**“It’s not as bad as there” ... but it is bad enough
here**

**Microaggression in New Zealand based on stories of Asian New
Zealanders**

**by
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Abstract

This thesis explores microaggression in New Zealand based on stories of lived experiences written and shared by Asian New Zealanders. It examines how Asian New Zealanders are able to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences of microaggression through stories in online spaces, and how such narratives are used as performative elements for social change and activism against racism. I show how incredibly hurtful and damaging microaggressions are, by focusing on the stories of my participants, where they expressed feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, and anger as well as significant impacts on their sense of identity and belonging in New Zealand. These were largely effects of experiencing multiple, constant, and ongoing acts of microaggression; I argue that this is the predominant type of racism that Asian New Zealanders are facing. The stories and the act of storytelling allowed Asian New Zealanders to initiate discussion and awareness to strive for social change against issues of racism that had persisted and distressed them for so long. Listening to and analysing their voices and the stories has allowed me to deeply engage with the impact of casual racism and also to detect new voices that use storytelling as an empowering device and to gather strength for resistance and speaking back.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I explore microaggression towards Asian New Zealanders and how stories and storytelling of lived experiences are used as performative elements for social change against racism. I examine such narratives as responses to recurring incidents of microaggression and racism in New Zealand. I argue that microaggression is the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face based on the stories as well as my own interpretation as an Asian New Zealander and the writer of this thesis. By discussing the issues of microaggression in New Zealand and the effects that they have towards Asian New Zealanders, I am analysing issues of their identity and belonging, as well as the purpose and intention of stories that are written and shared by Asian New Zealanders which are aimed to initiate discussion and awareness on these very issues of microaggression and racism in New Zealand.

In the preliminary stages of this research, I was exploring different pathways for conducting research on and with individuals with multiple identities and contested belonging. But not too long after a few failed attempts at settling on the right research focus, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened and so too did anti-Asian racism. Consequently, I decided to focus my research on something that would relate to this supposed once-in-a-lifetime event with hope that it would have an immediate and lasting impact. However, towards the final stages of the fieldwork for this research, I realised that the amended research focus on COVID-19 related racism was not just a current issue that emerged from the pandemic; it gave light to an ongoing and often brushed-aside problem.

By initially focusing on racism solely during the COVID-19 pandemic (and eventually moments of moral panic), I came to the realisation that I was overlooking the very issue that was glaring throughout the entire project. The issue of racism that was *coincidentally reappearing* every few years during low moments of New Zealand history and society, such as the economic recession in the 1990's which saw a rise in white supremacism (Gilbert & Elley, 2020), the housing crisis which saw Chinese communities targeted (Ng, 2017a), and now with the COVID-19 pandemic, had been

severely and continuously affecting many minority communities to the point that it did not matter which low moment was causing the racism. It was a deep-rooted and an almost-accepted problem in our society. COVID-19 was just an excuse for the enactment of racism for some and a reason to speak up for others. Thus, this issue provided an opportunity to formulate some core questions: Is there a distinct type of racism towards Asian New Zealanders? How are they reacting to it and what is being done about it?

After shifting my focus towards these questions, I was able to develop a broader understanding of racism. It raised different but important points of identity and belonging among Asian New Zealanders such as the effects of being othered and disregarded as New Zealanders as results of facing racism, but also how they were responding to these effects by expressing and reaffirming their identity as New Zealanders. I was then able to also explore wider aspects such as the ways they are acting themselves against racism as well as why they are doing it. I found that stories and storytelling were employed as performative elements for social change against racism by initiating discussion and awareness to ultimately confront these issues, which I saw as a making of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders. I use four main stories of racism written by Asian New Zealanders as well as other online discourses such as articles, blogs, social media, and public media through online ethnographic fieldwork to present stories, viewpoints, and life experiences. Thus, this thesis seeks to extend the voices and stories told by Asian New Zealanders with a focus on lived experiences.

Background and context

In the early stages of my research project, I struggled to settle on a research focus that I was fully satisfied with. With my interest lying in the topic of multiple (and/or multicultural) identities, I toyed with some potential areas including language and sport, and how they play a role in identity formation. This was in early March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic was only just beginning to affect social and governmental matters in New Zealand, such as closing of borders and the imminent nationwide lockdown. It

would not be a far-fetched assumption to think that world news at that time was dominated by this novel infectious disease¹. During a meeting with my supervisors, they noted the increasing number of reports of incidents of racism and xenophobia that had been happening, both globally and in New Zealand and suggested that this could be a potential topic to explore. Fully intrigued by this idea, I set out to do some preliminary research.

Upon a quick Google search of 'COVID-19 racism in New Zealand', a plethora of stories appeared: an article about an email stating "our Kiwi kids don't want to be in the same class with your disgusting virus spreaders" and "No Chinese allowed" were only some of the first headlines I came across. Subsequently, the Human Rights Commission would report that out of the 250 received complaints regarding COVID-19 as of May 2020, 34% were race related with Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon (2020) stating that "there was a big spike in racism. It is disappointing and we must also flatten the curve of racism too". One particular story that had an impact in the early stages of this thesis was about a Chinese American student who noticed an uptick of COVID-19-related racism in her school. Titled "Coronavirus Racism Infected My High School", Oung (2020) documented her and her peers' experiences of facing racism during the outbreak of COVID-19. She highlights the treatment that people in the Asian community have faced since the start of the outbreak,

"Everyone knows Chinese people are disgusting. They'll eat any type of animal. They're dirty" - that's what one of my classmates said, just days after the coronavirus outbreak started... This is someone who I've gone to school with for almost three years.

There is this Chinese restaurant [and] they were texting their customers saying, "none of our staff have been to China, we have no contact with the coronavirus, please come back to us" and people were making fun of it... There are thousands and thousands of cases in Italy... no one's boycotting a mom and pop's pizza place, it's the same thing.

¹ At the time of writing the introduction of this thesis in March 2021, the global situation of the pandemic has barely changed.

Throughout the story, which was portrayed in a video, Oung also shows other cases of COVID-19 related racism including clips of local news reports about violent assaults towards members of Asian communities in the United States. More recently, during the first three months of 2021, there has been another viral resurgence of violent assaults towards Asian-Americans, which in one case resulted in death² (Cabral, 2021), not to mention the shooting in Atlanta which resulted in the death of 8 people, 6 of whom were Asian women. In March 2021, Stop AAPI Hate (2021) revealed that nearly 3,800 incidents of anti-Asian hate were reported over the course of roughly one year during the pandemic - an increase of almost 150% compared to the previous year. These were categorised into different types of racism including verbal harassment, shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. Another survey revealed that 3 in 10 Asian-Americans reported experiencing racial slurs or racist jokes since the start of the pandemic (Ruiz, et al., 2020).

Many have attributed the spike in anti-Asian racism to Donald Trump, the ex-President of the United States who repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the “China Virus” and “Kung Flu” (BBC, 2020). Civil Rights expert Powell (2021: para. 3) claims that these terms “in both tone and frequency, were clearly designed to be broadly anti-Chinese” while the current White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki says that the “damaging rhetoric...led to perceptions of the Asian-American community that are inaccurate, unfair [and have] elevated threats against Asian Americans” (Porterfield, 2021: para. 2-3).

In Australia, there have been similar cases of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism. In a survey on racism, from 377 self-reported cases in a period of two months in 2020, 35% of incidents were racial slurs/name calling while over 6% of Asian Australian respondents reported physical intimidation (Asian Australian Alliance and Chiu, 2020). Below is a comment made by one of the respondents,

Told me to stay away from them because I'm Asian so I have coronavirus. Told that it was my people who brought the virus over here. Attempted to kick me. Called me an Asian slut and an Asian dog. Told me to go eat a bat. Threatened

² Vichar Ratanapakdee, an 84-year old Thai-American was killed in a violent attack on January 28, 2021.

me with a knife. Spat in my face getting spit in my left eye - Female, 19, Vietnamese Australian (Asian Australian Alliance and Chiu, 2020: 10).

The above comment is just one example of many of racism that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and as details of the incident show, incidents of racism have both increased in frequency and severity. While this thesis focuses more on anti-Asian racism and the stories and voices of Asians based in New Zealand - particularly online - the reason I illustrate anti-Asian racism in other countries is not purely to present these incidents and *prove* the presence of racism or the spike in racism since the start of the pandemic. During my fieldwork, as I scanned across many different sources in online spaces³, I came across a fairly regular expression that New Zealanders or people based in New Zealand were saying. The expression, that goes something like “at least it’s not as bad here in New Zealand as in the United States or Australia”⁴, was often said in response to comments about racism in New Zealand. For example, in the comments section of a thread on Reddit where a poster shared a story of an anti-Asian incident they encountered in New Zealand, I immediately found some comments of this type of denial expressed by other users. For example, one user commented, “So some random asshole said a mean thing to you and you don’t want to live here anymore? Why don’t you try Australia [?] I’ve heard they are a warm, welcoming people”. This expression of deflecting and/or denying racism also spread over to other sorts of comparisons such as with other generations of New Zealanders, and among different minority groups like Asian, Pasifika, and Māori. In the same thread, a different user commented:

Harden up. At least you weren’t put in classes that didn’t let you attend [university] like the Irish were when they arrived... She’s not being deported like the Pacific Islanders in the middle of the night, there is no poll tax on her head like the Chinese... It’s just words.

This sort of expression which contains elements of deflection, denial, and in some instances, an acceptance of racism in New Zealand was also prevalent in other cases I came across throughout my research. I expand on this in Chapter 2 “It’s not as bad

³ I explain my fieldwork and methods in Chapter 1.

⁴ The title of this thesis is a paraphrase derived from this expression.

as...”, where I describe this behaviour as strategic, disruptive, and problematic narratives in the context of racism in New Zealand. However, I found it to be an indication of another sort of problem of racism which I will explain below.

Microaggression as a dominant form of racism against Asian New Zealanders

The expression above stuck with me throughout the rest of my research. While reports presented in surveys may suggest some truth to what people are saying (on a bare surface level), it made me think of my research focus in a different way. As my fieldwork progressed, racism specifically during COVID-19 became increasingly less prominent in my research data, findings, and foreseeable conclusion. Though a lot of the data did concern COVID-19 in some way, the underlying tone in the stories, articles, and comments about racism were in fact a product of a certain type of racism in New Zealand that exists and has thrived in recent years: *microaggression*.

Originally coined by Pierce et al. (1978) who used this term throughout the 1970s to refer to the “everyday subtle and often automatic “put-downs” and insults directed toward Black Americans” (Torino, 2019: 5), microaggression describes covert forms of racism and aggression that are “subtle and stunning” (Pierce, 1970: 266). It refers to “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights and insults” (Sue et al., 2007: 271) which are often targeted towards “certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue, 2010: 24). The term *microaggression* is often used as a synonym for ‘modern racism’, ‘symbolic racism’, ‘everyday racism’, and ‘aversive racism’ (Gaertner et al., 2005; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988; Levchak, 2018; Milner et al, 2020) while in New Zealand, it is regularly referred to as ‘casual racism’ (Ng, 2017a; Veer, 2019; Godfrey, 2020; Wong, 2016).

Considering these definitions, Sue et al. (2007) and Torino et al. (2019) elaborate that microaggressions are “derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of an oppressed group [and] communicate bias and can be delivered implicitly or explicitly” (Torino et al., 2019: 3). They can be broken down

further into three types of microaggressions: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007; Torino et al., 2019; DeAngelis, 2009). These three types differ from one another based on the way that they inflict damage onto the receiver:

Microassault refers to “blatant verbal, non-verbal, or environmental attacks intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments, [and] derogatory messages to target groups” and is only seen in anonymous conditions or in the presence of others who share or tolerate similar beliefs and actions. *Microinsult* refers to “unintentional behaviours or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person’s racial heritage/identity, gender identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation identity”. The final type *microinvalidation* refers to “verbal comments or behaviours that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group” such as comments like “I don’t see colour” or “we are all human beings” negating lived experiences of religious and ethnic minorities (Torino et al., 2019: 4).

My understanding of microaggression is based on the definitions above. For this research, I focus on microaggressions that are directed towards a person for their racial heritage/identity. Specifically, I focus on forms of microaggressions that Asians have faced in New Zealand based on their stories of racism that were shared online. Among these stories, there are some particular elements in their storytelling which suggest the prevalence of microaggression in New Zealand as well as how these incidents of microaggression have impacted them in terms of their identity and belonging. Based on the similarities between the stories, I argue that microaggression is the predominant type of racism that Asian New Zealanders face by analysing and interpreting the stories based on my methodological approaches which I will discuss below.

Positioning myself as the writer of this thesis as well as an observer of the stories of other Asian New Zealanders, this argument is also derived from my personal understanding and interpretation on these issues as many of the stories which are based on lived experiences by my participants relay my own experiences and thoughts of racism in New Zealand. The cases below demonstrate some components of

microaggression in New Zealand which is a key concept and theme of this research. This feeling is particularly evident in many literature by Asian New Zealand writers. For example, Wong highlights this problem through her autobiographical account of her upbringing as a Chinese New Zealander in *Being Chinese* by saying,

Whether it's voiced by small (and big) boys, opportunistic politicians or angry white women with an air of entitlement, racism still exists here. And now a new term has appeared: 'casual racism'. It seems to imply some behaviours, such as stereotyping, might be acceptable. But if racism means an attitude of superiority and/or hostility, then, yes, stereotypes can be racist. And when we are chided for being 'too quick to cry racism', the answer is obvious: we will stop accusing you of racism when you stop practising it. (2016: 176).

Wong concludes by posing a challenge to New Zealanders to see if they are ready to accept the evolving social reality and "be easy with a national identity comprised of many identities" and "move on in our attitudes toward difference, especially racial difference" (2016: 177). Similar sentiments are expressed by Ng in *Old Asian, New Asian* where she refers to New Zealand writer and commentator Godfrey's argument that "the reality of modern racism [is that it is] shaped by history, carried out by otherwise well-meaning people and almost impossible to name" (Godfrey in Ng, 2017a: 26). She recounts experiences of being told "you speak English very well" and "you're quite Westernised, aren't you" during an interview despite being NZ-born, which she described as a "driving wedge between the 'Chinese' and 'New Zealand' parts of my identity" (Ng, 2017a: 30) and "offensive and alienating as a second-generation Chinese New Zealander" (Ng in Tan, 2017: para. 22).

Godfrey (2020) would later publish his own opinion essay on the subtleties of racism (which is another way of saying microaggression) in New Zealand based on his own experiences as well as historical contexts like the role of race in New Zealand rugby, and more recently, the flow-on effects caused by the March 15 shooting in Christchurch⁵.

⁵ In his essay, Godfrey discusses the March 15 shooting noting Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" as one of the reasons the perpetrator committed the crimes, as a way to find his connection in "violent European

In the aftermath of the March 15 shooting, I recall many New Zealanders stating the fact that the perpetrator was from Australia in an attempt to distance the atrocity from New Zealand society. While it is true that the perpetrator is Australian and it is by far the single worst mass shooting incident in New Zealand history (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021b), which may make it appear as an anomaly on the surface level, Chief Human Rights Commissioner Paul Hunt argued that it cannot be called an “imported aberration” and that “there was something deeper in New Zealand which we have to confront” (Matthews, 2019: para. 22). This is based on data on white supremacy and the extreme right in New Zealand collected by Hunt (2019) in his report “It Happened Here” as well as from others like Spoonley who argue that issues that stem from ‘multiculturalism’ in New Zealand are examples of “anxieties and potentialities in those sites with a history of colonial entanglements, settlement and multicultural drift” (Spoonley, 2015: 2).

In addition, in nearly all of the aforementioned publications, historical context is mentioned in some way as the deep causal factor of racism today. In New Zealand based literature, the analysis goes back to historical episodes of Asian immigration such as Chinese gold miners in the 19th century, Pacific workers in the mid-20th century, and the influx of Asian migrants following the Immigration Act in 1987 (Belich, 2001; Spoonley & Bedford, 2012; Ng, 2017a; Crofskey, 2020). This is in addition to the common argument between Asian New Zealand writers who liken the discriminatory immigration laws⁶ that severely targeted Chinese migrants to a “White New Zealand Policy” as the foundation of continuing racist ideologies and systemic problems in New Zealand society (Johnstone, 2020; Ip, 2003b). These are often attributed to moments of “moral panic” in society (Murphy, 2006; Ng, 2017a), which Crofskey (2020: para. 6) exclaims, “we were – and are – your yellow peril, your oncoming invasion, the pandemic on your shores. Our presence is a nightmare...”. Similarly, U.S.-based writers also include historical context – usually in the form of drawing attention to the waves of xenophobia and discrimination during past epidemics/pandemics including

nationalisms”. Terence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm’s argument in *The Invention of Tradition* is referenced in that “traditions are often nothing more than recent beliefs that help foster a common identity when – to borrow from [Edward] Said – “organic solidarities” like the family or village break down” (Godfrey, 2020: n. p).

⁶ The Chinese Immigrants Act was passed in 1881 which imposed a ‘poll tax’ and minimum of 10 tons of cargo per one Chinese immigrant (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020). I explain this further below.

Jewish communities being targeted during the bubonic plague in the 1300s, Haitian Americans being blamed for HIV in the 1980s and Chinese Americans for SARS in 2003, and more recently, Mexican Americans for the swine flu in 2009 (Lee, 2020; O'Neill, 2020). Considering these contexts as well as incidents of hate crime in New Zealand, the notion that microaggressions are both a product and contribution to greater and more severe forms of racism is suggested through these conceptions.

I must express again that this section of the introduction was not to suggest that microaggression is the only form of racism that is prevalent in New Zealand nor was it to suggest that it is the only form of racism that affects Asian New Zealanders. As I discuss different ways that microaggressions have been recognised including denial of racism and the effects of microaggressions throughout this thesis, I also imply that these very issues also affect other ethnic groups in New Zealand including Māori. However, as an Asian New Zealander myself, the experiences of racism that I have read through the stories of the participants strike too many similarities and resemblances of my own experiences and feelings to ignore. I use the stories of the participants in this thesis as a way to show, discuss, and relate these experiences between Asian New Zealanders which have become all too common. Therefore, as mentioned, although there are indeed other forms of racism in New Zealand, my focus lies on microaggression which I present as the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face.

The Field - Asians in New Zealand (and terms of identity)

In this thesis, I present cases based on stories of four Asian New Zealanders as well as drawing on different forms of literature from other writers. Although in these specific cases, the four participants identify as Asian New Zealanders, I draw upon further sources from other people where their identity (whether they refer to themselves as a New Zealander) can sometimes be unclear, in which case I use the term 'Asians' or 'Asians in New Zealand'. My aim with the separate categorisation is to have a wider inclusion of Asian communities in New Zealand.

Asian New Zealander generally refers to those who are any of NZ-born or citizen, multi generation, and most importantly, self-identify as a New Zealander (and have stated so). Asians in New Zealand generally refer to any recent immigrants, international students, and/or those who don't identify as a New Zealander or explicitly identify as a non-New Zealander. These two groupings are applied to those who have ancestral origins in East and Southeast Asian regions, for which the participants have also identified themselves through this definition. In addition, the separation of the two groups is also a product of the data I have collected - which often categorise the two groups separately (in cases of surveys)⁷ or is unclear which group the participants align themselves with (in cases of data obtained from online 'Asian communities')⁸.

Edwards discusses pan-ethnicity in her PhD thesis by referring to it as “the development of bridging organisations and the generalisation of solidarity among heterogeneous subgroups that are racialised to be homogeneous by outsiders” (2019: 28). She argues that Asian pan-ethnicity in New Zealand is both performative and performed “as a product of relationships between externally imposed, in group enforced, and *self-made conceptions of 'Asianness'*” (2019: ii, emphasis mine). As I scanned across multiple stories of Asian New Zealanders as well as my own and my peers' experiences, I attest to Edwards' argument that being Asian is a combination of several factors. My participants also indicate in their stories that despite their Asian identity which they acknowledge proudly, they attribute their external Asian appearance as the main causal factor for their experiences of microaggressions.

This distinction (and often confusion) of terms that define and categorise identities extend to other terms like *ethnicity* and *race*, which remains a contested debate in academia. For example, Barth (1969) argues that although the substances of the characteristics of given definitions on ethnicity are unproblematic in the way that they can be used to produce new understandings, he objects to the way that the set

⁷ Already existing surveys done by research groups and not my own. For example, in the HRC survey “Drivers of migrant New Zealanders' experiences of racism”, focus groups are categorised into three: born in NZ, long-term migrant, and recent migrant. Stats NZ defines 'recent migrant' as those who arrived in New Zealand in the last five years (HRC, 2021).

