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Title
South Asian Americans' Microaggression Experiences in School: Retrospective Reflections on Interactions with K-12 Teachers

Author
Rice, Punita Chhabra

Spokespersons: South Asian Americans' Microaggression Experiences in Schools Seen Through Retrospective Reflections on Interactions with K-12 Teachers

Punita C. Rice[1]

New Northeast Consulting

Abstract

South Asian Americans—like other students of color—experience racial microaggressions in schools, including the model minority myth and the spokesperson phenomenon (McCabe, 2009). This paper discusses these phenomena and relevant research before examining qualitative, retrospective reports from 10 college-aged South Asian Americans who described experiences with racial microaggressions in K-12 settings, selected from a larger source study. These participants' reports—related to being asked to speak about Indian or South Asian culture or history—are explored in the context of three themes: (a) the positioning of students as spokespersons as an obstacle to learning, (b) the spokesperson phenomenon as a form of racial trauma, and (c) the positioning of a student as a spokesperson as a reflection of an imbalance and misuse of power. This paper offers implications for inviting students to share culture without positioning them as spokespersons. Possible paths for future research into student experiences with this phenomenon are offered.

Keywords: Asian Americans, K-12, microaggressions, minority group students, model minority myth, racism, South Asian Americans, spokesperson phenomenon

[1] Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Punita Rice at punita@newnortheastconsulting.com.

In today's sociopolitical climate, teachers across the United States have a growing responsibility to support our students by condemning and working to minimize racism in schools. However, various manifestations of racism persist; students in schools around the nation continue to experience overt and subtle kinds of racism, and since the start of President Trump's 2016 presidential campaign actions motivated by racism in America has increased (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).

Discussions of racism have often been in the context of the Black/White binary and antisemitism and, more recently, in the context of Islamophobia and anti-Latinx immigrant sentiment. However, there may be less public visibility of the experiences of Asian American students' experiences of racism. South Asian American[2]—who comprise one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States (Samuel, 2017; South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2015)—often experience racism in schools. In fact, South Asian American students have faced an increase in racist violence and bullying in recent decades (Desai, 2017; Iyer, 2015; Rice, 2019), despite the common and longstanding perception that Asian Americans are a non-oppressed group (Kitano & Sue, 1973; Leong, Chao, & Hardin, 2000). Frequently, the racism takes the form of microaggressions: the little, day-to-day manifestations of racism, which are often normalized and overlooked as innocuous or insignificant (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; McCabe, 2009; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013) but have the potential to cause significant pain and long-lasting harm (Comas-Díaz, 2016; Sue et al., 2007). One such microaggression with particular relevance for South Asian American student experiences is the way that teachers and peers position these students as spokespersons for their race, often with significant negative effects (McCabe, 2009).

Furthermore, data on Asian American experiences tend to aggregate all Asian subgroups' experiences together (Blair & Qian, 1998; Lee, 1994), which hides significant educational disparities among different subgroups (Teranishi, Lok, & Nguyen, 2013), making it difficult to examine any one cultural or regional group (Jaschik, 2013), adding to a lack of awareness. Even in studies that document the harmful impacts of microaggressions on Asian Americans (Gee, Ro, Sharrif-Marco, & Chae, 2009; Ong et al., 2013; Sue et al., 2007), parsing the experiences of specific Asian groups, such as South Asian Americans, becomes nearly impossible. To better understand—and perhaps to eventually improve—the experiences of the various subgroups and communities that make up the larger Asian American population, there is a need to examine their complex experiences (Samuel, 2017). For example, though there is research on the racial microaggression referred to throughout this work as the *spokesperson phenomenon* (McCabe, 2009), South Asian Americans' experience of this microaggression has not yet been examined.

Thus, drawing on retrospective accounts of schooling experiences from 10 South Asian Americans, this paper examines the racial microaggression experiences of South

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[2] South Asian Americans is the collective term for those Americans who also have cultural, national, or ancestral connections with countries or peoples from the South Asian subcontinent and surrounding areas (i.e., India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and/or Maldives) and is not exhaustive (South Asian Americans Leading Together, 2015).

Asian Americans in schools and within the context of interactions with teachers. Specifically, this paper highlights South Asian American experiences with the spokesperson phenomenon and discusses some of the impacts of this phenomenon on this student population. I start with a review of the theoretical framework guiding my work; next, I provide a brief review of key, relevant literature on microaggressions and two related key concepts (i.e., the spokesperson phenomenon and the model minority myth). Then, I offer an overview of the methodology informing the study that this work examines. Finally, the results of the study are discussed and analyzed in the context of emergent themes along with implications for teachers.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Emerging in the 1980s from the discipline of legal studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a concept and a movement offers a lens, language, and structure to examine inequalities in law, society, and education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is the product of many progressive sociopolitical philosophies and American civil rights movements and has several core tenets, some of which are relevant to this paper: (a) racism is "ordinary," and a normal part of American society; (b) those in power tend to facilitate minority groups' progress only when it also supports or promotes self-interest—this principle is referred to as "interest convergence"; and (c) "the voice-of-color thesis" points to the value of storytelling in examining racial narratives and experiences of minorities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, pp. 8–11).

