experiences of British colonisation, socio-economic structures that marginalise them, and cultural practices of exclusion, yet for detained migrants, it is linked to the carceral formation of the detention system confining and managing people as objects of subjugation, and bodies to be dismissed. Although the context that determines the content and political meaning of the racial concept is different for different groups, political and historical sensitivity towards racism and how it presents itself in relation to groups that are negatively labelled in society enabled interpretive schemas that some visitors tapped into when making sense of their visiting experiences and perceptions of racialised interactions in the visiting room.

Despite some participants not making direct reference to race and racism, this did not mean that practices and processes of racial meaning-making were absent in their accounts. On the contrary, their accounts also underscored processes of race-making that organise interactions in IRC visiting rooms. As they reflect on their experiences of visiting detention centres, they commonly pointed to a state of alert that characterise routine practices of the visiting room, but also underscored arbitrariness in how those facilities, and therefore detained persons, are being managed. Most participants have reflected on “unreasonable” punitive conditions through which detained persons’ “illegality” is being signified in the visiting room such as not allowing phones or pen and paper into the visiting space, not moving any chairs or tables (which was a great challenge for group visits), staff circling around their table, listening to conversations

even if they don't understand the language being spoken, or interrogating visitors about the person they visit although they have no right to do so. Participants also added that different practices might be allowed at different times or in different detention centres depending on which detention staff is on duty and what their "mood" is on that day.

Bryan (Friends of Detainees), who has visited several detention facilities, emphasised that staff exercise an "almost discretionary" power inside the space controlling movement, material, information, and affect. For many visitors interviewed for this study, this "discretionary" power determines the duration of or what is allowed in that visit, therefore impacting their ability to prepare for and the quality of time they could have with the detained person. Many expressed feeling like the interaction they might have with the detained person they visit is heavily dependent on staff, and mentioned cases where staff ends their visit abruptly because they are suspicious about the conversation. They reflected on the impossibility of establishing rapport when staff eavesdrops on conversations, coming into close proximity with the detained person, or collecting information that might be used to in supporting detainees in their casework if staff is not "lenient" that day. Yet for others, the staff's unchecked power manifested itself more strongly in letting the detainee into the visiting room or not. Robyn from Anonymous Visitors reflected on that, by saying:

When they call people to come to the visiting room you can't be sure if they are using the right pronunciation of somebody's name or you never know whether they have called them or haven't they, what happened or why isn't the person coming you know, what's going on.

Most visitors expressed their frustration over people being deported without any notice or information being given to anyone, including visitors, therefore not being able to have "some sort of conclusion" (Bryan, Friends of Detainees) to their support for the person they visit over extensive periods. As the phones being given to detained persons are taken away as they are deported or transferred to another facility, visitors often lose contact with the person they visit. Some visitors expressed their anger due to deportations taking place on public holidays such as Christmas by saying: "Obviously the Home Office thinks this is a good time to deport somebody because it's very difficult to get to the lawyer" (Tylar, Anonymous Friends). Visitors' accounts pointed to the penetration of uncertainty, which is a key aspect characterising detained lives (De Genova, 2021; Turnbull, 2016) into relationships and interactions detained persons might have inside detention centres. With abrupt deportations or transfers, detained persons are constituted as bodies that disappear seamlessly and are transformed into objects with whom no lasting relationship can be built.

For most visitors, witnessing discomfoting scenes that subjugate detained persons, and being unable to "change anything in that space" often activated adverse affects such as anger and frustration. But especially those registered with charities stressed their frustration even more as they reflected on institutional rules and regulations of visiting organisations that are designed to increase efficiency and order as factors contributing to oppression. The rules and expectations pertaining to detention visiting are neither made explicit in the statute nor in the policy setting the rules and procedures. Conditions for visiting are rather enforced by the IRC management in a way to sustain political silence over detainees and detention harms. Visiting organisations are banned from any type of political engagement including seeking publicity, making social media posts, participating in protests related to immigration detention, or making complaints about the detention staff. Some visitors also mentioned receiving warnings from their organisation not to engage in further action for the person they visit if the visiting organisation thinks it might jeopardise their access.

Visitors' accounts pointed to a particular "power geometry" that IRCs illustrate within which "some people are more in charge than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (Massey, 1991, p. 26). Detainees are included in these power dynamics as objects of subjugation through their "illegality" and "disposability," detention staff are positioned within it as official and legal actors able to make rules or ignore them, and visitors as legal but unofficial actors. Taking racial/ethnic differences of visitors into account showed that race is indeed an important factor in this geometry. Whilst non-white visitors are placed lower within hierarchies of oppression, racism is naturalised within the relational dynamics of detention centres. However, power is also embedded in relations between visitors and detained persons, as well as being expressed in their relations with detention staff. Visitor-detainee relationships might indeed generate dependency and hence, might perpetuate the subordination of detained persons if the visitor is always placed on the providing end of the relationship and the detainee is always on the receiving end. Again, despite all good intentions, visitors abiding by the silencing logic operating in detention centres and addressing the suffering of detained persons without holding much of a prospect for change might indeed contribute to racialised relations of subjugation and reproduce relations of domination.

4.2. "Resisting the Spirit of the Place"

Against the camp-like rationale operating in detention centres that keep detained persons invisible and muted in remote areas by confining them into an existence defined by "illegality" and "undeservingness," visitors

often stressed that they aimed to show detainees that “people care about them, and they matter” (Robyn, Anonymous Visitors). Most visitors explained they aim for establishing “humane contact” with detained persons not just by offering them space and a “befriender” to talk with as they need, but also by building a relationship of trust. Some mentioned that they continued visiting the same person even after they are transferred to another IRC, offering social links if they are released, or writing to the families of detained persons “to make [them] feel he wasn’t alone” (Robyn, Anonymous Visitors).

In addition to practical support visiting organisations offer such as money or topping up SIM cards, visitors mentioned they try to connect detainees with the “outside world” by bringing books, magazines, CDs, or clothes to them and by providing them with connections to other organisations and human rights networks. Although most expressed they can only do “small things” that do not solve the problems of detained persons, it is possible to regard those acts as forms of political action through which they resist racialising dynamics of power that characterise detention centres. Despite being constrained in their capacities and conduct, most visitors mentioned that they aim for fostering an “allyship” (Kelly, Anonymous Friends; Brian, Friends of Detainees) with the person they visit and mitigate the effects of isolation that the detention system inflicts on people. Some reflected on material and symbolic repression that characterise British IRCs and mentioned that they create “a mental space” (Meaghan, Friends of Detainees) with the person they visit where they don’t fight the guards but they “resist the spirit of the place” (Sarah, Anonymous Visitors) together. Others addressed the cumulative effects of racist injuries being inflicted on detained persons that cause low self-esteem and people “giving up on themselves,” and mentioned their efforts to “nudge” detainees to achieve more after their release by reminding them of their capacities and worth outside the detention system.

Against the unpredictability and uncertainty that function as a form of punishment inside detention centres, visitors think their continued presence can “give their [detainees’] life a bit of normality and structure” (Bryan, Friends of Detainees), but more importantly, it allows visitors to “bear witness” to the harms being inflicted on detained persons. Some participants mentioned they will give testimonies in the first-ever public inquiry launched to investigate the allegations of physical and psychological abuse that took place in Brook House IRC where visitors’ accounts will contribute to the case establishing detainee abuse as a public concern. Perhaps, here as well, visitors’ accounts reflect their embodied positions, generating differences in perceptions about varied forms of everyday racism that confine detained bodies into a particular subjective existence.

Overall, visitors’ accounts pointed to the embodied, affective, and experiential realities of the IRCs that

are shaped by intersubjective relations involved in the space, as well as racialised identification and management of detained persons as “undeserving” and “dangerous” bodies. Against the exclusionary and subjugating logic of the detention system that reduces detained persons to a bodily existence via various techniques including denying them contact with the outside world, actors find various tactics to enact new ways of being, especially by being together.

5. Conclusion

This article discussed various ways in which race and race-making operate in everyday workings and interactions that characterise British detention facilities. Grounded on a social constructivist understanding, it argued that racialisation in the detention and deportation system occurs through sociological coding of detained persons’ as “undeserving” and “deportable subjects” without access to the law. This formation is exercised and performed through the everyday workings of the detention and deportation system, and experienced and resisted by actors involved in it. Drawing on experiences and perspectives of volunteers visiting various detention centres across the UK, findings revealed some of the practices and processes that characterise social relations of the IRC visiting rooms such as suspicious gazes, ever-changing punitive measures, normalisation of the violent atmosphere, and arbitrary exercise of power that constitute detained persons as objects of control and subjugation. Here, incorporating race and racial perceptions of visitors into the analysis has enabled addressing the influence of subject positions and sensitivities of visitors in their ability to identify race-making processes and practices inside detention centres, and revealed some of the “bodily experiences, subjectivities, judgements, and epistemic relationships” (Alcoff, 1999, p. 17) through which race is made and lived. Whether they have recognised the violence of the detention and deportation regime in its connection to race and racism or not, participants commonly underlined the centrality of politically established ideas of migrant “undeservingness” and “illegality” in describing how detained persons are imagined and managed in detention facilities. In that regard, findings echoed studies (Amit & Lindberg, 2020; Bhatia, 2020b) on detention centres by illustrating that coercion and abandonment work in tandem in managing “unwanted” bodies in British detention facilities. Violence is exercised by the street-level bureaucrats of the policy that is racist in essence, and whilst harm is being done within mundane workings and interactions that characterise detention centres, racialised relations of domination, subjugation and violence often remain unchecked under the veil of race neutrality of institutions.

