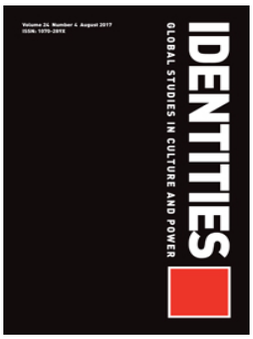

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Races without Racism?: everyday race relations in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

In Singapore, race has a prominent place in the *city state*'s national policies. Its political ideology of multiracialism proclaims racial equality and protection for minority groups from racial discrimination. However, despite official rhetoric and policies aimed at managing and integrating the different ethnic groups, some scholars have argued that institutional racism does exist in Singapore. While it is public knowledge, with few exceptions, racist provocations and experiences of racism are not publicly discussed. In recent years, the advent of social media has made it possible for Singaporeans oftentimes unwittingly to express racially derogatory remarks. This has highlighted that racism is much more deep rooted. Yet, it still remains the white elephant in the room. This paper examines the sociopolitical context that has contributed to everyday racial discrimination and calls for a public acknowledgement of racism so as to combat racist practices.

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KEYWORDS Ethnic minorities; everyday racism; multiracialism; race relations; race; Singapore

Introduction

The tiny city state of Singapore is an immigrant society consisting of a Chinese majority (74.1%) followed by Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%) and 'Others' (3.3%) (Singapore Census 2010). The so-called Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other (CMIO) policy of multiracialism confined Singapore's national identity to these four races. It is how the Singapore state defines the nation's ethnic composition and governs race relations. The use of race as a normative category and identity marker, in turn filters down in everyday life, where racial difference continues to be produced and manifests itself in a multitude of ways through official, bureaucratic and quotidian encounters. Though some variation of patrilineal racial labelling is allowed, the majority of Singaporeans are ascribed a racial identity and it is recorded in all official documentation. At school, racial identity is tied to

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bilingual education: Chinese-Mandarin; Malay-Bahasa Melayu; and Indian-Tamil (more recently Punjabi/Hindi). Race appears in official representations, religious and national festivities, public campaigns, social policy, the media and tourism. In short, race is ubiquitous and equally the reproduction of highly racialized subjects and racial hierarchies are taken for granted and this, as I will discuss has direct effects on patterns of everyday interethnic relations.

In this paper, I examine the construction of race in Singapore and racist practices in a number of everyday settings which include the Internet, social media, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Drawing on some high-profile racist incidents that have occurred in the Internet and social media and field research over a period of 4 years, which involved in-depth interviews with Singaporean Chinese, Malays and Indians, I discuss how racist practices manifest in everyday encounters[1]. Here, taken-for-granted assumptions of racial traits and prejudices spill over into mundane practices, normalizing stereotypical racial attributes and behaviours and perpetuating racial inequalities. My analysis takes the epistemological perspective that investigations of race relations should be expanded to the domain of the everyday. This is primarily because published academic literature on Singapore multiracialism is mostly concerned with state's model and ideology, how it produces simplified and rigid racial identities for administrative and policy purposes and on hegemony and state control and their unintended consequences and rarely in terms of everyday discriminatory practices or the lived experiences of racism. As Lai (2004, 9) points out politically, ethnicity and ethnic relations have come to be viewed as needing careful management by the state and political elites, 'due to their potential for intragroup cohesiveness and for intergroup divisiveness and conflict. The official demarcation of issues relating to race and religion as "sensitive" and falling within the "out of bounds" markers makes their engagement by the public in public discourse all the more difficult'. Thus the topic of racism remains mostly muted in public and academic debates and in fact, much of the criticisms of state policies and their negative impact on race have come from non-Singaporean academics (Barr and Skrbiš 2008; Brown 2000).

In some sense, this apathy further reinforces the assumption that racism is a Western/European problem. In the West, there is a general sense that racism is becoming an overused term so much so potentially all are labelled as perpetrators and can claim to be victims (Song 2014). Some scholars are proposing to jettison the use of the term racism altogether. My argument is that the situation in Singapore is quite the opposite. There is an urgent need to own up and confront different forms of racial prejudices and discriminatory practices. In cases of publicized racist incidents, authorities particularly the police and politicians intervene and issue stern warnings against perpetrators and the matter is quickly put to rest. Consequently, the extent and nature of racists' attitudes are never openly debated. For those at the

receiving end of racial abuse/discrimination, there is little opportunity to speak out as there are no publicity campaigns against racism and Singapore does not have a national anti-racism strategy.

