# Excluded and Avoided: Racial Microaggressions Targeting Asian International Students in Canada

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This qualitative study explored East and South Asian international students' (N = 12) experiences with racial microaggressions at one Canadian university. Data were collected through unstructured, individual interviews. Using a modified version of the consensual qualitative research method (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), we identified six racial microaggressions themes: (a) excluded and avoided, (b) ridiculed for accent, (c) rendered invisible, (d) disregarded international values and needs, (e) ascription of intelligence, and (f) environmental microaggressions (structural barriers on campus). In addition, we used the same approach to identify themes pertaining to the ways in which students coped with racial microaggressions: (a) engaging with own racial and cultural groups, (b) withdrawing from academic spheres, and (c) seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu. Microaggressions and coping themes differed based on country of origin and language proficiency. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Asian international students, racial microaggressions, coping, campus racial climate, higher education

Internationalization of North American institutions of higher education has become a priority since the 1950s (Bartell, 2003; Knight, 1997). Through higher enrollment rates of international students, among other goals, institutions hope to prepare students to live and work cooperatively in a diverse, global context (Knight, 1997). In 2005, nearly 100,000 international students came to Canada and roughly half were students from Asia (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2009). Asian students consistently have accounted for the largest share of international students in Canada. Although international students contribute vast financial resources and expertise in the cultural and professional practices of other countries (Arthur, 1997), they face many obstacles throughout their adjustment to the host culture. Scholarship and popular media alike strongly suggest that Asian international students experience racial bias (i.e., prejudicial attitudes; Allport,

ment" toward member[s] of a group on account of race; Dion, 2002, p. 2; Arthur, 2003; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Findlay & Kohler, 2010; Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007). Yet, students' experiences of modern and subtle forms of racism are under-researched and underexamined. Empirical research in the United Kingdom and the United States has documented that Asian international students often are mar-

1979) and discrimination (i.e., "unfair behavior or unequal treat-

has documented that Asian international students often are marginalized and ignored on campus because of their race (Bradley, 2000; Diangelo, 2006). Furthermore, Constantine et al. (2005) showed that Asian international students frequently are ostracized for studying too hard and performing too well academically. Popular media have suggested that dominant group members blame Asian students for creating competitive campus environments and enrolling in leading universities at higher rates than White domestic students (Findlay & Kohler, 2010). Canadian universities with high enrollment rates of Asian students have been referred to as "Asian universities" in colloquial language, and typically are seen as difficult, asocial, and unattractive to White students; meanwhile, predominately White universities have been described as social and "fun-loving" (Findlay & Kohler, 2010, p. 2). International students experience covert forms of inhospitality, cultural intolerance, and unfairness, which often are hard to articulate (Lee & Rice, 2007). Representing subtle and unintentional forms of racism and racial discrimination, racial microaggressions theory (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) is well suited to understand the complex range of Asian international students' experiences with racial discrimination on campus.

Covert forms of racism (i.e., racial microaggressions) may be particularly salient in Canada because of its official multicultural policy, adopted in 1971 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). This policy emphasizes the value of cultural diversity and asserts that all citizens are equal (Beharry & Crozier, 2008; Esses

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& Gardner, 1996). Statistics Canada (2010) projected that by the year 2031 the majority of the Canadian population will consist of visible minorities.<sup>1</sup> However, scholars such as Arat-Koc (2005) have argued that liberal multicultural policies portray pseudotolerance for cultural diversity. Thus, as a consequence of multiculturalism, Canadians often deny their own racism and instead characterize the United States as "that country to our south with its awful racism" (Nelson & Nelson, 2004, p. 3). Despite these notions, Canadian scholars have demonstrated that racism is commonplace in Canada generally (Nelson & Nelson, 2004) and within Canadian universities specifically (Henry & Tator, 2009). Given the unique Canadian context, the rapid influx of Asian students at Canadian universities, and the negative influence of racism on Asian international students' well-being (e.g., Lee & Rice, 2007; Perrucci & Hu, 1995), examining Asian international students' phenomenological experiences with racial microaggressions is critical. Such examination has the potential to ameliorate students' well-being, enhance campus racial climates, and to fulfill the aim of internationalization.

#### **Racial Microaggressions Model**

Although rarely applied to the Canadian context, racial microaggressions theory (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) provides a promising means for understanding Asian international students' experiences with subtle racism in Canada. Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate negative racial insults to people of color (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2003; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Although racial microaggressions can appear innocuous, they often are experienced as invalidating and degrading (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Sue, Capodilupo, and colleagues (2007) developed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that comprises three categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults, the most overt of the three, are racial microaggressions that directly defame the target's racial background and are meant to be hurtful. Microinsults refer to subtle communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity toward a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinvalidations encompass subtle communications that negate or invalidate the target's thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality. Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson (2003) conceptualized the negative effects of racial and ethnic discrimination on targets' psychosocial well-being, including their life satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem. The cumulative effects of subtle forms of racism on targets can be detrimental to the health and adjustment of targets (R. Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

Despite the prolific rate at which racial microaggressions research is growing in the United States, little is known about Asian international students' experiences with and responses to racial microaggressions. To date, empirical examinations of racial microaggressions have focused predominately on Black (e.g., Constantine, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), Asian American (e.g., Lin, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007), Latina/o Americans (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010), and American Indian (D. A. Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011) targets. To our knowledge, no empirical research has examined racial microaggressions among international students. Moreover, with notable exception (Hernandez, Carranza, & Almeida, 2010), few empirical investigations have addressed racial microaggressions in Canada.

