Research article

Exploring racial microaggression experiences among ethnic minority nursing students: A descriptive phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing pursuit of enhanced educational opportunities has led to a significant rise in international student enrollment in various fields, including nursing. Nursing is currently in its early stages and faces challenges related to racial microaggression. Understanding the dynamics of racial microaggression is crucial in countries like Turkey, where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds are accommodated.
Objective: To explore and achieve a more profound insight into the lived encounters of ethnic minority nursing students confronting racial microaggression.
Method: The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach. Data collection involved conducting in-depth interviews from February 1, 2023, to June 1, 2023. Analysis was performed utilizing Colaizzi's analysis method.
Results: Each participant in the study encountered at least one type of microaggression. The analysis identified three clear themes: "challenges in social interactions," "unfavorable learning atmosphere," and "aspirations for the future."
Conclusion: This study highlights the crucial need to establish secure and inclusive environments that foster authentic discussions within academic settings. Faculty and educators should strengthen their ability to consider diverse perspectives in various scenarios. Moreover, integrating an up-to-date and comprehensive curriculum, along with the adoption of inclusive language, into the nursing program is essential for effectively addressing these concerns.

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly globalizing and changing world, several elements, including improved travel access, international partnerships, and the desire for better educational opportunities, have led to an increased presence of international students across different educational domains, including nursing (Bednarz et al., 2010; Jeffreys, 2004).

Despite the expanding diversity among nursing students, the nursing education sector faces challenges in effectively supporting underrepresented students worldwide (Bednarz et al., 2010). While many nursing programs integrate content on cultural competence and transcultural nursing, these efforts unintentionally uphold certain norms, including whiteness, heteronormativity, middle and upper-classism, and positivism, thereby perpetuating a systemic racial approach within the educational framework (Bell, 2021).

Racial microaggression (RM) was introduced in 1970 by Chester Pierce, a Black psychologist from Harvard, to describe the "subtle blows" that Black individuals encounter. These incidents are neither major nor overt but still inflict genuine harm (Freeman and Stewart, 2024) RM, which represents a modern form of racism, includes subtle yet impactful daily occurrences of racial slights and insults (Williams et al., 2021). Students of color at college campuses in both the United States of America (USA), and United Kingdom (UK) commonly face RM (Lilly et al., 2018; Morrison et al., 2023). This prevalence is linked to the diverse composition of higher education institutions in these countries. In recent years, there has been a growing concern about RM at the international level. Particularly within higher education literature, studies have underscored how individuals from various racial backgrounds experience microaggressions on college campuses (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Morrison et al., 2023).

Racism within nursing education appears in explicit forms, like direct discriminatory incidents, and more subtle ways, such as RM. Due

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to their subtlety, RM often goes unnoticed but significantly contributes to perpetuating systemic racism within nursing education. Research suggests that nursing education is still in the early stages of addressing and preventing RM (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2022; Koch, 2021; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). Therefore, openly discussing and tackling RM within nursing education is crucial (Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). Moreover, gaining a thorough understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority nursing students (EMNSs) regarding RM is imperative for fostering an inclusive learning environment in nursing education.

1.1. Background

Microaggression predominantly appears in three forms: microinsult, microinvalidation, and microassault (Sue et al., 2007). Microinsults entail impolite or insensitive messages, while microinvalidations dismiss the thoughts, ideas, or contributions of individuals from marginalized groups. Microassaults involve deliberate and conscious attempts to offend and discriminate against individuals from underrepresented groups (Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2007) Racial microaggressions (RMs) include discourses or actions involving racial insults and offenses that lead to traumatic experiences (Williams et al., 2019). RM is not extensively discussed among nursing students (NSs) or faculty, often regarded as a taboo topic (Williams et al., 2023).