This paper is primarily concerned with racism experienced by 'older races' of Singaporeans and remains centrally on Chinese attitudes towards Malays and Indians as this 'old' racism has a longer history, spilling over from colonial racism, through the bureaucratic and daily processes of racialization by the Singapore state and deeply embedded in everyday practices. My point is the challenge for Singapore as a culturally diverse immigrant society lies, first and foremost, in naming racism, and second, in acknowledging that racisms are 'structured systems of power and domination which have a historical basis' (Song 2014, 123) and third, in addressing personal and social costs of racial discrimination.

Race as a colonial legacy

Race and racism have a historical basis in any given context. Singapore is a product of Western colonial capitalism. Historians often celebrate colonial Singapore as a bustling and cosmopolitan *entrepôt* containing a vast array of cultures and peoples, intermingling and going about their commerce. However, as Busch (1974, 20–21) observed

> 'despite geographical proximity, each group lived within its own social borders, maintained its cultural identity and exclusiveness, and interacted with other peoples only for economic purposes. Indeed, the word "society" seems applicable only separately to each of the resident peoples; the only unity among them came from dealings in the marketplace and from a rather loose subordination to the colonial government'.

The creation of a plural society, therefore, was engineered by the British colonial administration. It also draws on essentialist anthropological representations of natives in order to administer the population. As Goh (2008, 235) explains

> 'the British saw the Chinese as economically useful but perfidious orientals to be kept out of the colonial body politic while the Malays were lazy but picturesque medieval to be advanced in civilization by political and agricultural training and the Tamils from South India to be cared for as docile savages working European-owned plantations'.

By all accounts, colonial Singapore was a highly segregated society divided along race, ethnicity, class, language, religion and so forth. It is instructive to take into account that racial discomforts, tensions and stereotyping were prevalent as these immigrants co-mingled under the watchful eyes of the colonial authorities. Indeed, colonial Singapore does experience serious incidents of racial conflict in the post-war period, notably the Maria Hertogh Riots (1950) and the Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots (1964)

involving violent clashes between Chinese and Malays. These incidents clearly highlighted the fragility of interracial relationships and the disaffections that arise in the daily experience of living with cultural difference.

The postcolonial state then essentially inherits the historical legacies of colonial racialization with some degree of variation as part of its nation-building project. According to Chua (2009, 240), 'race is a conscious ideological construction and representation of the island-nation. This official or "state multiracialism" which organizes the citizenry into three "visible" racial groups has greatly facilitated public administration and governance'. By recognizing the three major racial groups, Chinese, Malay and Indian as discreet communities, the state accords them racial equality and thus, racialization remains writ large. Importantly, as I will discuss later in the paper, the legacy of colonial racism and in particular racial stereotyping and prejudices conceived between the three races have continued through to the present.

Research on race and racial discrimination in Singapore

Suffice to say, there has been a great deal written about the official construction of race and multiracialism in Singapore (Lai 2004; Chua 2003; Clammer 1998). The accounts are not dissimilar. They problematize the narrow and rigid application of the concept of race but acknowledge that the policy of multiracialism adopted by the Singapore state has inculcated a sense of commitment in the various race groups to the state and to existence in racial harmony. In official discourse, as Barr and Skrbiš (2008, 50) observe, 'the concept of race is bereft of pejorative connotations and is used as shorthand for ethnic and religious identities'. My concern here is the social realities of racism in everyday life in Singapore.

There has been some academic interest in exploring perceived institutional discrimination (though not racism) suffered by the Malay community. The Malays, who are indigenous to the region, migrated to Singapore from Indonesia and Malaysia. Their 'indigeneity' unfortunately has earned them the unenviable historical and cultural label of the 'lazy native' (Alatas 1977). The works of Li (1989), Rahim (1998), Mutalib (2012) and Barr and Skrbiš (2008) building on from Alatas' in-depth analysis of the 'backwardness' of Malays have further drawn attention to the issues of marginalization, continued stereotyping and socio-economic discrimination faced by Singapore Malays, despite the so-called meritocratic policies of the Singapore state. In essence, institutional discrimination against the Malay population has been handled delicately by the state, which is conscious of a potential outcry from its neighbours – Malaysia and Indonesia.

