UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF RACIAL-BASED BULLYING MESSAGES OF BIRACIAL ADOLESCENT

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the meaning behind racially-based bullying messages experienced by biracial adolescents. Racial bullying targets the physical features or ethnic identity of the victim, often resulting in significant effects on their personal development and mental well-being. Using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study delves into the lived experiences of several biracial adolescents aged 12-19, with mixed heritages including Indonesia-Korea, Indonesia-India, Indonesia-New Zealand/Dutch, and Indonesia-Nigeria.

In-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection, focusing on the victims' interpretations of the bullying messages they encountered. Symbolic Interactionism Theory and Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) were applied to analyze how victims make sense of and respond to these racially motivated messages within their social relationships. The findings suggest that biracial adolescent as victims interpret the racial-based messages as deeply ingrained with racial stereotypes. Additionally, the findings also revealed that biracial adolescent understand the act of racial-based bullying as act of social exclusion and the construction of self-doubt. These racial-based messages interpretation leads to a negative self-concept and the development of trust issues. Moreover, biracial adolescent interpreted the process of communication with family, friends, and school authorities as the efforts to seek support and process their emotions.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that biracial adolescents perceive racial-based bullying messages as deeply rooted in racial stereotypes and view these acts as forms of social exclusion that foster self-doubt. Racial-based bullying not only affects the psychological development of biracial adolescents but also shapes their understanding of their racial identity. This study highlights how biracial adolescent make sense of the experience they faced in order to form coping mechanism.

Keywords: *biracial adolescent, racial-based bullying, self-concept, racial stereotypes, exclusion, and trust issue*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami makna pesan-pesan bullying berbasis ras yang dialami oleh remaja biracial. Bullying berbasis ras merupakan bentuk intimidasi yang berfokus pada ciri-ciri fisik atau identitas etnis korban, yang sering kali berdampak signifikan terhadap perkembangan diri dan kesehatan mental remaja yang menjadi korban. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman mendalam dari beberapa informan remaja birasial campuran antara Indonesia dan Korea, Indonesia dan India, Indonesia dan New Zealand – Dutch, dan Indonesia dan Nigeria yang berumur 12-19 tahun.

Penelitian ini menggunakan wawancara mendalam sebagai metode utama pengumpulan data, dengan fokus pada makna yang ditafsirkan oleh korban terkait pesan-pesan bullying yang mereka terima. Teori Interaksionisme Simbolik dan Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) digunakan untuk menganalisis bagaimana korban memahami dan merespon pesan-pesan rasis tersebut dalam konteks hubungan sosial mereka. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pesan-pesan bullying berbasis ras dimaknai sebagai pesan dengan stereotip yang mendalam. Tidak hanya itu, remaja birasial sebagai korban juga menginterpretasikan pesan bullying berbasis ras sebagai tindakan untuk mengasingkan seseorang dan membentuk keraguan akan nilai diri yang menyebabkan penurunan konsep diri dan munculnya masalah kepercayaan. Selain itu, proses komunikasi dengan keluarga, teman, atau pihak sekolah berperan penting dalam upaya korban untuk mencari dukungan dan pelepasan emosional.

Kesimpulannya, temuan tersebut menunjukkan bahwa remaja birasial menganggap pesan-pesan intimidasi berbasis ras berakar dalam stereotip ras dan memandang tindakan-tindakan ini sebagai bentuk pengucilan sosial yang menumbuhkan keraguan diri. Penindasan berbasis ras tidak hanya memengaruhi perkembangan psikologis remaja birasial tetapi juga membentuk pemahaman mereka tentang identitas ras mereka. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan pada bagaimana remaja birasial memahami pengalaman yang mereka hadapi untuk membentuk mekanisme penanggulangan.