⁸ For example, a Facebook group where two of the main stories were shared in mostly consists of Asians in New Zealand but is not entirely the case; it appears that there are also members who do not identify as Asian, or do not explicitly state how they identify themselves.

definitions preconceive certain views on how ethnicity *should* be understood. Ethnicity in Barth's terms is based on ongoing negotiations of boundaries between groups but where "discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (Barth, 1969: 10, emphasis in original). Similarly, to an extent, Brubaker (2003) argues against set boundaries of ethnic "groups" which instead should be focused on practical categories, discursive frames, contingent events, and variable groupness to name a few ways. Because this thesis focuses on racism against Asian New Zealanders and thus involves discussions of identity, it is important to consider the fluidity of these terms as well as terms of identity themselves (including Asian New Zealander vs Asians in New Zealand as discussed above).

Considering this, as I have mentioned above, the four main stories I discuss in this thesis are written by Asian New Zealanders. In three of the stories, they write that they were born in New Zealand and identify as multi-generation Asian New Zealanders by acknowledging their Asian heritage/identity which plays a role in why they wrote and shared their stories. This includes Chinese and Vietnamese as well as other Asian identities in the supplementary stories, which in cases of the former, Chinese New Zealanders have often talked about the historical context of anti-Chinese racism as a way to better understand and demonstrate the situation of racism today. I discuss and refer to their self-identification as Asian New Zealanders throughout the thesis as a way to understand how incidents of microaggression affect their sense of identity and belonging in New Zealand.

However, among these stories as well as literature from other Asians, I have found another distinct group that I associate to those who talk about racism that I am able to present and discuss in my thesis. This is about the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders who are not afraid to speak up against racism and are finally out to confront the issues that they have been facing for so long. The 'new generation' is made up of mostly multi-generation Asians (in New Zealand, United States etc) and fits in with the common purpose of many of these cases – using their voices to speak up and strive for change. It is a response to a common perception that Asians are monolithic perpetual foreigners who are docile and look to avoid confrontation by staying quiet

(Fukui, 2018; Yeung, 2019; Yuan, 2021; Dhingra, 2021), often through the method of the 'Oriental response' (Wong, 2016) or as Ibrahim (2021: para. 7) puts it, "quick to discount our discomfort". I explore this in Chapter Four where I discuss how the stories and storytelling by my participants are used as performative elements to combat racism and strive for social change. I relate this to the concept of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders by discussing this concept as representing the storytellers as well as the essence of the stories themselves.

The Field - Online spaces (and using it to share stories)

I stated above that the primary field for observing and gathering data for this research was in online spaces, in particular, by using stories, viewpoints, and life experiences of Asian New Zealanders who have been subject to, affected by, and talk about racism. All of the cases presented in this thesis are collected from online discourse including but not limited to posts, articles, conversations, and discussions on various online platforms such as blogs, social media, and public media. I explain how I used the online field to conduct fieldwork for this thesis in Chapter One but it is important to first give it some context in terms of this research.

While researchers have been using online platforms to conduct research for many years, isolation measures (as a response to COVID-19) in most countries have forced a higher number of people onto using the online space for interaction (Lupton, 2020). Research shows that there has been a significant uptick in internet/online usage since the start of the pandemic: 47% reported spending more time on social media, 46% reported spending more time on messenger services, 36% reported spending more time on mobile apps. New Zealand is on par with the global average of increase of total social media use at 47% (Hootsuite, 2020). The same report shows that the top five mobile apps by number of downloads and consumer spend in March 2020 are all social media apps. In addition, most students, professors, and academics should be well aware of the increased use of online communication platforms like Zoom which have often been the primary form of communication in these fields. While the data above is hardly surprising, the increase in online usage also relates to many incidents of racism

that have either occurred, been portrayed, commented on, or relayed online during these times (Macguire, 2020; Foon, 2020; Hurihanganui, 2020). Netsafe reported a 63% increase in online hate speech and online racism between 1 January to 12 April 2020 compared to the previous six months (Peters, 2020).

However, in addition to the increase in online hate speech and racism as well as general usage, it has also meant that many Asian New Zealanders resorted to going online as a way to actively confront these issues of racism by sharing their stories as seen in the cases in this thesis. I explore the significance and relevance of online sources in Chapter Four where I discuss how Asian New Zealanders have employed this method for sharing their stories of racism as intervention for social change. In regard to this, to add context for later discussions, I describe some characteristics and features of some online sources where I have gathered stories from below. For the four main stories that I present in this thesis as primary cases, two were gathered from a Facebook group and the other two were gathered from an online anti-racism campaign that was initiated by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission.

The Facebook Group

The Facebook group operates as an online community for Asians in New Zealand where the members can post a wide range of content as long as it abides by the group rules as well as the general Facebook Community Standards. For example, Facebook prevents any content that may cause harm to be shared including violence and incitement, sale of illegal goods, objectional content, inauthentic behaviour and false news, and spamming.

The Facebook group where the stories of Participants A and B were shared has similar rules except it does not allow any buy-and-sell activity nor is it a “dating site or yellow fever⁹ page”. These rules make the group purely for sharing content and discussion with other Asians in New Zealand. For example, most of the content in the group discussion board are shared posts from other Facebook pages or news articles that

⁹ A term used to describe ‘Asian fetish’.

are related to Asian news or culture. Some other posts include recommendations for goods and services in New Zealand or general questions that concern Asian culture in New Zealand. On a daily average, there are around 10-15 posts from the group members which they can create on the top of the discussion board that appears immediately upon entering the group page.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, unsurprisingly, most of the content has been about COVID-19 including unofficial announcement posts about news relating to COVID-19 in New Zealand and other countries. This also includes sharing articles and stories based on incidents of racism during COVID-19, which are among the more “popular” posts in terms of the amount of Facebook reactions and comments by the group members. By gauging this relationship, it is clear that content related to undermining Asian culture and people are met with defensive reactions due to the controversial but sensitive nature.

Furthermore, as the description suggests, a lot of the group members identify as Asian which is determined through a series of questions that are presented upon a request to join the group. Depending on the answers to the questions as well as the legitimacy of the Facebook profile (the group rules clearly state no fake or new profiles), the admins can either accept or deny the request. This helps create the communal feeling of the Facebook group where, similar to the way that there is a large Korean community in Auckland’s North Shore, it acts as an online community for Asians in New Zealand. For these reasons, the group appears to be a safe place for Asians in New Zealand to share their thoughts and opinions as well as their own experiences of racism (and other topics) without fear of receiving backlash or neglect. Within the group, there are some regular and frequent posters as well as running in-group jokes/content that a lot of the members are aware of.

I came across this group during fieldwork when I was searching for stories of Asian New Zealanders that I could present in this thesis. Since I have joined the group and the time of writing this thesis in mid-2021, it has grown by a few thousand reaching a considerable number of over twenty thousand members in total.

The New Zealand Human Rights Commission anti-racism campaign - “That’s Us”

The other two of the four main stories I present in this thesis were shared in an anti-racism campaign by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (HRC) called *That’s Us*. This campaign was launched in 2016 as “New Zealand’s first anti-racism campaign that asks Kiwis to start sharing our own personal stories about racism, intolerance, and hatred as well as our hopes for the future”. As of the time of writing this thesis in 2021, there have been at least three more campaigns by the HRC that focus on minimising racism in New Zealand: *Give Nothing to Racism*, *Voice of Racism*, *Racism is No Joke*. Although the HRC was formed in 1977, since *That’s Us* launched in 2016, they have adopted a more online approach with the use of websites and interactive technologies to engage visitors in different ways.

For example, upon entering the website for *Voice of Racism*, visitors are immediately encouraged to interact with the website by clicking on random spots to hear voice segments of people who talk about their experiences of racism in New Zealand. However, there is a message warning visitors of “racist and offensive language” which are deemed “unsuitable for younger listeners”. Afterwards, a separate page appears which has the answers to questions of “why is this racist?” by providing explanations as well as alternatives to these situations. As with other anti-racism campaigns by the HRC, the aim of the *Voice of Racism* is to raise awareness of racism by allowing people to see and hear what others experience (as incidents of microaggression can often be implicit and unconscious as described through the definitions).

The specific names given for the campaigns are directed towards the visitors/readers, stating the problem explicitly; it is like they are confronting the public by characterising racism in New Zealand in different ways such as the “voice” of racism or an underlying trait by saying “that’s us”. Through these ways, they aim to eliminate any form of racism denial by acknowledging that racism is a real problem in New Zealand, and in turn, initiate discussion and raise awareness.

In addition to the main websites, these campaigns are also promoted through social media, mass media, and nationwide institutions like schools to “raise awareness of racist behaviour and the harm caused to those on the receiving end of it” (HRC,

2020a). I initially came across the *Voice of Racism* when I saw the launch billboard on the back of a bus in Wellington while other campaigns like *Racism is No Joke* appeared sporadically on my Facebook news feed, on the side of news articles, and as advertisements before YouTube videos. There is no doubt that this campaign was promoted more extensively during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the relevance of racism during the pandemic in addition to the New Zealand Government's message to "be kind". However, the method of sharing these campaigns through both public and online measures are significant as they have the potential to reach wider audiences, not just locally but nationwide and globally.

The Field - Multicultural Diverse New Zealand

As my research looks at racism against Asian New Zealanders, there are discussions on topics of identity, ethnicity, belonging, and the Asian communities in New Zealand throughout this thesis. Therefore, in addition to setting the context for the online field and the participants that this research focuses on, it is also important to consider the wider context in which these are set in as a way to fully understand the stories of the participants. This includes some historical perspectives and the current structural make-up of New Zealand in terms of immigration and diversity.

As I have mentioned above, certain histories of New Zealand are frequently discussed in the stories of Asian New Zealanders. The starting point of this tends to be the Chinese Immigrants Act in 1881 which imposed a 'poll tax' of £10 (equivalent to \$1770 in 2020) on Chinese migrants, and only one Chinese passenger was allowed for every 10 tons of cargo. In 1896, this increased to one passenger for every 200 tons of cargo and the poll tax also increased to £100 (equiv. to \$20,000 in 2020) (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020). Following the dwindling employment on goldfields since the first arrival of Chinese gold miners in the mid-19th century, the introduction of the act was a response that developed out of intense public racism and discrimination which also led to the creation of white supremacist leagues like Anti-Asiatic League and Anti-Chinese Association (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020). These events initiated a five-decade period of an ideology similar to a 'White New Zealand Policy' (Johnstone,

2020). This includes labelling Asian immigration as a “deteriorating effect upon civilisation” and an “Asiatic terror” (Ip, 2003b).

The historical exclusion and racism towards Asians in New Zealand have been especially visible as Pākehā-Māori relations have generally dominated New Zealand’s history and focus on race since the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 (Murphy, 2006; Wong, 2016). Such views even led to the creation of the “Aryan Māori” in some cases as displayed in Tregear’s 1885 book *Aryan Māori* which constructed Māori as “brown Europeans” and “honorary members” to legitimise New Zealand for the concept of a “Britain of the South” (Bennett, 2001; 2004; Murphy, 2006; Belich, 1997). Since the first British and European mass migration to New Zealand, the proportion of Pākehā compared to Māori became increasingly large; in 1874 Māori became less than one-tenth of the total national population (Kukutai, 2017: 29). However, people who identify as Māori today account for about 17% of the national population and alongside this increase, New Zealand’s population has become more “ethnically diverse” since the 19th century. This is due to large increases of the Asian and Pacific population since the mid 20th century, accounting for around 15% and 8% respectively in 2018 (Stats NZ, 2019). These numbers are projected to increase over the next decades.

In this context, the concept of *superdiversity* is especially relevant. With reference to Vertovec’s concept of superdiversity who uses this term to describe levels of cultural complexity that surpasses “anything the country has previously experienced” (2007: 1024), Spoonley applies this concept to New Zealand’s demographic make-up where it is largely comprised of indigenous and majority identities alongside a growing presence of ethnic minorities (Spoonley, 2015; Spoonley & Butcher, 2009; Hansen, 2020). He states that this concept is the “new reality” of Auckland due to the “everyday cosmopolitanism” that is intrinsic to life in superdiverse Auckland (Spoonley, n.d).

However, despite the multicultural demographics of the population, the country is governed though the framework of biculturalism and not multiculturalism affecting areas like minority rights, cultural recognition, and affirmative action policies (Hansen, 2020). This is due to concerns of a multiculturalist approach potentially undermining the recognition and rights of Māori as tangata whenua and commitments to the Treaty of Waitangi (Hansen, 2020; Mishra, 2012; Smith, 2007). Therefore, terms like “cultural

diversity” and “superdiversity” are instead used in place of “multiculturalism” (Hansen, 2020; Spoonley, 2015; Spoonley & Peace, 2012).

Considering this, I aimed to present the picture of New Zealand’s demographic make-up as well as the cultural framework as ways to show the current situation in which Asian New Zealanders have shared their stories of racism in. As mentioned above, many of my participants have stated that they identify as multi-generation New Zealanders but with recognition of their Asian heritage/identity. As I discuss racism in New Zealand as well as the challenges of the participants to be accepted as New Zealanders throughout this thesis, it is suggested that these cases are not unique nor should they be ignored because, as Spoonley (n.d) puts it, the superdiverse population of New Zealand is the “new reality”.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One – Methods (and changes for the pandemic)

In this chapter, I outline the approach I took for this research in terms of the methods chosen and how this thesis came to be. I discuss the specificities of the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and cyberflâneur (Goldate, 1998; Hendel, 2012) which were methods that were ultimately influenced by some challenges I faced in the early stages of this research. This includes the uncertainty of both the research focus and the methods themselves which were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. By narrating these steps, I show how this thesis ultimately eventuated.

Chapter Two – “It’s not as bad as...”: Comparisons, defensiveness, and denials as disruptive strategies and narratives in discourse on racism in New Zealand.

In Chapter Two, I will begin the discussion on racism in New Zealand by talking about certain comments that I saw prevalent in discourse on racism in New Zealand including comparisons, defensiveness, and denial of racism. I will start by analysing a series of

exchanges between Taika Waititi and Duncan Garner, which I present as prime examples of this specific narrative in New Zealand based on concepts of white defensiveness by Harris (2018) and denial of racism by van Dijk (1992; 1993). I will then discuss other similar and common examples that were expressed online which exemplified narratives of racism denial by making comparisons between New Zealand and other countries or between historical accounts of racism. By discussing this, I will show how problematic and disruptive these strategic comments of comparisons, defensiveness, and denials are as they display and contribute to issues of microaggression in New Zealand.

Chapter Three – But it is bad enough here: Microaggression and stories of Asian New Zealanders – expressing feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger from constant experiences of microaggression.

In Chapter Three, I will continue the discussion on racism in New Zealand by presenting four main stories of racism that were written and shared by Asian New Zealanders. By focusing on these stories (as well as supplementary stories), I will discuss how my participants were able to use them to express their feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger which were derived from facing multiple, constant, and ongoing acts of microaggressions as Asian New Zealanders. This includes repeated questions of “where are you *really* from?” and other means that imply feelings of being “othered” through both intentional and unintentional ways. From this, I argue that microaggression is the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face.

Chapter Four – Online storytelling as social activism: How stories and storytelling are used by Asian New Zealanders as a performative act for social change against racism.

In the fourth and final chapter of my thesis, I will conclude analysing the stories of Asian New Zealanders by discussing the role of storytelling as well as the purpose and intention of the stories. I will first introduce the concept of the ‘new generation’ which I describe is a concept that represents the Asian New Zealanders who are speaking up and confronting the issues of racism by shifting away from the traditional “Oriental

response” of ignoring these very issues which was problematic and damaging as I will discuss in Chapter Three.

I will then move onto the stories of my participants which I argue encapsulate the concept of the ‘new generation’ as they are used as performative elements for social change with the purpose and intention of initiating discussion and awareness on issues of racism in New Zealand. I will discuss how the internet is utilised by Asian New Zealanders as a performative space by analysing the specific online platforms that my participants shared their stories in. Overall, the stories are a part of a significant contribution to the overall movement of discussion by Asian New Zealanders on racism which is gaining momentum as they connect with each other through these ways.

Chapter One

Methods (and changes during a pandemic)

In this chapter, I will outline the methods involved in this research. I will discuss the methods I employed for collecting and analysing data, as well as some additional details on the online field which was the primary focus for this research. This includes talking about the changes I embraced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as some measures I adopted that refined this research.

Firstly, I will explain the decision of focusing on the online field as the primary field for this research. Originally, I planned to conduct interviews and participant observation by recruiting potential participants for fieldwork. As I explained above, my initial focus for this already-amended research (since the shift away from looking at language and sport) was to look at racism against Asian New Zealanders during the pandemic. My approach for this was to send emails and contact various groups and organisations to see if they were willing to talk about racism and related issues experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of around five or six groups and organisations that I contacted, I received one legitimate response while the rest either were basic and almost-automated responses stating that they could not help me any further than their already-published resources or did not respond.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic had seriously impacted life in New Zealand, I knew that even my new research plan was near-impossible. With offices and institutions like universities being (temporarily) shut down, I could not gain enough contacts to interview when their focus was to simply abide by the new rules instated by the government and adapt to online working and learning. For these reasons, I shifted the field of this research to looking at online spaces due to many components of this research being impacted by COVID-19, which forced me to also reshape other parts of the research to allow me to complete this project in a timely but feasible manner. However, this was not solely based on the uncertainty of changes to the alert

level¹⁰ by the New Zealand Government which determined if I was legally able to physically interact with potential participants, but the growing anxieties and hesitation from potential participants prevented me from conducting interviews and in-person fieldwork.

While I had initially gained contact with the organiser of Fight Virus Go China, a small organisation that campaigned against COVID-19-related anti-Chinese racism and supported those who were affected by it, within the same week the alert level rose to “Level 4 – Lockdown”. Facing a total of around two months of nationwide lockdown and great uncertainty on how the Alert Level was to sway for the remainder of this research¹¹, the preliminary plans for interviews and contact with the organiser were mutually called off. This meant that I lost the opportunity to have my research information sheet circulate within a relatively significant Chinese community in New Zealand, as the organiser was interested in sharing my research with their Chinese New Zealand community group on WeChat¹². As a result, the field for this research was subsequently moved to looking at online spaces which had its own advantages.

With this new direction, an appropriate way to go through with this approach was to use already-existing forms of data that I could find online. This was due to having already seen a high amount of stories and articles based on racism written by Asian New Zealanders that were available as well as the likely reluctance of potential participants to be involved in an interview over Zoom or by email because of the lack of rapport. This was especially the case considering topics of racism can often be sensitive and triggering (Mizock et al., 2011; Lebron et al., 2015).

From this, I decided to take on the role of a *cyberflâneur* as a way of scouring and observing materials in online “spaces and places” (Goldate, 1998; Hendel, 2012). This is described as a “modern day re-incarnation of the [19th] century flâneur via social media” (Smith, 2019: para. 1) of spectating modern life “with an inquisitive wonder and

¹⁰ “The COVID-19 Alert System was introduced in March 2020 to manage and minimise the risk of COVID-19 in New Zealand. The system helps people understand the current level of risk and the restrictions that legally must be followed” (New Zealand Government, 2020).

¹¹ The Alert Level has since changed four times (as of June 2021).

¹² A Chinese-based messaging and social media smartphone app.

infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective” (Jenks, 1995: 146). As Hendel (2012: para. 1) writes,

A cyberflâneur, by definition, strolls through the Internet. Little purpose guides his journey, and hours slip by as the individual explores the many different crevices of the ever-growing web, from Wikipedia to Tumblr, from popular news sites to Twitter, from obscure journals to social media. He crawls through them all and is all the stronger for it. How do you turn a corner into the unknown online? You click a link. You go places. Who cares where?

I started to search for stories and relevant data by entering keywords on multiple online search engines including Google and YouTube, and various social media websites like Facebook and Twitter including sub-groups and individual pages within the social media sites. The following are some examples of the searches: COVID-19 racism, COVID-19 racism New Zealand, racism during COVID-19, anti-Asian racism, stories of racism, #IAmNotAVirus. Once I found a suitable source or story, I delved deeper by clicking on hyperlinks, re-searching new keywords, reading related comment sections, exploring the authors’ other works, and revisiting these sets of data to see if I was able to interpret new ideas. This consisted of saving website links, bookmarking pages, saving posts on Facebook, screenshotting, and copy-and-pasting. My aim with this method was to gather enough stories and data that I could analyse and then discuss in this thesis. Through this, it “employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in which phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants” (Mendez, 2013: 280).

Eventually, after an extended period of fieldwork, I was able to source a few select stories and sets of data that were detailed, lengthy and relevant for this research. The decision to settle on a few main stories of Asian New Zealanders was partly influenced by the complexities around the ethical concerns of using online data for research. This includes the debate on which online data is deemed public and private (which was a great cause of concern for this research) as well as issues of privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent (Sugiura et al., 2017; Franzke et al., 2020). Furthermore, this was even more relevant in cases of online research on social media where there are further issues due to the use of private and often information-revealing

personal profiles (Townsend & Wallace, n.d; Moreno et al., 2013). Following a long and rigorous process which resulted in me having to change more aspects of this research, I finally received ethics approval.