The issue of Malay loyalty to the Singapore nation and the broader Islamic community in the region in times of conflict is a constant worrying

point for the state. It is a commonly held view that Malays have been denied key military appointments including as Air Force pilots because of the possibility of them shifting their allegiances. According to the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1959–1990), 'it would be tricky business for the SAF [Singapore Armed Forces] to put a Malay officer who was very religious and who had family ties in Malaysia, in charge of a machine-gun unit' (cited in Chua 2003, 65). The discrimination that Malay-Muslims face in conscription and roles assigned in the military service continues today. Moreover, because the Malays are often singled out as 'lagging behind' and 'socially and economically underachieving' as a racial group compared to the Chinese and Indians, this has generated critical response and resentment from neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. Much of the above discussions, especially around the position of the Malays and the state's role in excluding them in the military service are still in the realm of institutional discrimination. A similar reading is offered by Michael Barr (2006), who has written on the education system in Singapore and how racial privileging and the endorsement of the development of a Chinese elite excludes Malays and Indians from Singapore's top schools because their medium of instruction is in Mandarin and English. While the idea of meritocracy is frequently invoked in Singapore as an ideological principle that accords equal status to all races, it does not take into account systemic or structural impediments which may prevent underprivileged or minority races from accessing particular opportunities or pathways to social mobility (Barr and Skrbiš 2008). As observed earlier, interracial disparity continues to grow and the Chinese population consistently occupy a commanding position in the socio-economic hierarchy. The idea of meritocracy is never enforceable in practice because social advantage is not equally distributed. There are, for instance, no anti-discrimination laws in Singapore to deal with discriminatory practices in the workplace.

Lai's (1996) ethnographic study of a local public housing community in Marine Parade offers some insights into the ways in which ordinary Singaporeans inhabit and negotiate everyday living in multiracial Singapore. One aspect of her work focuses on how residents from different ethnic background negotiate the sharing of spaces based on their regular encounters and varying degree of familiarity as friends, schoolmates and neighbours. For example, in playgrounds found around housing blocks, Indian, Chinese and Malay kids usually take turns to play team games among themselves, respectively. She also observed that arguments and verbal abuse do occur often and during with ethnic expletives and derogative language were frequently used. For Lai, the hurling of such ethnic insults are often intended as banter rather than hate abuse and in fact she suggests that in certain situations the free flowing exchange of abuse and obscenities helps to dissipate everyday tensions of cross-cultural differences.

While Lai has highlighted these tensions, she failed to further explore them through the lens of racism. Instead, she downplays the severity of such abuses particularly in terms of relations of power.

Lee et al. (2004, 120–125) in their qualitative study of children's experiences of multiracial relationships in informal primary school setting found that same-race groupings were more prevalent than mixed-race groups and the children did not always know much about the differences between racial groups or were able to demonstrate clear conceptualization of language, race and religion as distinct qualifiers. They argue that stereotypical physical characteristics such as skin colour and facial features remain the most visible discriminator in defining others, especially children with dark complexion (typically Indians) were often singled out in exclusionary ways (Lee et al. 2004, 129). These include teasing, name-calling and making references to skin colour ('blackie', 'black coffee', 'dirty', 'smelly' etc.) combined with derogatory remarks like 'Tamils are stupid', 'untrustworthy', 'deceptive' and 'unreliable'.

Velayutham (2009) in his article on 'In my article on everyday racism' presents a more detailed account of racial discrimination experienced by Singaporean Indians. Some of the acts include name-calling, racist jokes, use of expletives, contact avoidance and expression of displeasure and differential treatment. I points out that 'forms of racial discrimination that Indians experience in the everyday context shift between old and new forms of racism based on biological inferiority and cultural differences respectively' (2009, 271). I argue that most of his respondents were often hurt and embarrassed during such encounters and given their relatively disempowered position were unable to challenge the perpetrators because the racial discrimination they suffered tended to vary from casual comments and mocking to subtle and concealed acts. As was the case in Lee et al. (2004) study, I found that victims of racial abuse oftentimes simply put up with such practices.

The works of Lai (1996), Lee et al. (2004) and Velayutham (2009) clearly demonstrate that racial stereotyping, abuse and discrimination are commonplace in day-to-day encounters. Although, there is a tacit acknowledgement of racial discrimination among the racial minorities, the Malays and Indians, they are not aired in public. These incidents have become accepted norms that victims would have to deal with privately and as individuals. In fact, while the Singapore media will readily report Singaporeans (often Chinese) who have encountered racism while overseas and major racist incidents in the West, rarely report on racism in Singapore. It would seem that discussing racism at home would potentially undermine the credibility and achievement of Singapore's successful multiracial policy and race relations.

More examples of everyday racism

The sociologist Philomena Essed (1991) in her groundbreaking work on *Understanding Everyday Racism* argues that racism is more than structure and ideology; it is a process that is routinely created and reinforced in everyday practices. She defines everyday racism as a 'process in which socialized racist notions are integrated into everyday practices and thereby actualize and reinforce underlying racial and ethnic relations'. Everyday racism may not take extreme forms but by nature are embedded in mundane and routine practices. This perspective emphasizes the need to understand the intersections between macro-discourses and structures and everyday practices. Essed outlines many different scenarios of racism as described by her participants to demonstrate that actions like close scrutiny, passing comments, contact avoidance, name-calling and ridicule may appear trivial but when felt and experienced persistently must be conceived as micro-injustices (1991). In other instances, when it comes to job application and workplace encounters, minority races are consistently confronted with additional requirements, inflexible attitudes and exclusion from certain positions or overlooked for promotion. I will now provide some examples of everyday racism and want to argue that these incidents reveal that colonial racial stereotypes have continued to filter interethnic relations and how the racial majority construct and engage with minorities *in everyday encounters and situations*. In addition, since authorities are not prepared to recognize racism and a veil of silence exists on this issue, minority races tend to accept their predicament as unassailable.