Kata Kunci: *bullying berbasis ras, remaja biracial, konsep diri, pesan rasis, dukungan sosial*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an archipelago nation full of remarkable diversity encompassing over 300 ethnic groups. Amidst the influence of globalization and the country's involvement in the World Trade Organization, foreign expatriates are expected to work in Indonesia. The data from the Ministry of Manpower (Kemnaker) shows around 168.000 foreign workers (TKA) in Indonesia throughout

2023. The number increased by 50.66% compared to 2022 which was 111.000 people. Recent study shows how expatriates employed in Indonesia are married to Indonesian citizens where the aspect of demographic shifts and globalization have contributed in the shaping of family forms that results in the growing numbers of mixed families. Mixed families themselves consist of intermarriage couples that involve spouses of different nationalities, race, ethnicity, religions, and language which results in having biracial children (Wright, 2017).

Herring (1995) defined biracial adolescents as mixed-race individuals whose parents came from two distinct racial backgrounds in which they face unique experiences from their environment as they reconcile their dual heritage and societal perceptions of them. Biracial adolescent represents a reflection of diverse cultures, values, and traditions. With this in mind, the ability of biracial adolescents in communicating can be complex emphasizing on different communication skills, psychological adjustment, behavioural flexibility, and cultural awareness. Biracial adolescents can also be referred as those who born to parents who identify with different racial groups where they incorporate both racial identities into their self-concept (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002).

Social interactions become important for biracial adolescents where they can explore ways to process dealing with differences, discovering similarities, and adapting to stereotypes and prejudice within their environment.

The American Academy of Children and Adolescent Psychiatry described two common dynamics biracial adolescents have. According to them, the majority of biracial adolescents perceive multiple races and cultures as enriching and rewarding that can contributes to a healthy adjustment. Meanwhile, there are some biracial children who may feel uncomfortable and uncertain with

themselves due to their diverse heritages. These two conditions can occur depending on the experiences of biracial individuals face in their environment. As mentioned before, biracial adolescents go through phases of exploration on how to define and identify themselves based on their social interactions with others who may challenge their identity or pressure them to 'choose' one race over the other (Herman, 2004).

The complexity and abstractness nature of biracial adolescent in communicating with their surroundings can be seen as an interesting aspect of their sense of self. In the context of social interactions, biracial adolescent may often have the need to assert their identity by explaining or defending their duality (Khanna, 2011). The perspective of social interactions show how individuals in and out groups can be significant for biracial adolescent to communicate their diversity as people in their environment can either validate or invalidate them which may affect their overall sense of belonging

(Renn, 2004). Adolescent may perceive their diversity as highly salient if they grow up in an environment where supportive friendships with peers who understand and accept them as a whole can reinforce a positive self-concept (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). Being accepted by peer groups can positively boost their self-esteem and identity formation (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996).

There are conditions where biracial adolescent are ashamed of who they are because they are biracial. Some also choose to avoid learning and acknowledging their biracial self, growing up because they're in an environment where peers are not accepting towards their diverse cultural backgrounds. Facing negative peer interactions like bullying or microaggressions in school may also negatively impact children's self-esteem in communicating their identity as they become afraid to be who they truly are. Bullying usually starts within a particular environment we're closely related with like

school, home, or even workplace. Bullying can be defined as an act of aggression that focusing in causing distress to someone mentally and physically. The act of bullying can be in a form of verbal and nonverbal aggressive behaviours like physically hitting or pushing a person, name-calling, threatening someone, spreading rumours, excluding someone due to their race, cyberbullying, and many more (Smith, 1994). The psychological impact of bullying can impact the victims in a bad way where they often suffer from anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation.

Aggressive behaviour such as bullying can be found in our everyday life where it can happen to anyone like our friends, partner, colleagues, and many more. A report from UNESCO in 2019 showed that bullying, including racial and ethnic bullying, have an impact towards 246 million children and adolescents worldwide every year. The report highlighted how students with minority racial and ethnic backgrounds were at higher risk in getting bullied. In United States, The National Center for Education Statistics showed around 25% students of age 12-18 years old experienced bullying and among these, 23% were bullied because of their diverse race, ethnicity, and national origins. In addition, Public Health Agency of Canada reported around 15% of students from visible minority groups especially those of African Asian, and Indigenous descent experienced bullying in 2018. Lastly, a 2018 survey by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) revealed that 84% of students reported having witnessed bullying that linked to racial or ethnic differences which targeting students from minority groups like Papuans or students with Chinese descent.