The significance of meaningful diversity and inclusion in nursing education has grown, emphasizing the pressing need to enhance awareness and understanding of how RM functions in this context (Nicolson and Quassoli, 2023; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). Existing literature on RM in nursing education primarily focuses on the Black student population, with limited exploration of White and Black segregation, and is predominantly conducted in the USA and European contexts (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2022; Carter and McMillian-Bohler, 2021; Koch, 2021). However, it is essential to grasp RM in countries accommodating students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. For example, Turkey is a country that requires effective strategies to address RM in nursing education.

The number of EMNSs studying in Turkey has been on the rise annually. While around 18,000 international students were registered in Turkey in 2000, the figure has exceeded 300,000 from 198 countries as of 2022. Consequently, there has been a continual increase in the enrollment of students in nursing schools across Turkey. These students, predominantly from countries like Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Iran, and Afghanistan, face various challenges in both social and academic aspects during their education. Research with EMNSs in Turkey has revealed adjustment issues that negatively impact their learning experiences (Özaslan et al., 2019; Yılmaz et al., 2021). However, there is a scarcity of studies focusing on students' encounters with RM and their perspectives.

There is an immediate requirement to enhance awareness and comprehension of how RMs function in nursing education, particularly in countries like Turkey. Consequently, personal and educational strategies need to be developed to eradicate existing RM.

This qualitative research aimed to investigate and gain a thorough understanding of the lived experiences of EMNSs regarding RM.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach, also referred to as Husserlian or transcendental phenomenology, to elucidate the essential meanings and structures of the phenomenon (Husserl, 2012).

We utilized the descriptive phenomenological approach, which is suitable when there is limited existing knowledge about a particular issue. The objective of the study was to elucidate and comprehend the fundamental meaning of a phenomenon as perceived by those directly

experiencing it (Husserl, 2012; Morrow et al., 2015). Additionally, the descriptive phenomenological approach enabled us to gain deeper insight into the experiences of EMNSs concerning RM, given the scarcity of knowledge about RM in nursing education.

2.2. Setting and participants

The study took place at a local university known for having a high number of international students enrolled in Turkey. In the nursing department, there were a total of 445 students ranging from the first to the fourth year. About 10 % of the student population in each academic year came from different countries, including Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, and other Turkish states. Using purposive sampling, the authors reached out to EMNSs via email and telephone, explaining the study and inviting their participation. Seventeen non-Turkish NSs, studying in their second, third, and fourth years at a local university in Turkey from 2022 to 2023, agreed to take part. Participants of any gender or ethnicity were eligible. As the study aimed to delve deeply into individual lived experiences using the descriptive phenomenological approach, the sample size was determined by the richness and completeness of the information provided rather than the number of participants (Malterud et al., 2016). Sampling ceased when data saturation was achieved, which occurred after the 14th participant, prompting the conclusion of interviews (refer to Table 1 for Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants).

2.3. Data collection

The data were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews between February 1, 2023, and June 1, 2023, on online platforms using a semi-structured questionnaire that focused on students' RM experiences. Researchers developed this tool based on the principles of a descriptive phenomenological approach, focusing on "what" and "how" questions (Table 2). Before each interview, the authors briefly explained RM. They conducted three initial interviews to pilot the questions and made revisions as needed.

The interviews, conducted online to enhance EMNSs' participation, were scheduled based on participants' availability. The authors sent the online interview link to all participants. All interviews were recorded and lasted approximately 25 to 35 min (with one interview lasting 25 min). The recordings were stored and analyzed using MAXQDA software.

2.4. Data analysis

The investigation of the "lived experience" was approached through

Table 1
The characteristics of the study participants.

Characteristics	Total $n = 14$ - %
Age (years)	
Mean	22.5 ± 8.5
Range	21–31
Ethnic group	
Iraq	6 (42.9)
Iranian	2 (14.2)
Somalia	2 (14.2)
Afghanistan	2 (14.2)
Turkmenistan	2 (14.2)
Grade	
Third year	9 (64.2)
Fourth year	5 (35.8)
Sex	
Male	6 (42.8)
Female	8 (57.2)
Duration of residency in Turkey	
Mean	4.92 ± 8

Table 2

Questions for semi-structured interviews.