The pervasiveness and permanence of racism is an important perspective for examining student experiences of racism (Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009). Additionally, the concept of interest convergence suggests those in power—including White educators—are likely to pursue equity for people of color only when doing so converges with interests of White people (Milner, 2008). Thus, the experiences of South Asian American students may not be examined or addressed, given the absence of any obvious benefit to those in power. Further, CRT's emphasis on storytelling offers context, nuance, and insight to our understanding of experiences and also creates a space for giving voice to minorities: Ladson-Billings (1998) asserts that "the voice of people of color is required for a deep understanding of the educational system" (p. 14). Moreover, it is an important first step to understanding the complex experiences of underexamined minority groups.

Literature Review

Microaggressions

Although scholars have used the term in different ways, microaggressions generally refer to the seemingly innocuous—though often deeply hurtful and insidious—and frequently hidden products of racism inflicted daily on people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Skriken, 2014; Solorzano, 1998). Because of their pervasiveness and ubiquity, this form of racism may even be perceived as more insidious than the more obvious kinds of racism (Solorzano, 1998; Wang, Leu, &

Shoda, 2011). One study of 152 Asian Americans found that as many as 78% experienced racial microaggressions in a given two-week period (Ong et al., 2013).

Racial microaggressions take many forms, including facial expressions or glances, comments like "you speak such good English," and code words like "reverse discrimination" or "you people" (Solorzano, 1998, p. 125). Microaggressions can also include the belief in concepts like the model minority myth or its inverse, the spokesperson phenomenon. Further, all of these manifestations of racism can exist in the classroom.

Notable recent research has examined the prevalence (Ong et al., 2013) and impact (Gee, 2008) of microaggressions as experienced by Asian Americans broadly, without closely examining the experiences of South Asian Americans. Further, what little research does exist has not focused on this population's experiences of racial microaggressions in classroom settings, as this paper aims to do.

The Spokesperson Phenomenon (and the Model Minority Myth)

Two microaggressions frequently experienced by South Asian and other Asian American students include the spokesperson phenomenon (Rice, 2019) and the model minority myth (Kitano & Sue, 1973; Li, 2005; Wong, 1980). The first of these, the spokesperson phenomenon, refers to the situation in which individual students of color are asked to speak for their entire race or culture (i.e., to serve as a spokesperson for their people), and they may even feel an ongoing "daily pressure" to do so (McCabe, 2009, p. 142). Positioning someone as a spokesperson—something teachers may do in the classroom as the findings of this paper suggest—is a microaggression. It is also sometimes referred to as a *microinvalidation*, as it negates the individuality and actual experiences of the person positioned as a spokesperson and positions them as something they may simply not be. It also implies that they are a perpetual foreigner in America (Sue et al., 2007). For young people whose sense of identity is still developing, this can be particularly destabilizing.

The second microaggression, the model minority myth,[3] might be thought of as an inverse of the spokesperson phenomenon. The model minority myth and the spokesperson phenomenon are two sides of the same coin. The model minority myth uses the whole to define the individual, whereas the spokesperson phenomenon positions the individual to define the whole. Rather than asking an individual to speak for the whole identity group, the model minority myth microaggression conversely uses a perception of the group to draw conclusions about individuals.

The model minority myth refers to the misguided and harmful belief that—compared to other minority groups—South and other Asian Americans are smarter, better educated,

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[3] Although the model minority myth was a key concept explored in the original study this paper is based on, this paper focuses only on those responses that relate to the spokesperson phenomenon. Some of these responses contain references to experiences with the model minority myth. Responses from the source study that refer only to experiences with the model minority myth, but that *do not include experiences with the spokesperson phenomenon* are not included in this paper.

more successful, and more emotionally stable. In short, they are exceptional (Leong et al., 2000; Rice, 2019; Ung, Tendulkar, & Chu, 2015; Wong, 1980).

Prior to the 1960s, this was not the common perception of Asian Americans, many of whom worked in farming, lumber, and other manual labor. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965—which aimed to develop the national economy and military— led to a selective influx of Asian scientists, engineers, and doctors, and shifted the perception of Asians in America. These immigrants' academic and economic status differed from that of their predecessors and their descendants and gave rise to the inaccurate perception that *every* Asian is smart and economically successful. The Immigration Act of 1990, which led to a notable wave of immigration from Asian countries, again placed an emphasis on highly educated and skilled immigrants. Still, the new wave of immigrants was far more diverse than the preceding wave, including large refugee populations from Asian countries (Tamura, 2001). The term model minority, which entered the American lexicon by way of a 1966 article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Pettersen, 1966), has persisted ever since and is used to draw misleading conclusions about individual Asian Americans.