Because I was using methods of the *cyberflâneur* which consisted of observing online spaces from a non-interactive and non-visible way to collect data, I had to be especially careful to not jeopardise this research. After much deliberation during the stages of ethics approval, I was able to gain consent for the four main stories as well as the other supplementary stories that I present in this thesis. Yet, the often blurred understanding on the ethics of which areas of online data can be collected and used for research meant that I had to selectively choose particular stories and abandon others.

However, by focusing on a smaller number of stories than initially anticipated, I was able to concentrate and analyse them further by making these stories the central points of my thesis. I argue that these four stories along with other supplementary stories clearly demonstrate and exemplify the essence of this thesis as well as my own thoughts and experiences; they represent typical incidents of microaggression/racism that Asians face in New Zealand and the consequent effects that it can inflict towards individuals in the Asian New Zealand community. I also found that the way the stories were written reflected many other stories and articles that did not make the final version of this thesis; these four main stories were representational voices of Asians in New Zealand (and other countries) who spoke up about these very issues.

As mentioned above, for the stories that I found on Facebook, because they were posted from the participants' personal profiles, I had to approach these with caution due to the potentially sensitive and identifiable nature. For these, I approached the participants individually via private message from my personal Facebook account - I also had to go through the process of having to be approved to join the Facebook group. After some brief exchanges where I informed my participants about my research and interest in their stories, I provided them with a link to the research information sheet and consent form which I made available to access and interact online. Through these steps, I was able to obtain their consent for me to use their stories. It also offered some options for the participants including whether they wished to be de-identified, paraphrased, and provided with a copy of my thesis. Because both

of the participants expressed their wish to be de-identified, I refer to them as Participant A and Participant B in this thesis. I also refer to the group as “Facebook group” to avoid using the actual name.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The decision of choosing to approach the stories through Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2001) as the primary method was due to the type of materials I had gathered for this thesis. As explained above, I was unable to conduct interviews or any other in-person fieldwork due to the uncertainty of how things would pan out in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, I could not depend on formulating my own questions that I could use in an interview to draw out a core for this research. By relying on stories that I was able to find online, I had to approach these with a suitable and practical method that would allow me to analyse and extract enough information towards creating an argument for my thesis.

Therefore, CDA is at the core of this research as a way to conduct interpretive and critical analysis of the stories of racism written by Asian New Zealanders. Consolidated as a three-dimensional framework, CDA aims to map three separate forms of analysis together: language texts, discourse practice, and discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995). Through this method, I am able to break down the stories of my participants by analysing different components of discourse such as the content of the text, the type of material, any external references, writing style and approach, and language which then leads to looking at the author, where and who it was published for, and the reaction. Finally, I analyse the sociological significance of the stories, contributions to social movements or ideologies, and the context the stories are presented in. Conducting CDA through these ways allowed me to generate and interpret forms of meanings in the stories through the interaction between the participants, the stories themselves, and myself (Fairclough, 1995; Snee, 2016).

Van Dijk (1995) argues that when studying the role of discourse in society, CDA particularly focuses on relations of power, dominance, and inequality and how these are reproduced or resisted by social group members through text and talk. Furthermore, it attempts to “uncover, reveal, or disclose what is implicit, hidden, or otherwise not immediately obvious in relations of... their underlying ideologies” (van Dijk, 1995: 18). In relation to the stories of Asian New Zealanders, while the general theme in many of the stories are quite obvious in that they talk about racism based on their thoughts and experiences, further interpreting the stories in wider contexts such as the sociological interpretation can generate a fuller understanding in relation to this thesis. For example, in Chapter Four, I will discuss the significance of the stories of Asian New Zealanders which I argue represent a change in image and approach to racism in the context of the gaining momentum of Asian literature as well as the current events of the COVID-19 pandemic. I explain this in relation to the concept of the ‘new generation’ of Asian New Zealanders which is a concept I was able to interpret and apply through the stories and the act of storytelling by my participants.

In relation to this, Fischer argues that,

Accounts of self or life histories, including individual and collective memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, psychodynamic texts, and data sets organised around the life cycle are particularly useful as sites of access to constellations of cultural models, discourses/critical apparatuses, and new self-fashionings (1991: 24-25).

Above is a passage on the usefulness of life histories for developing understandings about the self and various elements between individuals. In relation to the last *site of access*, Fischer further explains the inclusion of “new self-fashionings” by saying that “perhaps the most important use of life histories, particularly in the contemporary world, is the strategic use of a life frame that straddles major social and cultural transformations” (1991: 25). He demonstrates this idea by referring to Kingston (1981) who encapsulated this point by saying that to be Chinese-American is very different from being Chinese in America because it is a new construction (of their sense of self) that is fashioned from many different cultural environments (Fischer, 1991). In this instance, Fischer argues that “the key to constructing self-accounts and life histories

is attention to *who* is constructing the account, *why*, *how*, and for *whom*” (1991: 25). By approaching qualitative work through observations like these, I am able to interpret the stories of Asian New Zealanders and subsequently relate some themes to these ideas, i.e. the conception of the ‘new generation’ of Asian New Zealanders as a form of a “new self-fashioning”. I refer back to the components of CDA throughout the thesis as my analysis of the stories progresses.

Despite the challenges that arose during the early stages of this research including the amendments taken for the research question and other parts that were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, they helped me evaluate, refine, and eventually settle my focus by making me explore other areas that I would not have done otherwise. In the following chapter, I will begin the analysis of the stories of the participants by first discussing the theme of racism denial which I found was prevalent among the topic of racism in New Zealand. By doing so, I set the premise for the subsequent chapters as I delve deeper into analysing the stories.

Chapter Two

“It’s not as bad as...”

Comparisons, defensiveness, and denials as disruptive strategies and narratives in discourse on racism in New Zealand

[New Zealand is not a racist place because] “that was South Africa under apartheid, New Zealand is not as racist as that.” (Duncan Garner)

In this chapter, I will introduce the expression “it’s not as bad as...” which I discuss is a form of racism denial by presenting cases based on comments made by New Zealanders. The expression was applied to making comparisons between New Zealand and other countries, and between generations and ethnic groups in New Zealand as ways to downplay and deny racism in response to racism discourse. Some key concepts that apply to this expression are denial of racism (van Dijk, 1992; 1993) and white defensiveness (Harris, 2018) which I use to supplement the analysis in this chapter by discussing the implications as a way to gain a fuller understanding of the expression in relation to the comments made by New Zealanders. By doing so, I argue that these acts display and contribute to issues of microaggression in New Zealand. In addition, it allows for comprehension of certain moods and sentiments held by New Zealanders on racism, setting the premise for the next chapters where I discuss racism, and in particular how microaggression is the predominant form of racism towards Asian New Zealanders, based on stories of racism in a local context.

I begin this chapter by introducing and specifying the idea of comparisons in the context of the term itself as a human tendency and in racism discourse. I will discuss social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and apply these understandings to the subsequent analysis and discussions in this chapter. By doing so, I am able to show how comparisons are used as strategic techniques to disrupt progressive discourse on racism, and how the comparisons themselves display and contribute to issues of microaggressions in New Zealand. As the next chapters discuss microaggressions towards Asian New Zealanders in more detail, this chapter discusses the situation of

racism in New Zealand in terms of some public perceptions and responses as well as showing a specific manifestation of microaggression.

I will then discuss some cases of comparisons and racism denial in relation to the concepts of white defensiveness (Harris, 2018) and denial of racism (van Dijk, 1992; 1993) as ways to understand what these comments mean in the context of racism in New Zealand. After this, I discuss another case of comparison, defensiveness, and denial by analysing comments that were made in response to a story of microaggression in New Zealand. Finally, in contrast to cases of comparisons, defensiveness, and racism denial, I will display some examples where New Zealanders acknowledge racism as a real problem which I use to set up the next chapters where I talk about microaggression and the use of stories. Subsequently, I highlight how problematic and disruptive denying racism is by arguing that the comments of comparisons and denial themselves are forms of microaggression.

The meaning of comparisons of racism

In the introduction, I talked briefly about the escalating faction of anti-Asian racism since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in other countries like the United States and Australia. Although my thesis focuses more on anti-Asian racism in New Zealand and the experiences of Asian New Zealanders, these recent incidents have generated and resurfaced some specific comments and attitudes from New Zealanders that demand some attention in this thesis. This is about the utterance of comparisons that have been regularly expressed towards issues of racism such as the aforementioned phrase “at least racism is not as bad here as [enter country]” which palpably compares the urgency of racism in New Zealand to other countries. However, the comparisons were not exclusive to looking at racism in different countries; it also carried over to racism within New Zealand where specific comparisons were made between different generations and ethnic groups in New Zealand. These expressions were indicative of certain moods and sentiments held by some New Zealanders which revealed more to the discussion than originally expected.

However, before I begin the analysis of the comments of comparisons, I will first explain the idea and concept of comparisons. Festinger (1954) in his discussion of social comparisons states that there is a human tendency and innate drive to evaluate oneself, often in comparison to others. While there is an initial evaluation of oneself, to the extent that objective and non-social means are unavailable, it leads to evaluating their opinions and beliefs by comparing it to others. Moreover, as it applies to these domains of evaluating their opinions and abilities, it also applies to the use of comparisons to manage one's emotions and protection of their self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Suls & Wills, 1991). Through these ways, the direction of comparison is relevant in terms of *upward* or *downward* social comparisons (Suls & Wills, 1991; Suls & Miller, 1977; Michinov, 2001). Upward social comparison refers to the way that comparisons are made with those who are believed to be better than the subject which often lead to focusing on improvement to match that level. Downward social comparison refers to the way that comparisons are made with those who are believed to be lesser or worse off than the subject. This is often done to make the subject feel better about themselves by thinking that although they may not be perfect, at least something is better than others (Kesici & Erdogan, 2010).

Within this thought, I apply these concepts to the way that comparisons were made in the comments responding to racism discourse that I present in this chapter. As I discuss the cases below, many comments made comparisons in a downward direction by diverting the problems of racism in New Zealand to other countries, while others compared racism among different generations and minorities in New Zealand. In these ways, problems of racism in New Zealand were downplayed, brushed-aside and/or denied because "it isn't nearly as endemic as say middle-income Australia or the U.S" (a comment made in response to Taika Waititi's experiences of racism). The quote under the heading of this chapter exemplifies this behaviour and is a typical response when problems of racism in New Zealand are brought into conversation.

I found Barth's (1969) concept of ethnic boundaries particularly relevant to the comparisons. As I explained in the introduction of my thesis, ethnicity as described by Barth is based on ongoing negotiations of boundaries between groups where "discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the

course of individual life histories” (1969: 10, emphasis in original). On this idea, it is not about preconceived views but rather negotiation – “the features that are taken into account are not the sum of ‘objective’ differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant” (Barth, 1969: 14). Considering this, Barth argues that where ethnic groups are viewed as an organisational type, “since belonging to an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person, having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged, and to judge oneself, by those standards that are relevant to that identity” (1969: 14).

As I discuss below the comments of comparisons made in response to stories of racism in New Zealand, there is a certain theme that evokes Barth’s conception of ethnic groups as an organisational type; to be a proud and true New Zealander, one cannot allege that racism is a real problem in New Zealand because racism is not a part of the New Zealander identity. In other words, “we are not racist so there is no racism in New Zealand”¹³.

With these ideas, I argue that the comparisons exhibit forms of white defensiveness (Harris, 2018) and denial of racism (van Dijk, 1992; 1993) which both display and contribute to the problems of microaggression in New Zealand themselves. As I discuss microaggression as a concept along with the four main stories of my participants in more depth in the following chapters, I use this chapter to first discuss some issues that surround, and initiate, microaggression and the context that the stories of racism told by Asian New Zealanders are presented in. It will hopefully help make sense of the stories as well as the arguments throughout the thesis. However, I must say that the discussion in this chapter is not to suggest that making comparisons is inherently a bad thing to do, but instead that the way comparisons are used as strategic and disruptive techniques to discuss and subsequently deny racism in New Zealand are problematic in their own ways within the anti-racism discourse and rhetoric.

¹³ van Dijk (1992) argues that this is a form of racism denial by way of reinforcing positive self-presentation on both individual and social dimensions.

The beginning of the recent nationwide discussion on racism in New Zealand and subsequent comments of comparisons and denial of racism

In 2017, Taika Waititi first made headlines by criticising New Zealand for its “dirty rivers, depression rates, teen suicide rates, housing crisis¹⁴, and child poverty rates” (Newshub, 2018a: para. 1). While conversations on these issues have been going on mildly for some years, Waititi added to his original statement following backlash from some New Zealanders by tweeting: “I’m sorry NZ! I wasn’t thinking and spoke in haste. I forgot to mention domestic violence, sexism, homophobia, and racism”.

Among those listed, however, racism seemed to be one of the more unrealistic claims about New Zealand’s issues according to many Kiwis, sparking another form of controversy. However, Waititi’s statement later in 2018 where he called New Zealand “racist as fuck” was perhaps the tipping point of defensive behaviour from some New Zealanders. He then went on to tell stories of his upbringing in New Zealand by recounting experiences of racism he faced as a child as well as issues of profiling and “flat-out refusal to pronounce Maori names properly” (Newshub, 2018a: para. 4). The quote under the heading of this chapter is a response from Duncan Garner, a New Zealand radio host, who criticised Waititi for being “treasonous” which is just one of many other comments that aggressively disagreed with Waititi’s statement. In the case of Garner’s comment above, he demonstrably downplayed racism in New Zealand, attributing racism to only the extreme forms to which Marvelly wrote, “if not being as racist as apartheid is the barometer we are using to measure ourselves, the bar is so low that you could trip over it” (Marvelly, 2018: para. 17).

In response to the series of elevated discussions on Waititi’s statement on racism¹⁵, Tollan, then-homepage editor of Stuff, tweeted that he was “currently axing every 9 out of 10 comments on McConnell’s column¹⁶” and that it was just one proof that “NZ is crawling with racists, hiding behind their keyboards...” (Tollan, 2018). Following

¹⁴ To note, in 2015, Labour Party’s Phil Twyford was caught in controversy following his accusation of people with ‘Chinese-sounding surnames’ as a reason for the housing crisis.

¹⁵ Since his original statement, Taika Waititi has been involved in anti-racism campaigns in 2017, 2018, and 2020. In 2018, he issued a statement that “New Zealand is racist as f***” which sparked another series of discussions in the media.

¹⁶ Glenn McConnell’s (2018) column on Stuff NZ titled “Taika Waititi’s right, New Zealand really is a racist place.”

these series of events, it subsequently led to a rise in discussions on racism in New Zealand – of which many comments followed Garner’s remark on how *it’s not as bad as other countries*.

Below is a collection of comments made by public users in the New Zealand mass media that were gathered and presented in the satirical article “Irrefutable proof Taika Waititi is wrong and NZ is not racist as fuck” (The Spinoff, 2018) which complement Tollan’s statement on racism in New Zealand and the hiding-behind-the-screen-keyboard-warrior behaviour. The comments below, however, are not satirical and are real examples of comparisons, deflection, and denial of racism expressed by real New Zealanders.

Figure 1 - Screenshots of unsatirical comments responding to Waititi's original comments featured in a satirical article (Spinoff, 2018)

The concept of white defensiveness as a response to racism discourse

Harris (2018) outlines four types of white defensiveness in response to racism that are frequently observed in New Zealand:

- Denial – kneejerk responses that attempt to deny that there is racism, rather than taking claims seriously or considering its roots.
- Diversion – instances in which facts about racism or colonisation are raised, the conversation is derailed through a claim that Māori themselves are guilty of some other wrong.
- Detriment-centring - a focus on the disadvantages faced by Māori, but without any acknowledgment of the advantages or protective factors which flow from being Pākehā.
- Move on – where defensive demands are made for discussions about racism to end.

Immediately in his article “Racism and White Defensiveness in Aotearoa”, Harris (2018) addresses the denial expressed by Garner which he calls a ‘defensive denial’. Although the phrase “it’s not as bad as...” is more aligned with ‘diversion’ than direct ‘denial’, these types of white defensiveness can often coexist, as is evident in some of the comments displayed above. Kaho (2019) took Harris’ categories of white

defensiveness and applied it to the comments section of a Facebook post on a 2019 documentary *Land of the Long White Cloud*. Out of a sample of 188 comments, Kaho reported that 56 percent of the comments were white defensiveness (matching the categories identified by Harris) while 10 percent were “outright racist” (Kaho, 2019). It is important to note that these comments were in relation to a documentary about stories of white New Zealanders who talked about the colonial history and present context of New Zealand. The documentary’s producer explains it as an “anti-racism conversation timed to coincide with the 250 year anniversary of Captain Cook’s arrival in Aotearoa. Racism is a white problem, and the onus is on white New Zealanders to look at ourselves” (Phipps, 2019: para. 3).

By considering the types of comments that were said in response to the documentary, the specific content of racism and colonialism in New Zealand clearly triggered some emotions and particular behaviours among New Zealanders, subsequently leading to comments of white defensiveness and racist nature. However, the incidence of white defensiveness as a response to colonialism and racial inequalities in New Zealand such as those witnessed in the comments above is alarming but not unique. Referring back to the categories of white defensiveness, acts of *diversion* are often seen where inequalities and discrimination faced by Māori and other minorities in New Zealand are rejected and downplayed due to “self-perpetrated disadvantages” like commonly-referenced (but refuted) myths about Māori treatment of Moriori (King, 2000; Solomon, 2019). Moreover, examples of ‘move-on’ comments include accusations of separatism when discrimination and racism are discussed (Barnes et al., 2012; Harris, 2018; HRC, 2020b).

In the cases of the comments that resorted to comparing racism in New Zealand to other countries, van Dijk argues that the “notion of racism [is] used to describe abroad or in the past, as is the case for apartheid in South Africa or the period of slavery, reconstruction, and segregation in the USA” (1992: 93). This is seen in the comment by Garner who compared racism in New Zealand to South Africa as a reason to deny its presence as an issue in the former. Below are some examples of comments that displayed similar sentiments where racism is only attributed to more severe and overt

forms. These comments were drawn from Reddit and are in response to an article on Waititi's statements on racism that was shared in the post.

The image shows a screenshot of four Reddit comments. Each comment includes a user profile picture, a username, a timestamp, the comment text, and interaction buttons (upvote, downvote, share, report, save).

Comment 1:
User: PM_ME_LEGAL_FILES
Time: 2 years ago · edited 2 years ago
Text: As someone who's lived in a few countries, I find Taika's experience of racism a bit weak.
Is NZ racist? Yes. Is it racist as fuck? I don't believe it is.
Australia has a far larger issue with casual racism. South Africa is racist from all angles. The US has a more veiled but discriminatory racism. The UK is more class segregated and polite so I didn't see much there but I'm sure it exists.
And, for fear of being labeled a racist, I won't get in to how racist places like China and Japan are...
Upvotes: 4

Comment 2:
User: sheogor
Time: 2 years ago
Text: I'm someone who has lived most of their life in chch, 3 years in Brisbane, knowing a lot of white south Africans while there.
Is there racism in Nz yes, do I think it is a problem or "racist as fuck" no.
Australia has a serious casual racism problem and a real eye opening step up but talking to the Africans was even bigger step up.
Do we have a blatant policy from the ether local or higher levels of government that prevents some ethnic or culture groups from having access to the basics, I have not seen it.
Upvotes: 15

Comment 3:
User: _CodyB
Time: 2 years ago
Text: he's just flat out wrong. Sure there are some racists in NZ but it isn't nearly as endemic as say middle-income Australia or the US. Your median white Kiwi is probably the least racist out of all European majority countries in the world.
Upvotes: 5

Comment 4:
User: [deleted]
Time: 2 years ago
Text: I don't really think we can say kiwis are racists specially if we compare to Australians.
1. if they don't know how to pronounce Maori name is because Te Reo isn't mandatory at school.
2. I don't see any Maori been killed for no reason as in the US, Brazil etc
3. I speak 8 languages and I understand if someone can't pronounce some words. The point is in New Zealand we 'use' Maori culture to be exotic but we don't give the same opportunities to Maori people than to white ones.
He could have said retarded because they don't make an effort to learn the good pronunciation but racists... Oh dear...
Upvotes: -7

Figure 2 - Reddit comments responding to Waititi's original comments (Reddit, 2018)

The concept of the denial of racism as a response to racism discourse

Van Dijk (1992; 1993) describes denials as a defence mechanism similar to the way that is described by Harris. Often as social norms prohibit explicit discrimination, white group members usually attempt to avoid being seen as 'racists' and will therefore use denials or disclaimers instead of "outright racism" to maintain a positive impression, or rather, avoid a negative impression (van Dijk, 1993). Van Dijk expands on this idea saying that, "speakers may not only deny the incriminated act itself, but also its underlying intentions, purposes or attitudes, or its non-controlled consequences" (1993: 180). Lentin (2018) further argues that the act of denying racism is often itself another manifestation of racism and a rhetorical device of distancing from being accused of racism. For example, the phrase "I'm not racist but..." is often used during discussions of migration, integration, crime, or terrorism and backed up by claims of freedom of speech (Lentin, 2018; Ahmed, 2016).