Contributing to the studies (Bosworth, 2019; Lindberg, 2022) detailing emotions and attitudes of officers implementing detention and deportation policies, this study provides insights into the racial affect

that is experienced and resisted differently by actors involved in relations of power characterising detention centres. More research with same ethnicity/race visitors of detained persons will contribute to this understanding, but more importantly, research addressing detained persons' experiences of and resistances to race and racism is needed to shed better light on operations of race and how it shapes everyday interactions and relations in those sites of abuse.

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Conflict of Interests

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Article

Refugee Women’s Volunteering as Resistance Practices to Micro-Aggressions and Social Exclusion in the UK

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Abstract

In an increasingly hostile environment for refugees in the UK and the “everyday bordering” that creates exclusionary effects for refugees and migrants, this article examines how refugee women of diverse backgrounds enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and social exclusion. We draw on in-depth qualitative research with members of a support group for refugee women established by a local charity in England. We find that the support group not only allows the refugee women to foster a strong sense of solidarity in the face of everyday microaggressions; it also facilitates the women’s volunteering activities in the local community. Applying the concept of “differentiated embedding,” we argue that such activities enable these women to build wider social connections and skills for future employment and, crucially, develop emotional and linguistic resources to critique dominant exclusionary discourses and policies towards refugees through the idea of “contribution” and “giving back.” In so doing, we contribute to renewed interest in the concept of integration to highlight the agency of refugee women in creating differentiated embedding in a hostile environment.

Keywords

critical incorporation; differentiated embedding; hostile environment; integration; microaggression; racism; refugees; resistance; volunteering

Issue

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly hostile environment for refugees in the UK and the “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) that creates exclusionary effects for refugees and migrants, this article examines how refugee women of diverse backgrounds (in terms of countries of origin, language, age, religion, immigration status) enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and perceptions of refugees as a threat. While recent data suggests a softening of anti-immigrant attitudes in the UK since Brexit (Blinder & Richards, 2020), the issue remains politically contentious (Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017; Rutter & Carter, 2018). Analysis of a Twitter “conversation” about migration

among non-elite users, occurring in temporal proximity to the lifting of transitional controls on Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the UK, highlighted concerns about immigrants’ moral worth and anxiety about the impact of immigration on national space and culture, confirming findings in scholarship that draws on survey data to investigate British attitudes to immigration (Shah & Ogden, 2021). However, this analysis also revealed pro-immigration attitudes amongst non-elite users that drew on multiple and sometimes contradictory values (Shah & Ogden, 2021). Within this contested terrain, anti-immigrant discourses remain dominant on Twitter (and elsewhere). Media images of large groups of refugees crossing a body of water or land have the effect of positioning refugees as an economic, security,

and cultural threat and generate moral panic among the public (Cooper et al., 2021; KhosraviNik, 2010). Further, the categories “refugees” and “asylum seekers” are frequently conflated with the categories “immigrants” and “migrants” in the media (Philo et al., 2013). In the last few years, UK newspaper headlines have been dominated with stories about the number of small boat crossings of the Channel by migrants, active plans to offshore asylum processing to Rwanda, and the general questioning of the legitimacy of asylum seekers. Moreover, explicit anti-refugee sentiments have been advanced by leading British politicians, shaping the tone of public debate. For example, Albanian asylum seekers have been singled out as illegitimate, even criminal. The current British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, highlighted the rate of rejection of Albanian asylum seekers as “just” 45%, saying “the vast majority of claims from Albania can simply be declared clearly unfounded” (Sunak, 2022). Similarly, current Home Secretary Suella Braverman referred to the arrival of asylum seekers as an “invasion on our southern coast,” and asserted that they are coming “illegally...taking advantage of our generosity, abusing our laws and being accommodated free of charge” (Braverman, 2022). Ongoing demonization and mediatisation of refugees and asylum seekers creates a “hostile environment,” which is compounded by the UK’s immigration policies and citizenship regimes.

Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) argue that successive immigration acts in the UK, and especially the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, have extended “everyday bordering,” the practice of differentiating between “us” and “them,” by criminalising employees of banks, health services, and private landlords who fail to enforce existing immigration laws. This “everyday/everywhere bordering technology” creates a hostile environment not only for irregular migrants but also for other migrants and racialised minority groups, thus undermining social and political solidarity (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). This has been further extended by the 2022 Immigration and Borders Act, which includes the introduction of a two-tier system for refugees that penalizes some of them by limiting their rights and the protection afforded to them on the basis of their mode of arrival in the UK. The ensuing hostile environment is linked to the growing “autochthonic populist politic of belonging in the UK and elsewhere” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018, p. 241) and to a neoliberal construction of citizenship and access to social and political rights (Turner, 2014).

Within this hostile environment and the prevalence of citizenship regimes that require displays of cultural competencies such as language and knowledge of British values, as well as a self-reliant entrepreneurial self (Turner, 2014), how do refugee women foster belonging and attachment in their new homes? Integration is the concept most commonly applied to the consideration of migrants’ adaptation and incorporation into the receiving societies in which they reside. It assumes that migrants constitute an alien element

(Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018, p. 186) that will require the adoption of practices to move towards structural and cultural similarity with the host society over time. Although comprehensive multidimensional frameworks for integration have been advanced (most notably by Ager & Strang, 2008), in policy and practice the emphasis has been on more structural and functional aspects such as employment, education, language, housing, and health—which are seen to signify successful integration rather than more experiential notions of welcome and attachment (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Furthermore, conceptions of integration have been contested for being too linear and unidirectional, suggesting an achieved endpoint and permanent settlement in one country, as well as assuming a homogenous, monocultural receiving society in which to integrate (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018). Following these arguments then, we draw on the concept of “differentiated embedding” (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015) that highlights a more nuanced, processual account of migrants’ attachments and participation in the receiving society. Mulholland and Ryan (2022, p. 5) define embedding “as dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space.” The differentiated aspect recognises that “migrants negotiate attachments and belonging to varied degrees in different social and structural settings” (Ryan, 2018, p. 235).

By applying the framework of differentiated embedding, we demonstrate how for refugee women, despite experiencing the exclusionary effects of microaggressions in everyday life and thus lack of embedding at the local level, participation in a support group enables them to foster a strong sense of solidarity and establish relational embedding. This relational embedding facilitates the women’s volunteering activities in the local community and, therefore, civic embedding, and also a degree of economic embedding and wider relational embedding. Embedding in these domains enables the women to demonstrate that they are “good immigrants” (Hackl, 2022): prepared to become entrepreneurial selves who will eventually contribute economically through employment, thereby meeting the requirements of neoliberal citizenship regimes, and being civic-minded and publicly engaged, thereby contributing to the public good (Yap et al., 2011). But they also acquire the emotional and linguistic resources to resist dominant exclusionary discourses about refugees through the idea of “contribution” and “giving back,” and critique the state’s failure to provide a conducive environment for processes of embedding for refugees.

Literature on the volunteering experiences of refugees and migrants is limited; primarily focused on the functional benefits for integration, and often considered in its role for progression to employment, particularly in the context of the labour market barriers refugees face (de Jong, 2019; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017;

Tomlinson, 2010; Yap et al., 2011). Only a few studies focus on refugees' volunteering in the context of politics and civic life (Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011). We view refugee women's volunteering as practices of negotiation, adaptation, and/or resistance that both accommodate neoliberal citizenship regimes and contest the hostile environment. We argue that such practices lead to a "critical incorporation" (Shah, 2012) rather than an uncritical emphasis on adaptation and integration into their new home. By highlighting the agency of refugee women in creating opportunities for embedding that leads to critical incorporation in a hostile environment, we contribute to renewed interest in rethinking the concept of integration (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018).

In the following sections, we first expand on Mulholland and Ryan's (2022) concept of "differentiated embedding." This is followed by a discussion of our methodology and findings that explore different aspects of the women's embedding practices. We end with a conclusion that draws out the implications of these findings in terms of viewing volunteering as a resistance practice to fight microaggression and exclusion, and the contribution differentiated embedding can offer to further our understanding of processes of integration for refugees.

2. Theoretical Framing

A number of concepts have been developed to capture processes of migrants' adaptation and building attachment, such as integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), social anchoring (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016), and belonging or feeling "at home" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). We draw on the concept of embedding (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015), and particularly differentiated embedding (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022; Ryan, 2018), to examine refugee women's experiences of microaggressions and the strategies and responses they adopt to negotiate and resist the ensuing exclusionary effects. The concept of differentiated embedding enables us to explore the circularity of the process: A lack of embedding resulting from discriminatory and exclusionary encounters in everyday public interactions propels the refugee women into new localized spaces of inclusion, attachment, and participation from where they can challenge this hostility and potentially cultivate a wider sense of belonging. Ryan and Mulholland (2015) use the term "embedding" rather than embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) to emphasize dynamic, ongoing, and multidimensional processes in migrant belonging and attachment over time and space. They define embedding as "a means of explaining the process through which social actors connect to and interact with a multiplicity of social, economic and political structures through various social relationships/social networks" (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015, p. 142). While social relations are important in processes of embedding, so is the "socio-economic, cultural and physical particularities of the local areas in which [migrants] live

and work" (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015, p. 139), which structure the opportunities and resources migrants can draw on to create new ties and belonging. Embedding focuses on the subjective perceptions of the migrants themselves through their accounts of their lived experiences, rather than being assessed externally by a set of supposedly measurable outcomes, as has been a critique of the application of the concept of integration in practice (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018).