The nature of bullying itself is destructing to both the bully and the victim of the bullying but more on the victims themselves. Bullying have a huge impact on the well-being and social adjustment of the victims where they will experience

ongoing trauma. Like mentioned before, victims of bullying can experience the feeling of distress, anxiety, lack of self-confidence and many more. From these exact reasons, and in the context of this research, the researcher want to observe and discuss the interaction and meaning of communication exist in such negative setting where meaning and action have an connection and can effect one another. The interaction and meaning of the communication that is created will certainly be different depending on how the victims of bullying which are biracial adolescents respond to the racial based bullying messages they receive.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to understand the process of interpreting messages from the phenomenon of racial-based bullying, both verbally and nonverbally, experienced by biracial adolescents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpretive Paradigm

Guba (2013) described a paradigm as a set of beliefs that guide how we understand the world. This research uses an interpretive paradigm, which focuses on how people make sense of their experiences. It involves reflecting on how individuals see the world and the actions they take based on those views. The interpretive paradigm emphasizes how culture and history shape the way people understand their social world (Crotty, 1998). It highlights the importance of meaning-making and explores the complexity of human experiences (Pfeifer, 2000).

One goal of interpretive research is to understand and describe how people communicate and behave within their social environment. This approach is subjective, as it focuses on how individuals interpret and give meaning to their reality. The interpretive paradigm values how

people create meaning in their daily lives. It is useful for understanding how biracial adolescents experience and cope with racial bullying while expressing their identities.

Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory

Biracial adolescent oftentimes deals with the phenomenon of microaggressions in a social setting. Facing negative situations may be hard for biracial adolescent to cope with. Pearce and Cronen developed the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory to explore how social interactions coordinate complex meanings and actions comprehensively (from Littlejohn, 2011: 124). In encountering communication situation, individuals tend to assign meaning to the situation, the behaviours, and messages of others on hand. Next, individuals then decide what kind of action to take in order to respond within the situation.

To simplify, CMM works to understand the process of meaning and action in order to inform every communication situation to see how individuals coordinate actions with others based on the process of interactions. Meanings and actions are closely related to each other in the concept of CMM because meanings may have an effect on action vice versa. The relationship between meanings and actions is shaped by a series of contexts, serving as reference points that influence both meaning and action. Actions are interpreted within various contexts, such as the individual self, relationships, and the broader cultural environment.

The theory of coordinated management of meaning mainly focuses on how contexts frame interactions, assert meanings, and develop actions which are shaped by rules. Pearce and Cronen identified two kinds of rules (from Littlejohn, 2011: 125), namely:

- **Constitutive Rules**: This rule can also be called as the rules of meaning where communication is used to interpret or understand a particular situation or messages.

Constitutive rule then counts which messages or events is constituted by the rules of meaning,

- **Regulative Rules**: This is essentially the rules of action where it determines how individuals respond or behave to a certain message or event. The context of a particular action shapes the rules that determine what is logical or appropriate in a given situation.

Pearce & Cronen's LUUUUTT Model of Storytelling

To frame experience, the use of stories are essential to achieve coherence in a particular situation that works interdependently in creating contexts, establish meanings, and define actions. Through storytelling, both the logic of meaning and action is codified, allowing individuals to explore their own and others' social worlds. Pearce and Cronen describe communication as a two-sided process involving 'stories told' and 'stories lived.'