However, while there is a clear significance on an individual level, van Dijk also argues that as "a social dimension... such strategies may at the same time aim at defending the ingroup as a whole: 'We are not racists', 'We are not a racist society'" (1992: 89). As such cases in public discourse (like mass media) where it potentially reaches a larger audience, the social form of denial is the most influential (and most damaging) therefore being the most persuasive in constructing and upholding the dominant white consensus (van Dijk, 1992).

Referring back to Garner's response of denial and deflection to Waititi's comment on racism in New Zealand, he added further saying, "He's thrown New Zealand under the bus. Stop selling us out on the international stage. There is a word for it, and it's called sabotage" (Newshub, 2018b) to which Garner's co-host joined in saying, "every country has it (racism) – doesn't make it right – [but Waititi is] in a position of privilege and power; our tourism is so important" (Strongman, 2017: para. 6). In this situation, Waititi's accusation of racism evidently caused some social disturbance in the media which van Dijk argues is a "more serious social infraction than racist attitudes or actions themselves because they disrupt ingroup solidarity and smooth ingroup encounters: they are felt to ruin the 'good atmosphere' of interactions and situations" (1992: 90). In this case, it was an attempt of face-keeping and positive self-presentation

of New Zealand in the front of mass media for touristic and international image purposes.

As described above, Barth's idea of ethnicity and boundaries is applicable to these forms of comparisons and denials of racism, where being a proud and real New Zealander are not based on "the features... of 'objective' differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant" (1969: 14). In these examples, the "significant feature" that contributes to being a New Zealander is through the positive self-representation as an anti-racist, even if it means resorting to comparing and denying issues of racism. This is clearly seen in another quote from Garner:

He was New Zealander of the year... so he's an ambassador for New Zealand now... you cannot be this treasonous about your own country. You cannot say you're not proud to be a New Zealander if you're the New Zealander of the year (Garner in Strongman, 2017: para. 7).

In relation to these examples, I argue that the use of comparisons and denials, which were employed as strategies to talk about racism by some New Zealanders, display a form of microaggression and contribute to the very issues of racism in New Zealand. In particular, rather than expressing outright racist views or committing racist crimes, they display a form of microinvalidation through the way that they aim to "exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group" (Torino et al., 2019: 4). This is in spite of many New Zealanders coming forth and talking about racism as a way to fix the issues, which are subsequently met with attempts to shut them down, and instead shift the focus to another country or completely deny the existence of racism in New Zealand.

The way in which the techniques of comparisons and racism denials act as disruptive strategies when talking about racism is something that the stories of Asian New Zealanders aim to counter. The importance of acknowledging racism as a problem and the use of stories to create discussion and awareness for social change are recognised in the stories that I present in the following chapters of my thesis. Next, I discuss further examples of comparisons and racism denials by referring to a shared story of racism in New Zealand.

Comments that compare incidents of racism within a New Zealand context as a response to a story of racism

In this section of the chapter, I will introduce another case of a story of racism that was shared online. Despite this story being based on a specific incident of racism that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic as opposed to Waititi's statement on more general issues of racism, they share similarities through the way that they were both met with comparisons and denials. However, in this case, many of the comparisons were between different generations and minorities in New Zealand. With this technique, the commenters acknowledge the presence of racism in some way by referring to historical accounts of discrimination but share similar traits in that they aim to invalidate the experiences of racism by again comparing them to different situations that are considered "worse" and "more serious". Through this, it is not much different from the comments of comparisons above and therefore I argue that they still display and contribute to the very issues of microaggression in New Zealand.

This story was gathered from Reddit which is as an online website for discussions and sharing content. Posted in the same sub-reddit¹⁷ as the comments of comparisons and racism denial I presented above, it drew 420 comments from other members in the r/newzealand sub-reddit of which I will discuss some particular comments of comparisons that were made below. After this, I will include some other comments that were different to the comments of comparisons and denials of racism by showing examples of those that acknowledge racism in New Zealand. Doing so, I aim to demonstrate a contrast of the views and attitudes of New Zealanders to show that not every New Zealander compares and denies racism, but actually contributes to making a change on the issue of racism. From this, I am able to continue discussing microaggression into the following chapters by focussing on Asian New Zealanders who use stories as their way of talking about racism and making a change.

¹⁷ Sub-reddit refers to a section or community on Reddit that has a focus on a particular topic or theme. For example, the sub-reddit r/newzealand mainly consists of content related to New Zealand.

Figure 3 - Story of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism on Reddit (Reddit, 2020)

As the post above shows, the original poster explains a situation where their wife was a target of racism in the streets of Wellington. Written in simple terms and straight to the point of accusing the group of displaying racist gestures and comments, the poster writes that this incident has affected their perception on New Zealand in terms of acceptance and level of racism that are widely believed by “everyone”. Already expecting some forms of comparison and racism denial, I scrolled through the comment section and again found comments of varying nature. One comment read,

Figure 4 - Comparative comment in response to the story of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism on Reddit (Reddit, 2020)

Another comment which I included as a shortened version in the introduction read,

Babbyodafans · 1y · edited 1y

Harden up. At least you weren't put in classes that didn't let you attend uni like the Irish were when they arrived. Nor are there signs, no Koreans need apply. She's not being deported like the Pacific Islanders in the middle of the night, there is no poll tax on her head like the Chinese and there are programmes in most corporate workplaces to ensure she has more chance than a pakeha male of getting a job. It's just words. I think it's totally unacceptable but if it ruined your night you are too soft

↑ -34 ↓ Share Report Save

Figure 5 - Comparative comment in response to the story of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism on Reddit (Reddit, 2020)

Matching the other comments of comparisons discussed above, these comments similarly draw on the effect of downplaying the urgency of racism in New Zealand by uttering a form of the expression - “at least it’s not as bad as...”. However, the second comment exhibits some significant features that distinguishes itself from most others; namely, it displays a different sort of comparison where rather than comparing other countries’ situations of racism, it brings in other (historical) incidents of racism in a New Zealand context. They begin by referring to discriminatory practices felt by early Irish immigrants before moving onto the anti-immigration discrimination that Chinese and Pacific Island communities faced in the late 19th and 20th centuries respectively. Furthermore, while the commenter’s identity is disembodied due to the pseudonymous and anonymous nature of Reddit, they display a form of “inverted racism” where the poster of the original comment is considered “oversensitive, exaggerating, and intolerant” (van Dijk, 1992: 90) with comments like “harden up” and “it’s just words”. They then proceed to reverse the accusation of racism, by referring to affirmative action as a disadvantage to “pakeha males”, ultimately shifting the blame and countering the role of the victim (Louw & van Ommen, 2019).

In the same thread, they replied to a response made by another user who slated the original comment by saying,

Babbyodafans · 1y

Why is she unsafe? Literally nothing is happening to ruin her future, harm her or remove her from the country (as experienced by prior immigrants). She's not unsafe she just heard some mean words. It's deplorable and by all means ask for it to stop but she needs to move on not have it ruin her night. It's just so fragile.

↑ -8 ↓ Share Report Save

Figure 6 - Comparative comment in response to the story of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism on Reddit (Reddit, 2020)

I stated above that these comments are slightly different to other narratives of comparisons by the way that they compare incidents of racism within the New Zealand context. Yet, similar to other comments where “true racism” was attributed to those seen in South Africa’s apartheid, slavery in the United States, or simply racism in those countries today, the benchmark for “true racism” in New Zealand in these comments appear to be around the historical discriminatory laws that were instilled during different episodes of immigration. Undeniably, those discriminatory incidents in New Zealand’s history like the Dawn Raids in the 1970s were indeed some low moments which the New Zealand government even acknowledges (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021c). And although these comments that I discussed in this section admit that there is racism in New Zealand, or rather there are some racist people, they nevertheless resort to deflecting the issues of racism by referring them to other situations. They effectively compare and essentially deny racism ending in a similar result.

Again, because the commenters’ identities are disembodied, it is impossible to analyse their comments based on their physical and personal characteristics. However, their comments alone indicate the problematic and disruptive nature in the context of discussion on racism discourse. When considering these comments to the earlier examples in this chapter, I am able to use these to support my argument that they display forms of microaggressions themselves, not because they are “covert” forms of racism, but because they invalidate others’ experiences, which in these cases seem intentional. However, they also contribute to the persisting issues of microaggressions in New Zealand by subsequently denying racism and therefore acting as a narrative against those who attempted to speak out about the problems of racism. These comments can be seen as displays of certain sentiments and attitudes held by New Zealanders towards the topic of racism in New Zealand.

However, contrary to these views, I will now present some examples that oppose the comparisons and denials that were expressed by showing other comments within the same threads and comment sections as those discussed above that acknowledge the problem of racism in New Zealand. I aim to present the other side of the narrative by

showing some disparities in the techniques employed by New Zealanders when discussing racism. Doing so will allow me to show how disruptive and problematic comparing and denying racism can be which I hope will be made clearer when “compared” with the comments that display the opposite.

A contrast: New Zealanders who acknowledge racism as a real problem in New Zealand

By illustrating some comments that resorted to comparing and subsequently denying racism in New Zealand, I was able to show some examples of the narratives that New Zealanders employed when talking about racism. I was able to do this by presenting two main cases of racism discourse including Waititi’s experiences and the story of racism that was shared on Reddit which showed some variety of online comments including comparisons of racism in New Zealand to other countries as well as (historical) incidents of discrimination faced by different generations and minorities in New Zealand. While these examples were indicative of certain sentiments and attitudes on racism (and the accusation and confrontation of racism) held by New Zealanders, they were not the only forms of narratives. Below are some comments that express opposite views to the comments of comparisons and denials I discussed above in relation to the story of the racial incident that was shared on Reddit. These two sets of comments were both gathered from the same thread/comment section showing contrasting views on the same exact topic that were expressed by New Zealanders.

SmilieSmith 342d

...

Lots of underlying racism is coming out. People think it's okay now because of events happening around the world. My daughter has an friend born in NZ but of Asian descent. Some other parents have told their kids not to play with her I'm case they get the virus. Its ridiculous. I'm sorry that happened to your wife. Perhaps a positive take away is that as it comes out in the open more, we are more aware that it exists and can work to educate those who were keeping it hidden?

👍 354 💬 Reply

C39J 342d

...

Everyone seems to think that it's OK to speak what they were thinking now that a virus originated in China. We have a real problem, being racist against Asian people here in New Zealand which has gone from being relatively quiet and behind closed doors to blatant, out in public full out attacks.

Everyone's justifying it as "oh but they are near other Chinese people that might have the virus". I was with a Japanese person last week and people literally crossed the road to avoid them. They haven't been to Japan in 10+ years, and have never been to China. Me, on the other hand, being white wouldn't get a second look, despite the fact I was in China in December / Early January.

I'm sorry you're experiencing the bullshit, and I sure hope it gets better soon. I'll continue to call out racism as I see it and hope everyone else starts realizing it's actually not OK. We don't need closed-minded garbage like that here.

18 Reply

barry_dingle_nz 342d

...

The problem is NZers mostly think NZers are not racist therefore all the casual racism is fine and normal. Its very bad in the older generations but goes through all ages. But why improve ourselves when we see ourselves as a multicultural utopia right?

And bring on the down votes for pointing this out.

215 Reply

[deleted] · 1y · edited 1y

> Everyone loves to say that we are a multicultural nation that accepts all cultures.

Yeah, that's what people like to say. Definitely not the case for as long as I've lived here. I'm sincerely sorry that happened to you. You shouldn't have to endure it, and you shouldn't feel the need to apologise for calling it out.

The problem with NZ racism is that most NZers like to believe we aren't racist, and so racism gets brushed under the carpet or normalised. Unfortunately we are not the exception to the rule and we all need to be a bit more aware of this. Comments like "at least we're not *insert way worse country here*" do nothing but show they have lower standards for human decency. Racism has always been an issue in NZ. Wish more people would acknowledge it.

I'm white AF, but I STG if I hear one more offhanded generalisation about Maori/Asians/whatever I'm going to disown my family. I've already decided against going home for the holidays. Don't like being around it, and I don't like hearing it doesn't exist, either. Problem is, I hear it from a lot of young people too :/

3 Share Report Save

Figure 7 - Four comparative comments in response to the story of COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism on Reddit (Reddit, 2020)

Above are four examples of comments that acknowledge racism as a real problem in New Zealand. They all display this by explicitly stating the presence of racism as well

as issues on the way that racism is perceived in New Zealand. Referring to the main story these comments are responding to, the original poster writes,

What's happening with racism in NZ? Everyone loves to say that we are a multicultural nation that accepts all cultures... If you see your friends or family members making racist comments, please speak up. This has to stop.

In addition to the way that these comments are responding to and agreeing with the original poster, they also directly counter the comments of comparisons and subsequent denials as a straight contrast. All of the comments immediately refute the common attitudes I discussed above including the lack of acknowledgement on racism in New Zealand as well as the associated behaviours such as the use of comparisons as ways to downplay the seriousness and prevalence of racism. By talking about these issues, the commenters also recognise these specific attitudes and behaviours as problematic and disruptive towards the (increasing) efforts of anti-racism discourse and rhetoric. The difference is shown through the way that the comments that acknowledge racism criticise those who deny racism and work towards fixing the problem, while the comments that compare and deny racism simply turn a blind eye.

This is summed up in the last comment where the commenter writes,

The problem with NZ racism is that most NZers like to believe we aren't racist, and so racism gets brushed under the carpet or normalised. Unfortunately we are not the exception to the rule and we all need to be a bit more aware of this... Racism has always been an issue in NZ. Wish more people would acknowledge it.

They go on further to recognise the narrative technique of comparing racism to other countries as useless and only damaging by saying that they "do nothing but show they have lower standards for human decency". This is also implied in the second comment through a sarcastic rhetoric question, "but why improve ourselves when we see ourselves as a multicultural utopia right?" In general, these four comments express similar thoughts and intentions against narratives of comparisons and racism denials showing a different side of the narrative on racism.

I compared these comments as a way to demonstrate the contrast between two different sets of narratives that New Zealanders have employed when talking about racism in New Zealand. While it is clear that the earlier comments I discussed above were problematic and disruptive through their ways of downplaying and subsequently denying racism as an issue in New Zealand, the four comments that I have presented in this section aim to work through these issues by first acknowledging racism in New Zealand. Moreover, these commenters do not set out to compare issues of racism in New Zealand but rather confront them based on the experiences and beliefs of themselves and their peers. As I analyse the four main stories of Asian New Zealanders in the following chapters, the significance of these comments will become clearer through the way they approach the issue of racism in New Zealand in similar fashion of acknowledgement as well as creating awareness and discussion on racism.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the different narratives that were employed by many New Zealanders when talking about issues of racism. Primarily, I discussed the expression “it’s not as bad as...” which was a common expression that was used as a way of comparing racism in New Zealand to other countries in terms of the gravity and prevalence. I showed that these comments of comparisons subsequently denied racism in New Zealand which I argued were displays as well as contributions to the very issues of racism themselves, specifically microaggression.

I then discussed comments that acknowledged racism as a real problem in New Zealand by way of contrasting to present the other side of the narrative. By doing so, I aimed to show how disruptive the comments of comparisons can be, especially within racism discourse, which allowed me to set the preliminary context for the following chapters as I analyse and discuss the stories of Asian New Zealanders.

For these narratives, I focused on Waititi’s statements on racism in New Zealand which I considered the reignition of the recent nationwide discourse on racism. Among the multiple statements where he recalled his experiences growing up and facing racism in New Zealand, they were met with backlash and strong defensiveness reactions from

many New Zealanders including public figures and online commenters. During the discussion of the comments of comparisons and denial that I gathered from various online sources, I was able to apply them to some concepts including white defensiveness (Harris, 2018), denial of racism (van Dijk, 1992; 1993), and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). This aided the analysis of the implications as well as the significance of the comments in support of my argument that these strategic and disruptive narratives displayed and contributed to issues of microaggression. I demonstrated this by also presenting another story of racism that was posted on Reddit which was met with similar responses of comparisons and denials but also comments that contrasted these attitudes as discussed above.

In the following chapter, I will continue and expand the discussion on racism in New Zealand by analysing four main stories of Asian New Zealanders. I will discuss microaggression as a concept in detail by referring to the stories. By doing so, I aim to show how microaggression is the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face and the effects of microaggression on their identity and belonging in New Zealand. My aim is that this chapter will serve as a preface for the following chapters by situating racism in the context of both in New Zealand and the online setting.

Chapter Three

But it is bad enough here

Microaggression and stories of Asian New Zealanders – hurt, frustration, and anger

Each time a stranger greets me with ‘konichiwa’ or ‘ni hao’, or asks me where I’m from, I know they’re seeing me as Asian first – my New Zealandness doesn’t enter the equation until I refute their reading (Ng, 2017: 26).

The “old fashioned” type where racial hatred was overt, direct, and often intentional, has increasingly morphed into a contemporary form that is subtle, indirect, and often disguised... The “new” manifestation of racism has been likened to carbon monoxide, invisible, but potentially lethal (Sue et al., 2009: 88).

In this chapter, I will focus on microaggression as a concept for discussing the stories of Asian New Zealanders that were written and shared based on lived experiences of racism in New Zealand. I argue that microaggression is the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face by analysing multiple components of the stories that help make sense of their significance. This includes the effects and implications of microaggressions on Asian New Zealand communities as well as the magnitude of the impact on individuals. I show that notions of being ‘othered’ in their own country and the subsequent feelings of hurt, frustration, disappointment, and anger on their senses of identity and belonging were results of continuous and repeated acts of microaggressions. Rather than singular incidents, multiple and ongoing experiences of microaggressions have been detrimental as well as distressing for many Asian New Zealanders as expressed in the stories.

I will introduce four main stories from my participants who identify as Asian New Zealanders as well as supplementary stories for the discussion and analysis on microaggressions in this chapter. I will also refer to the definitions of microaggression

that I explained in the introduction of my thesis as a way to help the reader understand the significance of the concept to the stories and my thesis as a whole. By building upon the previous chapter where I discussed comparisons and denials of racism, this chapter demonstrates some other direct manifestations of microaggression and the prevalence of these issues based on lived experiences which were expressed through stories.

Overt racism in New Zealand – Microaggression is not the only type of racism

Before I begin the discussion on microaggressions and the stories of Asian New Zealanders, it is important to add that this chapter (and the thesis in general) does not suggest that microaggression is the only type of racism that Asian New Zealanders face nor does it suggest that it is an exclusive problem to New Zealand. For example, microaggressions were evidently the most reported in anti-Asian racism surveys in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic as I discussed in the introduction while overt forms of racism, or “macroaggression” (Levchak, 2018), also exist in New Zealand. For instance, there were a series of violent attacks on Asian students in Auckland in 2016 which prompted concerns about increasing violence of racial motivations (Tait, 2016) and a murder of a Korean tourist in 2003 by a group of white supremacists in the West Coast (Lynch, 2010).

The most obvious “overt” incident in recent years, however, is the Christchurch mosque terror attacks in 2019 which resulted in 51 dead and a further 40 injured as Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called it “New Zealand’s darkest day” (Quinlivan & O’Connor, 2021). Perhaps the biggest discussion in the aftermath was the racial motivation behind the shooting as it was understood that New Zealand’s Muslim communities were purposely targeted due to the perpetrator’s beliefs of white supremacism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia (Crothers & O’Brien, 2020; Zaki, 2021). Immediately, phrases of “this isn’t New Zealand” and “they are us” were said to reaffirm New Zealand’s stance on anti-racism, inclusion, and diversity (Satherley, 2019; Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2019).

However, contrary to these claims, Chief New Zealand Human Rights Commissioner Paul Hunt stated that “[the shooting] has to be seen in the context of years of hate crime, going back generations” (Hunt in Matthews, 2019: para. 18). In relation, the Christchurch shooting perhaps draws parallels to the killing of Joe Kum Yung in 1905 by white supremacist Lionel Terry due to similar reasons of “promoting his crusade to rid New Zealand of non-European immigrants” (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021a). Spoonley (2019; 2020) also provided his own argument by writing, “there is a tendency to see the Christchurch attacks as a one-off or an aberration” but with the continuing presence of far-right extremists, it should end New Zealand’s innocence about right-wing terrorism.

Although hate crimes are generally classed differently to microaggressions as per the definitions of the concept given by Sue et al. (2007) and Torino et al. (2019), Morris in his cartoon strip “This is Us” suggested that the Christchurch shooting “exposed ugly truths about New Zealand”. In addition, he claimed that “[the shooting] didn’t come of nowhere... Overt acts of horror are built on top of a lifetime of smaller everyday assumptions, structures, and systems that reinforce an undercurrent of white superiority” (Morris, 2019: para. 2).