In a review of the literature, S. Kim and Kim (2010) theorized potential racial microaggressions targeting international students as a broad heterogeneous group in the United States. They conceptualized classroom ascription of intelligence as pertaining to international students' experiences of being perceived as unintelligent because of speech characteristics and language proficiency. Similarly, they denoted pathologizing cultural values/communication styles to describe messages that students must assimilate their personal beliefs and manner of speech to match the dominant culture. They also discussed that professors may invalidate international issues and perspectives in the classroom and curriculum. Several themes (i.e., exclusion and social avoidance, assumption of homogeneity, and invisibility) referred to international students' experiences of being excluded, perceived as all being the same, and being overlooked by members of the host culture. Last, to address systemic barriers faced by international students, they indicated the theme of environmental and systemic microaggressions. S. Kim and Kim's model makes a strong contribution to the literature but is in need of empirical investigation. It does not distinguish between the categories of racial microaggressions (e.g., microinsults). Finally, international students from all over the world are referred to as a homogeneous group; thus, further empirical research is necessary to provide a more nuanced and complex portrayal of specific international students' experiences of racial microaggressions.

# **Coping With Racial Microaggressions**

Although there exists a host of literature on coping with racism (e.g., Alvarez & Juang, 2010; Brondolo, Brady ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009; Lewis-Coles & Constantine, 2006), to our knowledge only two qualitative studies have investigated coping responses to racial microaggressions specifically (Hernandez et al., 2010; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Huntt, 2012). On the basis of the negative effects of racial microaggressions noted above, scholars have called for empirical examinations of coping responses as an important and necessary extension of the microaggressions literature (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). In a qualitative study investigating coping responses to racial microaggressions, Hernandez et al. (2010) identified eight responses to racial microaggressions used by mental health professionals of color (e.g., confronting the aggressor and spirituality). In the other qualitative examination among a sample of Black women, Lewis et al. (2012) identified resistant (e.g., resisting Eurocentric standards), collective (i.e., leaning on one's support network), and protective (e.g., becoming desensitized and escaping) coping responses to gendered racial microaggressions. Further examination of coping responses has the potential to inform campus interventions and mitigate negative impacts on students.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Defined as individuals who do not self-identify as Aboriginal peoples, "are non-Caucasian in race, or non-White in color" (Employment Equity Act; Minister of Justice, 1995, p. 2).

## Purpose and Rationale of the Present Investigation

With few exceptions (e.g., Constantine et al., 2005), the majority of studies focusing on Asian international students' experiences consider all students as one homogeneous group at the expense of important factors, such as country of origin; most often, they have excluded South Asian students. Furthermore, as noted above, no empirical research has explored international students' experiences with or coping responses to racial microaggressions. Given the unique liberal multiculturalism policies in Canada (Canadian Multiculturalism Act; Minister of Justice, 2003), the proposed project offers one of the first empirical investigations of racial microaggressions and coping responses in Canada by empirically examining racial microaggressions targeting the largest group of international students in Canada: East and South Asian students.

We used the consensual qualitative research method (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) to analyze interview data among East and South Asian international students. We selected CQR on the basis of its increased use in the study of racial microaggressions (e.g., D. A. Clark et al., 2011; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). CQR is based on the assumption that complex issues involve multiple perspectives that provide a check against research bias (Hill et al., 1997). Uniquely, CQR employs research teams of three to five members to ensure a variety of opinions when arriving at consensus judgments, as well as auditors to review consensus judgments (Hill et al., 1997). This approach is appropriate as it uses an inductive process to discern concepts in the data. Research questions include (1) In what ways, if any, do East and South Asian international students experience racial microaggressions? (2) What effects, if any, do intersecting identities (e.g., gender, nationality, and English proficiency) have on East and South Asian international students' experiences of racial microaggressions? (3) For those East and South Asian international students who experience racial microaggressions, how do they cope?

## Method

## **Participants and Procedure**

Participants (N = 12; women = 7, men = 5) were drawn from a larger study of narrative identity and adjustment, and consisted of international undergraduate students from China (n = 7), South Korea (n = 2), India (n = 2), and Pakistan (n = 1). See Table 1 for demographic characteristics. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 21 years, in their first year of undergraduate study, and had arrived in Canada within 6 months prior to data collection. All but one participant stated that English was their second language. Participants in the present study were representative of those in the larger study, with the exception of slightly fewer men (42%, as opposed to 50%) and South Korean students (17%, as opposed to 27%).

The larger project comprised a longitudinal investigation of narrative identity and adjustment among 129 first-year Asian international students. Those participants were drawn from the admission data at a large public university in a Canadian metropolis. Students were invited to participate in the longitudinal study by phone and were compensated (\$10) for participating at each wave of data collection.

