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“He’s an idiot!” Experiences of International Students in the United States

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Kim, a doctoral student from South Korea, went to a grocery store after being in the U.S. for only one week. When he got to a counter to pay for the items that he picked up, a clerk asked if Kim wanted cash back when he paid with his debit card. Since there was no cash back system in grocery markets in his home country, Kim did not understand right away what the clerk meant. Kim seemed to be puzzled and responded, “Yes, I want cash [back]” but changed his answer in a few seconds, “No, no, no. [I] don’t need [it].” On hearing him, the clerk whispered to another clerk, “He’s an idiot.”

(Kim, South Korean Doctoral Student)

This reflection stems from my personal observations of international students in the United States whose first language is not English. Having witnessed some uncomfortable moments and stories, I investigated international students’ experiences of discrimination against their language proficiency, foreign accent, race, ethnicity, and gender. As the number of students from the globe has been continuously increasing, the concern with international students has also been growing across the nation. However, practical instruction that informs international students of unpleasant race- and/or language-related experiences that they may face in U.S. society has been insufficient. Moreover, some international students – East Asian students, in particular, – tend to ascribe racial slurs and microaggressions against themselves not to social or structural problems, but to individual faults such as their lack of English proficiency or cultural inadaptability to a new society (Frey & Roysircar, 2006).

Microaggressions can be defined by three main characteristics: (1) subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, visual) directed at people of color, often done automatically or unconsciously; (2) layered insults, based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative insults that cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging Whites (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 160). In this essay, I will explore experiences of discrimination that international students at college or graduate levels go through in everyday life. I hope this reflection calls for special attention to international students who study in the U.S to protect the students’ human rights and improve

awareness of related issues in schools and other institutions.

Microaggressions against Language and Race

For international students, studying in the U.S. is full of adventures and challenges. They have to adapt themselves to new schools and a society where different social/cultural norms and regulations exist. Furthermore, English can be an additional constraint for many international students whose first language is not English. In addition to these challenges, international students seem to encounter microaggressions in everyday life. In fact, discrimination against one’s language proficiency and foreign accents is not a recent phenomenon in the U.S at all. Although the US has always been linguistically diverse, certain dialects and accents have always been undervalued (Wiley, 1996). Moreover, speakers of the devalued languages or dialects are stigmatized and even problematized. As for African American English (AAE), the language has been denounced as ignorant, wrong, and improper, although it has a legitimate and grammatical system.

In addition, overall negative attitudes exist towards Spanish and Spanish speakers (Reyes, 2010), and there has been pressure to exclude Spanish from public spaces in both explicit and implicit ways (Hill, 2008). With regard to Asians Americans, a forever-foreign stereotype is perpetuated in American society (Tuan, 1998), and the general public normally views Asians as newcomers who speak English with Asian accents (Reyes, 2010). For international students whose first language is not English, situations are more challenging than for other linguistically marginalized



populations. These students are newcomers to this society and have rarely experienced discriminations against their race or language in their home country.

Previous research studies have shown that people of color in the U.S. suffer from a subtle and covert form of discrimination against race, ethnicity, phenotype, language proficiency, foreign accent, immigration status, last names, and so on and that people of color experience these microaggressions on an almost everyday basis (e.g., Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, Ceja, Smith, & Solórzano, 2009). In addition, Davis (1999) asserts that microaggressions cause a great deal of stress to their victims because they have to interpret the insult and then make a decision about whether and how to react to the insult. Further, if English is not one's first language, s/he has an additional burden to decode slangs or certain demeanors that are unfamiliar to their culture. Responding to microaggressions in a proper way is also demanding due to their limited English proficiency and lack of cultural knowledge. What is worse, microaggressions against one's language proficiency or foreign accent can be mixed with racial and sexual discriminations, so the frustration that international students experience is quite a bit greater than people might normally expect. However, there is little research that specifically focuses on international students' experiences since they are viewed as temporary residents who will leave this country when they graduate from school. Furthermore, it is generally considered that it is international students who have to be responsible for adapting to this new society by learning language and cultural norms as soon as possible.