In terms of this, overt acts of racism like those discussed above are often given more attention due to the explicit and unambiguous nature of the acts; when considering the Christchurch shooting, it is impossible to deny the fatal consequences that occurred. In short, these acts are often the most visible to the majority of people and therefore easiest to be labelled as *racism*. For contrast, Sue et al. describe microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily indignities” but often “ambiguous and nebulous... that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge” (2007: 272-273). Despite this, I argue that acts of microaggression are equally as impactful and damaging to the recipient and, as Morris suggests, have similar contributions to issues of racism in New Zealand. However, this is of course not to downplay the Christchurch shooting from being considered an atrocity or a horror nor is it to dissect the event of the shooting itself and investigate its origins.

As Pierce states on the dangers of microaggression, “*the cumulative effect [of microaggression] to the victim and to the victimiser is of an unimaginable magnitude*”

(1970: 266, emphasis mine). As I move onto the stories of my participants below, I will demonstrate the level of impact that microaggressions, which are often inflicted constantly, repeatedly, and ongoing, have on Asian New Zealanders by discussing the effects, implications, and feelings that were expressed in the stories. By doing so, I am also able to show how prevalent issues of microaggressions are among Asian New Zealanders and in New Zealand which I argue is the predominant form of racism that Asian New Zealanders face.

Explaining and situating the concept of microaggression in New Zealand

To set an understanding of the significance of microaggression for this chapter, I will first briefly outline again the components of the concept in relation to the given definitions in the introduction. I will also situate this in a New Zealand context as a way to lay out the framework for the discussions on the stories.

Explaining the concept of microaggression, Pierce writes that “most [racist] offensive actions are not gross and crippling. They are *subtle and stunning*” (1970: 266, emphasis mine). In addition, Sue et al. describe this as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, negative slights and insults” (2007: 24). In the introduction of my thesis, I expanded on the definition of microaggression based on the multiple conceptions of types including *microassault*, *microinsult*, and *microinvalidation* (Sue et al., 2007; Torino et al., 2019; DeAngelis, 2009). In short, the differences of these types are the way that they inflict harm on the recipient: *microassault* refers to blatant attacks that convey discriminatory and biased sentiments, *microinsult* refers to unintentional acts that convey rudeness or insensitivity towards a person’s identity, and *microinvalidation* refers to acts that negate or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential realities of the target group (Sue et al., 2007; Torino et al., 2019).

To situate and understand these in the context of Asian New Zealanders, microaggressions can take forms through the use of racial epithets like ‘chink’ and ‘gook’ as deliberate means of singling out and causing harm, thinking all Asians are

good at maths or only relevant because of affirmative action, and finally the “classic” question of “where do you really come from?” or compliments on their English proficiency. These are just some examples of microaggressions that I have personally experienced growing up, and still continue to experience living in New Zealand. Considering this, a significant feature of microaggressions is the way that they are constant and ongoing acts of racism rather than an isolated act, and as with my own experiences of microaggression, the stories of my participants are often described and recalled in general terms which indicate this notion. From this, I argue that the feelings expressed in the stories are based on an accumulation of feelings resulted from continuous and repeated acts of microaggression to the point of finally speaking up and sharing their story. The extent to which microaggressions affect the recipient can only be fully understood once this notion is acknowledged. As I discuss below the stories of my participants who experienced these forms of microaggressions, I am able to demonstrate how prevalent and damaging microaggressions are towards Asian New Zealanders.

As Pierce explains,

The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly... the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimiser is of an unimaginable magnitude (1970: 266).

I will discuss below the experiences of David Fong and Ally McCrow-Young whose stories were published in *That's Us*¹⁸, an anti-racism campaign which was initiated by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission. As I analyse the stories by examining the language and approach as well as the actual content, it is clear that they are not based on single incidents of microaggression but rather cumulative incidents that were experienced over a lifetime. This is explained as one of the more frustrating and damaging aspects of facing microaggressions to the point of identity crisis and being othered. To further understand the stories and experiences of my participants, in the following chapter, I will discuss *why* and *how* the stories were shared which will give a

¹⁸ In the following chapter, I describe *That's Us* in more detail along with the other online sources that I used to gather the stories from.

stronger indication of the implications and effects of microaggression towards Asian New Zealanders, but also on what is being done about it. After the stories of David and Ally, I will discuss the stories of Participants A and B.

David Fong's story: "Where are you *really* from?" – frustrations of facing the same questions over and over again

In David's story (2016), he shares his thoughts on microaggression in New Zealand by uttering the three questions he gets asked the most: "Where are you from? No, where are you really from? Do you work in IT?" and recounting incidents he experienced in relation to these questions. David writes about a particular incident he had experienced where his identity as a New Zealander was questioned in this way,

One time, the husband of a staff member was introduced to people in our workspace, and he was asking people where they are from. As many staff are from overseas, this was fair enough. But when he asked me where I'm from, when I replied, "Lower Hutt", he just stared at me.

"No, I said where are you from?" He said, again. He had assumed that I didn't understand the question.

I replied again. "Lower Hutt".

He asked again, "Well where were you born?"

I replied again. "Lower Hutt". Then he just looked at me and stormed off angrily.

In relation to this story, he later writes,

I was born in Lower Hutt and grew up in Lower Hutt, so I describe myself as a Hutt boy. But I say that ironically because people don't really think of me as a Hutt boy because I don't match their expectations of what a Hutt boy looks like.

The above sequences in David's story show clear real-life examples of microaggression where David's outward Asian appearance was the main causal factor for the repeating of the question "where are you from?" He says that while the first question was fine due to many of his co-workers coming from overseas (and therefore

was a reasonable topic of conversation during the specific moment), it was the way that the question was repeated despite having already given an answer. In this case, David's identity as a New Zealander was negated and automatically assumed to be a foreigner with continuous utterances of "where are you from?" in attempt to receive the expected answer (most likely of an ethnic minority or Asian country) (Liang et al., 2004). It displayed a form of microinvalidation where the effect was to negate David's identity as a New Zealander and instead see him as a perpetual foreigner despite being a fifth generation Chinese New Zealander (Sue et al., 2007). David shares another incident of microaggression where his identity was similarly questioned.

A few years back I was in a café on Lambton Quay, sitting there eating chips and reading a magazine. When a middle-aged Pākehā woman sitting nearby staring at me leant over and asked:

"Do you actually understand any of that?"

"Of course I do, you stupid cow!" I replied, in my head, while my mouth simply said: "Yes, I do." My conditioning to 'take it on the chin' kicked in.

Looking down her nose at me, she replied: "Oh, I thought you were one of those FOREIGN STUDENTS that doesn't understand English."

This excerpt shows another example of microaggression, specifically microinvalidation, through the way that David's outward Asian appearance was again the main instigating factor for this particular interaction. In this case, rather than being questioned multiple times where he is from, the woman in the story automatically assumed David was a foreign student and not a New Zealander. This is made clear through the woman's assumption that David was not able to speak nor read English because he looks Asian. In a situation like this, I find it hard to imagine that this sort of interaction would have been played out with every person in the café who was reading at the time. He continues the story by saying,

Little did she know that I used to teach English to speakers of other languages, and at the time, my knowledge of English grammar was well above that of the average New Zealander.

When these things happen, it's usually in a social setting, and you don't want to make a scene even though they are incredibly rude. This woman was clearly an educated person but being educated doesn't stop someone from being offensive or ignorant.

Torino et al. distinguish microaggression from everyday incivilities¹⁹, explaining that individuals who have experienced microaggressions in the past (as well as those who are aware of historical or systemic discrimination) are likely to be “more conscious of how their identity groups impact interpersonal dynamics” (2019: 5). In these cases, rather than brushing off the interactions as everyday incivilities or minor slights, David was immediately aware of the connotations of the comments as racially motivated based on his reaction and response to the situations as well as the way he described them in his story. In relation to Torino's explanation above, it is likely that these feelings were not based on single one-off incidents that were easily dismissible but rather an accumulation from multiple incidents of microaggression that David has experienced in the past. This also explains David's rationale of how and why he reacted in the way he did.

David also talks about another incident where his identity as a New Zealander was once again questioned and doubted during a brief interaction with a flight attendant who said, “Really? Well, you don't look like one” after being told where he was from. After contemplating whether he should confront the flight attendant or “let it slide”, he asked her,

If I were white, would you have asked me that question?

The flight attendant responded by saying,

Oh well, when people hear my accent they always ask where I'm from.

His discomfort and reason of confrontation in the situation are revealed when he says,

¹⁹ Torino et al. (2019) give examples of “everyday incivilities” as “when strangers bump into you without apologising [or when] someone takes the parking space you were waiting for” (2019: 5).

But that's because of how you talk not because of how you look. You don't walk down the street, and people don't ask where you come from whereas I get asked where I come from all the time.

In this last incident, David's reaction and response are more serious than the other two as he decides to take action by confronting the flight attendant. As seen in the last sentence of the excerpt, he vents his frustration at being "asked where I come from all the time" which was the essence of all three incidents in his story. Unlike the flight attendant who said that she also gets asked the question of where she comes from because of her accent, David's experiences of this are far more common and have a more immediate effect due to his appearance being the main causal factor for these questions. He explains that he faces these questions in various different settings including his workplace, in the public, and during brief interactions with strangers despite having a perfect Kiwi accent and ultimately being a born and bred New Zealander.

Ravishankar (2020) argues that questions like "where are you *really* from?" can lead to feelings of alienation and othering by reducing an individual's identity to a social group, city, or culture, and thus ridding a sense of belonging on their own accord. Ravishankar also argues that "where are you *really* from?" can be received as a reinforcement and magnification of differences between marginalised communities and majority demographics which can often reflect existing (and unequal) power structures. Furthermore, Torino et al. (2019) argue that microaggressions have a more powerful impact on those who frequently and/or intensely experience them compared to those who don't, which gives separates microaggressions from everyday incivilities. This distinction as well as the effects of "where are you *really* from?" show how constantly experiencing these forms of microaggressions can be damaging by ultimately building up and serving as reminders for the frustrations and distress which epitomises David's feelings and reactions to the situations.

I am able to recognise as well as understand these feelings by interpreting his use of general terms e.g. "people *don't really think of me* as a Hutt boy", "when these things happen, it's *usually* in a social setting", "I get asked where I come from *all the time*" (emphasis mine). The element of microaggressions as incessant and multiple race-

related acts that are severely damaging inherently contribute towards the feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger that he expressed through his story. David uses these particular incidents as representations to encapsulate his overall feelings and experiences of microaggression because it is impossible to recite *every* act of microaggression experienced, just as it would be impossible to recite every act of everyday incivilities experienced.

Ally McCrow-Young's story: "I'm a Kiwi" – a robotic response to reaffirm her identity as a New Zealander

This next story is written and shared by Ally (2016) who, like David, identifies as a Chinese New Zealander. She writes of her experiences of facing microaggression in New Zealand to similar points of frustration and distress as well as subsequent issues of her identity, belonging, and acceptance as a result. Below is an example of how Ally perceives and describes a typical interaction whenever her identity is brought into conversation,

"Yes" I would answer, "I was born here, in Auckland."

...

"Yes, so was my mum. Also Auckland."

...

"Before that? There was no 'before' that, I mean, I think mum moved from Ponsonby to the North Shore at some point, if that's what you mean." (It was never what they meant).

...

"No I don't play the piano. Or the cello."

...

"Thanks, yes, my English is pretty good." (It better bloody be good, considering it's my only language).

The excerpt above shows how Ally generalises and encapsulates her experiences of microaggressions as she describes the times whenever the same set of questions of “Where are you *really* from?” were uttered in a comparable way to David. In addition, she also recalls the other questions and comments she regularly gets asked such as whether she plays an instrument (which is a common Asian stereotype – especially instruments like the piano, cello, or violin) as well as compliments on her proficiency in English which she states is in fact her only language. Immediately through the way that she describes her experiences in a very generalised way (and not particularly referring to specific moments) shows how much she gets asked the same set of questions repeatedly to her frustration and anger. Similarly, Ally is a born and bred second-generation Chinese New Zealander whose outward Asian appearance is the main causal factor for the acts of microaggression she faces; and in the same way as David, it is hard to imagine situations like this happening if Ally would not look Asian. Mayeda says that because Asians are regularly considered to be migrants, it creates an automatic distinction with White/European communities, and therefore predisposes Asian New Zealanders to be non-New Zealanders (Te, 2021). Ally exemplifies and vocalises this notion by saying,

Why is it that a second generation Kiwi Asian gets the third degree about her ancestry, while her South African-born (white) friend beside her gets a simple “Hey mate?”.

In contrast to these situations in New Zealand, Ally describes her time in an overseas country when she wasn’t asked the particular set of questions,

When I arrived three years ago in Malmö, in the south of the country, I was struck that when I told people I was a New Zealander, it went unquestioned. None of the usual follow ups ensued, like “no, but where are you really from?” Instead, what I got was more along the lines of “New Zealand, cool! I really like Lord of the Rings.”

Ally continues by saying,

What was going on here? Where was the usual string of questions about the origins of my family tree, or the precise boat my great grandfather took from

China back in the day? Where were the compliments about how well I've grasped the English language? Growing up in New Zealand as a second generation Kiwi Chinese, I've had to prove the extent of my 'Kiwi-ness' time and time again. It became habitual to me; I learnt a series of phrases to repeat robotically whenever the inevitable interrogation began.

In the last excerpt, Ally explains the frequency of the comments and questions she gets asked in relation to her identity/appearance to the extent that her responses have become habitual and automatic. She writes that she “learnt a series of phrases to repeat robotically” to the point of shock in the unfamiliar and unprepared situation when these questions were not asked. Similar to the way that David wrote his story, Ally's story is based on general recollections and overall feelings that are derived from constant and ongoing multiple experiences of microaggressions that are difficult to specify and are instead encapsulated in a few select (hypothetical but actually experienced) examples. She continues her story by listing her responses to the “inevitable interrogation” by writing,

It got to the point where if I had to take a test on being a legit Kiwi, I would ace it. Prove my Kiwi-ness? No problem! Look at how much Marmite I eat, see how many pairs of jandals I own, and here's a picture of me and some mates with the giant L&P bottle. I could prove my Kiwi-ness till the cows come home.

The excerpt above demonstrates an example of what Cheryan and Monin argue on the social identity threat where “targets are often quite aware of identity denial and react by altering their behaviour when the threat looms large or when it is perceived to do so” (2005: 717). They expand on this idea by saying that identity assertion is a typical response to targeted identity denial where “one proves to others that one belongs in the in-group... by appearing more prototypical by engaging in prototypical behaviour or displaying evidence of past prototypical behaviour” (2005: 718).

For Ally, her evidence of (past) “prototypical behaviour” (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001) is by listing and saying she has interacted with some iconic New Zealand things including Marmite, jandals, and L&P to prove her Kiwi-ness. Because her self-assertion as a New Zealander is often questioned and rejected, she explains that she had to

resort to these ways to prevent being othered which is described as a stereotype which posits that “members of ethnic minorities will always be seen as the ‘other’ in the White Anglo-Saxon dominant society” (Huynh et al., 2011: 1). Chan and Spoonley argue that “a single and homogenous view of identity... creates a binary division between one group and the defined ‘other’” (2017: 19) which fits in with a common misconception that ‘Kiwi’ and ‘Chinese’ or ‘Asian’ are mutually exclusive (Wong, 2016; Ng, 2017a; Bartley, 2004; Devos & Banaji, 2005). The effect of this type of microaggression has led to Ally’s identity as a New Zealander being negated and instead conveyed as Chinese/Asian or a perpetual foreigner to her frustration.

Ally describes her feelings of having to prove her “Kiwi-ness”,

But should I have to? Should anyone really be forced to demonstrate the validity of their Kiwi-ness, therefore asserting their right to be here? It shouldn't be the case that I feel the most like a Kiwi only after leaving New Zealand. And I'm betting I'm not alone in this feeling.

As I have discussed with David’s story, Ally’s story is also based on multiple experiences of microaggression she has faced rather than single incidents. Ally recalls and writes her story by referring to her experiences through general terms which represent her overall experience and view of microaggression. For example, the first excerpt shows a typical conversation she finds herself in when her identity is brought up, but it is written in an unspecific way and is instead described through her “learned phrases” that she repeats robotically in situations like these. Based on these stories, and likely for many Asian New Zealanders, multiple, constant, and ongoing experiences of microaggressions commonly lead to thoughts and reactions becoming internalised and instead portrayed through preformulated and automated responses because of the familiarity to these situations of microaggression. In David’s story, his ways of responding were to repeat his answer, internalise his thoughts, and finally confront the situation in the three incidents respectively discussed above.

For David and Ally, these experiences have become forms of trauma as feelings of hurt, disappointment, distress, and anger are reintroduced every time acts of microaggressions are faced. These serve as reminders for the effects and implications

that microaggressions have including forms of othering, rejection of a New Zealand identity, and the incredibly frustrating need to constantly repeat sentences “robotically” in response to the question “where are you *really* from?” as displayed in the stories above. As Wu, an Asian American writer, suggests, ““where are you from?” is a question I like answering [but] “where are you really from?” is a question I really hate answering” (2002: 79). In these cases, the separation between the first question of “where are you from?” and “where are you *really* from?” is examined through the intention of the reiteration where it is often a question of doubt, assumption, and external categorisation of the other’s identity (Fiske, 2019; Torino et al., 2019).

Baldwin writes that in New Zealand, “one less visible form of racism I often encounter is the need for others to define who I am and where I belong within society based on my racial appearance” (Baldwin, 2016: n.p). This leads to her plea for people to “consider their motivation behind the question “Where are you from?” before they ask rather than to [just] have their curiosity satiated”. Likewise, Ng writes,

I was always trying to box at shadows and fit in and seem less Chinese than I was. Thinking back on it, I’m like ‘Why was I doing that? What was I trying to prove and who was I trying to prove that to?... The “of course you’re a New Zealander, your family has been here for generations” angle is cold comfort (Ng, 2017b: para. 11).

Both the stories of David and Ally and of other Asians epitomise the characteristics of microaggressions as they express feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, and anger based on their constant experiences of microaggressions that are evidently embedded in their daily lives which they cannot avoid. Although there are definitely more stories and examples of microaggressions that Asian New Zealanders experience that I have not presented, I used the stories of my participants as I felt they were illustrative of typical acts of microaggressions and the subsequent feelings and effects that usually derive from these experiences. This is based on stories and other incidents I have seen and heard but also from my own experiences of microaggressions as an Asian New Zealander. As Sue argues,

Microaggressions have the lifelong insidious effects of silencing, invalidating, and humiliating the identity and/or voices of those who are oppressed. Although their lethality is less obvious, they nevertheless grind down and wear out the victims (2010: 66).

Below are two more stories of microaggressions that were written and shared by Asian New Zealanders on Facebook; they both display similar feelings and themes to the stories of David and Ally including issues on identity, belonging, and acceptance which were seemingly surfaced and reinforced due to global events of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant A's story: A COVID-19 microaggression and rupture

This next story of Participant A is about their experience of microaggression/racism related to COVID-19 and shows an example of a typical incident of anti-Asian racism of the kind that that increased and worsened since the start of the pandemic, as I discussed in the introduction. Although the story revolves around a single incident of microaggression/racism, it has similar elements to the stories of David and Ally including issues of identity and belonging as an Asian New Zealander as well as feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger that were expressed as a result of facing microaggression. This story, in addition to the way that it illustrates COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism, also features similar characteristics to the overall experiences and again shows how prevalent microaggressions are towards Asian New Zealanders (Foon, 2020; Stop AAPI Hate, 2021).

This story was posted in a Facebook group (mentioned in the introduction) in early March 2020 which was not long after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in New Zealand. Also around the time was the change to New Zealand border controls, which resulted in a ban on all non-citizen/resident arrivals from China as cases of COVID-19 increased around the world. As the virus is reported to have originated in China, a lot of COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism around the world have been related to Sinophobia and/or anti-Asian sentiments (Shi, 2020; Viladrich, 2021).

Participant A starts their story by describing the beginning of the incident,

Yesterday around 8pm, my partner and I decided that we needed to stop by the Chemist Warehouse in Botany... We parked our van right in front of the entrance of Chemist Warehouse, next to our van was another car with (what I presume) an islander mother in the drivers seat, her son standing next to the drivers side of the car with his girlfriend...

As I exited out of my car, I made eye contact with the son and as I got out he loudly says to his mom "watch out for the corona virus", his girlfriend then exclaims "babe!" in that tone that girlfriends do when you shouldn't be saying something.

As seen in the excerpt above, Participant A was accused of having or perhaps being the coronavirus (COVID-19) by an unrelated stranger in a car park. This incident was unprovoked and developed out of nothing, merely instigated by encountering another individual in a public space. In the context of increases in anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the specific type of microaggression they faced, it is implied by Participant A that, like David and Ally, their Asian appearance was the main cause as they write in the beginning of the story, "to add context to this story, I'm full Vietnamese born and raised in NZ". By the definition of microaggression, it is a clear example as it was a "brief, everyday exchange" that sent a "denigrating message" to the participant "because of their group membership" (Sue, 2010: 24).