Further, Ryan and Mulholland (2015, p. 150) note that migrants can be embedded in different domains, can be embedded in one domain but not others, and that there can be different depths of embeddedness across various domains. More recently, Ryan (2018) and Mulholland and Ryan (2022) have developed the concept of "differentiated embedding" to acknowledge that embedding trajectories are not only shaped by opportunities and resources in a given material context, but also by the intersections of ethnicity, class, gender or religion, which "influence motivations, opportunities and obstacles for embedding" (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022, p. 5). Other scholars have applied the concept of embedding to understand the experiences of single-nationality refugee groups in the UK, e.g., considering the influence of varying immigration entry routes and positionality shaping co-national relational embedding for Syrians (Speed et al., 2021) and differential labour market experiences and fragmented community organisation formation for Vietnamese (Barber, 2021). We extend this application to a multi-national collective of refugee women which fosters solidarity and a shared experience of deep relational embedding, enabling further relational, economic, and civic embedding through the practice of volunteering. Therefore, we demonstrate how the dynamism of embedding trajectories in different domains are linked.

3. Methodology

This article draws on research carried out by the first author in 2019 with members of a women's support group based at a charity providing services for refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants, in a city in the south of England. The study looked at how support groups affect the way refugees experience belonging in the UK.

The support group was founded almost 20 years ago by a refugee woman to build social connections and offer other women like her opportunities to get involved in varied activities. These include: weekly English and exercise classes; workshops and courses on topics such as health, domestic abuse, female genital mutilation, legal rights, food hygiene, employability; cultural sharing sessions; skill development such as art and cooking; volunteer opportunities; and participation in community events and projects with external organisations. They can also access advice and advocacy and counselling support from the charity staff.

The support group, which meets several times a week, had an overall membership of 56 women in 2019 (although not all attend every week), who originate from a range of countries and ethnic groups. The group is also diverse in terms of age (22–65 years), length of time resident in the UK, religion (the largest proportion are Muslim), immigration status, support needs, and length of membership of the group.

Access to the group was achieved through the first author's previous professional relations established through working in the refugee sector. This gave her familiarity with the research setting, but she recognizes her distance as a British (since birth) white woman with the advantages afforded by her privilege and secure citizenship status. Whilst being wary of the resultant power asymmetries, social difference may also offer the prospect of generating rich insight into experiences because participants may articulate more clearly their perspectives when the researcher is assumed to have less knowledge as an "outsider" (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 132).

Ten women were involved in the study, and all volunteered to participate following an initial information session about the research. There were no incentives for participation. They came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Bangladesh, Algeria, and the Caribbean. All the study participants were regular attendees and long-standing members of the group (membership ranging from two to 14 years), and all were able to speak sufficient English to conduct an interview without an interpreter. Seven of the women took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews, and five of the women took part in a focus group (two of the women were involved in both). Additionally, two staff members, the group coordinator and her manager, were interviewed to gain their perspectives and triangulate the women's accounts.

Interviews lasted between 47–76 minutes and were conducted at a location selected by the participant. The focus group lasted one hour and took place at the same time as the normal group meeting to enable accessibility. The interviews and focus group followed similar questioning; participants were asked about their general experience of life in the UK and in the city in which they live (sense of welcome, or not, as migrants), their social networks in the UK, their experiences of the women's support group, and any voluntary or paid work they are involved with. All the interviews and the focus group were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

4. Findings

4.1. *Everyday Microaggressions and Social Exclusion*

All the women described experiences of social isolation in the UK, particularly when they first arrived, due to unfamiliarity with the country, language barriers, not

knowing where to go for support, cultural differences in neighbourhood interactions, and very limited social and familial networks. Many lacked the confidence to venture out, staying in the house often for years, as Tehmina describes: "First time when I came here everything is strange for me. And you know I was feeling scared, and I was crying all the time." A couple of the women mentioned how hard it is in British culture to meet people. Aliyah infers the contrast to practices of socialising in her country of origin, where people know each other in their neighbourhoods through frequent interactions. Whereas in the UK, she explains, "I can't find space from the street [meet people in the local area through interactions on the street], they don't [know] me, and I don't know them. It is really, err, scary." This highlights the acute psychological and emotional challenges faced by these women in establishing local social connections through everyday interactions.

Most of the women remembered experiences of everyday microaggression in the public sphere at some point (at school, at work, on buses and trains, or in the street), which added to their feelings of social isolation and exclusion. For example, Salma recalled having apples thrown at her in the street in a rural town where she lived when she first arrived (on account of being black), and Farida described being racially abused on a train (on account of being Asian). Prominent in these hostile encounters were perceptions of refugees and migrants as inferior, a burden, or a threat. Farida recounted comments people made to her:

All this people came from other country, and so now we don't have a job, they are taking our housing....If someone have more than two child, they say: "Oh that person is having a child to get more benefit"....Every single day somebody will show you—you are not us, you are not one of us.

Annabel, the manager at the charity, noted that many people have felt increasingly anxious following Brexit and the escalation in hate crimes. Furthermore, she observed that clients are frequently reluctant to identify as refugees, and will quickly reject the label once they have been granted British nationality.

Muslim participants, particularly those wearing the hijab, experienced microaggression based on their religion, for example being called terrorists. During the focus group, Zania narrated how a white British man on a bus touched her hijab and asked very publicly why she was wearing this and that she should take it off to be more beautiful. He demanded to know where she was from and why she was in the UK. This left her and her companion feeling very scared, particularly as no one on the bus intervened to support them. The other women agreed that these experiences create an ongoing sense of anxiety about leaving the house alone due to fears of being attacked because they are Muslims. Masira commented: "Some people, for me—no good. Sometimes when I go

outside people look at me very angry. Sometimes I am scared, I don't go outside, just with my husband."

Such experiences show a multifaceted interplay of microaggression and isolation on the basis of intersecting immigration status, nationality and ethnicity, culture, gender, and religion, set in the wider political context of the hostile environment towards refugees and migrants. These experiences demonstrate the sense of insecurity and threat/fear that many of the women felt, which can severely curtail the opportunities for refugee women to engage in processes of relational embedding at a local level, as they do not know where to go to meet people and the public sphere is often not experienced as a space of welcome. It is in this context that the women used their agency to find alternative spaces for relational embedding, such as the support group for refugee women.

4.2. *Fostering Solidarity and Confidence*

Participation in the support group enabled these women to foster a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support:

If there are some people I can meet they are rude or whatever, I don't know, I don't care, because I have my best people, who like me, and we like each other....[This] is my family...the women's group, this is my home, my second one, because I meet people, sharing experience, talking, helping each other.... Because when you are coming in, the first time, you are feeling lonely. And when you come to the group, you are laughing now, you see the happiness. (Amara)

Here Amara describes how the group enables her to overcome social isolation and microaggression experienced at the local level. This echoes a point Tomlinson (2010, p. 294) makes; exclusion and rejection on account of perceived difference as refugees in one domain can reinforce attachment in another, where this becomes a criteria for inclusion. In the group, being a refugee/migrant woman permits entry and becomes a point of shared experience and togetherness. Almost all participants described other group members as family, who provide support and an emotional sense of belonging, particularly in the context of lacking familial networks in the UK. Group members relied on each other when they experienced problems: They shared advice on parenting in a different culture, supported those who had difficult relationships with their husbands, interpreted for those struggling with English, donated household items to each other, and looked after each other when pregnant, ill, or depressed. Relationships between the women were characterised by high levels of trust and reciprocity, and frequent and intense interactions (Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015), and reveals the highly gendered dimension of their deep relational embedding.

Further, their relational embedding was generated across a diversity of positionalities (ethnicity, language, religion, culture, age, immigration status). The partici-

pants valued diversity, seeing it as a way to learn from each other and to share their different ideas, cultures and experiences in the UK:

This mixed [in the group] is really nice, mixed religion, mixed—because, okay, I see this thing in my country, but now I live here, many things is wrong. So many people is reading news, or looking in paper or TV, and after you speak...properly [with] people...sometimes is 50% wrong what you [were] listening before this. Is making you "doctrinage." (Nura)

Nura proposes that being exposed to different ideas and ways of doing things through the group has expanded her outlook and ability to question dominant doctrines and discourses that are disseminated. Salma also mentioned how the group avoids the insular stance of other co-ethnic community groups she has encountered. Khadija, the group coordinator, suggested that the women fostered solidarity as refugee women despite their difference; they understood their situation as "a global issue" affecting refugees of all national/ethnic groups. As Vickers (2016) suggests, this collective awareness and solidarity may enable the formation of a collective identity, which may perhaps be seen to contribute to their confidence and drive to resist microaggressions and negative discourses, as is discussed later.

Certainly, involvement in the different activities through the group nurtured confidence among the women and provided them with the resources and opportunities to engage in volunteering. The women related how the group helped build their self-confidence and a sense of agency, and, as Aliyah explains, staff and group members encouraged each other to volunteer:

They keep push me: "No, Aliyah, you are strong, you need to do this, you need to do that"....We need somebody to show us the right thing, especially we are struggle with the language....This is my time, my freedom, to relax, calm down. And I give and I work [volunteer].