Numerous studies—from as early as the 1970s—have revealed that the concept is inaccurate (Kitano & Sue, 1973) and harmful: Asian Americans are not smarter than other groups but have varying needs and abilities (Li, 2005; Rice, 2019; Yang, 2004). They are not universally more academically successful than other groups but have diverse levels of educational attainment or financial success (Bald, 2013; Rahman & Paik, 2017). Furthermore, they are not more emotionally stable. Many Asian Americans struggle with identity development (Kiang, Huynh, Cheah, Wang, & Yoshikawa, 2017), may be more susceptible to depression and anxiety than peers from other cultural groups (Gee, Spencer, Chen, Yip, & Takeuchi, 2007; Leong et al., 2000) and feel isolated from other racial groups (O'Brien, 2008). Besides being inaccurate, the model minority myth is dangerous.

On an individual level, the myth imparts pressure on Asian American students to excel academically; one study on identity salience among college students found that even seemingly positive stereotypes contribute to psychological distress for Asian American students (Gupta, Szymanski, & Leong, 2011). On an interpersonal as well as a societal level the myth creates divisions by setting up misleading comparisons between populations and promotes interracial tension between Asian Americans and others (Hartlep, 2013; Lee, 2015). Others' belief in the myth often translate into negative feelings toward Asian Americans (Maddux, Galinsky, Cuddy, & Polifroni, 2008) and can lead to strengthening negative stereotypes (Kay, Day, Zanna, & Nussbaum, 2013). Many people also believe that Asian Americans are nerdy, too serious, cold, selfish, and awkward (Ho & Jackson, 2001; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). Despite the myth's inaccuracy and potential for harm, it persists in mainstream media, daily society, and schools; consequently, students suffer (Rice, 2019). Many teachers assume Asian American students are smarter and more stable than other students and are therefore less likely to acknowledge Asian Americans' academic problems or needs (Empleo, 2006; Rice, 2019). Though Asian American students are no less susceptible to developmental delays or learning disorders than their peers, teachers are less likely to identify them as needing special education services (Hartlep, 2013). Similarly, Asian Americans are

susceptible to struggles with mental health and well-being (Gupta et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2000), but many find that their teachers do not refer them for counseling (Rice, 2019).

The persistence of the model minority myth is echoed by the persistence of the tendency to position students as spokespersons for their people. Although the spokesperson phenomenon has been examined previously, the existing research is limited and has not explored Asian Americans' experiences or specifically those of South Asian Americans, as this paper does.

One noteworthy study examined Black and Latinx students' experiences with specific microaggressions, including the spokesperson phenomenon. McCabe (2009) examined college students' experiences with microaggressions and found some students felt that others perceived them according to societal stereotypes about their gender and racial group (e.g., Black men felt perceived as threatening; Latinas felt perceived as exotic and sexually available). The study also found that for some groups, the classroom can be an important setting for microaggressions. Critically highlighting the spokesperson phenomenon, the study demonstrated that students of color sometimes had professors ask them questions when the topic of race or stereotyping arose in class. Although McCabe's study primarily focused on Black women, this paper follows McCabe's lead in placing an emphasis on the particularity of the classroom as a setting for this kind of microaggression.

Existing research on multicultural and culturally responsive education—henceforth referred to as multicultural education—stresses the responsibilities of teachers in increasingly diverse education settings to minimize inequities in the classroom (Brookfield, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Multicultural education research finds that, to be effective and supportive of all students, teachers must be culturally competent, use culturally relevant pedagogy, engage culturally responsive teaching strategies, and employ a culturally sustaining pedagogy (Brookfield, 2017; Hammond, 2014; Nieto, 2013; Paris, 2012). Though not specifically stressed within this literature field, examining the harm that can come from positioning students as spokespersons for their cultures certainly has implications for multicultural and culturally sustaining teaching practice.

Methodology

This paper is based on responses to qualitative, retrospective reports from 10 college-aged South Asian Americans that described experiences with racial microaggressions in K-12 schools. These experiences were shared in response to selected survey items from a larger study[4] ($N = 85$), conducted by the author of this article, focusing broadly on South Asian American K-12 experiences, especially in context of teacher cultural proficiency (Rice, 2019). The survey was conducted through a retrospective online survey, in which participants were asked to reflect on their experiences in school. The survey was made available over three months and included an anonymous informed consent form.

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[4] The survey used in the full study was developed by the author of this work for a study through Johns Hopkins University and is published as *South Asian American Experiences in Schools: Brown Voices from the Classroom* (Rice, 2019).

Procedure

Survey participants were recruited through letters sent to organization leaders of South Asian and South Asian American affinity groups affiliated with colleges or community organizations. Social media outreach supplemented this approach, including posts on the Facebook pages of college- and community-based organizations that included South Asian or Indian American in their descriptions. The recruitment letters and messages included a prompt describing the study and a link to take the secure survey. Before completing the required survey items, information about participant backgrounds was collected (see Table 1). Participation was voluntary and participants were not compensated for their participation.