This incident is typical of COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism that was seen in New Zealand and in other countries. For example, Stop AAPI Hate (2021) categorised five main types of racism that were reported during the COVID-19 pandemic: verbal harassment, shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. These types of discrimination are listed in accordance to the highest number with verbal harassment making up 68.1% of reports while shunning and physical assault account for 20.5% and 11.1% respectively. In March 2021, Stop AAPI Hate reported an increase of almost 150% compared to the previous year (before the outbreak of COVID-19) at a total of nearly 3,800 incidents.

In a New Zealand context, the NZ Human Rights Commission reported similar results with 4 in 10 respondents in a study saying they have experienced discrimination since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak (HRC, 2021). Of these incidents, online negative comments or abuse were the most prevalent followed by “others glaring/staring on the street” and general public avoidance and shunning compared to other people. Chiang (2021: para. 1-3) writes that,

The spotlight on anti-Asian attacks in America is spilling over to New Zealand and has highlighted the fact that such sentiments lurk beneath the surface here too... New Zealand may seem like a safe haven compared to what’s happening in the US, but the ugly undertones of racism against Asians exist here too.

Participant A continues the story by saying,

I turn around to him and said directly to him “well that’s a fucken racist thing to say”. I was fuming at this point but decided to walk off and continue with my business.

As I entered chemist warehouse, I could see that family was staring at me from the car while I shopped. I would purposely make eye contact with them to let them know I could see what they were doing... I also think this was the point where the family realised I had a European boyfriend.

As the story develops, the first interaction that occurred in the car park continued as Participant A entered the store. The ongoing tension which was sustained by making eye contact and being conscious of the interaction made way for a confrontation in the excerpt below,

The family was still at the same spot when we left. So as we left the entrance, my boyfriend goes to the son “I think you have something to say to my girlfriend”. The mom jumps to his defence and goes “he didn’t mean it that way at all, that’s not what he meant” (total bullshit), at the same time the son jumps in and says “yeah, bro that’s not what I meant”. My boyfriend then responds, “well you shouldn’t be saying shit like that, because it’s offensive”.

This excerpt shows the final set of sequence as Participant A confronts the offender at the same spot in the car park since the first interaction. Eventually after a back and forth exchange, Participant A writes that they received an apology,

... the son responds under his breathe with “well I didn’t mean it in that way, and I’m sorry”. My partner and I get in our van and drove off after this.

Incidents like these remind me that racism is still prominent. It makes me mad because I consider myself a kiwi being born and raised here...

As with the stories and experiences of microaggressions discussed above, the primary cause for acts of microaggression is often due to the appearance of Asian New Zealanders as *Asian*. For example, David stated his frustrations at immediately facing forms of microaggressions such as being asked where he comes from either repeatedly in the same conversation or directly during brief interactions, which displayed effects of conveying David as a non-New Zealander. Interestingly (and unfortunately), Indigenous Canadians have also been subject to similar forms of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic by often being mistaken as Asian due to their appearance. This includes being told, “go home, you don’t belong here” and being physically assaulted in public in the same way many Asians have experienced (Young, 2020). Kambhampaty who documented racism experienced by Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic says,

And now, as in the past, it’s not just Chinese Americans receiving the hatred. Racist aggressors don’t distinguish between different ethnic subgroups – anyone who is Asian or perceived to be Asian at all can be a victim. Even wearing a face mark, an act associated with Asians before it was recommended in the U.S., could be enough to provoke an attack (2020: para. 2).

The issues of facing racism due to appearance were also felt and expressed by Sally Han, a Korean New Zealander who was subject to “COVID-19 related racism”,

I was born and raised here, this is my country, this is my home, and I have to walk around nervous, and my safety is stripped from me, my security is stripped away because of how I look, but I’m a Kiwi. People look at me like I’m not or assume that I’m not a Kiwi (Han in Connor, 2021: para. 5).

She explains these feelings in relation to experiences of harassment, intimidation, and physical attacks since the start of the pandemic,

The lady asked me if I am from where coronavirus is from. I think racism was always there, but it's definitely been amplified and has given bullies the confidence to act out, even more, for sure... It's pretty intense but I'm kind of used to it at this point, which is really messed up because it shouldn't be normalised... I was born here, and I don't know what I did to deserve this (Han in Connor, 2021: para. 9)

Based on the excerpts of the stories shown, it is clear that the incident of microaggression that Participant A experienced also developed similar feelings of hurt, disappointment, and anger as the other stories discussed above. The language and approach of the story is annoyed, irritated, and aggressive, as Participant A writes to get their feelings and understanding of the situation across to the readers. Again, like the stories of David and Ally, I will discuss the purpose and intention of the story of Participant A in depth in the following chapter. But in the context of this chapter, by interpreting multiple components of the stories like the language, style, and approach of the writing as well as the content, I see the stories as ways to vent frustrations and distress from the multiple and ongoing experiences of microaggressions that have accumulated up to this point. I also view these stories and the way they are placed as core-narratives summing up and framing the problem.

Bell argues that storytellers often “do not tend to see such stories as isolated incidents but, rather, as part of the larger historical and ongoing threat they experience from a frequently hostile... society” (2003: 10). Considering this, she argues that timelessness is often a characteristic of stories as “stories about long ago incidents were frequently told not as past history that is over and finished, but an encapsulating lived experience up to and through the present time” (2003: 9). These ongoing acts of microaggressions contribute with one another towards creating an overall intuition, attitude, and emotion as Asian New Zealanders are “under constant race-related stress that requires constant vigilance and psychological arousal” due to the “continual, never-ending, and cumulative” nature of microaggressions (Torino et al., 2019: 9). In addition, Sue

explains the extent to which cumulative experiences of microaggressions can cause harm,

They often appear to be small slights that in isolation produce minimal harm to recipients. However, being exposed to a lifetime of daily assaults, insults, disregard, and disrespect has been shown to be extremely harmful... The effects of microaggressions may be compared to the perennial “**slow death by a thousand cuts**” (2010: 66, emphasis mine).

From the stories I have discussed so far in this chapter, I am able to draw on the incidents of microaggression as examples of a typical narrative of how Asian New Zealanders experience microaggressions. As with the stories discussed above, the acts of microaggression Asian New Zealanders experience are often highly unprovoked and occur “randomly” throughout their everyday life. These experiences of microaggressions then act as forms of rupture to their everyday normal lives as it happens the way microaggressions are defined synonymously – ‘everyday’ and ‘casual’ (Sue, 2010; Wong, 2016; Ng, 2017a; Levchak, 2018).

For example, referring back to David’s story, one incident he describes is how he was subject to microaggression in a café while he was reading a magazine. In this particular incident, the woman is said to have questioned and doubted David’s ability to speak and understand English purely due on his appearance. Based on his initial internalised reaction (by saying “Of course I do, you stupid cow!”) and eventually the writing of his story, he was met with a momentary reminder of his constant and ongoing experiences (and vulnerability) of microaggression. Participant A also describes their story as having taken place as a form of rupture with the incident occurring in a casual and public setting. They eventually explain their reaction to the incident of microaggression in their story by saying, “anyways, we are both fuming and decided to get what we needed and leave” and “incidents like these remind me that racism is still prominent”.

Sue (2010) refers to this narrative as the “microaggression process model” which follows these steps,

- (1) Incident of microaggression.
- (2) Perception and questioning of the incident.

- (3) Immediate response to the incident.
- (4) Interpretation and meaning of the microaggression.
- (5) Consequences, implications, and effects of microaggression to the recipient.

As a whole, I was able to discuss this story of Participant A as another example of how acts of microaggressions affect Asian New Zealanders. Although this story was slightly different compared to the stories of David and Ally as it was mostly centred on a single incident of a COVID-19-related microaggression/racism, it nevertheless demonstrated similar notions such as the feelings of hurt, frustrations, and anger that developed from experiencing multiple and constant acts of microaggressions. As Te (2020) suggests, “[COVID-19 is just] a new, convenient symbol of racism against Asians in New Zealand”.

Participant B’s story: “I gave up on trying to be a Kiwi Banana” – the effects of microaggression towards identity and belonging as an Asian in New Zealand

This story of Participant B, the last of the four main stories I discuss in my thesis, demonstrates similar feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, and anger as a result of facing multiple and constant acts of microaggressions in New Zealand. I will discuss this story to show further examples of how incredibly hurtful and damaging microaggressions are on Asian New Zealanders and how they are subsequently expressed through stories, which in the case of Participant B, his internal and external perception of his identity were severely impacted into adulthood.

This story was shared in the same Facebook group as Participant A’s story and was posted in April 2020 which was also around the time the COVID-19 pandemic was worsening and related anti-Asian racism was intensifying. Although the events in the story are not directly related to COVID-19 like Participant A’s, it is worth considering in the context of anti-Asian racism and the related discourse on racism that appeared during this time. However, as I will discuss below, the feelings and attitudes expressed by Participant B are largely based on his past and ongoing experiences of

microaggression/racism that have ultimately influenced how he sees racism and identity in New Zealand which he shows through his story.

I must admit when I arrived in NZ in the late 90s from China, I was blown away by the green grass and the blue green ocean. People and kids were nice (generally) aside from the usual playground occurrences. Learning English by just playing with friends and the obvious lack of homework was something out of a fairy tale. Then came intermediate school, and things started to go downhill.

*Kids got nasty; I mean really nasty. Casual racist remarks from the select white and brown kids, “ching chong china man”, “f***ing communists” and “go back to where you came from” were shouted across the playground and halls that it became a usual greeting from the “cool crowd”.*

In this excerpt, Participant B begins by writing about his initial impression of New Zealand since his arrival from China to which he lists some of the positive images of New Zealand's nature, the “obvious lack of homework”, and the way of learning English through friends. Generally, the story begins in a positive way by reflecting on his good experiences of New Zealand. However, it takes a sharp turn as Participant B starts to describe some incidents he experienced in school such as racist comments like “ching chong china man”, “f***ing communists”, and “go back to where you came from” which are some very typical comments that Asian New Zealanders face and grow up with; I can confirm this from my personal experiences. Without delving too much into these comments as it is obvious that they are racial and correspond to the definitions of microaggression as discussed above, this story is particularly interesting as Participant B talks about how these collective incidents have largely influenced his perception and understanding of his own identity as an adult. As Bell writes in the cases of storytelling based on experiences of racism, such stories are offered “as emblematic tales that bridge past and present to illustrate the continuities of racism in contemporary daily life” (2003: 9).

He continues his story by saying,

In early adolescence, I gave up on trying to be a Kiwi Banana, it was an evolutionary dead end so to speak. The early years of my upbringing in China

has had a profound impact on my world view that despite spending 2/3 of life here in the West, that it remains a significant part of my self-identity. So there you have it, my life as an inbetweenner, a dude that is not Chinese in the eyes of the Chinese in the traditional sense, and de facto Chinese in the eyes of the non-Chinese.

In this excerpt, Participant B shares his thoughts and perception on his own identity which are based on experiences of living in China and New Zealand as well as the racism he faced growing up. As a result, he explains that, like many Asian New Zealanders, he sees himself as an “inbetweenner” who is (considered) neither full Kiwi nor full Chinese while ultimately giving up on “trying to be a Kiwi Banana”²⁰. This is similar to what Park calls the “marginal man” which refers to a (migrant) person who is,

Living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples, never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now seeks to find a place (1928: 892).

Furthermore, Participant B explains that these feelings were also heavily influenced by his relationship and experiences with other Asian kids at school as he writes,

The worst were actually the other Asian kids, the ones that had either been around longer or had friends to please. Forever shattered was the sense of compassion, empathy, and intervention I expected from other Asians and immigrants whom I thought I could depend on in times of need. How could I blame them? All they wanted was approval from their friends in ‘doing the right thing’ by ganging up on this boy from china.

In the above excerpt, he explains that the racism/bullying experienced from other Asian kids was “the worst” due to the lack of “compassion, empathy, and intervention”

²⁰ ‘Kiwi Banana’ refers to a common term for describing an Asian New Zealander. It is to mean “yellow on the outside, white on the inside” suggesting the “individual has an East-Asian appearance but internally identify with and adopt the values, norms, and behaviours of the dominant culture (e.g., White American, Pākehā) (Cheung, 2018: 18-19). This term is usually reserved for “Westernised Asians” or those “who have forgotten the customs or identity of his or her ancestors” (Lam, 2019: 2-3).

during times of need. In these cases, the issues of identity and facing racism that Participant B already had were impacted further and greater, as he started to experience racism/bullying from those (in other minority communities) who he thought he could depend on. For perspective, the sense of solidarity within Asian communities has been a strong theme in the fight against racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, while there have also been historical examples of this between Asians and Black Americans, and Asians and Māori whose solidarity and “congenial bonds” were results of common affinities in adversity as minority and migrant communities (Ip, 2003a; 2008; Shui, 2020; Chang, 2021). Contrary to this, the bullying and “ganging up” by other Asian kids is explained by Participant B who writes that he feels it was mostly “the ones that had either been around longer or had friends to please”; in other words, as a form of peer pressure to “fit in” (Pellegrini et al, 1999; Espelage, 2002).

Referring back to Han’s experiences of COVID-19 related microaggression that I discussed above, she describes similar experiences of having to change her behaviour and attitude in school to fit in. She explains that because she was regularly made to feel unaccepted by her peers in school, she often attempted to “white-wash” herself including rejecting calls from her mother to avoid speaking Korean as a way to appear less Korean (Han in Connor, 2021). Graham explains this as “internalising negative messages about their racial or ethnic groups, causing them to reject their racial or ethnic identity and adopt white culture” (2001: 42). In regard to this, many respondents to a survey of racism in New Zealand said that racism deeply affected their sense of self-belief which resulted in fear, disengagement in society, and loss of culture and identity (HRC, 2021). As a response to this, Foon (2021) commented “our migrant communities²¹ should not have to change themselves to fit into white society”. However, as the stories above suggest, constant acts of microaggression/racism have indeed led to Asian New Zealanders changing themselves to fit in showing just how impactful microaggressions can be.

²¹ In the survey ‘Drivers of migrant New Zealanders’ experiences of racism’ (HRC, 2021), for the purpose of the survey, they classify “Born in NZ” as a group of migrant status allowing them to look at minority populations that have a history of migration. Along with this, “long-term migrant” and “recent migrant” (those who arrived in New Zealand in the last five years) were also surveyed.

By focusing on these examples, I am able to express some differences compared to the stories of David, Ally, and Participant A. The stories I discussed above conveyed feelings of hurt, disappointment, and anger which were derived from multiple, constant, and ongoing experiences of microaggressions. I related these feelings to the resurfacing issues of identity and belonging such as asserting themselves as New Zealanders and the frustrating need to constantly reaffirm their identity. However, in the case of Participant B, I am able to use his story to show some other effects of microaggressions on Asian New Zealanders. As he writes that he migrated from China as a child, his issues related to being a migrant as well as the inability to become a New Zealander were evidently conceived from his own experiences growing up in New Zealand²².

These experiences based on past, multiple, and perhaps still ongoing acts of microaggressions/racism have affected and impacted him through the way of completely influencing his self-identity, as described above, by giving up on trying to be a “Kiwi Banana” and instead remaining an “inbetweeners”. This relates to Turner’s (1969) concept on continuous liminality which Hoey (2016) and Cunningham and King apply to experiences of migration and identity formation by looking at the marginalisation of those who feel they are “neither one thing nor the other” (Cunningham & King, 2018: 8). I have found this experience of being “neither one thing nor the other” to be quite common among Asian New Zealanders leading to issues of identifying and belonging as neither “Asian” nor “New Zealand” in terms of both internal and external perceptions.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on microaggression in New Zealand and the ways that it affects the lives of Asian New Zealanders in terms of their identity and belonging. I introduced four main stories of my participants to discuss how their experiences have ultimately led to feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, trauma, and anger as

²² During my conversation with Participant B, he stated that he now lives in the U.K.

results of facing multiple, constant, repeated, and ongoing acts of microaggressions. This includes the repeated and reiterated questions of “where are you *really* from?” and other ways that implied the inability to be fully considered and treated as New Zealanders and instead negated as perpetual foreigners. For David, Ally, and Participant A, despite identifying and reaffirming as (born and bred) New Zealanders, their Asian appearance was the main causal factor for the acts of microaggression they faced leading to great levels of frustration and anger while for Participant B, his identity and self-belief as an adult were largely affected and influenced from experiencing acts of microaggressions while growing up in New Zealand.

Despite these differences, the occurrence of facing acts of microaggressions often led to it becoming a normalised part of their daily lives as they struggled to both cope and avoid these issues. As Ally described in her story, the question of “where are you from?” and other similar comments of invalidating her identity that followed were met with premeditated and robotic answers which showed how often she faced microaggressions as an Asian New Zealander. The acts of microaggressions ultimately worked as forms of rupture to the everyday lives of my participants (and other Asian New Zealanders) as, like David and Participant A, they were inflicted in various random (and all possible) ways including in the public, at work, and during brief interactions with strangers.

By regularly facing microaggressions, my participants are reminded and prompted of the issues of identity and belonging that were previously instilled and implied by others, which cumulatively have led to intense distress and hurt. As Sue describes, microaggressions are compared to a “slow death by a thousand cuts” (2010: 66) showing just how damaging and hurtful multiple, constant, and ongoing experiences of microaggressions are to Asian New Zealanders. Although there are other forms of racism in New Zealand including more overt forms like assault or extreme hate crimes, through the stories of my participants, I argued that microaggression is the predominant type of racism that Asian New Zealanders face.

In the following chapter, I will continue on with the stories of my participants by analysing the rest of their stories to discuss the significance as well as how and why they were written and shared. In particular, I will focus on how the stories and the act

of storytelling are used as performative elements towards social change against racism in New Zealand. I will also discuss how the internet is used as a performative space for Asian New Zealanders to share and connect with others in the context of racism. From this, I am able to introduce the concept of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders which I see as a development of the changed attitude and approach of Asian New Zealanders, including my participants, who use stories on their experiences of racism to express their voices and strive for change.

Chapter Four

Online storytelling as social activism

How stories and storytelling are used by Asian New Zealanders as a performative act for social change against racism

And we are saying: no more. We're done with putting our heads down, of silencing ourselves to try and fit in. More of us are choosing to speak out, but how many of you are choosing to stand with us? (Lin, 2021: para. 16).

Especially as marginalised people, we can't be afraid to speak out about our experiences. I believe community building starts with relationship building – however messy or imperfect that process might look. The Black Lives Matter movement continues to show us a new world is possible (Liao in Kambhampaty, 2020: para. 14).

In the final chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the stories and the act of storytelling by Asian New Zealanders which I argue are used as performative elements and intervention for social change against racism in New Zealand. I will introduce the concept of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders to fully understand the purpose and intention of the stories which I discuss are used to initiate discussion and awareness among Asian New Zealanders as well as others to ultimately confront the issues of racism that have persisted for so long. The 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders shows a shift away from trying to ignore the issues of racism towards a changed attitude and approach of Asian New Zealanders who are finally speaking up and challenging racism in New Zealand. Thus, storytelling ceases to be a 'sharing of harm act' and turns into a form of activism.

I will demonstrate this concept by analysing and concluding the discussion on the stories of Participant A, Participant B, David, and Ally as well as other supplementary discourse. I will discuss what and how the stories of my participants set out to do in the context of racism in New Zealand by exploring the ways they were shared on online

platforms. By doing so, I am able to explain the significance of the internet as a performative space for sharing and discussing stories and experiences of racism which is a method that is relevant and common among the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders in this social climate. Through their stories, they are able to vent their frustrations and share their experiences with others while ultimately contributing towards the gaining momentum of the overall movement of discussion on racism in New Zealand.

The 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders – a shift away from the old and into the new way of confronting racism

In the previous chapter, I introduced four main stories of Asian New Zealanders who talked about their thoughts and experiences of racism in New Zealand. Through these stories, I discussed how David, Ally, Participant A, and Participant B were able to express their feelings of hurt, frustration, disappointment, and anger which were clearly some effects derived from facing multiple and constant acts of microaggression. By using stories of other Asian New Zealanders who also expressed similar sentiments to supplement my argument, I was able to show the prevalence of microaggression in New Zealand as well as how damaging and hurtful acts of microaggressions are towards Asian New Zealanders.

However, by analysing their stories, I also showed different mechanisms of how Asian New Zealanders often cope with microaggressions including internalising the thoughts, keeping quiet, and moving on to avoid confrontation and/or hostility. These responses to microaggression and racism are what Wong describes as "Oriental response" which she says,

As a second-generation Chinese New Zealander, I have spent over 40 years practising the Oriental response to prejudice: keep your head down, keep your mouth shut, suppress your anger, and get on with your knitting... (2016: 115).