The charity facilitates volunteering opportunities both within the group and with external organisations. Within the group, the women helped coordinate group activities, acted as unofficial outreach workers identifying new women needing support in the community, and were involved in voluntary projects such as "pop-up" cafés and cooking for different groups of people across the city. Many of the women also volunteered with external organisations; in local charity shops, other community groups, schools, and a local museum. Mostly these opportunities were initially arranged through the group coordinator, but a few women found other volunteering positions independently. Such volunteering activities facilitated relational embedding in the wider community, as well as economic and civic embedding, as we explore next.

4.3. Wider Relational Embedding Through Volunteering

Through some volunteering activities the refugee women's "difference" was not only accepted but promoted and shared. The women described their joy in being able to share aspects of their cultures, most particularly their cuisine through the "pop-up" cafés. Some women were involved in a volunteer project with a different organisation offering classes to non-migrant locals in Arabic, cooking and needlework. Others volunteered with a museum sharing their knowledge about traditional dress and artifacts from their countries of origin. Aliyah described being "excited" by how many people from other places were interested in her culture. These experiences clearly contrast with the hostile encounters participants faced in other contexts, as previously discussed. It implicitly challenges racism that positions difference as problematic and unable to belong (Anthias, 2016), because arguably difference here was instrumentalised as an aid to wider relational embedding. Thus, such activities facilitated a degree of relational embedding in the local community, and although to a lesser extent than in the protected space of the support group, the women were able to achieve a sense of belonging in local public spaces. Khadija, the group coordinator, observes:

You can already see the difference, they feel part of the community, because you go to events and the ones who are already volunteering in other [organisations], they know so many people and they are very recognised, they go and chat to people, or they'll say: "Oh, we work together"...and you can already see that sense of belonging there, like, "this is where I do volunteering," you know they were very proud to be able to be part of that community and to be able to even do something with non-immigrants....It is an enhanced status for them.

Additionally, the women facilitated relational embedding for other refugee and migrant women through their volunteering practices, such as unofficial/informal outreach work:

[I] let everyone learn there is a group, and this what you can do, and if you ever need help, to contact them....It's good to let people know who are new to [the city]...and when they find a group, they feel welcome, a sense of ease, they can talk to somebody. (Salma)

Though initial relational embedding for new group members will occur in the localised space of the support group, Salma and other women explicitly identified this as a measure to counter the social exclusion they know many refugee women experience.

4.4. Economic Embedding Through Volunteering

In line with findings from other studies (de Jong, 2019; Tomlinson, 2010; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011), volunteering was seen as a (potential) route to future paid employment in the context of the considerable labour market barriers refugees face. Having an income was noted as a necessity in being able to live sustainably by several of the women, and volunteering was understood as a way to gain UK-based work experience and references that will increase their employability.

However, several of the women explained that working was not, or could not be, their ultimate goal. For Nura working was an impossibility due to her legal status as an asylum seeker. For several other women, paid employment was unattainable due to caring responsibilities, for children and husbands with health problems. Aliyah explains: "I work volunteer because I can't work, because my husband is disabled. I look after him, I look, and no time to find job, I am so busy. But I am really happy, I work volunteer everywhere."

Aliyah was a university graduate and had worked in a bank prior to becoming a refugee. Her current family circumstances, as well as her previous lack of adequate English language skills, prevented her from seeking paid employment. Volunteering allowed her to use her skills and "energy," which provided a sense of fulfilment. As Khvorostianov and Remennick (2017, p. 345) found, volunteering can provide meaningful activity, in some ways compensating "for the loss of professional self." Volunteering may provide an alternative (or even only) way to allow a degree of economic embedding in the context of labour market exclusion. Hence, for Aliyah, Zania, and other women, volunteering enabled them to resist both their complete economic exclusion as a result of not engaging in paid employment and the dominant discourses that paint refugees as scroungers or a burden on society (Yap et al., 2011), prominent in occurrences of everyday racism. Zania explains:

We look after ourselves, and now we want to look after somebody else, we're helping....Someone ask: "Why you working voluntary?" Like, seven years I work full time [volunteering], you know I work full time. I'm saying: "Because it makes me happy like that."

Being able to contribute by helping others through volunteering enabled these women to feel valued and connected to the community.

4.5. Volunteering as Resistance to Discourses of Unbelonging and Civic Embedding

The literature on volunteering experiences of refugees and migrants focuses on its benefits related to employability, and the achievement of functional markers of integration more generally (such as language, training/skills, and knowledge of the UK). While this was certainly a

desired outcome for some of the study participants, others also perceived volunteering as an opportunity to “give back” to the UK, emphasizing the contribution they make to society. For example, through a series of pop-up community cafés, the women cooked for local people living with homelessness, dementia, caring responsibilities, and for other migrants. They cooked food from their home countries and produced and sold a recipe book to raise funds for the charity.

The scale of volunteering was of particular note. All of the women were involved in multiple volunteering roles, and Salma and Zania worked with three or four different organisations across the week. Volunteering held an intrinsic value for the women, evidencing their “citizenship” through civic-mindedness:

If I take money, myself not happy, I want to make myself happy....Voluntary makes me very happy....And I love this country as well....For all my life I want to do this one, I want to more help, I want to improve my English a bit, to give more help, to do mentor for refugee, I want to do something more. (Zania)

For Zania the ultimate goal was not securing employment, but, perhaps even more virtuously, a vocation of volunteering. Giving back was seen in terms of recognising the support they received when they first arrived and returning this favour to other new arrivals—thus refugees looking after themselves, and also giving back to the wider local community and British society which had offered them sanctuary. In this, there was a definite element of being grateful, which Yap et al. (2011, p. 168) argue could position volunteering as repayment to the state for its (financial) support welcoming “burdensome” refugees. Volunteering also positions refugees as “good citizens” in the wider society, demonstrating them as motivated, concerned about the welfare of others, contributing to public good, loyal to the country, and even being “good value” in working for free (Hackl, 2022; Yap et al., 2011).

However, additionally, we find volunteering provides refugee women with the emotional and linguistic resources to actively resist experiences of microaggressions and undesirable stereotypes. Referring back to the incident on the bus with the white British man, Zania pointed out that the aggressor didn’t know her because she was actually on her way to her voluntary job, to “look after their country as well.” She continued:

I think they are racist because they look in our faces, they think we are from different country, we are beggar, we are come to take their benefits. But they don’t know....I work voluntary for full time, they don’t know me, because I want to give back....I am sure all refugees the same, they are very kind. Someone, see my group, they can’t speak [English], they reading the book, they writing the book, we make recipe book, we

selling, we make money, to look after refugees and look after the homeless people, we do “pop up” café.

Zania refutes the racist stereotyping of refugees by evidence of her volunteering and her civic embedding, and she further imputes her desire to give back to all refugees. The emphasis here and elsewhere is that all refugees are good; they are self-reliant and civic-minded. Indeed, Zania, Aliyah, and some of the other women assumed the role of quasi-spokesperson for refugee women, continually emphasising the contribution all refugees make, despite language barriers or other obstacles. Thus they ascribed to the notion of deservingness, suggesting that conditional belonging may be earned through “goodness” (Hackl, 2022). However, in this, they resisted the idea of a hierarchy of refugees: the good volunteering refugee versus the lazy non-working one, which Yap et al. (2011) found. Indeed, Farida went as far as to place deserving and hard-working refugees and migrants above undeserving British people, inverting the dominant discourse:

One of my neighbour, she’s all, her daughter, her son, everybody is on benefit, you know. And I say to her once: “Why don’t you guys’ work?” And she is like: “Where can I get a job, because all these people come from other country and they taking our job, they’re messing, and they taking everything from our country.” And I said: “That’s not true, you know, I do job in a care home, would you like to—we have got jobs?” She’s like: “No, I don’t want to do this kind of job”....You know the care home I worked, there wasn’t a single, single, single English person!

Here Farida uses evidence of her own economic embedding, and her neighbour’s lack of, to defy the microaggression she experienced.

Feelings of solidarity and belonging in the support group, and confidence developed through volunteering activities, allowed study participants to critically assess the precarity of their positioning as refugees in wider society. During focus group discussions, Zania in particular articulated the feelings of other participants, stating that they cannot feel fully safe and free in the UK—despite coming to this country for safety and freedom—when they are fearful of racist aggression and attack:

In my opinion, to have some course, have some news, or something. They have to talk, the government talk, about refugee people, they are very kind, they are very good, they not make more problem. Because they have to learn we are not beggars...we are not come to this country to take their money. Because we want to give back, everyone give back, they didn’t see.

Here, Zania points to the general public’s ignorance about refugees. She asserts that it is the government’s

responsibility to change the negative and inaccurate narrative and to educate the public. The women recognised that refugees cannot embed in a hostile environment where public discourse paints them as a burden and threat to society. Farida and Khadija critiqued the media for ignoring positive stories about refugee volunteering such as the community cafés. Indeed, Aliyah explained how she uses her position as a volunteer, and the social connections it affords her, as an opportunity to educate people about the situation of refugees:

And we talk about our country [countries in the Middle East], to tell the people what happened to us. If we be quiet they think we are fine. No, there is something here, hurt [points to her heart], that upset us. We need to keep a smile, to be strong, to family, to myself, to everybody here.