- Have you encountered instances of microaggressions during your educational experiences in Turkey?
- Could you describe the specific situations you encountered?
- What were the personal impacts of these experiences, and would you be willing to share them?
- In your opinion, what strategies or approaches can be employed to address and manage microaggressions?

three phenomenological philosophical viewpoints: intentionality (where reality arises through conscious awareness), essences (the relationship with something real, whether in memory or imagination), and phenomenological reduction (the suspension of beliefs regarding the experience) (Husserl, 2012).

The authors considered these three steps and applied Colaizzi's data analysis method. Colaizzi's systematic approach offers a concise and comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon studied, validated by participants' firsthand experiences (Morrow et al., 2015). Grounded in Husserl's philosophical stances, this method employs eight rigorous steps to thoroughly analyze narrative data, resulting in a detailed description of the phenomena under investigation (refer to Fig. 1 for the Detailed Analysis Process).

2.5. Trustworthiness

The authors adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines for reporting qualitative research (Booth et al., 2014). They sought to establish phenomenological validity through three primary components: reflexivity, credibility, and transferability.

2.5.1. Research team and reflexivity

A reflexive approach was employed, guided by a practical framework including personal, intrapersonal, and methodological reflexivity (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The study was carried out by two researchers. The first author, FA (female), holds the position of assistant professor in public health nursing, specializing in qualitative studies. The second author, ÖY (male), is a graduate nursing student. FA and ÖY are affiliated with the same institution, with ÖY having had no prior contact with the participants. Neither FA nor ÖY possessed prior knowledge of the research field. ÖY conducted the interviews, facilitating participants' ease in expressing their experiences by creating a comfortable discussion environment. FA participated in the interviews as an observer.

The study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach, focusing on elucidating the meanings of phenomena from lived experiences, rather than aiming to explain or identify causes. Phenomenological research design investigates the fundamental nature of human experiences and comprehends the significance individuals attach to these experiences. Its objective is to grasp the inherent structures and fundamental elements of these experiences without imposing predetermined theories or interpretations. Consequently, no theoretical framework was incorporated into the study.

2.5.2. Credibility

The authors comprehensively and transparently presented all procedures and methods. Additionally, they utilized the member-checking method to allow participants to confirm the accuracy of the research findings, along with employing the saturation strategy. Transparency throughout the analysis was ensured by providing a detailed account of the analysis process and findings, including the utilization of visual aids.