Table 1

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Participant pseudonym	Self-described cultural background	Highest education
Aman	Indian American	Master's student
Dev	Indian American	College graduate
Jaya	Bengali American	Doctoral student
Manoj	South Indian American	College student
Nadia	Pakistani and Indonesian American	Master's graduate
Neha	Gujarati (Indian) American	College student
Neil	Indian American	Doctor (M.D.)
Rohan	Indian American	Doctoral student
Vijay	Indian American	College student
Vinod	Punjabi (Indian) American	College graduate

Note. Data are not exhaustive.
$N = 10$

Instrumentation

This paper focuses on results from the original study that relate to the spokesperson phenomenon. This section provides context and details about the source study. The survey instrument used examined the following:

General academic support: This construct explored how participants perceived their teachers in regard to meeting their academic needs. Relevant survey items examined whether participants felt their teachers afforded them sufficient opportunities to review material or checked to ensure they understood material before moving on with lessons.

Executive functioning support: This construct examined how participants perceived their teachers' support of their executive functioning skills by teaching study skills or supporting them with developing time management skills or organization skills.

Perceptions of teachers' cultural competence: This construct focused on participants' perceptions of their teachers' cultural knowledge and skills, and their apparent ability to support diverse populations.

Experiences in school: This construct broadly explored participants' overall experiences in schools, especially in the context of their relationships with teachers.

A survey instrument based on these constructs, consisting of 25 Likert-type items and three open-ended constructed response items, [5] was developed. The survey was thoroughly examined and revised through a multi-stage sorting process to verify instrument validity and to ensure that survey items measured their intended concepts consistently and effectively (Rice, 2019). Next, education doctoral students were recruited to examine the clarity of the entire survey through a process called cognitive interviewing. They examined each survey item for clarity and helped verify that study participants would understand and interpret them correctly. Qualitative feedback from the students was carefully considered and minor revisions were made as necessary. Table 2 presents the finalized versions of these three open-ended items.

Table 2

Constructed Response Survey Items

Survey Items
1. Could teachers have supported you or your academic needs differently or better? (If so, how?)
2. Do you think your teachers understood you, your cultural identity, and/or your background? (Why or why not?)
3. In the context of your relationship with teachers, what was your overall experience like as a student?

This paper draws from these three open-ended response survey items. The first of these questions aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers could have better supported participants and allowed for a deeper look at the concept of student support needs. The second item asked what participants imagined to be teacher beliefs, which may provide insight into how participants perceived teachers' cultural competence. The third and final question allowed for an explicit look at the concept of the overall student experience. This last question may also have provided further insight into students' perceptions of teachers' cultural competence. CRT scholars have argued that naming one's own reality is key to communicating experiences and realities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Thus, these survey items were designed with an open-ended format to allow participants to respond to each survey item with only what was most important or salient to them and provide information accordingly.

Participants

Adult participants who had completed K-12 schooling were selected to reflect on their K-12 experiences. Participants were able to report significant experiences with teachers, and in classrooms, that ostensibly had lasting enough impacts on them to come to mind while participating in the study. To mitigate the concern of participants' ability to reliably recall their experiences, survey items were carefully designed so as not to focus

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[5] Qualitative survey items that invite participants to share contextual and setting factors related to the phenomenon being studied are well suited to allowing a researcher to gain deep insight into participants' experiences and the factors contributing to them (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

on estimating frequencies of events and event dates (Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Porter, 2011).

Analysis

The author analyzed participant responses to open-ended, constructed-response survey items using NVivo (QSR International, 2020), a qualitative data analysis software package that facilitates the coding and development of themes in responses. The author identified themes and coded the responses for the identified themes with support from a research methodology specialist. Key patterns emerged from this analysis process, including teaching peers at a student's own expense, potential embarrassment, othering, racial trauma, power and agency, and when cultural sharing is acceptable. These patterns are discussed in the following sections.

Results

Of 131 respondents, 85 fit the participant criteria and also completed all survey items (see Appendix for discussion of this sample). Constructed responses from the 85 respondents were analyzed, and certain shared experiences emerged. One such example—and the focus of this article—is that 10 participants (Rohan, Neil, Manoj, Aman, Neha, Vijay, Jaya, Dev, Nadia, and Vinod) described experiences in which teachers asked them to speak about Indian culture or history as an official authority. Their responses were coded as spokesperson experiences and are provided in this section of this paper.

Of these 10 participants, eight identified as Indian American—Manoj specified that he identified as South Indian, Neha as Gujarati, Vinod as Punjab—and two identified as South Asian but not Indian—Jaya identified as Bengali American, and Nadia as Pakistani and Indonesian American. At the time of taking the survey, all of the participants had at least some college education: Three were current college students, two had completed their undergraduate education, one was a master's student, another had earned her master's, two were doctoral students, and one had earned a medical degree.

Relevant Responses

Rohan

Rohan described being positioned as a cultural spokesperson and being mocked:

> The teachers made assumptions about me based on race. I became embarrassed of my cultural identity. [Teachers] did not understand why I would be embarrassed about talking [about] Hinduism in front of the class even when all the other students were making fun of it. One of my teachers mockingly asked if my parents spoke English.