Aliyah draws on opportunities for fostering support and solidarity, created by her and other women through the support group and their volunteering practices, to critique the state's failure to provide spaces for relational embedding that refugees can access, especially given the immense scale of isolation that refugees and migrants initially face in a new country:

Everybody welcome [talking about community groups]....We can do something for this country, no just sit down. If nobody took my hand, how can I continue? Because everybody shy, scared, especially language, the language is really hard for people. And this is the first step...to do activity, to know each other, to different culture welcome, to help each other. If no open door like that, how can contact people?...And I now my time volunteer, if I see a new family in the school in my area, straight away I tell them: "Come [to the refugee charities] there"....There is women's group. How can I, because community closed from the government? Just this, thanks God, open door, [the refugee charities], to let them come.

Salma also talked about two different community groups for migrant women that she helped set up, in response to community need. Thus, through its inaction, the state encourages the social exclusion of refugees, and it is left to the voluntary sector and the refugees themselves to use their own agency to help others access spaces of welcome, or to even create these spaces.

Therefore, we have shown how volunteering is used by these women as a way to counter everyday experiences of microaggression and negative discourses about refugees and to create spaces for relational, civic, and economic embedding. Furthermore, volunteering was also instrumentalised to critique government (and some media) irresponsibility in both allowing these discourses to perpetuate and in failing to support the embedding of refugees in the UK.

5. Conclusion

Autochthonic populist politics of belonging in the UK and the "everyday/everywhere bordering technology" that has emerged through a succession of recent British Immigration Acts create a hostile environment not only for irregular migrants but also recognised refugees, asylum seekers, other migrants, and even racialised minority citizens (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). In such an environment, everyday microaggressions and exclusion in the public sphere compound the social isolation and lack of confidence refugees already experience in their new home, and curtail opportunities to engage in processes of differentiated embedding. We have demonstrated how, within this context, some refugee women use their agency to find alternative spaces for relational embedding. The support group for refugee women in this study offers a safe and supportive local space to develop solidarity around shared experiences of refugeehood/migrancy among women of diverse ethnic, language, religious and age positionalities. The support group facilitates deep, trusting relationships among the women, enabling the establishment of gendered relational embedding.

Additionally, involvement in different activities through the group nurtures confidence amongst the women and provides them with the resources and opportunities to engage in volunteering activities, both to facilitate the work of the support group, and to contribute to the wider community. We found volunteering practices lead to a degree of relational embedding in the wider local community, creating a space of acceptance in the public sphere where previously they had felt excluded. Here their cultural difference was used as a means to engage in relational embedding. However, on this point, we caution that this may also risk reinforcing refugees' position as "other," or at least limit recognition of their contribution to that which promotes "cultural diversity" in local spaces but not beyond this (Tomlinson, 2010).

Volunteering was also a way to engage in a (limited) degree of economic embedding, both as a route to future employment (and fuller economic embedding) and as a means to resist current economic exclusion and narratives of refugees as an economic burden. Volunteering enabled these women to develop cultural competencies such as language and to demonstrate a self-reliant entrepreneurial self who is worthy of being included in the nation (Yap et al., 2011). However, we also note that volunteering as a long-term practice, where there is the desire to progress to fuller economic embedding through paid labour, may risk creating a sense of exploitation and exclusion, as the partiality of the process becomes increasingly emphasised over time when volunteering does not translate into employment. As other studies have found, progression from volunteering into employment is far from guaranteed, and, where successful, may limit opportunities to certain types of work and certain sectors (usually the

poorly remunerated voluntary/community sector with few options for progression; Tomlinson, 2010; Vickers, 2016), where “refugeeness” can be a recognizable competence (de Jong, 2019). Furthermore, as Vickers (2016, p. 449) argues, organisations, and by extension the state, receive substantial benefits through the unpaid labour of refugees in maintaining services and support systems for refugees. This raises ethical concerns in the further marginalisation (through unpaid labour) of an already economically disadvantaged group. It highlights the state’s evasion of its own responsibility to provide these services and spaces (along with fostering inclusive narratives) to enable refugees’ relational, civic and economic embedding.

Nonetheless, our study participants framed volunteering as a means of civic embedding, found in the idea of giving back, to support refugees and the wider local community. Therefore, through volunteering the refugee women in our study invoked qualities of “goodness” (being self-reliant entrepreneurial selves as well as contributing to the public good) to meet the criteria for conditional inclusion in the UK (Hackl, 2022; Yap et al., 2011); thus volunteering represents an accommodating response. But the capacity to volunteer and experiences of volunteering also provided them with the linguistic and emotional resources to resist everyday microaggressions and social exclusion. Some of the participants not only critiqued the state’s failure to provide a conducive environment for embedding; they also challenged the autochthonic conceptions of inclusion by inverting the classed and racialised hierarchy of the “good citizen” (Shilliam, 2018). They deemed hard working refugees and migrants as those more deserving than British people preferring welfare over low-status/low pay jobs.

Drawing on the concept of “differentiated embedding” (Ryan, 2018), we have contributed to scholarship on refugees and volunteering by exploring how it may be instrumentalised as a resistance practice in a hostile environment. We have demonstrated the variable degrees of embedding within and across domains, that is, for refugees, always effortful and reflexive (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022). On this point we wish to engage with Mulholland and Ryan (2022)’s idea of an axis of reflexive-tacit embedding. They argue that attachment formation may be purposive and agentic (reflexive), or unconscious and/or taken-for-granted (tacit) by way of privileged access to rights and entitlements or formed unawares over time. For the French migrants in their study, tacit embedding, particularly political, had been possible by virtue of their taken-for-granted EU membership rights, which were suddenly disrupted by the tumultuous event of Brexit (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022). In contrast, we suggest that for refugees embedding can only be reflexive, as their starting point is always as interloper, revealed in the culture of disbelief and severely curtailed rights they endure through the asylum process. Once they have struggled to overcome the initial hurdle to gain even the right to start embedding by being recognised as

refugees, they have to actively work to overcome considerable obstacles to processes of embedding, as we have demonstrated, such as social isolation, everyday racism and discrimination, and substantial labour market barriers (amongst others). Moreover, in the highly politicised climate of ever-increasing restrictions, hostility, and everyday bordering practices in the UK, refugees are continuously positioned as outsiders and reminded that they do not belong—such that tacit embedding is an impossibility. Thus, we have shown the agentic strategies the refugee women in this study have employed to overcome these barriers and resist exclusion through the means available to them, to enable embedding in (and in spite of) a hostile environment.

Further, we have shown how embedding trajectories in different domains are linked. Lack of relational embedding in everyday local arenas can provide the impetus for establishing gendered relational embedding in a support group. This, in turn, facilitated civic embedding through volunteering practices, including a degree of relational embedding beyond the support group and a limited form of economic embedding. Civic embedding can potentially facilitate further future economic embedding through employment, but significantly, it may provide the seeds for a degree of political embedding in the form of active, critical citizenship. Volunteering becomes a practice of resistance to experiences of microaggressions and discourses of unbelonging in the UK. While civic and economic embedding may reinforce dominant constructions of conditional citizenship (Hackl, 2022), the participants’ volunteering practices also offer refugees ways of resisting the persistence of race in constructions of an ethnic conception of the nation. We suggest that this represents a form of political embedding, in the sense of having the confidence to resist dominant narratives about refugees and migrants. In viewing refugee women’s volunteering as practices of negotiation, adaptation, and/or resistance that both accommodate neoliberal citizenship regimes and contest the hostile environment, we argue that such practices lead to a “critical incorporation” (Shah, 2012), rather than uncritical emphasis on adaptation and integration into their new home. At the same time, we acknowledge that whilst embedding practices undertaken by refugees, such as these women, may have some positive impact in changing perceptions, reducing microaggressions and fostering a sense of belonging at a local level, the recent ratcheting up of hostility towards asylum seekers (particularly those arriving through irregular routes) in the wider political-legal environment in the UK, makes it difficult to imagine a dismantling of hostile border regimes at a national level in the near future. These limits to resisting national narratives of social exclusion further underscore the purposive and reflexive nature of embedding processes for refugees. But it does also indicate hope that the potential for change may be located at the local level, in foregrounding the voices of those with lived experiences.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Confronting Racialised Power Asymmetries in the Interview Setting: Positioning Strategies of Highly Qualified Migrants

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Abstract

Based on our longitudinal, in-depth qualitative research focusing on the social construction of deskilling among highly educated migrants from Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states of the European Union, we will discuss in this article the positioning of the interview partners within the interview situation as interrelated to societal racialised power asymmetries. In this contribution, we exemplify that critical migration research can only be carried out when we reflect on our methods accordingly. To do so, we discuss actual evidence from this ongoing research project: While we see that many of our interview partners from new EU member states are reluctant to point to negative experiences in our conversations, we want to highlight that the potentiality of discrimination is part of the interview setting in our research and thus co-constructs the empirical data. By analysing a variety of discursive positioning strategies employed by our interview partners that can be understood as strategies to avoid anticipated discrimination, we aim to fulfil the promise of methodological reflexivity and thus contribute to the quality of interview research in the context of migration studies. The aim of this contribution is thus twofold: We want to contribute to methodological discussions as well as refine current research focussing on the racist experiences of CEE migrants.