Table 1Student Participant Demographic Characteristics

Country of origin	Gender	Age (years)	English first language?
China	Female	19	No
China	Female	19	No
China	Female	19	No
China	Female	20	No
China	Female	20	No
China	Male	19	No
China	Male	21	No
India	Male	18	Yes
India	Male	19	No
Pakistan	Male	19	No
South Korea	Female	20	No
South Korea	Female	21	No

For the current investigation, we selected a theory-based purposeful subsample (Creswell, 2005, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994) to conduct a secondary data analysis. The purposive criterion was students who spontaneously reported experiencing some form of racial or ethnic discrimination. Because the original study did not inquire about or examine students' reported experiences with discrimination or microaggressions, we chose a purposeful sample to investigate empirically international students' experiences with racial microaggressions in the Canadian context. The first author independently read all transcripts from the first round of interviews (N = 129) to identify a relevant subsample (n = 12).

# Setting

The university of interest was a major research institution in a large Canadian city. There are nearly 20,000 international students studying in the metropolitan city where the study was conducted, and the majority of these students are from Asia (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012). At the time data were collected, international students composed roughly 10% of full-time undergraduate students enrolled at the university of interest; approximately 64% of these students were from Asia (Facts & Figures; University of Toronto, 2008). With regard to country of origin, the current sample was representative of international undergraduates on campus.

#### Researchers

The primary researchers consisted of an Iranian Canadian female master's student in counseling psychology and a White, Jewish American female associate professor of counseling psychology. A second-generation Iranian Canadian male associate professor of social psychology was the primary investigator of the larger study and served as third author of the article. A multiracial male professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and with expertise in CQR, was the external auditor. Consistent with CQR (Hill et al., 1997), team members deliberated power differentials among them based on discipline, degree status, race, and gender. These discussions took place throughout the research process. We agreed to maintain a respectful and open environment in which each research member would feel comfortable expressing his or her views. As a team, we expected that certain students would report

Table 2					
Racial Microaggressions	That	Target	Asian	International Students	

Theme	Frequency (n)	Category	Definition
Excluded and avoided	Typical (9): 8 East Asian and 1 South Asian	Microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation	East and South Asian students reported feeling excluded on campus.
Ridiculed for accent	Variant (5): All East Asian	Microassault	East Asian international students reported being teased because of their accent, pronunciation, or language proficiency.
Rendered invisible	Rare (1): East Asian	Microinsult	An East Asian international student reported that her contribution in the classroom was unwanted or disregarded.
Disregarded international values and needs	Variant (2): All East Asian	Microinvalidation	East Asian international students reported that White peers were insensitive to cultural perspectives and needs.
Ascription of intelligence	Variant (3): 2 East Asian and 1 South Asian	Microinsult	East and South Asian international students felt that their personal characteristics were ascribed according to racial and cultural stereotypes.
Environmental microaggression (structural barriers on campus)	Variant (5): 3 East Asian and 2 South Asian	Microinvalidation	East and South Asian international students expressed concern about a lack of funding and barriers to obtaining visas or permits.

Note. Typical = theme applied to six or more cases; variant = theme applied to more than one but six or fewer cases; rare = theme applied to one case.

incidents of racism or discrimination. We also openly discussed our collective antiracist bias and interest in equity issues. Using continual discussion, we remained cognizant of our biases throughout the research process to minimize their effects on the analysis.

## Interviews

Data were drawn from individual, unstructured 30-min interviews. The first author conducted a portion of interviews in the larger study. A South Asian woman undergraduate and a White American male graduate psychology student conducted the remainder of the interviews. All interviewers received the same training and used the following prompt:

Please share with us the story of your life from the time you arrived in [current city] until now. Start at the beginning and tell us about your experiences, the good and the bad. We are interested in the challenges you encountered in adjusting to your new life in Canada.

Interviewers sought clarification where appropriate, encouraged and elicited narrative continuation, reestablished chronological order, and facilitated a general empathic atmosphere (Kohut, 1971). Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and identifying information, except for the participants' gender and ethnicity, were removed. Research assistants ensured that transcripts matched audio-recordings. Code numbers were assigned to identify participants during the remainder of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

The first author independently reviewed the interview transcripts and generated a start-list of racial microaggressions and coping response themes. She also identified quotations to exemplify the central elements of the themes. The second author independently reviewed the start-list and suggested modifications (e.g., revising theme titles and selecting illustrative quotations that better captured students' experiences). The primary researchers (i.e., first and second authors) discussed the preliminary themes during several meetings until they arrived at consensus. Next, they presented their preliminary list of themes to the external auditor who recommended renaming several themes (e.g., *invisibility* to *rendered invisible*) and refining one definition to reflect the impact of racial microaggressions. The primary researchers reviewed the audit and revised the analysis accordingly. Further, the primary researchers

Table 3

Asian Ir	nternational	Students'	Coping 1	Responses	to Racial	Microaggressions
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Theme	Frequency (n)	Definition
Engaging with own racial and cultural group	Typical (7): 6 East Asian and 1 South Asian	East and South Asian international students reported connecting with their own racial and cultural groups.
Withdrawing from academic spheres	Variant (4): All East Asian	East Asian international students described narrowed academic spheres.
Seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu	Variant (5): All East Asian	East Asian international students reported finding comfort in the racial diversity at the university and city at large.