2.5.3. Transferability

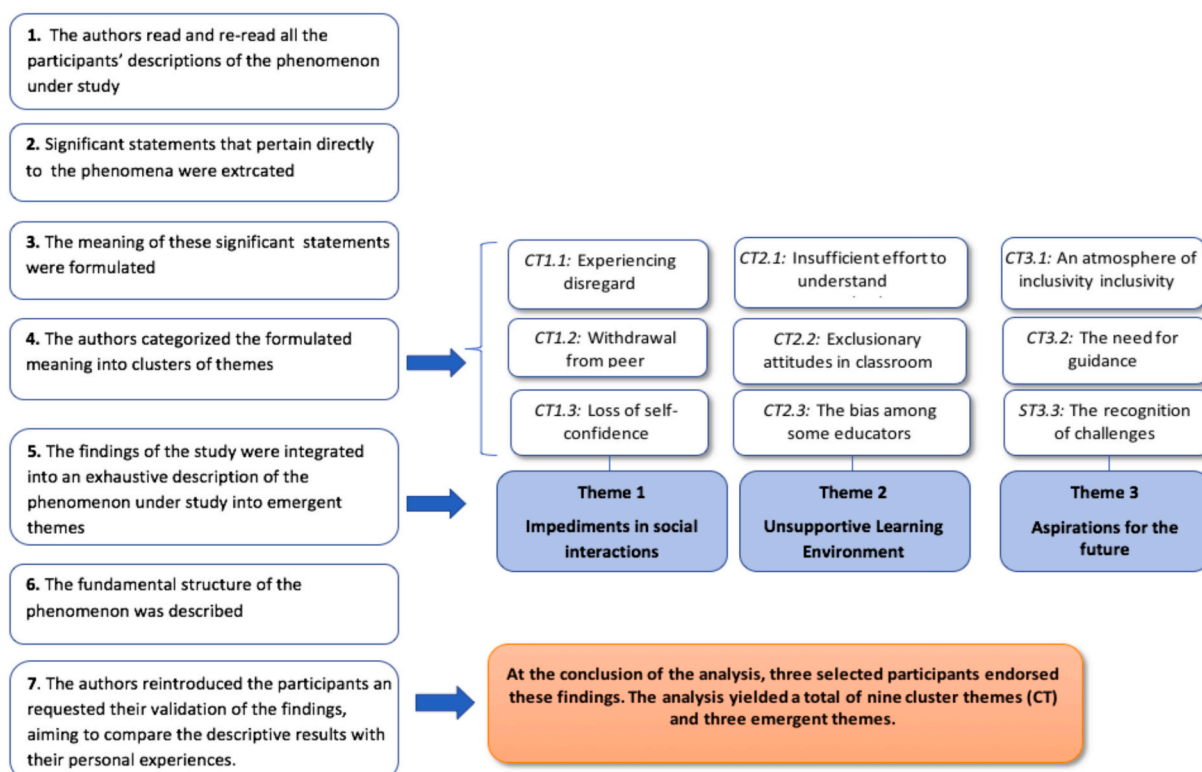Transferability evaluates the validity of findings and whether the

Fig. 1. Steps of Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological data analysis method and the formation of cluster themes and emergent themes.

study adds new knowledge to existing literature. Given the limited research on RM in nursing education, the authors anticipate that the findings of this study will substantially enrich the field's knowledge. The authors have diligently strived to transparently and comprehensively present all findings while prioritizing this objective.

2.6. Ethical considerations

All study procedures received approval from the institutional review board (Çankırı Karatekin University, decision number: 29/23-11-2022). The study objective was clarified, and participants voluntarily participated. Written informed consent was obtained from all participating students.

3. Results

The study involved 14 EMNSs. Demographic information for the participants is detailed in Table 1. Analysis uncovered nine theme clusters and three emergent themes.

3.1. Emergent theme: 1 impediments in social interactions

3.1.1. Theme cluster 1. Experiencing disregard

Turkish peers exhibited minimal effort in engaging in social interactions with EMNSs, leading to feelings of neglect within the shared environment.

"During a recent group project, a Turkish peer asked for opinions from everyone. When it came to my turn, he glanced at me but did not inquire about my thoughts."

(Participant 3)

"Feeling ignored can be quite difficult, leading to feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Thus, we should make an effort to seek attention from our peers, particularly during group tasks."

(Participant 7)

3.1.2. Theme cluster 2. Withdrawal from peer interactions

Being ignored and encountering language barriers contributed to a gradual decrease in social interactions over time, causing individuals to retreat from social engagements.

"Honestly, this situation has become normal for me, and I do not ask why anymore. I may have few friends, but I'm okay with it, I guess."

(P6)

"I believe there is prejudice against us, though perhaps not everyone feels that way. Nonetheless, I think it's best for us to maintain some distance."

(P8)

3.1.3. Theme cluster 3. Loss of self-confidence

EMNSs who felt worthless due to social exclusion initially struggled to cope with these emotions. As a result, they endeavored to explore alternative solutions.

"The first year was incredibly challenging; over time, I became increasingly withdrawn. I believed the problem was with me. During that period, I required support, and I had begun taking medication."