Keywords

discrimination; everyday experiences; highly skilled; interviewing analysis; migration; positioning

Issue

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1. Introduction

Until very recently, migrants from Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states were not considered as being subjected to discrimination (for a literature review and in-depth analysis see Kalmar, 2023). As very recent analyses show, the discrimination of so-called Eastern Europeans (a confusing and negatively connotated expression by now) on so-called Western European labour markets is not only latent but also visible in quantitative data (Lee, 2022). Such discrimination has a historical side to it and is usually construed today via cultural diversity going back to the times of the cold war as Kalmar (2023) described. Moreover, in Austrian mass

media, CEE migrants are not portrayed positively but usually as a threat to Austrians' jobs and as persons who try to abuse the Austrian welfare state (Zelano, 2018). Also, most of the political parties in Austria promote negative imaginaries as they have been against a swift integration of potential workers from EU member states that joined the EU in the course of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. CEE citizens are continually confronted with being unwanted by Austria—the most recent example being the government's veto against the Schengen integration of Bulgaria and Romania in December 2022 (Oxford Analytica, 2022). Whilst these examples are clearly visible to the public, everyday discrimination is also a fact (ZARA, 2021).

Based on these reflections, we are interested in how mobile CEE citizens perceive and position themselves in this context of racialised power asymmetries, discrimination, and processes of othering, not only but especially in the specific context of research encounters. In doing so, we want to contribute to reflexive research that aims to explore the complexity of research identities, positionings (Scheibelhofer, 2019), and intersubjectivities, thereby building on concepts and discussions of postcolonial, cultural, gender, and queer studies.

In this contribution, we focus on highly educated EU citizens from CEE countries moving to another EU member state (in our case, Austria) and ask how they position themselves in an interview situation, which we perceive as a societal site on which racism may be re-enacted. Secondly, we also contribute with this article to the advancement of empirical research on discriminated migrants in societies. Especially in qualitative research, we can swiftly overlook acts of positioning as we stress the actor as the main site of investigation: Essed (1988) showed in her groundbreaking work that when discrimination is not part of what can be said without damaging oneself as a victim, the issue is silenced. We are pursuing these two aims simultaneously, as we need to come up with adequate research tools to make the unspoken visible through our research. By applying a constructivist perspective inspired by Kathy Charmaz's works, we suggest how we can reach a better understanding of the different patterns of how such silenced discrimination is dealt with (see Charmaz, 2006).

Analysing the interview situation as an example of an encounter within a racist society (El-Mafaalani, 2017), we perceive it as a potential setting of everyday-life racism to be experienced by the interview partners due to the research question and our positionality as researchers: Three academics who can be read as Austrians holding jobs in academia are interviewing equally highly qualified migrants from CEE member states about their experiences of being denied commensurate jobs in and by the Austrian labour market. The interview situation as such is thus at risk to be in itself an experience of everyday discrimination for the interview partners, because it may reproduce othering and racialised positions of power.

2. Theoretical Background

We see that in an ethnically and racially stratified society, the persons we interview are positioned by members of the majority—and also need to forge out for themselves positionings according to the situation they find themselves in. Concentrating on such positioning is thus a way to analyse social inequalities in the making (Karakasoğlu & Doğmuş, 2016). Positioning is usually happening without the speakers' intentionality. We thus need to find a methodology in order to study it: As prior research has shown, positioning usually takes place and is reproduced in narratives (Baumgarten & Du Bois, 2012; Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2004).

As Ryan (2015) points out, qualitative research (especially when actor-centred, often feminist, and/or with interest in migration) has a long tradition of questioning positionalities (Draxl & Holzinger, 2016, 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2019; Voloder & Kirpitchenko, 2014). Going back to Merton's (1972) essay on insiders and outsiders, Ryan criticises "fixities" of social positions. She, therefore, is in line with research on the social positioning of migrants that emphasises the importance of context for acts of positioning (Spies, 2013). Building on transnational migration scholarship (Amelina & Faist, 2014) including the thinking around methodological nationalism (Scheibelhofer, 2016; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), she points out that, as researchers, we need to keep an eye on this "dance" of positioning while researching, as it is usually power-ridden. This is the case as interactions between researchers and their research subjects are embedded into an unequal society (Cederberg, 2014; Wiest et al., 2022). For our specific context, i.e., Austria, xenophobia and racism have been documented for decades (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009; Opratko, 2019; Schäfer & Schadauer, 2019; Schuster & Weichselbaumer, 2022; Wodak, 2015). Of interest for our specific context of labour market integration, Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2009) identify a "new" racism that is usually not expressed in overtly racist terms, but through justifications related to topoi such as protecting jobs, concerns about the abuse of welfare benefits, or cultural incompatibilities.

As already indicated, positioning happens in an actual conversational situation but is embedded in a wider societal context. While we assume that nation-states are powerful constructs (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) that may not organise the complexities of today's migration experiences as one might assume (Scheibelhofer, 2016), we are nevertheless referring to natio-ethno-cultural (Hoffmann, 2022; Karakaşoğlu et al., 2022; Wiest et al., 2022) ascriptions as we speak to one another (Battaglia, 2007). This is also the case if we distance ourselves from such (assumed) ascriptions and/or stereotypes. While distancing would mean naming issues and experiences, Essed's work—as already introduced above—points to the fact that instances of discrimination and racism may not be talked about without the risk of damaging the self as well. Theories of the spiral of silence, silencing and self-silencing (Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1991) refer to the observation that people may remain silent in certain contexts while expressing their opinions freely within their own circles of like-minded persons. In this theoretical work, it is assumed that individuals decide they either remain silent or they would speak out about a topic—depending upon their estimation of the interlocutor's reaction. While this line of thinking is helpful for our work, we needed to go beyond the literature of silencing/self-silencing because, when applying a constructivist grounded theory approach, we could discern more variability among different positioning

strategies that we understand as reactions to racialised power asymmetries.

While conducting this study, we are continuously reflecting on our own positioning and its influence on the research process, the results, and most importantly the interview partners themselves. We want to stress this aspect as we concur with Ryan (2015) that we are involved in a certain “dance” when doing our fieldwork—placing ourselves in the presence and in reaction to our interview partners—while they are doing the same. Our theoretical position is, therefore, clearly one of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1973, 1986) and we perceive it as important to address our societal positionings that are most likely influencing the interview situation: We are three women of differing age and status in our academic careers employed at the University of Vienna. We were all born into families with no recent migration history and are perceived as part of the white majority society. We were reinforced in our interpretation of the influence of our positions as when conducting the interviews, we left the choice of the interview location to the interview partners (with a clear preference on our part for their homes, work, or public places) but the majority of the interviewees wanted to meet in our offices at the university department. Thus, our academic positioning is stressed—whilst the topic of our research addresses how the interviewees experience their way into the Austrian labour market—whereby they might experience deskilling and discrimination based on natio-ethno-cultural ascriptions.

In our research, we use the term “deskilling” synonymously with “overqualification” and understand it as the phenomenon of exercising a job that requires a lesser qualification than the level of the highest degree obtained (Cardu, 2015). Deskilling affects both younger workers and migrants entering the destination country’s labour market. However, the persistence over time of deskilling among migrants is significantly higher than among native workers (Johnston et al., 2015; Mollard & Umar, 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015), indicating the presence of migration-specific causes and mechanisms. Not only might the recognition of educational diplomas be problematic, but also hidden discriminative elements, as migrants may experience a depreciation of their educational and professional credentials. Discrimination based on the place of education and reluctance to recognise seemingly “suspicious” foreign experiences may furthermore intersect with ethnic and religious prejudice towards certain groups (Cardu, 2015; Gächter, 2012; Mollard & Umar, 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018; Visintin et al., 2015). Difficulties in mastering the destination-country language are a further obstacle that may lead to migrants’ downward professional mobility. However, language issues transcend communication problems as linguistic discrimination may limit migrants’ access to certain jobs even though their proficiency or accent does not impair understanding or good performance in the actual job environment (Lopez-Ekra,

2015). Thus, our research and, consequently, our interviews focus on issues of discrimination related to the migration biography of our interview partners as well as to natio-ethno-cultural ascriptions (for a discussion of the term see Wiest et al., 2022). Thereby, the interview setting itself is characterised by the abovementioned asymmetries.

3. Research Methodology

Our analyses presented here are based on preliminary findings from the ongoing qualitative research project DeMiCo (2021–2025; for more information see: <https://demico.univie.ac.at>) that investigates the social construction of “deskilling” among highly educated migrants from CEE member states in the Austrian capital of Vienna. Aiming to explore the concrete micro-level processes involved in the production of this phenomenon, we apply a qualitative, actor- and process-oriented research approach to give special attention to the individual motives and migrant agency in coping with (the risks of) deskilling.

Austria constitutes an ideal-typical example of the European context as, like in most member states, the proportion of employees declaring themselves to be overqualified is lowest for native-born residents with native backgrounds, slightly higher for second-generation immigrants, and much higher for first-generation immigrants (Eurostat, 2017). The focus on migrants from CEE countries is thereby particularly relevant because they are disproportionately highly qualified and at the same time affected by deskilling above average (Gächter, 2016; Johnston et al., 2015; Sirkeci et al., 2018).