The above excerpt shows Wong's description on how Asians have historically (and usually) dealt with racism by listing her own previous behaviours and enactments of

keeping her head down and mouth shut, suppressing her anger, and minding her own business. In other words, what Wong calls the “Oriental response” to racism consists of ignoring the problems of racism and moving on which is a common feeling and often a standard practice among Asians. Similarly, Ibrahim writes,

When we (Asians) are uncomfortable, we are taught to not retaliate, be polite, and take up the least amount of space possible. We are taught that our existence – merely being seen – is the catalyst of our shortcomings. Many Asian women feel the need to be invisible to protect themselves, because for them, visibility can be dangerous and deceptive (2021: para. 21).

The idea of the “Oriental response” is formed from a common behavioural practice in many Asian cultures; for example, there is a Chinese proverb that many parents tell their children which is interpreted as, “a quiet heart will naturally keep you calm and cool” (Chan, 2021). Moreover, Crofskey (2020: para. 21) writes that “Chinese people are well-known for saving face and acting neutral. It’s a survival tactic to prevent becoming expendable targets”. This is also perhaps derived from the concept of the ‘model minority’ which characterises, or rather stereotypes, Asians as smart, assimilable/assimilated, quiet and compliant (Wu, 2013).

However, as I discussed the stories of my participants in the previous chapter, I showed how these ways of coping with microaggressions and racism were evidently ineffective as the participants expressed their feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger towards these situations. It also led to effects of being stereotyped, othered, and conveyed as perpetual foreigners. Perhaps the only positive outcome was that it prevented more serious consequences such as physical assault or death but as vented by the participants in their stories, this was clearly inadequate.

With this idea, as I will discuss in this chapter using the stories of my participants, I argue that they represent the concept of a *new generation* of Asian New Zealanders through the use of storytelling as a performative act for social change. This is a concept that I see is prevalent in many recent anti-racism stories and discourse as it is both created from and contributing to the gaining momentum of discussion and awareness on racism as a performative element. It represents a new attitude and approach of

Asian New Zealanders who are finally speaking up about issues of microaggression and racism in New Zealand to make change.

Wong in *Being Chinese: A New Zealander's Story* juxtaposes her two identities in the title which I see as an excellent representation of the feelings held by many Asian New Zealanders. She encapsulates this concept perfectly by saying “Now, in my reckless middle age, I cannot stand by and doom another generation of young Asians to another century of swallowing their pride. That is why I support Dr Ip²³, and I hope others of my generation will do likewise” (2016: 115).

This feeling is expressed by Participant A and Ally in their stories who say,

But the more we share and call people out for it, it will help make people rethink their actions - (Participant A).

My hope is that by sharing our experiences, we can stop denying that racism in New Zealand is real and start seeing that it's been here for a long time... let's put words into action and start acknowledging the facts by respecting peoples' experiences – (Ally).

In addition, some other Asian New Zealanders whose stories I discussed previously in relation to the four main stories also express the feelings of moving away from the “Oriental response” and into the ways of the ‘new generation’,

Racism towards Asian people is really swept under the rug, we don't speak up about it as much, because we're kind of told to ignore it and move on but I think I want to encourage people [to] really stand up, if they want to see change, they have to speak up (Han in Connor, 2021: para. 30).

I'm tired. My Asian brothers and sisters across the world are tired. We're tired of the hate and the violence. We're tired of being scapegoats, of being the butt of the same boring racist jokes, of being reduced to the same flat caricatures

²³ Manying Ip was criticised by some local Chinese leaders in New Zealand for speaking out about racist incidents and attitudes, because it inflamed racial tension and did not represent the Chinese communities in Auckland's views (Wong, 2016)

by popular media. Most of all, we are tired of our pain being erased. Talked over. Unrecognised (Lin, 2021: para. 1).

By analysing multiple components of the stories such as the significance of using online platforms as performative spaces for storytelling as well as how Asian New Zealanders are using stories as performative elements for social change and activism, I will demonstrate the idea of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders. I use these particular stories of my participants as they are representational of both the experiences of microaggressions faced by Asian New Zealanders through the way they are told as well as the idea of the 'new generation' through the purpose and intention in this social context.

The use of storytelling as a performative element and the internet as a performative space by the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders

In the introduction of my thesis, I discussed the significance of life histories/narratives/stories by referring to Fischer who said that, "accounts of self or life histories... are particularly useful as sites of access to... *new self-fashionings*" (1991: 24-25, emphasis mine). I consider Fischer's model useful to further construe the stories of Asian New Zealanders and how exactly they represent the 'new generation'; Asian New Zealanders are able to construct ideas and perceptions of themselves and each other, a "new self-fashioning", through the way that the stories and storytelling as performative elements allow them to. The idea of the 'new generation' is a new construction that is fashioned from many different cultural environments and experiences such as having multiple experiences of microaggressions despite their self-identification as an (Asian) New Zealander in a seemingly diverse country and subsequently their new approach of confronting racism (Fischer, 1991; Kingston, 1981). With previous methods of dealing with racism being inadequate and the growing number of Asians who identify as New Zealanders as well as the increase of the number of generations itself, these factors all contribute and characterise the concept of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders.

In addition to looking at the content or “texture” of the text (Fairclough, 1995: 185) as I have done in the previous chapter, it is also important to consider the other components of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which, as discussed in Chapter One, is a key methodological approach for this research (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1995). In this respect, within the three separate forms of analysis of CDA’s three dimensional framework – (a) language texts, (b) discourse practice, (c) discursive events as sociocultural practice – in addition to looking at specific components of (b) to see how the stories were shared, I will focus on the last form of analysis for this chapter as a way to understand the purpose and intention of the stories.

This means I will primarily look at the sociological interpretation of the stories such as the significance of the texts, contributions to social movements or ideologies, and the context in which the stories are presented in (Fairclough, 1995). As Fairclough writes, “textual analysis can often give excellent insights about what is ‘in’ a text, but what is absent from a text is often just as significant from the perspective of sociocultural analysis” (1995: 5). In addition, Bell writes,

Because we produce and communicate stories within a social context, the stories we tell are those that are “culturally available for our telling” (Ewick & Silbey, 1995) and so reflect and reproduce existing social relations... as such, stories are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns (2003: 4).

With this wider approach of textual analysis, I am able to discuss the significance of the stories of Asian New Zealanders by interpreting the implications and meanings based on several factors that were not considered in the previous chapter. This includes the context/situation of racism in New Zealand and what the stories entail in this particular social climate, as well as in relation to other anti-racism discourse that have similar bearings and are written by Asian New Zealanders. From this, I am able to argue how these stories contribute as performative acts to the social movement of talking about and confronting racism by the ‘new generation’ of Asian New Zealanders which is gaining momentum.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, I will also discuss the significance of the online platforms where the stories of my participants were shared. In the previous chapter, I briefly talked about this as I stated that the stories of Participant A and Participant B were shared in a Facebook community group for Asians in New Zealand and the stories of David and Ally were shared in *That's Us*, a government-funded anti-racism campaign website. For the supplementary stories that I also discussed, they were gathered from various online sources including university magazines, blog posts, public media, and academic literature. Among these various online platforms, the stories had relatively different approaches and interpretations depending on how accessible they were and to whom they were directed to.

As I move onto the stories below, I will discuss how my participants used specific places on the internet as performative spaces for social change. By analysing their approach, purpose, and intention of the stories, I will show how they were used as performative acts to initiate discussion and awareness on issues of racism as well as to empower other Asians to fight racism. By purely relying on online spaces for finding and reading stories of racism, the sociological significance and contribution of these stories are highlighted. The internet is a space that is incredibly useful and valuable for Asian New Zealanders to share their stories and carry out storytelling as performative acts.

Sharing stories to initiate discussion and awareness on racism as a way to empower Asians in New Zealand – Participant A and Participant B

In the previous chapter, I introduced the stories of Participant A and Participant B which I discussed in relation to microaggression. Through their stories, they were able to narrate some lived experiences of microaggressions as Asian New Zealanders which had affected them in various ways including feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, and anger. I will revisit these stories to discuss the significance of why and how they posted their stories on Facebook. As I refer to the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders, I acknowledge these stories as particularly valuable because they represent the essence of many stories of racism that were posted on social media

(especially during the COVID-19 pandemic) including sharing details about incidents and making public pleas about confronting the racism and rethinking actions. The immediate effect of sharing stories on social media is also significant as it allows them reach large amounts of people in a short time as it is often easily accessible and visible (Auxier, 2020; Dinhopl, 2017). As I explained in the introduction, the increase of social media usage means that more people are using social media for news, information on recent events, and political activism (Auxier, 2020; Lupton, 2020; Hootsuite, 2020).

When discussing how (online) stories are used as performative acts for social change, I will primarily draw on Participant A's story by discussing parts of the story I did not include in the previous chapter. However, there are strong similarities with Participant B's story as they both share their thoughts and experiences of racism on Facebook to create discussion and awareness on these prevalent issues of racism in New Zealand.

In the story of Participant A, they write in the final paragraph,

Incidents like these remind me that racism is still prominent. It makes me mad because I consider myself a kiwi being born and raised here, and I can't imagine what others must experience being Asian immigrants. I think it's important that we share these stories no matter how small so people are aware that it still happens. I've heard of worse stories than this from friends and family.

Their reason and purpose of sharing the story are made clearer as they finish by saying,

But the more we share and call people out for it, it will help make people rethink their actions. I personally think I got that apology because I called out the son telling him that this comment he made was racist, and because my boyfriend also called him out for it.

These two excerpts drawn from the last parts of the story show why Participant A ultimately decided to share their experience of racism with the Facebook group. They write that it is important for people to share stories as ways to create awareness on the issues of racism that Asians in New Zealand constantly face and experience. The effects are that they look to increase visibility and validate their experiences as ways of reminding others that these issues still exist in New Zealand which is something that

many people deny and downplay as I discussed in Chapter Two. Especially with many stories of racial incidents surfacing on social media as a result of increasing numbers of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of continuing to share stories is stressed even more as they write, “I’ve heard of worse stories than this from family and friends”.

Furthermore, Participant A expresses this view further by responding to a comment on the post where another member who stated that they should have retaliated with more racism by writing, “racism can only be destroyed when we are equally racist”, was quickly refuted by Participant A who said, “I completely disagree with this, it brews hate”. Through this attitude and approach, rather than letting incidents of racism go by unnoticed and not confronted, I see this as an example of the ‘new generation’ where the intention is to make a social change by looking to fight back on the issues of racism and not let it continue.

In many anti-racism campaigns and movements, the acts of making the offender accountable for their actions and educating each other by “unteaching racism” have often been common techniques in recent years (HRC, 2021). For example, ‘Unteach Racism’ is a program initiated by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission that gives support to education institutions in New Zealand as a way to “empower the profession to have safe and productive conversations about racism, [to] result in greater understanding and changes in behaviour and practice” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa, 2021). Furthermore, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission recommends recording²⁴ the event of a racist attack in a safe, non-confrontational (non-aggressive) manner as a way to hold the aggressor accountable, in addition to supporting the victim and reporting the incident (HRC, n.d).

Eventually Participant A states that they received an apology from the aggressor because of their way of confrontation by talking and calling them out, ending in a positive outcome that resolved the incident and protected their self-esteem as well as having an involvement towards slowly making a change on others. The comment in

²⁴ “Name and shame” is an act of sharing identifying features of a person, group, or business who has done something wrong as an attempt to discourage further acts of similar nature by forcing accountability onto the offender.

addition to the excerpts show that Participant A's message to Asian New Zealanders and purpose of sharing the story to the Facebook group are to inform others about the potentialities of facing racism in public as well as to encourage them to speak up and confront these very issues should they encounter an incident like this themselves.

Denzin argues that life-stories are "like the lives they tell about; always open-ended, inconclusive and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations" but the stories' movement "outward from the selves of the person and inward to the groups... give them meaning and structure [which are] learned and told in cultural groups" (1989: 81). The relevancy of stories and thus qualitative work through the stories are also expressed by Mendez who stated that it "employs a variety of methods which imply a humanistic stance in which phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants" (2013: 280).

Through the story of Participant A, as a way to fully understand the context, I will show the significance and value of writing and sharing their experiences of racism to other Asians in New Zealand by discussing where and how it was shared. As I mentioned above, although I primarily refer to the story of Participant A to show the significance of using Facebook groups (and social media), it also applies to the story of Participant B as well as other similar stories of racism that were shared by Asian New Zealanders. The analysis and meaning of Participant A's story is representational of stories that were shared to online community groups as they often set out to create discussion and awareness as performative acts for social change against racism.

Storytelling on social media (Facebook groups) to generate meaning and significance – stories of Participants A and B

In the previous chapter where I discussed the stories of Participants A and B, I stated that they were posted in a Facebook group during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since I have joined this group myself for the purpose of this research (around a similar time as the stories were posted), it has already grown by a few thousand members to over twenty thousand total members. This Facebook group was created to serve as an online community for shared activity and discussion with other

Asians in New Zealand. It is only available for participation by requesting to join the group for which one of the admins can approve or deny depending on the answers to a series of questions.

I described the details and information about this Facebook group in depth in the introduction of my thesis, but I will summarise some points here for the discussion in this chapter. As I explored this Facebook group, various posts and related content that had to do with racism (such as stories or articles) were not difficult to find and were in fact some of the more 'popular' posts in terms of activity (Facebook reactions, comments, and number of shares). This is among the several tens of daily posts in the group. While the admins do monitor the group discussion board, the majority of the members have a somewhat cooperative understanding of what can be posted; most of the content concerns Asian culture or is based around civil discussions of stories like Participants A and B's which the admins clearly approve of. Furthermore, as the description suggests, this group predominantly consists of Asian New Zealanders and Asians in New Zealand.

Denzin's (1989) conception of life-stories as gaining significance and meaning through the act of being told within "cultural groups" is relevant with the stories of Participant A and Participant B as they look to share their thoughts and experiences of racism with other Asians in New Zealand. Their stories shared in the group are given their own significance and meaning as they act as forms of "counter-narratives" through the way that, as opposed to the denial of racism in New Zealand as discussed in Chapter 2, they set out to confirm and share their lived experiences of racism (Bell, 2003). Delgado writes about the way that counter-narratives are meaningful, "the cohesiveness these stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup. An outgroup creates its own stories which circulate within the group as a kind of counter-reality" (1995: 64).

Furthermore, the use of storytelling for Asian New Zealanders as ways for performative action against racism relates to what Delgado and Stefancic say about counter-narratives,

Stories also serve as a powerful additional function for minority communities. Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence... Stories can give them a voice and reveal that other people have similar experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination (e.g., microaggressions, unconscious discrimination, or structural racism); once named, it can be combated (2017: 51).

Through this way, their intentions of using storytelling as performative acts for social change against racism are able to be realised by connecting with other Asians in New Zealand. The meaning of the stories are also appreciated more as they are circulated and interpreted by those who may have similar experiences and thoughts.

For comparison, I refer to Vic Deals, a Wellington-based buy-and-sell turned community group on Facebook where members would post anything from selling products to sharing memes²⁵ to making an unofficial public announcement about a certain topic in Wellington. In 2020, this Facebook group was involved in controversy as the admins were caught censoring content that were related to discussions on racism, colonisation, and Black Lives Matter (Junn, 2020). Although it is not abnormal for Facebook groups to have community guidelines and censoring of content such as illegal or antisocial activity, this led to a few members getting permanently banned for explicitly opposing these actions. One member who was subsequently banned during this incident posted in the group saying, “what isn’t wholesome is Vic Deals trying to silence Māori and other POC’s voices” as a way of criticising the admins’ actions (Rolleston, 2020: para. 14). To note, in recent years, as this group has moved away from purely being a buy-and-sell page, sharing and writing posts based on discussions of topical content are not uncommon and often encouraged.

Subsequently, after this incident, a new community page ‘Dic Veals’ was created which allows “people to be able to have free and open conversations that are respectful, without having to deal with racism” (Rolleston, 2020: para. 32). This is comparable to how Participant A and Participant B shared their stories in the Facebook group. Their stories of racism would gain significance and meaning through the relevancy of the group members as well as the Facebook group itself which acts as a safe place to have

²⁵ Forms of images, videos, or texts of humour that are shared and spread online.

discussions on sensitive topics like identity and racism. In relation to this, Bell writes that,

People from both dominant and subordinated groups promote strategic interests in the stories they tell... the counter-narratives of subordinated groups serve to confirm their experiences and bear witness to their lived reality in the face of a dominant culture that distorts, stereotypes, and marginalises that reality (2003: 6).

In the particular way that Participants A and B share their stories as counter-narratives, countering or challenging a “master narrative”²⁶ (Lyotard, 1984) such as racism denial, they contribute towards the movement of social change by displaying a form of “back-talk” (Warren, 2000). This is described as “the ability to recognise, articulate, analyse, and contest racism” such as in cases of racism denial by “learning how to decode racist assumptions and everyday articulations of racism” (Warren, 2000: 148).

By discussing the purpose and intention of the stories, the context of racism against New Zealanders, and the use of Facebook community groups, I am able to show how and why Participants A and B used stories and storytelling as performative acts for social change against racism. Morales sees this as a form of cultural activism, “because it does battle in the arena of culture, over the stories we tell ourselves and each other of why the world is as it is” (1998: 4) and through the way that stories enable people to “name and reclaim, over and over, the connections we are taught to ignore, the dynamics we are told do not exist” (1998: 5). As the stories are forms of narratives, it relates to what Jerneck describes as, “an unfolding story with the potential to serve as a theoretical thinking tool and an empirical guide to promote practical action” (2016: 15).

By analysing the shift away from the traditional “Oriental response” which consisted of staying quiet and ignoring the issues of racism and the move into using stories as ways to evoke social change against racism, we can identify the emerging characteristic of the ‘new generation’ of Asian New Zealanders. The stories of Participants A and B

²⁶ Henry Giroux calls this as hallmarks of “the enlightenment and Western philosophical tradition” (1993: 463) as Christine A Stanley explains as “a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out” (2007: 14).

were only some examples of this but they clearly represent many other stories of Asian New Zealanders that were shared on social media (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and related incidents of racism).

Use of public online websites to initiate discussion and awareness on racism in New Zealand – David and Ally

Along with the stories of Participants A and B, I also discussed the stories of David and Ally in the previous chapter. I analysed David's story by discussing his experiences of multiple, constant, and ongoing acts of microaggressions as an Asian New Zealander. His feelings of hurt, frustration, and anger were expressed as he described experiences of getting asked questions like "where are you *really* from?" in multiple and various scenarios including at his workplace, in the public, and during brief interactions with strangers.

In Ally's story, I discussed similar feelings that she was able to express in her story which were also based on multiple, constant, and ongoing experiences of microaggressions in New Zealand. Like David, questions of "where are you *really* from?" reinforced feelings of being othered and conveyed as a perpetual foreigner, despite being born and having grown up in New Zealand, to the point of internalising thoughts and memorising choreographed responses. I was able to show how they were both incredibly hurt and distressed from experiencing constant acts of microaggressions which they often attributed to troubles identifying as New Zealanders due to their Asian appearances.

David and Ally have similar reasons and intentions as Participants A and B of writing and sharing their stories of microaggression/racism in New Zealand. However, rather than using Facebook groups, David and Ally shared their stories on *That's Us*, an anti-racism campaign that was initiated by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission. This method is arguably more public and open which has the potential to reach wider audiences as it is accessible by anyone who visits the website of *That's Us* and anywhere else the campaign appeared on. I will explain the significance of this below in relation to the purpose and intention of their stories.

David continues his story by talking about reclaiming his Chinese heritage as it remains an important part of his identity by saying,

Connecting with my own Chinese culture and Māori culture has been quite a fascinating thing to be able to do. My philosophy is to focus on the common things, because while things seem different on the surface, below the surface they have a common root. The challenges are people who focus on our differences too much.

He then finishes by giving his thoughts on sharing his story,

I agreed to share my story because this discussion has to happen and if it doesn't happen now, when will it happen? While I am excited it is happening, I am also nervous about it.

Similarly, Ally talks about her reason for sharing her story by saying,

My hope is that by sharing our experiences, we can stop denying that racism in New Zealand is real and start seeing that it's been here for a long time. We throw around the word "diversity" proudly and frequently, exclaiming the greatness of our melting pot. But let's put words into action and start acknowledging the facts by respecting peoples' experiences... Let's have the conversation and put an end to the denial.

In similar ways of talking about issues of racism like Participants A and B, David and Ally insist on the prevalence of racism in New Zealand where their way of using stories as performative acts and "cultural activism" is instead performed through presenting it on a public online platform (Morales, 1998). As I have said above and in more depth in the previous chapter, David and Ally used their stories to express their thoughts based on their experiences of microaggression/racism in New Zealand. By doing so, they are contributing to the overall movement of creating discussion on racism in New Zealand, and particularly acts of microaggressions which I have shown and described are often delivered unconsciously and unintentionally (Sue et al., 2007; Torino et al., 2019). Their way of sharing the stories is to show how these acts are incredibly hurtful and damaging to their senses of identity, belonging, and self-esteem which will hopefully create levels of visibility and awareness on these prevalent issues.