(Participant 4)

"Participating in group studies, particularly in the initial stages, posed a challenge for me. I found it difficult to express my thoughts effectively, leading to significant stress."

(Participant 2)

3.2. Emergent theme 2: unsupportive learning environment

3.2.1. Theme cluster 1. Insufficient effort to understand

Inadequate communication and a lack of effort to understand EMNSs in classroom settings limited their ability to fully express themselves and effectively convey their knowledge, even when they had valuable insights to share.

"At times, during presentations, we may not be as quick as our Turkish peers, or we require time to explain things in our preferred manner. Unfortunately, the glances from others now suggest that we should stay silent."

(Participant 11)

3.2.2. Theme cluster 2. Exclusionary attitudes in the classroom setting

Experiencing exclusionary attitudes during group work negatively affected the academic performance of EMNSs, resulting in educators making inaccurate evaluations of their abilities.

"I wish we had the chance to present only to our instructors, rather than in front of the entire class."

(Participant 8)

3.2.3. Theme cluster 3. The bias among some educators

Some educators demonstrated bias in exams or grading processes. The absence of motivational discourse and behavior from educators contributed to an ineffective learning environment.

"When a Turkish colleague, performing at a similar level to myself during the internship, receives higher grades, it creates uncertainty about how to respond in such instances."

(P7)

"Not all educators, but I perceive that some are attempting to create a sense of distinctiveness or separation among us."

(P11)

3.3. Emergent theme 3: aspirations for the future

3.3.1. Theme cluster 1. An atmosphere of inclusivity

Participants were aware that the behaviors they experienced could affect both their academic and social lives. Although they had doubts about the possibility of positive change in some areas, there were also discussions expressing optimism for the future.

"In reality, some things are simpler than they believe. It would suffice for our Turkish peers not to refer to us as foreigners. This behavior is exclusionary."

(P4)

3.3.2. Theme cluster 2. The need for guidance

Due to limited communication with Turkish peers and certain educators, participants suggested solutions that suited their needs.

"Maybe having a mentor or receiving guidance from Turkish peers could facilitate our situation."

(P11)

3.3.3. Theme cluster 3. Recognition of challenges

Their dialogues conveyed aspirations, expressing a wish for Turkish peers and educators to acknowledge the hurdles they confront, including language barriers and constraints in articulating themselves completely, while also acknowledging their endeavors in communication.

"It would be genuinely motivating if they recognized our challenges and difficulties instead of simply labeling us as foreigners, and if we could engage in open conversations about it." (P5)

4. Discussion

Global migration for enhanced educational opportunities has surged, triggering microaggressions in higher education and necessitating extensive discourse. However, such discussions remain underdeveloped in nursing education, with existing studies primarily concentrated in the USA and the United Kingdom (Carter and McMillian-Bohler, 2021; Koch, 2021; Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). Research on RM in nursing education outside these regions, particularly in Turkey, a diverse transcontinental nation bridging Asia and Europe, is notably sparse. This study marks the inaugural effort in elucidating the experiences of microaggressions among EMNs in Turkey.

4.1. Impediments to social interactions

The results of the present study revealed that all participants encountered at least one type of microaggression, with micro-invalidations and micro-assaults being the most commonly experienced. Microaggressions can infiltrate various aspects of a student's life and are not confined to any particular aspect of the learning environment (Ogunyemi et al., 2020; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). EMNSs grappling with microaggressions encounter numerous challenges in their social lives. Specifically, microinvalidations and micro assaults often hindered their ability to form friendships and express themselves effectively. EMNSs highlighted that the most significant challenge was feeling disregarded, particularly noting that their suggestions were frequently dismissed in collaborative projects or other tasks involving Turkish NSs.