Also, migration between Austria and most CEE countries must be seen against the background of long-standing migration histories as well as considerable income disparities that exist between the states. Moreover, mobility and migratory patterns between these countries are complex and manifold, as one-way migration, circular forms of migration, and cross-border commuting co-exist.

Our focus on Vienna is based on decisive regional differences in the Austrian labour market as well as on the high share and heterogeneity of migrants in the Austrian capital compared to other Austrian regions (Statistics Austria, 2022), making this field of research of particular interest.

Our research employs a qualitative-interpretative approach drawing on the methodological principles of constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). To factor in the temporal dimension of deskilling, we conduct a qualitative panel study accompanying migrants over two years in three interview waves to gain insights into how deskilling processes are lived and understood by the individuals concerned. The data analysis is geared towards initial and focused coding techniques, as proposed by Charmaz (2006, 2014). The accompanying writing of memos serves for the systematic development of

the analysis as well as reflection and quality assurance (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Special importance is given to critically reflecting on our role as researchers and social positioning during the interview and research as pursued in this article.

Per grounded theory, we employ theoretical sampling, whereby data is jointly collected and analysed and additional data is selected based on theoretical insights gained in the previous analyses. However, we formulated some initial sampling criteria focusing on Hungarian, Czech, and Romanian nationals who live and/or work (transnationally) in Vienna and hold a tertiary degree acquired outside Austria. Our sample includes both migrants working in positions below their level of qualification as well as migrants not (anymore) affected by deskilling, thus providing valuable insights into coping and counter-strategies regarding over-qualification. As the phenomenon of deskilling among migrants from new member states in Austria is still under-researched, we did not limit our sample to certain employment sectors or types of education. Also, our sample is not limited to one-time migrants but includes a wide range of migration and mobility patterns based on our knowledge from previous research (Scheibelhofer, 2018). At the time of this article's completion, the first research cycle has been completed involving 25 narration-based, problem-centred qualitative interviews (Scheibelhofer, 2008; Witzel & Reiter, 2012) with migrants, ranging from 45 minutes to three hours, with an average length of 84 minutes. At the time of the interview, our interlocutors exercised a great variety of jobs (ranging from working as a hotel receptionist to holding a professorship at the university), and some were also unemployed. Also, the reasons why they came to Austria varied significantly: While some had followed their spouses and partners, others sought better professional and economic conditions or international experiences. Some had dreamt of migrating to Austria for a long time while others more or less accidentally "ended up" in this country.

The interview languages varied according to the interviewees' choice. We followed a multilingual research design based on the socio-translational collaborative approach suggested by Littig and Pöschhacker (2014), which includes the systematic involvement of qualified interpreters and translators throughout the entire research process. We offered every interviewee a Czech, Hungarian, or Romanian interpreter for the interview, which was accepted by ten participants. Another ten interviews were carried out in German, four in English, and one in a mix of German and English. All interpreters were themselves migrants from the same country as the interviewed persons—important information that affected the positioning strategies in the interview strategies as we will discuss below.

In the following, we elaborate on how racialised power asymmetries and thereby the potentiality of discrimination is part of the interview setting in our research and thus co-construct our empirical data.

As addressed already, we also have an eye within the analysis for our positioning as well as the positioning of the interlocutors. By analysing a variety of discursive positioning strategies, we aim to fulfil the promise of methodological reflexivity and thus contribute to the quality of interview research in the context of migration studies.

4. Positioning Oneself to Counter Potential Discrimination in the Interview Setting

In our interviews, instances of discrimination were only rarely narrated explicitly, and then often presented as an exception and/or normalised. Especially the idea of potentially being a victim of racism is vehemently refuted by some of our interview partners. Based on the theoretical work of Essed (1988), we understand this denial of (racist) discrimination as a coping strategy in order to avoid damaging oneself as a victim. Thereby, it is of crucial importance to envision the concrete conversational situation in which our data is constructed, i.e., in which the narratives about instances of discrimination are elicited. Foremost, we must consider who talks to whom in such an interview setting. Considering the positionality of researchers (and in some interviews, the presence of another migrant from the same country, i.e., the interpreter) is essential to understand the acts of positioning carried out by our interlocutors.

As elaborated above, in each of our interview settings, a member from a minority group (the migrant interview partner) finds herself/himself talking to a member of the majority group (the non-migrant researcher)—who could potentially discriminate against them. The anticipation of potential discrimination is present in our conversation because our research is embedded in the migration society we live in with its specific racialised structures. These racialised structures lead to everyday life discrimination and microaggressions for migrants: Asking questions regarding one's assumed foreign origins in situations that do not call for such asking is an example of discrimination continuously experienced in daily life (El-Mafaalani, 2018). As we might ask such questions, too—and *are doing so*, as we open the interview with the question to elaborate on one's migration history with a focus on one's education and work life—the interview situation is clearly set up within a racialised order. Reflecting our own research critically was fuelled by a peculiar set-up we developed for our study: Whilst this contribution focuses on the "classical" interview setting where only two persons (interviewer and interviewee) are present, this setting was often extended by a third person because we work with co-national interpreters—further complicating the conversational situation. The interview partner has to position herself/himself then not only concerning one but two interlocutors (researcher and interpreter)—and the respective positioning strategies might be difficult to reconcile. While we see the need for methodological reflections on this triad as well, we want to point out for

the following results that the comparison between our interviews alone with one person versus the interview as a triad was helpful to stir our thinking as presented here.

When analysing the transcripts of the interviews, we could identify a variety of strategies employed by our interview partners to avoid anticipated potential discrimination on our part. In the following, we will describe those positioning strategies that we repeatedly reconstructed with grounded theory coding techniques in a condensed manner.

4.1. Strategy: “Do Not Take Me for an Immigrant”

Our data indicate that our interview partners often recurred to discursive strategies assuring us that popular perceptions of migrants would not apply to them. For some interview partners, this meant that they explicitly differentiated themselves from “immigrants.” For example, one of our interview partners, Lukas Vacek, a jurist from the Czech Republic in his mid-thirties who worked in an Austrian bank complained about elderly colleagues who saw him and his other colleagues from abroad as “immigrants” (to assure anonymisation, we opted for changing names, places, and also industries to protect our interview partners). Other interview partners referred to themselves as “foreigners,” a term not directly connected to the context of migration. While this word sounds rather exclusionary in the German-speaking context, it can also be understood as a strategy to discursively distinguish oneself from migrants who are labelled negatively in public discourse (Schadauer, 2022).

Such distancing occurred also vis-à-vis co-nationals when some interview partners emphasised that they were more highly skilled and better educated than other migrants from the same country of origin. One of our interview partners, Zsuzsanna Becsei, a 38-year-old woman from Hungary working in the administration of a university in Vienna, stressed that she never experienced difficulties when looking for a job in Austria. However, she acknowledged that she also “hear[d] the contrary,” “that many have problems but this can also be related to the job. Because...many people, for example, from Hungary do construction work and so on” where they encounter problems at work: “So, it makes a difference which profession you have and which education, and so on and so forth,” she concludes. This citation is paradigmatic as it is an example of how instances of everyday life discrimination cannot be directly addressed: Even if she is not a target of discrimination herself (an account that we take into consideration), she wants to let us know that other Hungarians have discriminatory experiences based on their nationality. Whilst the content of this citation clearly delineates the social situation she describes—being discriminated against based on nationality—one may not say out loud words like “racist” or even “discrimination.” Still, in a racially structured society, she can assume that the researcher still understands clearly what she is alluding to. Thus, positioning occurs in the form of

a “do not take me for an immigrant” stance instead of self-silencing as the issue is brought up by her without the researcher prompting her into this venue.

Also, in the vein of this strategy, we met interview partners who clarified that they were not forced to migrate by economic necessity but had made a conscious and self-determined decision to come to Austria to work in a qualified position and “not to play a dishwasher,” as our interview partner Martin Svoboda, a political scientist, stated. His wording also reveals an identity construction of himself as highly qualified in any circumstance of life—so that at the utmost he would only be able to “play” a role instead of being a proper dishwasher himself. Purely economic reasons for migration or even threats of one’s livelihood were often explicitly refuted by our interview partner, such as, e.g., Paul Bretschneider, a 53-year-old doctor from Romania: “In Romania, I will never starve, I can always do something and I am doing relatively okay there.” In the case of Romania, public perceptions as a poor country may also play a role for Mr Bretschneider to clarify the possibility of leading a “relatively” acceptable life in Romania, too.

Presenting oneself as different from other migrants also might mean activating negative stereotypes to position oneself in contrast to them (for similar patterns see also Cederberg, 2014). One of the activated stereotypes that we could identify was the figure of the “lazy,” not working migrant who lives from Austrian social benefits. Lukas Vacek is a good reference for such perceptions: He told us that while wanting to go back to the Czech Republic in the long term, he and his wife planned to start a family in Austria because of the good social system. The discourse on migrants as a threat to the Austrian welfare state being common in media coverage (Schadauer, 2022) is a good way “out” of openly telling us about the couples’ plans and immediately emphasising that, up to now, their tax contribution in Austria was outstanding. He highlighted their therefrom derived deservingness in contrast to welfare “scroungers”: “We are paying quite high amounts of money to the social system, so we want to get something back. But we are not some kind of people who are applying for all the social benefits...not at all.” Questions of deservingness are thus not constructed as a right of a European citizen living legally in the country—which would be the legal prerequisite for receiving family benefits in Austria. Instead, there are moral grounds that need to be covered: Not only does it suffice that they are both paying taxes in Austria, but positioning oneself as other than “those immigrants” calls for the specification he gives as paying “quite high amounts of money”—and not just one of them, but both.