Neil

Responding to the question of how his teachers might have better supported him. Neil recommended, "culture and diversity training for teachers," though he did not explicitly indicate how they could have supported *his* needs. He described teachers as "ignorant,

[and] prejudiced." Responding to the survey item that asked about his overall experience in K-12 schools with a single word: "painful."

Manoj

Manoj reported that his teachers treated him like his peers but added that this changed when the topic of India came up:

> They [teachers] treated me like any of the other kids, except for when the topic India is brought up. Then they'd assume I was an expert on Indian culture and ask me very general or stereotypical questions about Indian attitudes on subjects such as marriage or grades or jobs.

Manoj also reported that his overall experience in school "was fine," and added that "it was annoying to be singled out during class, [but] it made no lasting impact."

Aman

Aman described instances where teachers held unreasonable expectations about his knowledge and positioned him as a spokesperson for Indian culture:

> There were a few times I wondered what they [teachers] were thinking. My 5th grade teacher Ms. Simon in particular stands out because we studied India in class and she was asking me if I thought the books were accurate; she seemed to think my ethnicity made me an expert on India, never mind I was 10 years old.

Neha

Neha described experiences with racism from her teachers:

> [Teachers] didn't understand I was fully American and born in this country too; their behaviors toward me reflected that . . . some used racial and religious insults . . . .I also had teachers that told me I was going to hell, and that I worshipped rats, grass, did ritual dances, etc.

She also described her experiences with the spokesperson phenomenon:

> I was always assigned to the India group and was expected to bring items from my house to enrich the class with diverse experiences, while learning nothing myself. . . . [Teachers] also assumed I needed no learning assistance and used me to help other students. Instead of challenging me, they would have me tutor other students, even talking them through test questions and helping them take school tests.

Vijay

Vijay described his experience with teachers who made assumptions about him and his knowledge base:

I think a lot of [teachers] made assumptions that I was Muslim and a lot of them made assumptions about my personality because of my Indian-ness. My seventh grade social studies teacher asked me a million questions when we were studying ancient India—like I knew anything.

Jaya

Jaya described being positioned as a spokesperson for a culture she was not connected to:

My family doesn't celebrate Diwali but I always had to talk about it . . . . My mom likes to recount stories about teachers trying to put me in ESL (English as a second language) classes because I speak another language at home. . . . I didn't feel close to any of my teachers in elementary school, the way others might have. I felt like race was part of the reason—there was always the distance and awkwardness of not having a Western name that teachers pronounced easily.

Dev

Dev used positive language to describe his feelings about sharing his culture in school:

I was very proud and confident in my cultural background—loved performing at talent shows, being active with the Indian community, etc.—that I didn't feel the need to be understood by others in terms of my background. We were all different and I knew that . . . if a teacher asked anything about my culture, I'd love explaining it.

Nadia

Nadia used positive languages to describe her experiences with sharing her culture. "I was never made to feel as an outsider for being of a different religion/ethnicity. [Teachers] would always be inclusive and encourage sharing my cultural background . . . elementary & middle school were positive relationships [with teachers]."

Vinod

Vinod wrote about having his background misrepresented. "Some [teachers] did not [understand my culture] . . .. Hinduism was misrepresented in the curriculums. And I did try to connect. But then I also thought, why do I have to be the only voice of examining my culture."

The section that follows offers analysis of these responses through a discussion of emergent themes.

Discussion

The responses from participants positioned as spokespersons for their cultures revealed some shared themes. Three such themes that emerged include: (a) being positioned as a spokesperson as an obstacle to students' opportunities for learning; (b) the potential for the spokesperson phenomenon in inflicting racial trauma; and (c) a teacher's power, and how it is abused in positioning a student as a spokesperson for their culture.

What follows is an analysis of the relevant responses discussed in context of these key themes; throughout the discussion, where appropriate, implications for teachers are also offered.

Teaching Peers at a Student's Own Expense

When teachers position a student as a spokesperson of their own culture, they create barriers to connecting with a student while also forcing the students to take on the roles of both foreigner and educator (Sue et al., 2007). Positioning a student as a foreigner and educator may cost them learning opportunities. This is reflected in Neha's experience; she shares that she "was always assigned to the India group and was expected to bring items from [her] house to enrich the class with diverse experiences, while learning nothing [herself]." To be certain, teachers are responsible for ensuring that every individual student's learning needs are recognized and supported (Brookfield, 2017). However, Neha's teachers positioned her as the cultural expert at the cost of her own learning opportunities. It is reasonable to imagine that if teachers repeatedly position a student as a spokesperson—by using them to teach others about their own backgrounds— they may be less able to explore and engage in novel learning opportunities. They may also wind up feeling annoyed at having to do something that is not their job as students.