The feeling of being disregarded and lacking acceptance gradually eroded their confidence, especially in forming new connections. This dynamic resulted in a self-perpetuating cycle that complicated social interactions further. Over time, this social exclusion led them to withdraw as a coping mechanism. Research has indicated a positive correlation between social exclusion and withdrawal behavior (Chen et al., 2023) because they believed withdrawal would alleviate their discomfort. However, experiences of exclusion could also lead to aggression directed at the source of exclusion, potentially affecting innocent bystanders as well (Wesselmann et al., 2010).

Some EMNSs described their experiences as routine, believing they had grown accustomed to such treatment. Discussions revolving around low self-confidence were prevalent, with alarming statements recorded from a few EMNSs regarding their use of anxiety medication. To prevent these harmful consequences, which can affect both EMNSs and native NSs, essential measures must be implemented, such as adopting inclusive language. Existing literature supports this need, as studies indicate that RM induces stress, which can gradually erode cognitive function, diminish self-esteem, reduce productivity, and negatively impact relationships (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2022; Blume et al., 2012).

The majority of participants expressed that they had grown accustomed to the way Turkish peers and society treated them, which hindered them from seeking alternative solutions. Ackermann-Barger et al. (2020) supported this observation by documenting that micro-aggressions can silence the voices of EMNSs. The primary risk to well-being and mental health arises from normalizing inappropriate behavior and refraining from seeking assistance in such instances. This reaffirms two crucial imperatives: (1) motivating EMNSs to voice their negative experiences and seek assistance when needed, and (2) fostering an environment conducive to open discussions among native students, EMNSs, and faculty members.

Research conducted in both Europe and the USA has found that language proficiency is not the main factor influencing exposure to RMs.

In these regions, English is often considered a universal language, while individuals' racial or ethnic backgrounds are seen as the primary contributors to such behaviors. However, in countries like Turkey, mastering the local language can pose significant challenges. For example, a study in Turkey revealed that EMNSs faced language barriers, leading to discomfort during interactions with peers (Yılmaz et al., 2021). This finding highlights how language barriers can greatly hinder social interaction, even for those proficient in Turkish. These insights urge us to consider how increased negative perceptions toward refugee populations in Turkey might affect the attitudes of NSs in diverse learning environments. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in negative sentiments toward refugees in Turkey (Toğral Koca, 2016), presenting a forthcoming challenge in promoting inclusivity within nursing education.

4.2. Unsupportive learning environment

The majority of EMNSs reported encountering exclusionary discourses and attitudes, such as criticism of speech patterns, withholding of notes, and displaying negative facial expressions by peers during presentations or speeches in classes. These behaviors hindered their ability to express themselves effectively and show their full academic potential. Studies have shown that students experiencing RM often have intense emotions that disrupt their ability to have successful learning experiences (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2022; Lilly et al., 2018; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). In addition to peers, the current study highlighted instances where educators displayed biased behavior during exams or assessment homework, as reported by EMNSs. Some participants perceived this behavior as understandable due to the educators' perceived poor communication skills or language barriers. However, a crucial aspect highlighted in the study was that neither these Turkish NSs nor the educators demonstrated sufficient efforts to truly understand the perspectives of EMNSs.

Similarly, existing literature describes an oppressive educational environment for non-native individuals, featuring a curriculum that disregards the social construction of diversity and a nursing culture disconnected from a broader sociopolitical framework (Bell, 2021). Additionally, several studies have highlighted that minority students perceive their learning environment as hostile and lacking support. These studies indicate that white students experience learning in a relaxed environment free from racial biases, whereas black students do not have the same experience (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2021). Discussions in Western countries like the USA and UK revolve around the influence of White cultural supremacy on standards and its role in perpetuating unconscious biases among nursing faculty (Harding, 2021; Pusey-Reid and Blackman-Richards, 2022). However, these concerns have yet to be adequately addressed in Turkish nursing education. The current study suggests that discussions should center on RM among faculty and educators, particularly given the recent rise in negative attitudes toward ethnic minority groups in Turkish society.