By all accounts, Singapore is often celebrated as a racially harmonious society with plenty of examples to show for when it comes to convivial interactions among Singaporeans of different races. Wise and Velayutham (2014) have illustrated how as a result of Singapore's simplified 'racial composition' and proximity created by high-density and high-rise living, Singaporeans have developed an awareness – however superficial it might be – of the cultural and religious codes of the other groups. This understanding enables the 'rubbing of shoulders' and 'getting along' in everyday practices and interactions through exchange of food and gift-giving; simple gestures such as greetings, holding of the lift door, banter, code switching and so forth. For these reasons, it is argued that Singapore is relatively free from interracial and religious tensions. However, this does not take into account the presence of discrimination or prejudicial attitudes towards the racial minorities.

Everyday racism operates in two ways in Singapore. First, a person's phenotypic characteristics and other biological features are singled out for discriminatory practices (see, for example: Velayutham 2009; Lee et al. 2004; Lai 1996). Second, as I will explore next, racist practices rely on cultural

stereotypes for the perpetuation of racial inequities. In recent years, the circulation of racially offensive comments on the Internet and social media are becoming common and some have been reported in the media attracting public attention. This development is very significant in the Singapore context because privately held negative views and prejudices about ethnic minorities now circulate in the public domain. In August 2012, Singapore's Law Minister K. Shanmugam told the local media that he had received an email from a resident (ethnicity not disclosed) in his constituency complaining about having to live next door to an Indian family. The complainant, an elderly man, indicated that he was upset at having to 'smell their Indian sweaty smell and unwashed bodies'. In October 2012, Eve Tan, a Singaporean Chinese commented on Health Promotion Board Facebook site to a query about the penalties for underage smoking (Figure 1). A screenshot of her Facebook response was published in the online version of *The Straits Times*.

A few days earlier, a Malaysian-born Chinese working in Singapore, Amy Cheong annoyed by the noise coming from a Malay wedding on the ground floor of her apartment block ranted on her Facebook (Figure 2).

These deep-seated views about the Malays are relatively common and should not be dismissed on the grounds that they do not represent the views of majority Singaporeans. In Singapore, where there are limited avenues for expressing personal opinions, the rise of online forms of communication have allowed Singaporeans to express their disaffection with the government and more generally social issues more prolifically and loudly.

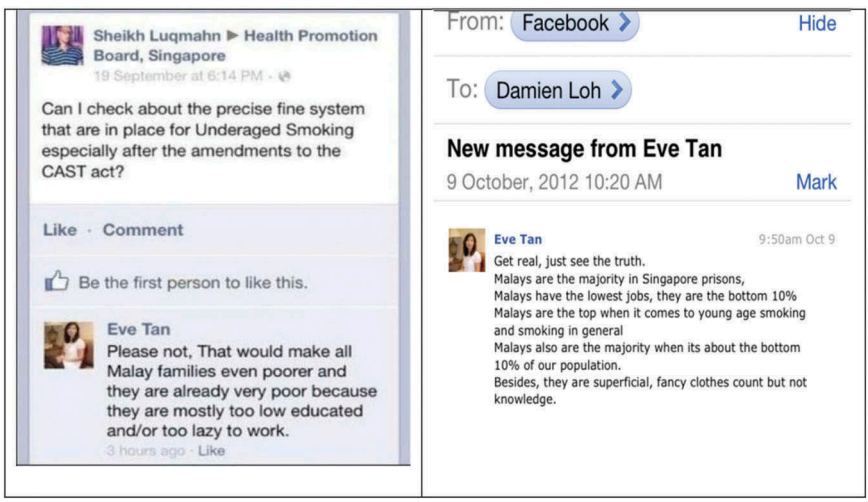

Figure 1. Screenshot of Eve Tan's Facebook page.
Source: http://news.asiaone.com/News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20121012-377350.html

Figure 2. Screenshot of Amy Cheong's Facebook page.
Source: https://sg.news.yahoo.com/ntuc-assistant-director-says-sorry-for-racist-post.html

However, authorities responded swiftly to these comment. The police were investigating Eve Tan's comments. Amy Cheong's employment was terminated by her employer the National Trade Union Congress almost immediately. The prime minister rebuked her and said the comments were 'just wrong and totally unacceptable' and that it was 'an isolated case that does not reflect the strength of race relations in Singapore' (15 October 2012, Channel News Asia). The reaction from the authorities who dismissed these incidents as one-off events, rather than recognize a deeper dissatisfaction and racist feelings in the general population, is telling of why and how there is little scholarship on racism in Singapore.