Experiences of Microaggressions

In this section I share several experiences of microaggressions that international students have encountered. I have collected these stories as a part of my regular class assignment from students who took English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Composition (EC) classes. The majority of students that I met were from Asian countries (e.g., China, South Korea, and Taiwan) where race composition is almost homogeneous and one official language is spoken. The stories they confessed included various types of microaggressions, and shockingly enough, some of their experiences were overt racism and obvious crimes. Further, the students' experiences varied depending on their academic levels

(undergraduate and graduate) and gender. In general, the younger students were, the more likely they were exposed to microaggressions; and female students were more likely to be victimized compared to their male counterparts. Although this essay cannot include the entire set of stories that I collected, I will share several stories that many students commonly confessed. The following stories were neither revised nor modified in order to give the students voice in their own words.

Physical-assault cases:

Some students said they were physically victimized for no particular reason by being bullied or even beaten by their peers. They also said they were too young to cope with the situations in a proper way. For some international students, it is also difficult to verbalize their feelings and thoughts when they encounter this kind of situation.

"When I came to the States, I attended a middle school as a 6th grader. Because I was an immigrant from Korea, I had difficulty communicating in English. One day I was walking to a classroom, one guy from my class suddenly hit my head and just walked away. I could not react to it because I didn't know how to speak and respond"

(22 years old, Male, South Korea).

"When I first came to the States, I went to a public school. The guy who sat next to me was White. At that time I was really scared and shy because I didn't know how to communicate with other people. The guy always stuck trash in my desk drawer and made fun of me. I couldn't do anything and I didn't know what to do, so I kept silent about the incidents" (18, Female, China).

Sexual assault cases:

Women are more likely to come across uncomfortable events such as intentional sexual jokes and emotional/physical assaults that take place both verbally and non-verbally. Moreover, some people intentionally take advantage of one's language proficiency or race in order to sexually harass female international students. Since English learners are not familiar with slang and sex-related vocabulary, female international students can easily be targets of sexual jokes and conversations. Nevertheless, they sometimes

do not fully understand how serious the situation can be and how to respond to the situation.

“My lab mates sometimes say sexual words behind me really quickly. And if I don’t understand the word, they laugh at me and make me feel I’m sexually harassed. If I ask them to repeat the word, they just ignore me.”

(24, Female, Philippines)

“I walked down one street, and a White guy came up to me saying, “Smack your ass.” Since he must have been mentally ill and I didn’t exactly know what he meant, I ran in the other direction without responding to him. I was so scared and felt really bad all day long.”

(30, Female, Taiwan)

Race-related assaults

Race-based discriminations are usually associated with language-related discriminations. However, students can experience discrimination against their race alone, and the following cases demonstrate such examples.

“My friend’s neighbor in a campus dorm was mean to Chinese. She used to talk (and say to her boyfriend) things like “Chinese are bullshit ...” and she intentionally let my friend hear that”

(19, Female, China).

“I know a professor who is harsh on Asian students only and ignores what they have done for a lab meeting. However, the professor does not act like that to Caucasian students”

(28, Male, Vietnam).

Language-related assaults

International students also experience microaggressions and discriminations against their first language use, English proficiency, or foreign accent. The following stories show students’ experiences related to their language use.

“I was talking on the phone with my Mom in Chinese. I heard some people passing by

mocking me, “Mandarin speakers fuck around”

(20, Male, China).

“During my TA section, a student complained about the grade of his lab report. While discussing his answer, he soon got upset and rudely said, “You don’t understand what I’m saying,” in which he meant my English was too poor to understand him. In fact, he didn’t understand the material, and that was why he didn’t understand me.”

(28, Female, South Korea)

“When we were discussing in class, my American classmates form their own discussion groups. They didn’t want to include me and other international students. They think we are poor in English and may not contribute to the group.”

(24, Female, Japan).

Conclusion

Although the short stories above cannot demonstrate every aspect of the uncomfortable reality that international students face in the U.S., the stories uncover challenging adversities in a partial way. According to the stories the students shared with me, young students and female students, in particular, were more likely to be victims of microaggressions, but they tended to take the microaggressions at the individual level, which can aggravate the situations. Despite the reality, however, there is sparse information available at the school or institution level, and it solely remains the responsibility of international students to manage microaggressions and to take care of their wounded emotions, feelings, confidence, and dignity. Given the increasing number of international students from various cultural/linguistic backgrounds, schools in the U.S. should offer practical instruction for diversity to students at all academic levels. In doing so, I hope both domestic students and international students benefit from each other’s various characteristics and become global citizens who can work for the world as well as their community.



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