4.3. Aspiration for the future

While participants may have resigned themselves to the current situation, they still harbored hopes for the future. They voiced their desire for the university to establish long-lasting initiatives that acknowledge and address the presence of racist behaviors. They advocated for an inclusive educational environment where their challenges are acknowledged, microaggressions are prevented, and their integration into both educational and social contexts is promoted. Additionally, participants emphasized the necessity of guidance to assist them during difficult times and tasks.

EMNSs strongly emphasized the importance of faculty members embracing diversity to effectively meet their educational needs. Recognizing the unique position of nurse educators and their potential to initiate transformative actions, it is crucial to acknowledge that they

have historically played a role in perpetuating systemic forms of oppression (Houston et al., 2023). To challenge this perspective, studies suggest that revisiting topics such as diversity and social justice within the nursing curriculum could be beneficial, and nursing educators should cultivate self-assessment skills (Bednarz et al., 2010; Houston et al., 2023).

While some participants maintain positive expectations for the future, they choose to remain silent. However, empowering students to recognize and address microaggressions can help overcome these challenges. Alternative approaches, such as organizing workshops using theater performance techniques (Carter and McMillian-Bohler, 2021) and adopting a flipped classroom approach to create inclusive and secure environments for discussing sensitive topics like racism, inequality, and social injustice (Miller and Nambiar-Greenwood, 2022), can facilitate this process.

4.4. Strengths and limitations

The utilization of descriptive phenomenology stands out as a significant strength of this study. This approach offers a robust method for understanding subjective experiences, providing profound insights into individuals' behaviors and motivations, thereby effectively challenging longstanding assumptions. Another notable asset is the inclusion of a senior nursing student as one of the researchers. This factor facilitated a more comfortable expression of experiences by EMNSs. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the monocentric nature of the study could be considered a limitation.

4.5. Practical implications

It is imperative to highlight the disparities between the intended goals of institutional anti-discrimination policies and the lived experiences of racialized students on campuses. The adoption of an anti-racist approach is a crucial objective, particularly within academic settings. We urge faculty and educators to enhance their ability to consider situations from diverse perspectives. Practical examples involving real-life scenarios, such as the experiences of non-native individuals in society, can aid in this endeavor. These instances could prove beneficial for NSs in developing a social justice perspective. Based on the interview findings, educators should spearhead proactive initiatives involving both faculty and students to foster the ability to embrace diverse perspectives and promote anti-racist understanding. Encouraging collaborative learning among all students through team-based assignments can help alleviate language barriers for EMNSs. Moreover, EMNSs should be encouraged to engage in open discussions about RM in academic settings, including groups that have traditionally remained silent on these topics, along with faculty and native students. Recognizing that social withdrawal can be a coping mechanism in response to microaggressions, nursing educators and faculty should maintain open lines of communication with EMNSs and actively encourage their participation in various social groups and campus activities.

5. Conclusion

Despite the various negative impacts of RM on students, higher education, especially in healthcare, is still in its early stages in terms of addressing and preventing this issue. The findings of this study highlight the importance of establishing safe and open spaces that encourage genuine discussions within academic settings. A crucial first step is to create an environment where open dialogues about RM can take place. In this respect, the current study initiated the conversation and successfully completed its initial phase by introducing the topic to EMNSs. The next phase involves involving faculty members and NSs to address the issue further.

Each participant encountered at least one type of RM, adversely affecting not only their academic performance but also hindering their

participation in social interactions, leading them to restrict themselves to familiar social circles. It is worth noting that a few students turned to medication to cope with this difficult situation. Consequently, urgent action is necessary within this context.

While nurses are pivotal in promoting community justice, the study underscores the need for the nursing profession to take further steps to achieve this objective. According to the findings, this goal can be attained by initially incorporating an updated and comprehensive curriculum, alongside inclusive language, into nursing education.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Funda Aslan: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ömer Yalniz:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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