Note. Typical = theme applied to six or more cases; variant = theme applied to more than one but six or fewer cases.

split one broad coping response theme into two new themes. Because it is essential in CQR to achieve consensus about the meaning of the data (Hill et al., 1997, 2005), the primary researchers consulted with each other and the auditor at every step of the revision process. The researchers retained the essential components of CQR (i.e., multiple perspectives and external auditor), but made minor modifications. Following previous researchers (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Perry & Calhoun-Butts, 2012), we retained a single theme that was expressed by only one participant because the content was informative. These divergent perspectives represent important counternarratives that offer a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Following recommendations by leading qualitative methodologists, we attended to oft-utilized standards of trustworthiness to ensure "goodness" of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005).

#### Trustworthiness

Data analysis followed standards of trustworthiness via four criteria: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005). To achieve credibility, we involved multiple research investigators. As noted above, interviewers did not inquire explicitly about experiences of discrimination or racial microaggressions, which also enhanced the study's credibility. We provide detailed descriptions of the context to address transferability of the findings. To enhance confirmability, we use participants' direct quotations to support the research team's conclusions. In accordance with the dependability criteria of trustworthiness, we used an external auditor who was not involved in earlier phases of the research project.

## Results

We present the results with regard to our two research foci: (a) racial microaggressions and (b) coping responses. We identified six racial microaggressions themes and three coping themes relevant to the experiences of East and South Asian international students. We define each theme and provide illustrative quotations, where appropriate. As per the revised CQR criteria (Hill et al., 2005), we use the terms *typical* for themes that applied to six or more cases, *variant* for those that applied to fewer than six but greater than one case, and *rare* for one theme that had only one case. See Table 2 and Table 3 for the racial microaggressions and the coping themes, respectively.

#### **Racial Microaggressions**

When describing the racial microaggression themes, we link each to one or more respective microaggressions category (i.e., microassault, microinsult, or microinvalidation). Four themes in the current study (i.e., *excluded and avoided, rendered invisible, disregarded international values and needs*, and *environmental microaggressions*) were consistent with S. Kim and Kim's (2010) conceptualization of racial microaggressions that target international students in U.S. higher education. One theme was similar but expressed differently in the present study (i.e., *ascription of intelligence*) and another was novel (i.e., *ridiculed for accent*).

**Excluded and avoided.** Six East Asian students and one South Asian international student typically reported feeling ex-

cluded by peers on campus. This typical theme is related to all three categories of microaggressions (i.e., assault, insult, and invalidation). Students' experiences ranged from being passively ignored to being deliberately excluded on campus. For example, one Chinese woman reported a microassault when she was told that she did not belong in Canada. She shared,

I was going to psychology class and on the phone with my mom, talking in Chinese of course, and an old guy pass by me saying, "Please go home," right into my face. . . . I turned back. I don't know what to say so I said, "You go home," but I realize it doesn't hurt him like me.

Other students shared more subtle experiences. For instance, some discussed being excluded from common areas of social interaction among peers and especially White peers. Because of the ways in which they were avoided and excluded, students reported having difficulty engaging with the predominately White campus culture. Similar to S. Kim and Kim's (2010) conceptualization, participants in the current study perceived domestic peers referencing Western culture, telling jokes, and using slang at the exclusion of international students. A Chinese man reported that because of cultural differences, he could not understand White peers at parties, in particular, when they told jokes. He elaborated, "I am standing there. I try to smile, but I do not get the joke. I feel weird."

International students also felt as if White domestic students avoided them. A male student from India reported that when he arrived on campus, he "didn't know anyone because [he] looked different. [He] never met people anywhere." From this point forward, we use the term *Indian* to refer to participants from India. A Chinese woman preferred to form friendships with Asian Canadians than White students, who she perceived to be "cocky." She shared, "Even if they've [Asian Canadian students] been here for 6 years . . . it is better because they know how you feel and they *like* talking to you." During numerous interactions, participants described feeling that their domestic White peers did not care about or want their presence on campus.

**Ridiculed for accent.** Reflecting the microassault category, in this variant theme, participants, across countries of origin, reported feeling ridiculed because of accented speech or language proficiency. For example, one South Korean woman shared, "The [science] teacher [asked] me to introduce myself. I ran in front of the class and I say my name and everybody tease[d] me on my accent. I felt so bad." Another Chinese woman recalled,

Once I had a presentation and everybody laughed and said something bad about the Chinese . . . like, "they suck." You know, not many people are friendly . . . some just laugh at you. That made me uncomfortable, so I do not like to do presentations.

Similarly, a Korean man described feeling embarrassed when an instructor repeatedly responded to his comments with "Pardon, pardon, pardon. What did you say? What did you say?" A Chinese woman who sought experiences to develop her English skills was met with impatient people who shouted at her for her accent and lack of proficiency.