Ally acknowledges her intention of the story as contributing to the discussion on racism in New Zealand by saying,

After seeing the New Zealand Human Rights Commission's new campaign against racism, That's Us, I not only feel comforted that casual racism is finally being acknowledged, but also a sense of responsibility to speak up. This is my attempt not to let the normalised racist comments that have followed me all of the 29 years of my life get swept under the rug. I hope that others will share their stories, and that we can begin to have the conversations that are so desperately needed in New Zealand.

The above excerpt shows another example of what I described the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders. Ally recognises the growing momentum of discussions on issues of racism in New Zealand, particularly 'casual racism' or microaggression, as a reason to join in and contribute to the movement. She writes that she feels a sense of responsibility to speak up due to her personal lived experiences of racism which were previously "swept under the rug". Her own way of shifting away from the "Oriental response" has been through using stories by writing and sharing her experiences in effort of making a social impact.

Because of their intention to encourage and empower other Asians in New Zealand to also speak up about these issues like Participants A and B, the stories of David and Ally are directed more towards the general public instead of focusing on in-group communities like the Facebook group where majority of the members are Asian. Public campaigns like *That's Us* are often shared and promoted in public places like social media, mass media and news, and in governmental institutions. This is typical of initiatives that are arranged by government-backed organisations as their main purpose for campaigns like *That's Us* is to reach wide audiences as a way to get their message across to the general public.

For example, I discussed the documentary *Land of the Long White Cloud* (2019) in Chapter Two which is another example of a government-funded initiative on anti-racism. However, this was instead organised through multimedia and national television as a seven-part series. I came across many of these anti-racism campaigns

through my personal social media accounts, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, not because I went out of my way to find them but because they were sponsored and promoted in various ways including YouTube ads and Facebook posts.

As mentioned by Ally in the excerpt from her story above, *That's Us* was a campaign introduced by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission (HRC) in 2016. Though predominantly delivered through the campaign's main website, like other HRC campaigns including *Give Nothing to Racism*, *Voice of Racism*, and more recently *Racism is No Joke*, parts of the initiative can also be found on places like social media including Facebook and YouTube as I mentioned above, where different ways of interaction such as multimedia can be experienced. HRC explains that they have also had "schools, community groups, individuals, sports teams, corporates, government agencies and churches join in the campaign(s)" along with "scores of Kiwi athletes, artists, leaders and celebrities²⁷". Likewise, Stop AAPI Hate which was created as an anti-racism organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic reached similar levels of widespread national and media coverage in the United States including the viral hashtags, #StopAAPIHate and #StopAsianHate. To my surprise and eventual comfort, I personally remember seeing these hashtags used and endorsed by major brands and platforms including Nike, ESPN, Complex, Tommy Hilfiger and more on Facebook and Instagram (showing that it was not ignored and effective in some ways).

The NZ Human Rights Commission describes *That's Us* as,

New Zealand's first anti-racism campaign that asks Kiwis to start sharing our own personal stories about racism, intolerance, and hatred as well as our hopes for the future... That's Us is about the kind of people we want to be, as well as the kind of country we want our kids growing up in. New Zealanders need to understand that the way we treat each other is crucial to our future so we are highlighting instances where we have not treated each other with dignity and mana.

²⁷ The New Zealand Human Rights Commission have often used local celebrities for endorsing the anti-racism campaigns. For example, Taika Waititi, who was caught in the controversy with Duncan Garner as I discussed in Chapter 2, was the face of Give Nothing to Racism in 2017. For *Racism is No Joke*, they enlisted Kiwi comedian James Roque in discussing racist jokes found online which they presented through a series of short videos. This campaign fit in with other discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic where most of it were circulated online.

Although *That's Us* is slightly different to the newer campaigns as it relied more on their website than the use of social media to spread their cause (perhaps as they started to adopt wider measures since the first campaign), this campaign allowed New Zealanders to submit their own stories which, as seen with David and Ally, featured some important and valuable discussions on racism in New Zealand. These two stories along with multiple others can be found on their website which immediately appear on the homepage. There are also other sections on the campaign website including where visitors can learn more about 'casual racism' in New Zealand, read tips on how to handle racist situations, access the YouTube videos around discussions of racism, and submit their own stories of racism. Although there are slight differences among the anti-racism campaigns, the HRC explains that they are all connected and build from one another by covering different aspects of what is necessary to confront and talk about racism in New Zealand.

Ways of using public online platforms to talk about racism and send a message for social change

The method of sharing stories and talking about racism on public online websites and platforms was also utilised by many other Asian New Zealanders showing the potential strength and influence. This includes the supplementary stories that I discussed in the previous chapters which appeared on websites of mass news and media, cultural commentary, and magazines as articles similar to David and Ally's. For example, *The Pantograph Punch* and *The Spinoff*, where many of the supplementary stories I discussed were published, are described as online media platforms that cover a range of different content including current affairs, pop culture, cultural commentary, personal essays, criticisms, and analyses which are often provided by contributing guest writers. *The Pantograph Punch* describes itself by saying,

Since 2011, we've been publishing punchy arts and cultural commentary in Aotearoa New Zealand, from personal essays to criticism and reviews to interviews and analysis... Our Kaupapa is to offer a platform for a wide range of experiences, ideas, and voices...

Similarly, Victoria University of Wellington's *Salient* Magazine (where I gathered a supplementary story from) writes,

We have continued to shake up the campus status-quo by chugging out a metric fuck-tonne of reasoned, topical, and informative content for Vic students to engage with. By showcasing a wide range of ideas in our news coverage, opinion pieces, feature articles, columns, and graphics, *Salient* connects students with the real shit that matters.

In this context, the approach is to allow the general public to 'engage' and 'connect' with these stories as ways of reaching out and speaking to wider audiences as well as to society itself; the stories themselves are messages to the public by allowing others to see what and how Asians experience racism and related issues of identity that I was able to show through the stories. Below are some examples of stories written by Asian New Zealanders that were shared on public online platforms such as those listed above. As they write, their purpose is also to share their experiences and thoughts on racism in New Zealand by sending a message to the readers and general public.

My experiences have shown me the necessity of speaking out but doing so takes courage. My decision to speak publicly may be met by more attacks, or it may be in vain. Or **it may in some small way contribute to the current momentum against racism**, both here in New Zealand and around the world (Cui, 2020: para. 10, emphasis mine).

The world is hurting, we all are. I'm not sure when this virus will pass, but I know my people need to brace ourselves for worse. Now might not be the best time to bring up this pain and rage, but then when? When will you have space for us? (Crofskey, 2020: para. 24).

Tautoko your Asian friends: listen to their voices, share their stories, support their businesses. We have a lot of work to do (Ibrahim, 2021: para. 21).

The last lines, and therefore often the purpose, of the stories finish by asking the readers if they are able to accept the reality of racism as a problem in New Zealand and if they are up to the challenge of confronting those very problems. They are often aimed directly at the readers by using words like 'you' and 'we' which show their

purpose and intention of using stories and storytelling as performative acts but also the desperation. Through these ways, Delgado and Stefancic explain how stories and narratives can collectively influence readers by writing that, “powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity” (2017: 51).

This movement of sharing stories and engaging in discussions on racism draws parallels to the Black Lives Matter movement (especially more in recent times with the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the movement of social justice that followed) where it is about making social changes by constantly creating discussion and awareness on various platforms, both offline and online. For example, Black Stories Matter is a sub-organisation of Black Lives Matter whose aim is to participate and contribute to the movement by using storytelling to “speak truth to power” and create narratives based on experiences where stories don’t have to be justified, explained, or defended (TMI Project, n.d). While the Black Lives Matter movement is still an ongoing process in terms of structural changes, it has created almost unprecedented levels of awareness and discussions of these issues among people.

Furthermore, NextShark, an organisation that covers Asian and Asian American news has been particularly active during the COVID-19 pandemic by collecting and presenting stories of racism on their website and social media pages. Their regular use of hashtags like #StopAAPIHate and #StopAsianHate in their posts have allowed their stories to reach wide audiences, especially of the younger generation, on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter which many are increasingly using as their go-to source for news in the recent years (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021; Hootsuite, 2020).

By describing the online platforms and techniques that David and Ally were able to communicate their stories with, I was able to discuss the purpose and intention of their stories as well as how they were specifically shared as ways of social activism against racism. The use of the internet and various online sources as performative spaces was highly advantageous because of the possibility to reach wide audiences which as I discussed is a common way for Asian New Zealanders to initiate discussion and awareness on the problems of racism.

Contributions of the stories to the gaining momentum of discussion on racism in New Zealand by the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders

I discussed in the previous chapter how the stories of Asian New Zealanders were results of feelings and experiences that were accumulated from facing multiple, constant, and ongoing acts of microaggressions and racism in New Zealand. As expressed by many Asian New Zealanders, these experiences are not just limited to those who spoke up about it but also those suffering in silence. Lin (2021: para. 11) puts these feelings into words in her opinion piece on racism in New Zealand by saying,

... every single Asian person here will have at some point in their lives felt the shame of being othered. I hear stories from other Asians who have grown up here and in other western societies and it's like replaying my own childhood experiences.

Of kids saying, "Yuck!" to our lunches.

Of being called, "Ching Chong".

Of being asked where we're really from.

Of being told how good our English is.

In relation to the shift away from the "Oriental response" which I described using Wong's conception as a 'traditional' response to racism by many Asians of ignoring the problems and quietly moving on, these stories that are appearing at a considerable pace and in tandem in recent years represent the movement into the 'new generation' of Asians.

Referring back to Black Lives Matter, the large protests and widespread nature/coverage of the movement in 2020 were not a result of a singular incident nor is it a one-off movement. Although it was largely influenced by the death of George Floyd in 2020 that helped reignite these feelings, it was a product of many years of suffering and continuous acts of racism towards African Americans (Buchanan et al., 2020; Illing, 2020; Black Lives Matter, n.d). While it was initially created in 2013 in

response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman who was responsible for the death of Trayvon Martin, in many ways, the essence of BLM is that it is a continuous movement for social justice and equality that builds from the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the 1950s (Thomas, 2019; Thomsen, 2020; Kirschner-Breen, 2017).

From this, as Cui (2020) suggests, the stories also have the effect and purpose of contributing to the overall gaining movement of Asian New Zealanders talking about and confronting racism. It is the gaining momentum of discussions, awareness, and recognition of racism in New Zealand that plays a significant role in why these stories are appearing as they are in this time. The timing of the stories (the four main stories and the supplementary stories) are similar to the way that Black Lives Matter have made an impact. The growing momentum of discussion and awareness created by Asian New Zealanders as well as anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic have given appropriate timing and reason for sharing the stories. This new method of talking about racism shows the face of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders as the common aim is to make social changes against racism by using storytelling as performative acts. It is the way that Asian New Zealanders are finally standing up to the issues of racism that have been haunting for a lifetime by using this opportunity to share the experiences, collectively contribute, and make the voices heard and valued by others.

Below are some final examples of this as I show a collection of screenshots taken of the titles of stories that were written by Asian Americans. They were all written and shared since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and again represents the concept of the 'new generation'.

Asian Americans speak up after silently enduring racism

Silvia Foster-Frau, Fenit Nirappil and Amy B Wang · 16:45, Mar 21 2021

OPINION

My People Are Dying in Silence — and I'm Here With a Megaphone

Eric Fells · February 23, 2021

Silent no more: The 'model minority' is finally speaking out, says CULTIQUE's Linda Ong

"As misinformation about the coronavirus' origins in China fuels violent attacks, my personal history with racism is coming full circle," says Ong. "It's time to step up and weaponize empathy for good."

Why I'm No Longer Staying Silent About Anti-Asian Racism

"You're Encouraged To Gracefully Internalise Any Issues, And Move On": Deconstructing The History Of Silence Around Anti-Asian Racism

BY SUE FUJIMOTO
8 APRIL 2021

MENTAL HEALTH

Anti-Asian racism: Breaking through stereotypes and silence

I'm done ignoring the racism I've faced as an Asian American

Opinion by Jeanine Celeste Pang for *CNN Business Perspectives*
Updated 1726 GMT (0126 HKT) March 8, 2021

Figure 8 - Titles of articles that exemplify the concept of the 'new generation' of Asians

Conclusion

This final chapter focused on concluding the stories of my participants by analysing other significant features that were not discussed in the previous chapter. By revisiting these stories of racism, I was able to apply and consider some other components of the Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to discuss the purpose and intention of the stories of Asian New Zealanders, both in the sense of the online context and the sociological interpretation including the significance, contributions to social movements, and the context they were presented in.

To make sense of the stories including how and why they were shared, I introduced the concept of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders which I discussed represented the essence of the movement of the stories of racism themselves. As characterised by Wong (2016), I explained the concept of the 'new generation' by attributing it to Asian New Zealanders who have recently spoken up and confronted

racism which monumentally signified a shift away from the traditional “Oriental response” of ignoring and internalising issues of racism and moving on. By referring to the previous chapter, the consequent effects that derived from constantly experiencing racism and responding to these issues with the “Oriental response” were detrimental on Asian New Zealanders’ senses of identity, belonging, and self-esteem.

By focusing on the stories of Participant A, Participant B, David, and Ally, I was able to use them as examples to show how stories and storytelling are used as performative acts for social change by initiating discussion and awareness on the issues of racism in New Zealand. I discussed how they set out to do this, including challenging, empowering, and encouraging other Asians to take action as well as by sending messages of pleas and demands by sharing their thoughts and experiences of racism to the general public.

Specifically, these were achieved by sharing their stories through various online platforms including a Facebook community group where Participants A and B’s stories were posted and a website of an anti-racism campaign where David’s and Ally’s stories appeared. This technique of using the internet as a performative space was valuable for multiple reasons including accessibility, the use of stories as cultural activism within cultural groups (Denzin, 1989; Morales, 1998), and the ability to create meaning and significance of the stories with others who have similar experiences (Denzin, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Ultimately, the stories of Asian New Zealanders were contributions to the overall gaining movement of discussion on racism in New Zealand as many others were also involved. With events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and repeated acts of racism coming to a boiling point, the overall movement of stories is what is both created from and creating the concept of the ‘new generation’. As Lin (2021: para. 1-2) expresses,

I’m tired. My Asian brothers and sisters across the world are tired... Most of all, we are tired of our pain being erased. Talked over. Unrecognised.

Conclusion

This thesis has been about microaggressions towards Asian New Zealanders and how they have managed and responded to their experiences of microaggressions in New Zealand. As they expressed feelings of hurt, disappointment, frustration, and anger by recounting their lived experiences of facing multiple, constant, and ongoing acts of microaggressions, I have explored how stories were used as a coping mechanism, a performative element, and as activism. With the act of online storytelling, they were able to express their thoughts and make connections with others who have similar experiences as a way to initiate discussion and awareness towards the strive for social change against racism. Through the stories that I have presented in this thesis, I aimed to extend the voices of my participants which I see as an embodiment and representation of many other Asian New Zealanders including myself who have experienced microaggression in New Zealand.

I have argued that the stories and act of storytelling are significant features as part of a shift away from the traditional and historical “Oriental response” to racism and towards the movement of the ‘new generation’ by finally speaking up and confronting the issues of racism that have been troubling Asian New Zealanders for so long. The previous methods of ignoring the problems, internalising the thoughts, and quietly moving on were clearly inadequate as issues of racism in New Zealand continued to persevere and affect Asian New Zealanders. I demonstrated this by using the stories of my participants who expressed how incredibly hurt and distressed they were as victims of multiple and constant acts of microaggressions that were essentially a part of their daily lives.

For them, the incidents they tell as stories, acted as forms of rupture and trauma by way of continuously making issues of their identity reappear such as having to repeatedly reaffirm themselves as New Zealanders or being involved in unnecessary and frustrating situations solely due to their appearance as Asians. Ultimately, this led to the inability to be fully accepted or viewed as New Zealanders and instead conveyed as perpetual foreigners in the country they were born and grew up in.

As I have interpreted and processed these stories through my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences of racism in New Zealand, these are strong examples of the effects that derive from having multiple experiences of microaggressions that are inflicted constantly, repeatedly, and in many cases still ongoing. For my participants, most of their stories were written in generalised terms as they recounted their past experiences of microaggressions (and illustrated their emotional struggle) which are often difficult to pinpoint and specify due to the recurring and almost-normalised aspect in their everyday lives.

The distinction between microaggression and other acts of incivilities is identified through the way that the former is inflicted with racial motivation and experienced as incessant acts. The cumulative nature of microaggressions as well as the cultural/historical awareness ultimately influence how these acts are perceived by the recipient; for Asian New Zealanders, like David and Ally, microaggressions are received as incredibly hurtful and damaging acts due to high numbers of past and ongoing experiences in addition to consciously knowing how their Asian appearance/identity is the significant causal factor for the act of microaggression.

By analysing the stories of my participants, I have argued that the predominant type of racism that Asian New Zealanders face is microaggression which I described consists of various forms depending on intention, consciousness, and the way that they inflict harm. Moreover, the widely understood concept of microaggressions is the way that it is “subtle and stunning” (Pierce, 1970: 266) and as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities” (Sue et al., 2007: 271). As per this understanding of microaggression, they are regularly referred to as every day or casual racism in New Zealand indicating the prevalent nature as well as the extent of potential harm.

I was able to understand the full context of microaggression and the extent to which it harmed Asian New Zealanders by approaching my research through a Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995). This allowed me to construe the significance and meaning of the stories in an appropriate and effective way to both formulate my argument and make sense of the thoughts and experiences of my participants in relation to my own. Reflecting on my methodology, despite some early challenges of

the surrounding (and interrupting) nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, by exploring various components of the online stories through CDA, I was able to still gain and interpret important information that proved instrumental for this thesis.

In addition to the lived experiences of microaggressions that were described in the stories, I have found that acts of microaggressions were also perpetuated and enacted in the form of responses to discourse on racism in New Zealand. Particular online comments made by many New Zealanders displayed sentiments of downward social comparisons which set out to compare the severity and urgency of racism to other 'worse' countries and contexts as ways to downplay, deflect, and ultimately deny racism in New Zealand. With the stories of Asian New Zealanders aiming to oppose this specific behaviour, other comments that refuted the comments of comparisons showed a stark contrast between certain attitudes and beliefs held by New Zealanders. Through these ways, these comments of comparisons themselves directly display and contribute to issues of microaggression and racism in New Zealand; the strategic and disruptive narratives convey sentiments of invalidating experiences of Asian New Zealanders (and other minorities) which prevent productive conversations about racism as well as minimise safe places to talk about racism online.

The stories of Asian New Zealanders were shared online which provided opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings as well as to productively talk about racism in New Zealand through suitable and appropriate ways. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which saw a spike in anti-Asian racism and the increasing use of social media and the internet in recent years, using online platforms as performative spaces to share stories proved valuable as they could be applied to reach wide audiences in online Asian communities as well as the general public in a safe and effective way. The stories were significant as they were employed by Asian New Zealanders as performative elements for initiating discussion and awareness on the persisting issues of racism in New Zealand. By doing so, they were able to encourage and empower other Asian New Zealanders to speak up and confront racism as well as to directly address these issues of racism to the public as ways to strive for social change.

I attributed this behaviour of speaking up and confronting racism as a characteristic of the 'new generation' of Asian New Zealanders which I see as a concept fit for this new

movement in the context of racism in New Zealand. Although I shifted away from solely focusing on COVID-19-related anti-Asian racism to looking at microaggressions towards Asian New Zealanders as a whole which I acknowledged as the greater overall problem, many of the stories of Asian New Zealanders who shared their experiences of microaggression and racism appeared alongside each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as some are based on single incidents of COVID-19 related anti-Asian racism such as xenophobic or discriminatory hate, many stories are based on Asians openly talking about their past and ongoing experiences of racism with COVID-19 only serving as a reason and suitable time to share the stories. The voices through the stories are collectively contributing towards a gaining momentum and movement of discourse on racism as Asian New Zealanders are finally speaking up and confronting the issues of racism that have been persisting, troubling, and distressing for so long.

This thesis has presented four main stories of Asian New Zealanders in addition to other discourses that have allowed me to duly focus on microaggression and how Asian New Zealanders have managed and responded to their experiences of microaggressions in New Zealand. Writing this thesis has been saddening, uncomfortable, and difficult as an Asian New Zealander myself but also motivational, necessary, and sincere. My hope for this thesis is that it will provide some insight on lived experiences of microaggressions in New Zealand and shine a light on the voices of Asian New Zealanders who are speaking up and striving to make a change; it is only one form of contribution to the cause but I hope it will be a useful one. For many Asian New Zealanders, it has been difficult and intimidating to talk about these issues that are so sensitive and upsetting, but I strongly believe that it is important to continue these conversations and discussions on racism as ways to carry on the momentum that is finally picking up and being recognised by others.

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