'Stories told' refer to the narratives we use to make sense of the world and our place in it, a process known as coherence. Coherence is the act of managing and making meaning through storytelling. On the other hand, 'stories lived' refer to the patterns of interaction we engage in as we strive to align our lives with others, coordinating our actions together. The stories we tell or hear are often more complex than they appear. To emphasize the practical application of CMM theory, the LUUUUTT model is used as an analytical tool, helping listeners explore alternative or additional interpretations. This model focuses on the tension between the stories we live and the stories we tell.

Symbolic Interactionism

Communication can be highly nuanced depending on the situation on hand. In the context of this study, communication can be seen in the way biracial adolescents interpret messages from the phenomenon of racial-based

bullying they experience in. The understanding of meaning-making arises from how individuals interpret the meanings for the objects, actions, and people around them through their symbolic interaction such as observing and communicating with others. According to George Herbert Mead, people's thoughts, sense of self, and the communities they belong to are shaped through communication and symbolic interaction. This theory highlights the continuous use of language and gestures, expecting responses from others. Symbolic Interactionism is based on three fundamental principles that contribute to the development of an individual's identity and their socialization within society namely the principle of meaning, language, and thinking. Emphasizing on the principle of meaning, symbolic interaction can be used to explore how biracial adolescents give meaning to the bullying messages they receive and interpret said messages to further shape their self-concept. This dynamics can also be seen as the communicative exchanges between the bullies and the victims.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an interpretative phenomenological method of research. According to Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research is used to locate the observer in the world in a situated activity. It employs a set of interpretive perspectives and practical methods to make sense of the world by interpreting phenomena based on the meanings individuals assign to them (from Sarantakos, 2013: 37). Qualitative research studies things in their natural environments to portray the constructed realities between research subjects and their interactions with others. The core idea of interpretive phenomenological research is to describe the shared meanings multiple individuals attribute to their lived experiences of a particular concept or phenomenon.

The data for this research is obtained through in depth interview with four research subjects of biracial adolescent by the age of 12-19 years old who have and currently experiencing racial-based bullying. The data then analysed by using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis method that focuses on patterns in participants' experiences, the meanings behind those experiences, and interpreting them within social and theoretical contexts (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Interpretation of Racial-Based Bullying Messages as Deeply Ingrained with Racial Stereotypes

Intercultural communication can be tricky at times, especially with having two or more cultural backgrounds. In the case of this research, it is shown that biracial adolescents have to deal with challenges in being mixed race to communicate their differences in a variety of settings, particularly in school. The most common challenge for biracial adolescent is having to experience racial-based bullying. Racial-based bullying can be described as a behavior that targeted individuals based on their race and ethnic identity. A very significant commonality evident in the descriptions from the four informants in describing the racial-based bullying messages they received is centered towards the victims' physical appearance with deeply ingrained racial stereotypes.

The racial-based bullying was mostly done by their classmates or the students in their school in general. The racial-based bullying messages were heavily targeted towards the informant physical appearance that is deeply ingrained by the bullies' stereotypical behaviors. Biracial adolescents are constantly navigating the meaning of racialized bullying messages that target their physical appearance. Communication is layered and involves both the content of the messages and how those messages are coordinated in social

contexts. For victims, racial bullying is not just a surface-level interaction—it carries historical, social, and cultural meanings. Biracial adolescents must navigate how to respond to bullying by coordinating their own interpretation of the messages with the broader societal meanings attached to race and appearance. The meaning of racial-based bullying messages is constructed through social interactions, as racial stereotypes get reinforced in everyday experiences. The repeated bullying messages convey deeply ingrained stereotypes, suggesting that specific racial features are undesirable. Biracial adolescents interpret these messages through their interactions with others, reinforcing feelings of marginalization or inferiority.

The four informants in this research which consist of biracial adolescents faced significant challenges in interpreting the racial-based bullying messages they received that focusing on their physical appearance which based on the long-standing racial stereotypes and the reflection of the minimal understanding of diversity and inclusivity.

As a result, biracial adolescents often feel isolated and face pressure to assimilate in order to fit in with their social environment. Through this analysis, it is highlighted that the education and awareness about racial diversity becomes important in order to develop a more inclusive and open-minded society for biracial adolescents to belong without having to face racial-based bullying especially centered in their physical appearance.