Vinod referenced a situation in which his teachers represented Hinduism inaccurately in classroom instruction. He recalled feeling like he "has to" be the voice of his culture and questioned why this responsibility fell on him. In Vinod's case, his teachers' failure to accurately teach cultural content he knew a bit about still led to him feeling pressured to serve as a spokesperson, even though he was not explicitly asked to do so. His experience suggests that teachers may inadvertently position students as spokespersons. As always, teachers should present all content with care and attention to accuracy and detail. This may be especially true when a teacher is discussing a particular culture and has a student from that background in the classroom; the responsibility to be both accurate and culturally sustaining might be even greater in that context. A teacher's failure to teach cultural content without attention to detail, or accuracy, can misinform students, and, in cases where students are aware of the inaccurate information, can unfairly burden them. In some cases, students of color may feel the onus is on them to correct their teachers in order for their own cultures not to be misrepresented. This burden can feel particularly heavy when students are tasked with representing their cultural backgrounds in settings in which there is limited knowledge about the cultural groups they claim (McCabe, 2009). That burden or responsibility detracts from a student's ability to do their primary job of learning, rather than checking their teachers' work. Putting students in the spokesperson role can further burden those students and thus be disadvantageous to their success as students.

Racial Trauma

Teachers are responsible for fostering inclusive classroom environments that minimize inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1995), but many may be positioning students as spokespersons for their entire cultures, which is a microaggression that hurts students. Microaggressions such as this can contribute to racial trauma: the cumulative negative effects of racism on an individual's mental, physical, and/or psychological well-being.

Logically, when Asian American, Latinx, and African American individuals are repeatedly exposed to racial microaggressions, they are at risk for racial trauma, a race-based traumatic stress (Comas-Díaz, 2016).

The responses from Rohan, the participant who described being mocked by peers, indicated that he even came to feel "embarrassed" about his cultural identity, which suggests racial trauma. Similarly, Neha's experiences with teachers who used "racial and religious insults" also exhibit evidence of such trauma.

Jaya wrote about "the distance and awkwardness" of not having an easily pronounceable name and her race as factors that may have prevented her from being close with her teachers. That inability to form close relationships with her teachers—especially as a perceived consequence of being South Asian American—may be a form of trauma. For her, too, the repeated instances of being othered because of her background could have functioned as race-based traumatic stress over time.

Extant research suggests that Asian Americans' experiences with discrimination harms student self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014) and even increases susceptibility to depression and anxiety (Gee et al., 2007), something many Asian Americans may already be susceptible to (Gupta et al., 2011; Leong et al., 2000). Moreover, racial trauma tends to go unnoticed, and mental health specialists tend not to address it effectively (Comas-Díaz, 2016). For South Asian Americans in particular, who are held to the model minority myth and thus perceived as unoppressed, there may be a heightened risk for racial trauma and anxiety that is more likely to be overlooked.

Potential embarrassment. When a teacher publicly asks a student to serve as a spokesperson and share presumed expertise, they may set up the student for potential embarrassment. Vijay was in seventh grade when his social studies teacher asked him "a million questions when we were studying ancient India" adding, "like I knew anything." Aman was only in the fifth grade when his teacher expected him to comment on the accuracy of texts on India—a burdensome task for most 10-year-old children. Today, Vijay and Aman look back and see their teachers' assumptions that they—by virtue of being Indian American kids—possessed content expertise as misguided. Aman expressed this when he stated, "there were a few times I wondered what they were thinking."

Just as students are not content experts by virtue of their skin color or ethnicity, it is even more concerning that students who are not affiliated with a particular ethnicity are asked to be content experts because they might be perceived as similar to members of that ethnic group. Unfortunately, some teachers may assume students are from a particular background based on how they appear; as Vijay shared, many of his teachers falsely assumed that he was Muslim. Some teachers may then take those false assumptions and ask students to speak on them, as in the case of Jaya, who did not celebrate Diwali but shared that she was "always" expected to talk about it in school. When a teacher makes a false assumption about a student's background and then positions that student as a spokesperson for the "wrong" culture, they put that student in the deeply awkward situation of having to speak about a culture they may know nothing about, risk admitting their ignorance, or admit that their teacher just made a racist assumption about them.

Some students of color might already feel a perpetual daily pressure to be spokespersons for their race (McCabe, 2009). Coupled with the pressure that may be felt

from being put on the spot in front of the entire class, a student may feel that they are being set up to fail. Rohan described having to talk about his religion in front of his peers while they made fun of it and added that his teachers "did not understand why [he] would be embarrassed." Additionally, for a student being positioned as the class expert on their own—or their perceived—background, it might feel potentially embarrassing to admit "I don't know." To avoid this embarrassment, it is plausible that a student might even make something up.

Over time, repeatedly being placed in potentially embarrassing situations may cause a student to internalize a sense of failure for not being able to rise to the occasion. This could cause further harm to their self-esteem and mental well-being.

Othering. Many Asian Americans may feel they are not seen and accepted as American (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Jaya, who revealed that she "didn't feel close to any of [her] teachers in elementary school, the way others might have," and "felt like race was part of the reason," was made to feel like a foreigner by her teachers. This experience may function as a kind of racial trauma. She referenced being pushed toward classes for students who were not fluent in English. Despite being fluent in English, she was nevertheless offered services for English as a second language. This experience directly speaks to the ways that othering made Jaya feel less American than her peers.