It is also extraordinary that these racist comments closely resemble that of the views held by the Chinese and the British administrators during the period of colonial rule. Both Eve Tan and Amy Cheong's comments may

seem to be based on factual accounts and are not intentionally racists but in reality the stereotyping reproduces structured systems of power in which the Chinese and indeed Indians have historically benefitted. Here as Essed (1991, 39) argues 'specific practices, whether their consequences are intentional or unintentional, can be evaluated in terms of racism only when they are consistent with (our knowledge of) existing macro structures of racial inequality in the system'. The labelling of Malays as lazy, unproductive and of low socio-economic standing has profound consequences and the census data on education attainment, housing and monthly household income remind us of the systemic lack of opportunities available to attain social mobility (see Mutalib 2012).

While economic and social indicators produced by the government are useful tools for evaluating the development and impact of social policies and standing of ethnic groups in terms of the total population, they also reveal particular patterns and attributes that are often inadvertently mapped on to the groups themselves. For example, the monthly average and median income and educational qualification of the three main ethnic groups between 1990 and 2010 (see Singapore Department of Statistics website) have improved significantly over the last three decades largely due to Singapore's steady economic growth, low levels of unemployment and access to quality education. However, the Malays have only made incremental progress in the last two decades. Their household income is by far the lowest compared to the Chinese and Indians and they also have the most number of early-school leavers. These statistical data consistently form the basis for stereotyping the entire Malay community. Looking at the figures for the Indians, it is evident that they are the most improved ethnic group especially with average/median household income exceeding the total national and Chinese averages in 2010. As a proportion of the total population Indians have the highest number of university graduates. Despite these achievements, there is a twofold explanation as to why Indians, in particular, continue to experience racial discrimination. First, Barr and Skrbiš (2008) in their analysis of the construction of state nationalism vis-à-vis the education system, national service, the civil service and Singapore Armed Forces demonstrate that an ethno-racial hierarchy permeates every aspect of Singapore society based on the assumption of the special place and superiority of the Chinese. They argue that these key institutions while championing multiracialism and meritocracy 'are chimeras whose main purpose is to facilitate and legitimise rule by a self-appointed elite, dominated by middle-class Chinese' (2008, 253). The perception of the Chinese as culturally superior and being the numerical majority they continue to dominate Singapore's political, social and cultural landscape bearing in mind that Indians are less than 10% of the total population (Tan 2004). This then

creates a powerful stereotype in the public mind of an entrenched racialized economic and social hierarchy with the Chinese at the top and the Malays and Indians below even though income levels, educational attainment, employment, housing and all other social indicators would suggest otherwise and thus producing an image of the Chinese as intelligent, hardworking and economically forward and strong social stigma and stereotype of the Malays to be generally lazy, unintelligent and unambitious (Moore 2000). This structured power differential between Chinese, Malays and Indians reinforces the hegemony of Chinese-ness in Singaporean society. The second, as Lai (1996), Fuller (1998), Lee et al. (2004), Khoo and Lim (2004) and Velayutham (2009) have argued, phenotype, perceived traits of ethnic group and stereotypes consistently form the basis of everyday discrimination experienced by the Malay and Indian racial minorities in Singapore.

A recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey on *Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony* of 4131 Singaporean residents (mostly citizens) offered further insights into labour market entry and workplace discrimination (Mathews 2014). One survey question asked 'when I know what a person's race is, I have a good idea of what some of their behaviour and views are like'. An astonishing 46% said they agreed or strongly agreed and a further 35.6% answered 'somewhat agreed' with the statement (Mathews 2014, 13). That equates to roughly 8 in every 10 Singaporeans who hold preconceived ideas about a person from another race prior to interacting with them. This clearly demonstrates stereotyping and prejudices cloud most cross-cultural interactions. This correlates with the response to another question 'how hard respondents felt members of different races had to work in order to reach top positions in their companies/organisations?' Only 16.5% Chinese felt that they had to work harder or much harder compared to Indians and Malays at 30.8% and 36%, respectively (Mathews 2014, 31). The result indicates that the Malays and Indians would have to work extra harder to overcome negative attitudes about them. From my own research with Malay and Indian participants concerning their experiences of interethnic interactions in the workplace, both groups consistently pointed to the lack of recognition they received and special privileges Chinese co-workers enjoyed at work. Haslam who is Malay has been working as security guard over the last 3 years at a large entertainment venue. He observed:

> From what I can see, since our managers are mostly the Chinese, most of the Chinese are given priority first in any pay rise, increment, whereas the Malays and Indians would be second-opinion for them. Yes, but they don't show it openly. When it comes to promotion, there's this group of people who will get better grade than this group, so we can see from the statistics they they've

> drawn up, it's like 2:1:1. It is like the Malays and Indians will be getting only one level whereas the Chinese will be getting two levels.

