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Responding to racial microaggressions: Chinese students' experience in the UK and universities' global social responsibility

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This article presents Chinese international students as 'racialised subjects'. Based on 54 interviews with Chinese students from 13 UK universities, it explores their discursive and behavioural responses to microaggressions and examines their situated accounts of the role played by universities in shaping their responses. The findings show that they tend be 'silent' when confronted with racial microaggressions, leading to 'self-segregation' that reinforces persisting stereotypes as 'the model minority' and that further reproduces racialised differences. Our analysis further reveals that they are actually 'silenced' in that they are prevented by institutional factors from being audible; instead of remaining 'silenced', they expect universities articulate and address their concerns about racism and safeguard them. This article recommends universities to pay greater attention to the invisibility of Asian international students and combat anti-Asian racism in UK higher education view care for international students as an integral part of their global social responsibility.

Full paper

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a spike of anti-Asian, especially anti-Chinese hate crimes and incidents. Recent literature has paid close attention to COVID-19 related microaggressions targeting Chinese international students in the North American context; however, fewer insights have been generated in the UK context, especially regarding the role played by higher education institutions. Against the neoliberal market principles that frame Chinese international students as 'monetarised objects' in UK higher education, this article presents them as 'racialised subjects'. Based on 54 interviews with Chinese students from 13 universities across the UK, this article explores their discursive and behavioural responses to microaggressions and examines their situated accounts of the role played by universities in shaping their responses. The findings show that they tend be 'silent' when confronted with racial microaggressions, leading to 'self-segregation' that reinforces persisting stereotypes as 'the model minority' and that further reproduces racialised differences. However, further exploration reveals that they are actually 'silenced' in that they are prevented by institutional factors from being audible; instead of remaining 'silenced', they expect universities articulate and address their concerns about racism and safeguard them. This article recommends universities to pay greater attention to the invisibility of Asian international students and combat anti-Asian racism in UK higher education, and, ultimately, view care for international students as an integral part of their global social responsibility for the global common good.

We firstly situate our research into the wider discussions of anti-Asian racism against Chinese now and then, particularly in the context of UK higher education, by way of which the key concepts such as neo-racism and everyday racism are also introduced. Then, after outlining the methodology, we present our findings in three aspects: Chinese students' discursive and behavioural response to microaggressions, as well as their perceptions of the role played by the universities in shaping their responses. On that basis, we discuss the wider implications of the research findings and make recommendations to the universities to take global social responsibility and to address racism to keep promoting international student mobility for the global common good.

At the first glance, our interview findings confirm and develop existing literatures that Chinese students tend to be silent when they confront racial microaggressions. In terms of discursive responses, they tended not to attribute their experience of microaggressions to racism; rather; it was more common for them to focus on other axes of inequalities, such as class, biological sex, and culture. Furthermore, they also showed the tendency to rationalise and justify racism in making sense of racial microaggression, making excuses for the perpetrator while taking the blame. As for behavioural responses, some of them were shocked at the scene and had no idea how to react; many students opted to take passive, defensive strategies to minimise the chance to be targeted for microaggressions, or to reduce the damage when microaggressions happened to them.

However, we argue that, instead of being a 'silent' ethnic group in an essentialist sense, they are actually 'silenced', in that they are prevented by institutional factors from being audible, and even engaged to perpetuate racialisation of this student group that intersects with gender and cultural power inequalities. As we have noted, there were a few students who adopted a more proactive strategy; however, they felt largely ignored and unsupported, and as a result such strategies had very limited social impact and were not sustainable. With further explorations, it turned out that Chinese students' reluctance to report to the authorities was resulted from both their insufficiency of racial consciousness, and their disappointment and distrust in the authorities, owing to the limited police force as well as the authorities' indifference to crimes against (Chinese) immigrants. Furthermore, the underlying reason links to the long-lasting invisibility of the Asian student group in UK universities' effort to address racism, together with dilution of anti-racism in terms of diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism or cultural competence that covers the real issues of race and racism. As a result, students had to opt to 'self-segregation' for safety concerns, which largely prevented them from engaging with and making contributions to the local community. This article thus contributes to a wider call to review the international mobility of Chinese students as a contribution to the global common good and to argue that their experiences and concerns of racism restrict their ability to fulfil their own desire to engage and enrich their host universities and local

communities, and recommends universities to take global social responsibility to enhance anti-racism education and to cultivate a more racially inclusive environment.

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