Neha, who was also subjected to overtly racist microaggressions, had this experience as well. She shared that teachers "didn't understand [she] was fully American and born in this country too," and that "their behaviors toward [her] reflected that." Neha's response suggests that teachers exhibited clear behaviors that made her feel othered.

Othering microaggressions may communicate "you are not American" or "you are a foreigner" to Asian Americans or Latinx Americans (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276). When a student of color is expected to serve as spokesperson on anything related to their cultural heritage, often the message sent by this commonplace racial microaggression is that the student is not American and is a foreigner. When Manoj and Vijay were asked to share their supposed expertise on India, their teachers were positioning them as foreigners in their classrooms; they were expected to provide the non-American perspective.

Power and Agency

The permanence and pervasiveness of racism may mean that the cultural identities of people of color are shaped by inequality and White needs (Liu et al., 2019). Given the predominantly White teacher workforce in this country (Deruy, 2013), for South Asian American students this may itself contribute to a feeling of less power in the classroom. The dynamic of student and teacher may also contribute to a power imbalance that might lead to a teacher abusing their power and students feeling powerless to remove themselves from an uncomfortable or traumatic experience. Rohan was a student who suffered as a consequence of this imbalance. He described having to talk about Hinduism "in front of the class even when all the other students were making fun of it," adding that his teachers failed to understand why he would feel embarrassment. Further, his response implies he continued to present about Hinduism, despite being mocked by peers, which suggests he may have felt powerless to remove himself from the situation.

Rohan also shared that one of his teachers "mockingly asked if [his] parents spoke English," further abusing their power in the classroom. Similarly, Neha described

experiences with teachers who used "racial and religious insults" and "told [her she] was going to hell, and that [she] worshipped rats, grass, did ritual dances, etc." Her experiences, like Rohan's, reflect not only a lack of cultural knowledge and basic respect but also a gross abuse of power.

That teachers felt comfortable enough to express clearly racist sentiments publicly is also further evidence of the power they have in the classroom. In recent decades, overt racism has tended to be more hidden. Generally, even people who consciously harbor racist feelings tend to make efforts to hide such displays of racism in public, unless they feel "relatively safe to engage in a microassault" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). It follows, then, that if a person is openly expressing overt racist comments in a particular setting, they feel safe or powerful enough to do so. That same power can enable teachers to put students in unreasonable situations where the student may not feel empowered enough to object.

Even teachers who do not use their power to boldly make racist remarks are still misusing that power when they position students as spokespersons. Furthermore, modeling the behavior of asking students of color to speak for an entire race or culture also signals to all students in the class that this is appropriate. Thus, teachers who engage in racial microaggressions of any kind in the classroom not only risk robbing a student of an opportunity to learn, and inflicting racial trauma by publicly embarrassing and othering them, but they also set a precedent that racial microaggressions are acceptable and appropriate behavior in their classroom.

Perpetrators of racism may view themselves as progressive and be unaware of their actions; indeed, their words or action may not seem like oppression to them (Lawrence, 1987). Moreover, even the victim may feel unclear: When a microaggression occurs, victims may often feel (a) unsure whether it was truly a microaggression or confused about the motives behind the event, (b) unsure how to respond, (c) fearful of the consequences of saying or doing something in response, (d) unsure of whether saying or doing anything will even have an impact, and/or (e) in denial that it happened at all (Sue et al., 2007).

Nadia's response reveals how a teacher might foster an inclusive atmosphere without abusing a power imbalance. She reported having spoken about her culture, but, unlike the other respondents, she did not use language that implied she felt pressure from her teachers to do so; instead, she only indicated that she felt "encouraged" to share. Dev, whose responses suggest that he usually felt comfortable with speaking about his background, similarly shared that when a "teacher asked anything about my culture, I'd love explaining it." Nadia's use of the term "encouraged" suggests she did not feel pressured into the spokesperson role, which may have important implications for teachers who wish to avoid making students into spokespersons but want to celebrate diversity. Moreover, she mentions having "positive relationships" with her teachers and makes clear that her teachers were "inclusive" and that she was never explicitly "made to feel as an outsider" by them. Giving students the option and encouragement to share things from their backgrounds, as Nadia's teachers did—without singling them out or positioning them as spokespersons—can be a way to foster an inclusive and healthy multicultural environment.

Two things may be worth noting here. First, when a microaggression occurs, sometimes victims may feel confusion about whether it was a microaggression at all and may even engage in "self-deception" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279) to deny that it happened. Consider Manoj, whose teachers asked him to share Indian attitudes on marriage, grades, and jobs with his classmates, and who described these experiences as "annoying." Yet Manoj also stated these experiences had no "lasting impact" on him, thus downplaying their impact. Second, research from Liu et al. (2019) on acculturation suggests many persons of color learn to appear racially innocuous by avoiding complex or racially charged discourse that could cause White people to feel uncomfortable. Put simply, sometimes people of color might learn to simply do what White people want them to do. In the context of the classroom, this may manifest as a student complying—perhaps even enthusiastically—with expectations that they speak for their cultures rather than pointing out that they would prefer not to or feel unqualified to do so in order to avoid making anyone uncomfortable. Thus, in some cases, students may go along with being positioned as a spokesperson.