**Rendered invisible.** This rare theme was related to the category of microinsult. Consistent with S. Kim and Kim's (2010) *invisibility* theme, an East Asian international student reported

feeling that her presence on campus was not visible, wanted, or acknowledged. Although only one student expressed this theme, it is important because it is consistent with S. Kim and Kim's conceptualization of racial microaggressions targeting international students. Specifically, a South Korean woman recounted an experience that left her feeling invisible in a science lab because her lab partner ignored her. She stated, "I have [a] partner and I think because my English is not very well he was just doing [the lab] by himself and I was just watching. He really made me feel bad." This illustrates that the student felt that her capabilities or contributions as a fellow science student were unimportant to her lab partner.

**Disregarded international values and needs.** This variant theme pertains to the microinvalidation category. Consistent with S. Kim and Kim's (2010) theme *invalidating international issues and perspectives*, two East Asian international students felt that White peers were insensitive to international perspectives and international needs. One Chinese woman explained, "White people do not care what you think about the world. They [are] just focused on their own culture and I [do] not feel very comfortable with that." Another Chinese woman reported thinking that certain professors and administrative staff were unaccommodating to their unfamiliarity with Western culture. As the student described,

In that class, I cannot understand the lecture at the beginning because he [the professor] was talking about very traditional Western classic novels I had not read before. Most of my classmates I feel like they have . . . read those before when they were small so I cannot understand in the beginning. I contact the professor and say, "Could you please slow down a little bit because I am an international student? Could you sometimes write some of the keywords when you're talking?" . . . His feedback is, "You can go to international student center and get help." That did not help me.

The quotation above demonstrates that students feel out of place and ignored when their needs as diverse international students were not acknowledged.

Ascription of intelligence. East and South Asian students reported feeling that their intelligence was ascribed according to racial stereotypes. This theme was variant and related to the microinsult category. For example, one Chinese woman stated, "Everybody thinks Chinese are good at math. Not really! We just work hard." A Chinese male history major reported feeling like an anomaly to others because of preconceived notions that Chinese students lack interest and competence in the liberal arts. An Indian man shared, "The thing about my [residence] floor is that I am the only person who is from India and . . . people [think] Indians are supposed to be very studious or not engaging in any social activities." These students reported feeling stereotyped on campus based on preconceived notions of how they should behave and what they should study.

**Environmental microaggressions (structural barriers on campus).** Variantly, East and South Asian students expressed concern about a lack of funding for international students and exhaustive barriers to visa obtainment. This theme is related to the microinvalidation category and consistent with previous conceptualization (S. Kim & Kim, 2010). Students felt that the host culture assumed that international students were inherently wealthy because they were able to study abroad in the West, and thus felt used for their money. According to one Indian man,

"They are taking too much [money] from us." Students reported feeling that common assumptions that international students are wealthy conveyed that they were only accepted to the university for revenue, and that their needs were not important to address on a systemic level. Several students communicated that they were struggling financially and felt like they were burdening their parents. Another Indian man stated that the university "should not expect the just filthy rich people from other countries to come and study here. There are people like me whose parents are spending everything on them just to get them educated. . . . There should be more scholarship programs." A Chinese man reported finding fewer than 10 scholarship programs for international students compared with "over 1,000 scholarship programs" for domestic students. The staggering difference in scholarship opportunities communicated to participants that their presence on campus was due to economic incentives. Furthermore, another Chinese man reported that international students often are not hired on campus because of the tedious paperwork involved in work permits.

#### **Coping With Racial Microaggressions**

In response to experiences with racial microaggressions, participants demonstrated resilience and engaged in a variety of coping strategies. In particular, three themes emerged among participants: *engaging with own racial and cultural groups, withdrawing from academic spheres,* and *seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu.* 

Engaging with own racial and cultural groups. This typical theme refers to coping with racial microaggressions through active involvement with one's own racial and cultural group. East and South Asian international students reported connecting with their own communities as a form of coping. The presence of people from the same racial background at the university provided the students with a sense of belonging and community. Moreover, because participants felt excluded and avoided by White Canadians, they deliberately chose to stay in their racial and cultural circles. A Chinese man elaborated, "There were no Canadian friends of mine during the whole time I spend in Canada. All my friends were Chinese. That is very usual for international students. ... It is really hard to interact with Canadian people here." A South Korean woman noted connecting more with Korean students, as opposed to White students, as a natural byproduct of exclusion. The preponderance of international students in the current study felt limited to social interactions with members of the international student community, specifically from their ethnic background. Although stating that they also desired and expected to have engaged in more meaningful interactions with "Canadian" students, these participants viewed their racial and cultural networks as supportive.

Withdrawing from academic spheres. In this variant response to racial microaggressions, East Asian students reported disengaging from certain academic activities. After being ridiculed for her accent, one Chinese woman avoided class presentations altogether. Another Korean woman who was ridiculed for her accent skipped classes for a week and sought counseling. Notably, this student explained that meeting with a counselor was a "last option." Furthermore, after having felt that her concerns regarding an English class had been disregarded (see Disregarded international values and needs section), a Chinese woman dropped an English class and reported that the professor left her feeling like there were no avenues for success in the course. East Asian students limited their engagement within the classroom following several different racial microaggressions. Thus, experiences resulted in withdrawal from academic engagement.

Seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu. Expressing this variant theme, East Asian students demonstrated resilience by finding comfort in the racial diversity at the university and in the surrounding community. One Chinese woman explained,

The reason I like it here is because I don't really feel alone, I am an international student, but I feel like there are a lot of others like me. I felt really comfortable in [city] because it's very multicultural.

Others were comforted by the high rate of immigration to the metropolitan city. For example, one Chinese woman said, "Maybe because many [people] are immigrants as well. I feel everybody here is involved in this community, in this society." The diverse environment was comforting amid the challenges of East Asian students' sojourn process.

#### Discussion

Results from the current study extend the literature on racial microaggressions by examining East and South Asian international students' experiences of microaggressions in Canada. East and South Asian women and men reported experiences of racial microaggressions in classrooms and social settings on campus. Participants in the current study also reported various coping strategies in response to racial microaggressions on campus. Notably, racial microaggression and coping themes varied according to students' intersecting identities. Below, we discuss findings in the context of the literature. In addition, we address limitations and provide directions for future research and practice.

#### Supporting Racial Microaggressions Theory

Findings revealed that East and South Asian international students experienced a range of racial microaggressions on campus. The three broad racial microaggressions categories of microinsult, microassault, and microinvalidation (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) were appropriate. However, in several cases, themes did not correspond exclusively to one category. For example, *excluded and avoided* was expressed as a microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation.

Four themes from the current study provided empirical support for S. Kim and Kim's (2010) prior conceptualization (i.e., *excluded and avoided, rendered invisible, disregarded international values and needs*, and *environmental microaggressions*). Asian international students in Canada, however, expanded on some themes in unique ways. While describing their experiences of being *excluded and avoided*, for example, participants in our study expressed a desire for meaningful interactions with White peers. Yet, despite their desire for meaningful interactions, participants reported feeling rejected by White peers, indicating the powerful role that dominant group members play in shaping students' adjustment to the campus culture. This finding is elaborated on below and linked to coping styles.

Several findings were consistent with existing literature documenting environmental and interpersonal challenges faced by in-

ternational students of color in the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, students in the present study noted barriers when obtaining visas, work permits, and fellowships. Analogous to previous findings (e.g., Lee & Rice, 2007), at times, students expressed feeling that their presence in Canada was reduced to economic revenue. Furthermore, students reported being excluded in social settings and classrooms on campus. Bradley (2000) similarly found that even when international students form relationships with domestic students, they describe the relationships as superficial and without meaning. In the classroom, Diangelo (2006) documented a lack of attention to the engagement and contribution of Asian international students in classrooms. We agree with S. Kim and Kim (2010) that these racial microaggressions convey the underlying message that international students of color are units of national revenue whose cultural backgrounds, communication styles, and lived realities are not critical elements of university life.

#### **Extending Racial Microaggressions Theory**

The present study extends understandings of racial microaggressions experienced by international students in important ways: One theme was expressed differently (i.e., ascription of intelligence) and another theme was novel (i.e., ridiculed for accent). The theme ascription of intelligence denotes students' experiences that their intelligence was ascribed by racial and cultural stereotypes. In contrast to S. Kim and Kim's (2010) theme classroom ascription of intelligence, which conceptualizes ascriptions of unintelligence due to perceived accents, in the present study, Asian international students reported being perceived as having greater intelligence in the math and sciences. Despite the seemingly positive implications of these messages, their impacts hurt targets by limiting their social and academic activity and pressuring them to conform to stereotypes. For example, the "model minority" myth, which assumes that Chinese individuals are naturally good at math and sciences, ignores students' hard work in these subjects and invalidates their motivation to pursue other nonstereotypical interests (Peterson, 1966, p. 11; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Similarly, assumptions that Indian students are neither interested nor allowed to partake in social activities can hinder Indian students' participation in campus events. Stereotypes have multidimensional negative consequences, limiting their opportunities and self-efficacy in nonstereotypical fields.

Also notable, ridiculed for accent is a novel microaggression theme. It is not surprising that students reported having accents given that all but one acknowledged English as their second language. Students variantly perceived hostility because of their accents and language proficiency. This finding is consistent with other empirical evidence that has identified characteristic of speech as a racial microaggression that targets Latina/o Americans (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010). This finding also corroborates literature documenting negative attitudes toward the accented speech of minorities in Canada (Creese & Kambere, 2003; Munro, 2003). Although the theme ridiculed for accent shares some similarities with S. Kim and Kim's (2010) theme of ascription of intelligence, we renamed the theme to feature a central aspect of students' experiences in the present study. S. Kim and Kim used ascription of intelligence to conceptualize assumptions that international students are unintelligent because of communication

styles or speech. While subsumed under S. Kim and Kim's theme, students in the present study explicitly discussed feeling disadvantaged and rejected because of their accents and English proficiency.