Nadeera, a Malay nurse in her late 20s also acknowledged similar treatments at a public hospital where she works:

> Yeah and also I would say as you know, Singapore is Chinese-dominated, so Chinese people would easily be promoted and whatsoever, like be given opportunities, which is normal in Singapore.

The normalization of Chinese privilege, and acceptance that the Chinese are more likely to benefit or presented with opportunities compared to other races, is quite telling of how minority races deal with unfair treatment in the workplace and also in other areas. In most cases, the discrimination is subtle or concealed and from Haslam and Nadeera's comments, we can argue that the dominant–minority relations inevitably produce an 'us' and 'them' divide and it is reasonable to assume discrimination is deeply felt. In effect, everyday racism involves cumulative practices, often covert and hard to pinpoint, but is felt and experienced persistently. As a result, these micro-injustices become normal, fused into familiar practices (Essed 1991, 204–208). There is also a sense of resignation and powerlessness about their social position in Singapore.

The IPS survey had another question that asked how often respondents (all races) felt racially discriminated against in their everyday lives. Those who answered sometimes/often were 17.6% when using public transport; 19% when shopping, eating or enjoying leisurely activities; 19.7% when at work; 24.1% when applying for a job and 24.3% when seeking a job promotion (Mathews 2014, 25). The survey did not disaggregate the responses according to gender or race/ethnicity. No further details were provided on the nature of these discriminations and who the perpetrators or victims were. However, the data do indicate that racial discrimination is most felt in the labour market and place of employment. Additional data according to race indicate that Chinese (5.7%) feel least discriminated against regarding a job or job promotion compared to Malays (26.4%) and Indians (24.2%). Similarly, Malays (43%) and Indians (36.1%) are far worst off when applying for a job primarily because of their inability to converse in Mandarin. From the IPS survey, it is evident that Malays, and Indians to a lesser extent, do experience some form of racial discrimination when at work. With the Chinese in the majority in most Singapore workplaces, ethnic minorities would be expected to adhere to 'Chinese work culture' and practices. It can be argued that preconceived notions of race are a factor that contributes to prejudices and discrimination in the workplace – the Malays are a case in point. Rina, a Malay customer service officer has been working at public hospital for over 2 years. She recounted:

Interviewer: You mentioned favouritism is normal at any workplace. Do you think it is split along racial lines at your workplace?

Rina: Yeah, a bit, sometimes. If someone can take leave, we can't take leave, we have to swap. So sometimes, for whatever reason, a Chinese lady will get to take leave but when a Malay worker asks for a swap, they won't allow. Actually we cannot change our work schedule. The Chinese will always get what they want from the superiors, like applying for dental leave. It is possible for the non-Chinese to apply for leave but we need to present a proof. For example, if you need to go for a wedding, you need to present the wedding invitation card as proof.

Interviewer: Why do you think this happens?

Rina: Since our manager is Chinese, after every roll call before we start work, those Chinese will talk in Chinese with the manager. During lunch time also, they will talk in Chinese. We Malays just don't bother . . . .

It is interesting to observe the 'additional requirements' that non-Chinese have to meet at their workplace. In this instance, a leave request is granted without question for one group and conversely strict rules are employed to ensure leave entitlements are not 'abused' by another. Being part of the dominant group also means that the Chinese are less aware that they are excluding other races when they converse in Chinese among themselves and with the manager. The Malay workers' reaction to such social exclusion is one of apathy.