Underlining one’s own hard work and contribution to the Austrian welfare (system) is a recurrent motive that we could identify in the interviews. In this vein, the insistence on one’s own efforts in and for the Austrian society can be understood as a strategy to position oneself in opposition to the public negative stereotype of the

migrant who is assumingly “unwilling to integrate.” One of our interview partners, Martin Svoboda, a Czech political scientist who has been working for several years in an IT company in Austria, finds rather strict words in this regard: “I believe that if you come to a society, and if it is not for professional reasons for one to three years, then you should really try to adapt.”

Language plays a crucial role in this regard and is by many of our interlocutors presented as the key to integration. Not knowing German is often presented as a legitimate and plausible penalty on the labour market. As one of our interview partners, a Czech biologist in her thirties, Michaela Huber, frames it: “I never had the feeling that I couldn’t get a job only because I am Czech and not an Austrian. I rather don’t think so. In the beginning, it was the language skills and everything.” Again, we see in this citation how interview partners vaguely point to areas of discrimination in everyday job life, but at the same time, the risk of damaging oneself seems too high to elaborate on the matter. As Michaela Huber explains: Being Czech was in her view never the reason why she would not get a job. Still, there is a need to nuance this clear statement: In the past, in her first time in Austria, it may well have been the case that she did not obtain a job (and it is relevant to add that she did get a job but not one consistent with her qualification)—because of her then still lacking language skills. So, again, we see the need to concur with public conceptions of the “good migrant” learning fast and proper (maybe even Austrian) German (Verwiebe et al., 2016).

This described recurrent positioning as an active, hard-working, and self-reliant person as well as the highlighting of one’s own educational and socio-economic status can be understood as a strategy to set oneself apart from preconceived ideas about migrants. In their positioning acts, our interview partners thereby refer to collective stereotypes known by both the researchers and themselves. These stereotypes are social constructs and part of a shared social reality—and consequently present in the interview situation. Activating them and positioning oneself in contrast to them can thus be understood as a strategy to avoid potential discrimination from researchers.

4.2. Strategy: “We Are Alike”

A further possible strategy that we identified in our data was to emphasise not the differences to other groups but instead to point out the likeness between the interlocutors, thereby discursively creating a union with the researcher. This can also be understood as a communicative technique to counter potential discrimination in the interview setting. At times, our interview partners suggested shared values or similar educational status. Also, the historical connectedness and assumed shared cultural heritage of their countries of origin and Austria were often mentioned. While historical as well as cultural entanglements are a fact, these references deserve a

closer look considering the contextualisation in the narration. For example, Martin Svoboda conceded that differences might exist between the organisation of the labour markets, but also recurrently underlined the proximity and cultural similarity of the respective countries:

If some people encounter difficulties—I won’t call it discrimination—then it is because they don’t know the system and that they can’t adapt to the system, because it is different even though we are neighbours and the countries are culturally similar....In Europe we have similar cultures, so Romania, uh, Denmark, we have the same rules, we try to treat each other with respect and that is a good basis.

As this quote well illustrates, pointing to “difficulties” needs to be right away set into the correct context to position oneself not within a discriminatory racist structure. The chosen wording yet invites the interpretation that—although the participant would “not call it discrimination”—it might as well be exactly that. At least he does not rule out the possibility of discrimination right away. Constructing European countries as neighbours is a typical metaphor in Austrian and CEE politics of EU integration (Péti et al., 2021). Additionally, the emphasis on shared values and cultural similarity often goes hand in hand with putting forward a European or cosmopolitan identity. One of our interview partners, Elena Nedelcu, a Romanian academic in her fifties, even admitted her astounding relief when she was for a very short period stateless, having given up the Romanian nationality and waiting for her Austrian nationality (as in Austria, dual citizenship is only permitted in exceptional cases):

And there was a very, very strange feeling, I mean for the short time when I was really stateless, although my husband was absolutely worried....But for me, it was a very strange feeling of liberation, so to speak, to be free, so to speak, to be free from all—curious.

While this “strange feeling of liberation” she talks about might as well be caused not only by being stateless but also by supposedly being free from everything negative that goes with having foreign citizenship, her ideal, however, wouldn’t be to have Austrian citizenship. As she told us, if at all, she would have preferred to receive “European citizenship” rather than the Austrian nationality because she can “identify well with it,” thereby emphasising something “we” have in common (Favell, 2011; Nowicka, 2020).

4.3. Strategy: My (Natio-Ethno-Cultural) Inheritance Is an Asset

Another identified strategy to counter societal power asymmetries and avoid potential discrimination on our part was to accentuate the value of one’s own natio-ethno-cultural background. The concept of natio-ethno-

cultural difference refers to the everyday construction of otherness, where categories such as “nation,” “culture,” and “ethnicity” are combined in diffuse ways, thereby structuring “we”-groups and “others” (Mecheril, 2010). We use this term because we perceive a difficulty in many other terms as they might further contribute to the essentialisation of Otherness—a social process we want to analyse but not perpetuate with our own work and terminology. Thus, it is neither the nationality nor the ethnicity or the culture per se—from an analytical point of view that is ascribed to persons or groups. By using this triad in one term, we hope to contribute to a problematisation and a heightened awareness of everyday life discrimination and racism as we (and readers) again and again stumble over this inelegant term. We are sure that we will find new expressions in the coming years as research on racism within Europe against CEE citizens just begins as discussed above.

Interview partners often put forward the importance they attributed to their first language. Also, the engagement in cultural associations was at times underlined and the reliance on and value of co-ethnic networks was emphasised. Occasionally, this might also mean to activate stereotypes—this time not to position oneself in contrast to but instead to be part of a positively connotated group. Exemplarily, let us look at the following quote in which Lukas Vacek describes, in a rather generalising manner, how his employer, an Austrian banking group, benefits from its international (especially Czech) employees—without sufficiently appreciating their contribution:

So I would say [thankfully] this company has people from abroad because otherwise, it would be a really big problem to perform. Especially Czech people, we are not really obeying all the rules but we are super effective, we are thinking outside of the box and you can really do whatever—almost whatever is asked. I mean, from the work perspective, we are really hard workers but now we start to have a feeling that we have to be paid at least equally.

This interview passage exemplifies how the interview partner copes with perceived discrimination by underlining the positive qualities he ascribes not only to himself but also to his co-nationals, positioning himself thus in a positively connotated “we”-group. In opposition to the experienced disregard, Lukas Vacek presents this group as achieving an over-average performance, an asset in the workplace, and consequently as deserving. While in this example, our interview partner primarily addresses a sensed discrimination from an entity exterior to the interview setting (his employer), we can nevertheless understand his insistence on positive ethno-national stereotypes (also present in other passages of the interview) as a discursive strategy to defend himself against anticipated discrimination from us researchers.

5. Conclusions; Or: “I Won’t Call It Discrimination”

The observations explored here could also be summarised with the words of an interview partner, Martin Svoboda, who coined the multifaceted phrase: “I won’t call it discrimination.” Such a brief sentence carries diverse allusions to the multifaceted dimensions of the lived experiences of everyday life discrimination. More specifically, this phrase hints at strategies individuals apply when confronting the danger of discrimination in the actual interaction situation. Following Essed (1988), we understand such (unconscious) denial as a strategy to avoid damaging oneself as a victim and therefore co-constructing the invisibility of everyday discrimination and racism. Simultaneously, the potential existence of discrimination shall not be ruled out—as the interview partner uses the subjunctive form of the verb and thus a wording that leaves the door open for the opposite of what he is negating. In other words, if it was the wish to negate discrimination as part of the situation he described, the interview partner could have easily formulated: “This is not discrimination.”

Discrimination is hard to grasp in everyday life, as well as in research, as it is often disguised as naturalisations or justified with different reasons and intersectional categories. Interpretative research aims at uncovering latent structures by looking at the contextualisation and references in the narratives of our interviewees. After analysing our data, we identified the above-described acts of positioning in our interview transcripts (“do not take me for an immigrant,” “we are alike,” “my (natio-ethno-cultural) inheritance is an asset”), asking ourselves about their functions in the interviewees’ narrations. Considering the context of racialised power asymmetries both in society and the interview setting, we understand them as different types of coping strategies aimed at avoiding potential discrimination (becoming discernible within an interview situation). The strategies were neither present in all interviews nor did they necessarily co-occur or emerge to the same extent in the data. However, our analyses suggest that these ways of positioning oneself influence the narratives of the research subjects and thus the (co-constructed) interview data—especially in the case of such sensible, harmful topics as discrimination and racism in a migration context. To critically reflect on the positionality of researchers and research subjects as well as the societal power structures in which the interview setting is embedded is thus an important prerequisite in migration research and must not remain hollow words. Our contribution aims at furthering this discussion by giving concrete examples of positioning and positioning strategies. In this way, we are aware that silencing and self-silencing as discussed earlier may also occur along and additionally to the acts of positioning discussed above. It will be a matter of future research to understand in more detail how these positioning strategies are influenced, interlinked, or accompanied

by spirals of self-silencing (Masullo & Duchovnay, 2022; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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