Interestingly, East Asian students also attributed their experiences of exclusion, avoidance, and invisibility to the dominant group's negative attitudes toward their language skills. Munro (2003), however, articulates that similar to racial prejudice, objections to foreign accents often have to do more with an unwillingness to accommodate differences and dominant group values than a genuine concern about comprehension. Previous research suggests that it is difficult to separate the concepts of language prejudice and racism (Goto, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2002). Both have been associated with negative consequences such as increased health problems (Yoo, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2009). Notably, a Chinese woman in the present study differentiated between language and racial prejudice. She expressed,

I feel like even if later, even if after university and I did work here and stay here . . . I won't really *get* into this society. . . . Like maybe I can speak better English and you know, understand better Canadian culture. But still, I don't feel like I will be . . . in the middle or anything.

This student expected to continue to feel marginalized within Canadian society after increased language proficiency.

Findings from the current study extend prior research by documenting differences in experiences of racial microaggressions on the basis of students' intersecting social identities. Overall, East Asian participants, in particular those from China, reported more microaggression themes than their South Asian counterparts. In fact, three themes (i.e., invalidating international perspectives and needs, ridiculed for accent, and rendered invisible) were reported exclusively by East Asian students. We speculate that this finding may be attributed to several important differences between East Asian and South Asian participants in our study. First, English proficiency was a key factor. One Indian man, for example, reported having attended English-speaking schools in his home country and declared English as his first language. Language proficiency may have buffered his experiences with certain racial microaggressions, such as being ridiculed for one's accent. Similarly, important social class differences among students may have influenced students' language proficiency and previous exposures to Western culture. Second, gender may have played a role in international students' experiences with racial microaggressions. Because all of the South Asian students selfidentified as men, findings of this study may be specific to South Asian men's lived experiences. Thus, we are unable to tease apart effects of South Asian ethnicity versus gender. Also, there were fewer South Asian students than East Asian students in the sample. Therefore, the present study may be missing important details about South Asian students' experiences with racial microaggressions. Third, higher enrollment rates of East Asian students on campus in comparison to South Asian students may have placed them under heightened scrutiny because of popular sentiments that Asian students are contributing to competitive campus climates. Regardless, findings from the current investigation demonstrate the need to consider important within-group differences among international students (see Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004).

## **Exploring Coping Responses**

Examining coping responses is a novel, important, and necessary extension of racial microaggressions theory (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Similar to Lewis and colleagues' (2012) investigation among Black women, we, too, identified three styles of coping with racial microaggressions (i.e., personal, collective, and environmental). International students in the present study reported having good peer networks with racial and cultural groups and finding comfort in a diverse milieu; this was consistent across nationalities. Notably, two coping styles (i.e., withdrawing from academic spheres and seeking comfort in the surrounding multicultural milieu) emerged only among East Asian international students. East Asian students, particularly Chinese students, also expressed more racial microaggression experiences. These findings may suggest that the accumulation of microaggression incidents contributed to East Asian students' withdrawal from certain spaces on campus to connect with the larger multicultural city.

Findings from the current study add support to scholarship regarding personal and collective coping styles in response to racial microaggressions and acculturation more generally. For example, prior scholarship has demonstrated that Asian international college women who reported being teased for their Englishspeaking skills preferred academic courses that required limited English language proficiency (Constantine et al., 2005). Participants in the present study seemed to have retreated to cultural enclaves after feelings of rejection and exclusion from dominant group members and reported desires for greater interaction with White Canadians. Previous literature also has noted the salience of peer networks to Asian individuals throughout the acculturation process (Chiu & Ring, 1998; Constantine et al., 2005). Scholars support the notion that Asian students may reaffirm their ethnicity to counter White peers' resentment and ostracism (Costigan, Hua, & Su, 2010; Costigan, Su, & Hua, 2009). Our findings suggest that being securely embedded in one's ethnic culture provided resilience to students throughout acculturation. Anisef and Kilbride (2000) demonstrated that newcomer adolescents who are securely embedded in their ethnic culture achieve the most academic success, for example, compared with students who feel disengaged with their ethnic background. Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002/2003) demonstrated the importance of satisfaction with one's social network in the adjustment of international students to the host culture as compared with domestic students. Furthermore, a sense of connection and belonging to one's ethnic group has been shown to ameliorate some of the distress associated with discrimination in general (Brondolo et al., 2009).

Notably, findings from the present investigation suggest that the environment, or surrounding milieu, makes an important contribution to East and South Asian international students' coping responses. For example, students were pleased with the diverse student body at the university and within the city at large, claiming that it provided them with a source of comfort and made them feel less alone. Consistent with previous research, a diverse milieu appeared to be conducive to the establishment of strong ethnic and cultural networks among students (Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003). Stevenson et al. (2005) found that diversity in the environ-

ment bolstered racial socialization among Black youth in the United States, which served as a protective factor for child maladjustment in response to racism. Thus, given the large and growing number of visible minorities living in large Canadian cities (e.g., Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal), coping styles may be particular to environments.

#### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Although findings from the present study add to the existing literature on racial microaggressions, several limitations must be noted. The current sample was derived from one university. Thus, future research should examine whether these themes are transferable to international students on different Canadian campuses. The participants in our study lived in Canada for 6 months and attended a large research-intensive university in a large, cosmopolitan city. Consequently, findings may not be transferable to other environments or to students who have lived in Canada longer. It is also possible that culture shock may have influenced students' experiences on campus. Most participants in the current study were from China; thus, we cannot discern what the results may mean for other Asian populations. Future research should examine the experiences of international students at campuses in smaller cities where the population of visible minorities is smaller. Given the importance of the diverse environment to students in the present study, we speculate that themes may differ in more homogeneous settings. Because we were unable to determine whether racial microaggressions differed on the basis of ethnicity or gender, future research should examine intersecting identities on students' experiences with racial microaggressions (Lewis et al., 2012).

Because the present study is a secondary data analysis of a larger project with a different purpose, microaggressions themes emerged naturally without direct probing about the racial climate at the university or the city at large. Consequently, some bias was reduced, which enhanced the credibility of the findings (Heaton, 2008). At the same time, we were unable to craft questions to tap into various aspects of racial microaggressions, which may have limited the richness of our data. For instance, if interviewers had inquired about subtle forms of racism, participants may have reported more experiences of racial microaggressions. Relatedly, we were unable to describe racial microaggressions to participants before data collection (as per Hill and colleagues' recommendations for purposive sampling with CQR).

To contextualize racial microaggression themes (e.g., to distinguish between experiences of being ridiculed for one's language skills from racism), future research should employ different qualitative data sources, such as focus groups, which provide opportunities for students to generate spontaneous recollections in light of other students' experiences (Krueger, 1994). Because coping themes emerged naturally without direct inquiry, future research should examine coping strategies used by international students directly. As one of few studies of racial microaggressions in Canada, we call on scholars to examine racial microaggressions in the Canadian context for different marginalized populations, such as domestic racialized students.

Although not a racial microaggression, one Chinese woman reporting feeling rendered invisible by a Canadian-born Chinese peer who ignored her. Theories such as internalized oppression (see Speight, 2007) and lateral violence (i.e., violence perpetrated by minorities toward other minorities; see Maracle, 1996) offer explanations for this particular expression. Thus, Asian domestic students on campus may also ignore Asian international students because it is socially acceptable according to Whites and because of popular sentiments that condemn students of color for increasing competition at Canadian universities. Future research might explore this phenomenon further.

# **Implications for Practice**

Diversity in the college environment is essential for student learning; thus, institutions of higher education must be dedicated to creating the necessary conditions to support international students' adjustment to the campus climate (Hurtado et al., 2003; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998). Because of the ways in which Asian international students routinely experience racial invalidation and insults on campus, the onus of acculturation and integration cannot be placed solely on international students. All members of the institution must contribute to facilitating a positive campus racial climate by taking a proactive stance against racial microaggressions. For example, faculty and teaching staff should undergo multicultural training to learn how to identify and respond to microaggressions on campus. To foster cultural sensitivity among undergraduate students, student affairs personnel should implement workshops that focus explicitly on racial microaggressions during student orientation. A South Korean man suggested that orientation events could prioritize bridging the separation between Asian international students and the rest of campus. Similarly, intergroup dialogue among students can be used throughout the year to foster social justice attitudes, selfreflection, empathy, and understanding (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012).

We also recommend the implementation of support services to assist Asian international students in understanding and responding to racial microaggressions. Because of the innocuous nature of racial microaggressions, targets often experience self-doubt, frustration, and isolation (Solórzano et al., 2000). New to Western culture, international students may look to dominant perspectives as they explore their identity as sojourners, and consequently internalize negative representations and societal beliefs about themselves (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000; Young, 1990). Furthermore, because research demonstrates that Asian international students typically do not utilize counseling services (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008; Zhang & Dixon, 2003), providing support services presents a challenge. In the present study, a Korean woman who was ridiculed for her accent during her class presentation stated that seeking a counselor was her "last option." Meanwhile, other students reported finding resilience in the diverse milieu and within their racial and cultural groups; thus, students may feel more comfortable with collective forms of coping and benefit from multicultural support groups.

#### Conclusion

The present study offers one of the first empirical examinations of international students' experiences with racial microaggressions and subsequent coping responses. Findings demonstrated that East and South Asian international students at one Canadian university experienced various racial microaggressions on campus and used three styles of coping responses. Many of the microaggression themes outlined in the current study were consistent with prior conceptual writings. Among the current sample, East Asian students reported more racial microaggressions than South Asian students, which may have been linked to lesser English language proficiency. Consequently, East Asian students reported withdrawing from academic spheres on campus and seeking comfort in the diversity in the surrounding milieu. Students across ethnic groups expressed resilience by connecting with cultural networks. Our findings suggest that international students are incredibly resourceful and rely on several key coping responses. Such institutions have an obligation to protect students from discrimination and to ensure that they in turn benefit from cross-cultural exchanges. Because of the detrimental consequences of racial microaggressions to students' lived experiences and the campus racial climate, we urge university personnel to acknowledge racial microaggressions, establish mechanisms to address and mitigate their effects, and provide additional support to help students cope with these subtle forms of racism on campus.

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