Another form of discrimination that has been consistently raised by Malays and Indians is the requirement in the job position criteria to speak

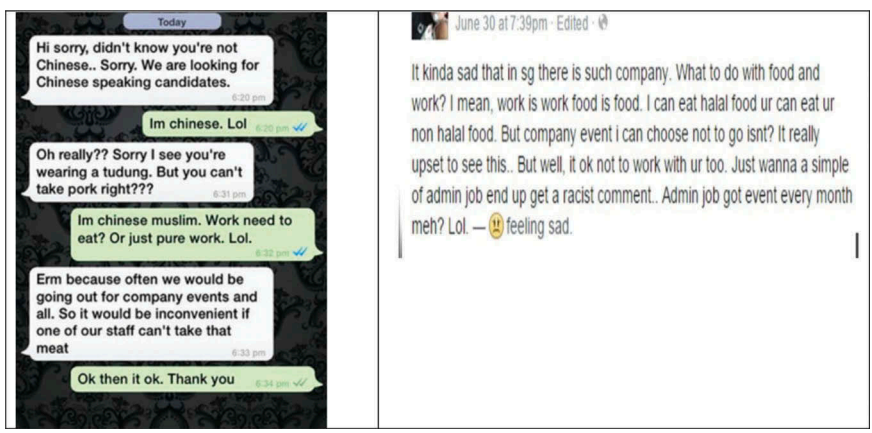

Figure 3. Screenshot of social media conversation.

Mandarin. In June 2015, a Singaporean Chinese Muslim woman applied for an administration position in a local company. She contacted the company to seek more information about the position and the ensuing correspondence which was reported in the papers was as follows (Figure 3):

In this instance, racist attitudes run much deeper than mere perpetuation of stereotypes. From the conversation threads, it is clear that the company representative was confused with the identity of the applicant. He/she deemed that the applicant was ineligible to apply for the position because she was wearing a headscarf (Tudung) which serves as an identity marker for Malays/Muslims and therefore a non-Chinese speaker. The applicant corrected the misperception and revealed that she was actually a Chinese-Muslim and was conversant in Chinese. The company representative then pointed out that the applicant will be required to attend company events where pork was served. While this appears to be a banal exchange, the critical point here is that, the applicant was turned away from the advertised position because it was always intended for a Chinese. It is important to note that within the category of being Chinese very few are Muslims and the employers' unwillingness to hire a Chinese-Muslim highlights that they have a preferred/presumed stereotype of a particular type of Chinese. With some irony, the company representative going by the outward appearance of the applicant (photograph) has systematically discriminated against her based on her/his essentialist cultural knowledge of Malays/Muslims, that is, they are non-Mandarin speakers and they do not consume pork. Crucially, the response from the applicant afterwards highlights the hurt, resentment and disempowerment felt victims of racial discrimination.

In addition, the issue of requiring 'Mandarin speakers only' remains a vexing question when English is the main language of communication in Singapore. Employers have been allowed to do so without penalty even though it discriminates against Malay and Indian job applicants. Barr and Skrbiš (2008, 265) go even further to assert that the Chinese are aware of their dominant status but 'have such a low level of consciousness of issues of discrimination that they are generally unaware of the advantages they enjoy'. These imagined entitlements contribute to the negative stereotypes and exclusion of non-Chinese in ordinary social and commercial intercourse. They argue that these factors go a long way towards accounting for racial discrimination against member of minority races on the basis of cultural dissonance, language and religion (Barr and Skrbiš 2008).

This then begs the question, why is the Singapore state unwilling to acknowledge everyday racism? According to Chua (2003, 61), the 'high visibility of race and racial divisions enables the Singapore state to 'set itself structurally above race, as the neutral umpire that oversees and maintains racial peace and racial equality'. This emphasis on race, however, has not troubled the government or the people in comparison to other multicultural

nation states such as Britain, Canada and Australia. According to Chua (2003, 61) 'there is an *apparent absence of anxiety* about being multiracial, about differences and potential conflicts that presumed to be well policed and kept in check by legislation and by government agencies'. Chua further observes (Chua 2003, 75) 'public voicing of grievances within a discourse of race is quickly suppressed and the parties voicing the grievances publicly chastised – if not criminalized – on the grounds of being "racial chauvinists" disrupting racial harmony'.

The 'heavy handedness' of the state and public apathy against racism has stymied critical debate and interventions. For instance, in 2010 Mr Githu Muigai, the *UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance* visited Singapore to gather information and hear from Singaporeans on these issues. After consulting with government officials, representatives of civil society organizations and ordinary citizens, Mr Muigai (2010) reported that 'while there may be no institutionalized racial discrimination in Singapore, several policies have further marginalized certain ethnic groups [and] this is a situation that must be acknowledged and acted upon in order to safeguard the stability, sustainability and prosperity of Singapore'. Among other things, Mr Muigai highlighted the poor socio-economic standing of the Malays; Special Assistance Plan schools (government-funded elite schools that support education of Chinese culture and Mandarin language) and the use of race in official documents as contributing to the marginalization of minorities. Immediately following the release of the report, in a press statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered a point-by-point rebuttal against Mr Muigai's findings and sought clarification from him as it felt that some of his claims were misguided and taken out of context. This response reinforces the sensitivity of discussing race-related issues. It unequivocally stated that race, language and religion will always be sensitive issues in Singapore and it was up to the government to determine between free expression and preservation of racial and religious harmony. The statement did not acknowledge that racial discrimination does exist in Singapore.