Interestingly, Dev shared that he "didn't feel the need to be understood by others in terms of my background," thus implying that his teachers may not have necessarily understood his culture. However, his responses suggest a high cultural identity: "I was very proud and confident in my cultural background." It is possible that Dev's cultural pride and confidence might have served as a protective factor against the harmful effects of microaggressions like the spokesperson phenomenon. This would be consistent with existing research from Mossakowski (2003), which suggested that in some cases a strong connection to one's cultural identity can mitigate some of the negative impacts of discrimination. Other research, however, has suggested that higher ethnic identity could increase some Asian Americans' susceptibility to the negative impact of racial discrimination (Yoo & Lee, 2008). There may be value for future research to examine the role of cultural identity in how a student perceives being positioned as a spokesperson.

It is critical that teachers of diverse student populations help minimize microaggressions because a key task of teachers is to cultivate an inclusive and supportive multicultural environment. Further, teachers must not engage in committing racial microaggressions. This requires teachers to examine and address their unconscious racism, in order to avoid what Lawrence (1987) referred to as "a slip of the mind" (p. 341): when one says or does something they think is innocent but which actually reflects unconscious racist beliefs. In the classroom, teachers are in a position to influence students' perceptions of racial dynamics; they can use their power to help move us all toward a fairer and more equal world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Rather than allowing themselves to be perpetrators of microaggressions against students, teachers must champion efforts to reduce the inequalities and discrimination their students experience.

Conclusions

This paper is a preliminary examination of how and why the spokesperson phenomenon is an inappropriate and harmful microaggression. Because this work examines the specific experiences of selected participants, further research is necessary to establish, first, how widespread this phenomenon is and, second, specific strategies for how it might be best addressed. It is worth noting that the participant responses that are

analyzed and discussed in this paper were responding to survey items that never explicitly asked about microaggressions. However, the 10 participants in this paper shared experiences relating to microaggressions in the classroom without being asked about this phenomenon explicitly. Further studies may be valuable in order to determine the pervasiveness of the phenomenon and to further delve into its effects.

It may also be important to note that participants were able to choose how much or how little to share in response to the qualitative survey items from the study. This allowed participants to volunteer what was most memorable and important; in many cases, it resulted in rich and complex responses. In other cases, however, participant responses were given with little context and might have been improved through a different survey format. For example, responding to how he would sum up his overall schooling experience, Neil offered the word "painful." For Neil, a required minimum number of characters in the response box might have resulted in a more thorough explanation; alternatively, it might have also contributed to reduced survey completion. A methodology that allowed for a way to ask follow-up questions might have been useful. For future studies, in-person or video conference interview formats, which are not without their own limitations, could be beneficial for some participants.

The negative school experiences of South Asian American students are typically overlooked because of existing misconceptions about their status as a model minority group. Students in this group are often subjected to the spokesperson phenomenon by being asked or expected by classroom teachers to serve as spokespersons for their culture or race. The microaggression of positioning a student as a spokesperson for their race is harmful and inappropriate in the context of good multicultural education for a multitude of reasons, some of which are examined in this paper. The spokesperson phenomenon may reduce a student's own educational enrichment opportunities; it may put them in an embarrassing situation, make them feel othered, subject them to racial trauma, and reflect an abuse of the power imbalance between teachers and students.

The experiences of participants—as shared in this paper—are consistent with existing literature that suggests microaggressions are harmful, as well as with research that acknowledges the tendency of educators to expect students of color to speak for their cultures or races (McCabe, 2009). This study adds to existing research highlighting and discussing the negative effects of the spokesperson phenomenon as experienced by South Asian American students. It also provides a discussion of implications for teachers with regard to the spokesperson phenomenon. Finally, driven by the assertion of Ladson-Billings (1998) that "stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism" (p. 14), the author of this paper shared participants' experiences in hopes of inspiring self-reflection and even change among readers. In order to examine the education experiences of people of color, the voices of people of color must be heard (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

This continued trend of positioning students from South Asian backgrounds as spokespersons for an entire population based on shared ethnicity or culture is reflective of the larger tendency to aggregate data for all Asian subgroups. In both instances, the oversimplification of a diverse and heterogeneous population leads to an overgeneralization of student experiences and results in individual students' experiences and needs being misunderstood or overlooked. As data are disaggregated, it becomes

easy to see each individual student as diverse from others, and to recognize the false sense of homogeneity generated by aggregated data is simply that: false. It is similarly important for educators to see each student—whether from a South Asian background or not—as an individual rather than as a spokesperson for their people.

Author Biography

Punita C. Rice iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1879-063X
Punita C. Rice *is the director of New Northeast Consulting and the author of* South Asian American Experiences in Schools: Brown Voices from the Classroom*. She also develops resources for Improving South Asian American Students' Experiences (isaase.org) and serves as an adjunct academic adviser with the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University.*

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