The state's swift intervention into highly publicized racist incidents has the unfortunate effect of shifting the public focus from acknowledging racism to singling out perpetrators as aberrant or rogue individuals who are a threat to public order. Equally, this action reinforces the perception that racist practices are isolated incidents. As I have shown in this paper, numerous other everyday racial discriminations in neighbourhoods, schools, shops and workplaces go unreported; the perpetrators are not dealt with and victims have no recourse to combat such practices and their consequences. As a result, discussions of experiences of racism mostly take place in the private realm and in recent years aired through social media. These

personal testimonies must be acknowledged and not treated as inflaming racial hatred so as to confront racial intolerance and negative perceptions of ethnic minorities.

The continuation of racial stereotyping and lack of intervention in terms of educating the public and initiatives to deal with discriminatory practices have contributed to sustaining such practices in everyday life. In an opinion piece in a local newspaper, Eugene Tan (2013), who is an academic and a nominated member of parliament, commenting on the IPS survey made a crucial observation:

> 'the survey consistently found that minority respondents, compared to Chinese respondents, held more positive attitudes towards embracing diversity, colour-blindness, inter-cultural understanding, social acceptance and cross-cultural friendships [and] given that three-quarters of the population are ethnic Chinese, it is crucial for Chinese-Singaporeans to appreciate that they may, unwittingly, be less sensitive of the interests, concerns, and fears of the minorities'.

Such insights however are seldom heeded. Local authorities and the media gloss over the issue of racism and speak positively about race relations on the basis that there is very little racial and religious tension in Singapore. The above incidents clearly tell a different story.

Conclusion

Studies in race and racism are primarily located at the intersections of colonial encounters – The West and the Rest – between the civilized and primitive worlds and in the contemporary setting in Western societies. Studies on contemporary race relations with some exceptions are primarily concerned with the ways in which immigrants and often minority populations are treated in a dominant White society. However, we need new modes of analysis that situates racism within particular settings. It is insufficient to say that the racism has its roots in European colonialism or in terms of a hierarchy of whiteness (i.e. not as a biological category but as a social construction). As Solomos and Back (1994) argue, racist discourses need to be rigorously contextualized because contemporary racisms have evolved and adapted to new circumstances.

In a non-Western multiracial settler society like Singapore, the postcolonial nation state and its people have inherited the legacy of colonial administration of race relations and everyday stereotypes of races. Chinese Singaporeans in this sense are in a unique position because they are in the majority and dominate the political, economic and cultural spheres. While political discourses propagate the concept of meritocracy as a governing principle of Singaporean society where all Singaporeans are accorded

equal opportunity, it is not a level playing field. Negative perceptions of Malays and Indians continue to disadvantage them.

State multiracialism ensures that the races are included but offers no guarantee that discrimination and exclusion does not occur in everyday life. There is therefore an urgent need to examine the impact of racism on the minorities as well as the question of Chinese privilege in Singapore society. It must be mentioned that a recent blog set up by Sangeetha Thanapal and Adeline Koh, *Chinese Privilege: On invisible privilege and Racial Politics in Singapore* is beginning to call into question the benefits Chinese enjoy as being the dominant ethnic group in Singapore. Solomos and Back (1994, 156) point put that the 'crucial point property of these elaborations is that they produce a racist effect while denying that this effect is the result of racism'. The construction of race as simply an identity category and its effect of normalizing racial stereotypes are never acknowledged in public discourse. For a member of a minority race, racism is accepted as inevitable and one cannot speak against it because there are no spaces to do so and importantly they will not be heard.

Racism in non-Western settler societies is inherited from the colonial project. In the postcolonial context, the dominant majority, in this case, the Chinese in Singapore benefit most from perpetuating racial prejudices and discrimination against ethnic minorities. Moreover, as Eugene Tan (2013) observes 'the management of markers of race, language and religion in Singapore has been characterised by top-down, coercive control and pre-emptive strikes against threats to harmony'. Speaking out against racism in Singapore therefore exposes the fragility ethnic relations in Singapore and consequently is seen as a threat to racial harmony. Unless there is direct intervention to combat racism through education and anti-racism campaigns, Singapore's ethnic minorities will remain silent victims of racism.

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Note

1. A total of 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Singapore with Chinese, Indians, Malays; newly arrived immigrants and migrant workers from China and India on their experiences of working in a culturally diverse workplace. These were primarily blue-collar workers employed in hospitality, manufacturing, security and health sectors. For the purpose of this paper, I present a selection of interview data concerning Malay-Singaporeans and their workplace experiences.

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