The Victims' Understanding on Racial-Based Bullying Behaviours as Acts of Alienation and the Construction of Self-Doubt and Negative Self-Concept of their Physical Appearance

The findings of the study revealed that the victims of racial-based bullying experienced negative impacts in the form of insecurity and self-consciousness.

Additionally, racial-based bullying contributed in the development of trust issues towards the social environment. The similarity of negative impacts that caused the formation of insecurity and self-consciousness is found. The description also depicts how self-doubt is constructed from the mean commentary made towards the victims. The victims experienced racial-based bullying messages targeted at their physical appearance which impacted badly towards their self-concept where they also felt strong pressure from their respective environment that judged them as different from them the majority of the people, both in terms of physical appearance and their racial identity. The nature of the hostility and inferiority experienced by biracial adolescents poorly effected their sense of self where they felt that they were constantly in the negative spotlight. Victims also felt a sense of trust issue towards their environment which made it difficult for them to navigate the dynamics of friendship. The trust issues that developed stemmed from a sense of betrayal or disappointment towards the victims' peers who did not provide them the support they needed. The difficulty in trusting others lead the victims to withdraw from social situations or avoid meaningful interactions with others which hinders the development of a stable, emotionally healthy relationships, further intensifying feelings of isolation and alienation.

Biracial adolescents who experience racial bullying are compelled to interpret the bullying messages directed at them. During this process, they perceive insults or taunts about their physical appearance as a personal attack on their identity. The focus on physical appearance as a central aspect of racial bullying fosters a stigma that victims internalize, leading them to question their self-worth based on their physical traits. The meanings formed through these negative messages contribute to trust issues, causing victims to lose faith in their social surroundings.

Over time, this distrust extends, becoming more widespread. Racial bullying experiences further solidify these trust issues, making it hard for victims to trust others, even those who might offer support. This erosion of trust hinders their ability to build healthy relationships moving forward. Victims may also begin to question the intentions of their peers, family, or even teachers. This constant sense of vigilance against being hurt again only intensifies their struggle to form meaningful connections.

Bullying isn't just about the words used but also about the underlying meaning behind them. When victims are mocked for their physical features, it communicates the idea that certain traits are not accepted by societal norms. This leads victims to believe their appearance is inappropriate or inadequate. Through repeated social interactions, the negative meanings assigned to their physical appearance become embedded in their self-identity. Victims internalize these negative

perceptions formed through social interactions, which significantly impacts their self-concept, especially in relation to their appearance. Consequently, biracial youth who face racial bullying develop a negative self-image, believing that their physical appearance is the root of their social challenges.

Communication Process as a Medium to Seek Support and Emotional Release in Establishing Coping Mechanism

The findings of this study indicate that the communication process between the victims of racial-based bullying with their families, friends, or school plays an important role in dealing with their experiences. The communication process is used as a tool to cope with the impact of the racial-based bullying the victims experienced where they view it as a means to release emotions, achieve catharsis, and seek support. Additionally, the victims tell their story to share their experience to other people.

The study found how the communication process is a crucial method that can be used for discussions with family and friends to express feelings that had been suppressed due to the racial-based bullying. Sharing their experiences can be seen as a way to manage the emotional pain and stress caused by the bullying. Open communication enabled them to openly discuss their feelings, which alleviated their emotional burden and lessened their distress. By talking about their experiences, they were able to process their emotions, feel heard, and receive acknowledgment for their struggles. This also helped prevent the buildup of negative emotions that could potentially lead to further psychological issues. Through discussions with close individuals, like family or friends, they look for understanding and assistance in managing the challenges they encounter. Communication serves as a space to receive advice, emotional backing, and new perspectives they may not have previously considered.

Engaging in communication with friends or family allows them to reframe their bullying experiences, which helps alleviate the psychological burden and gradually rebuilds their trust in others. Communication allows victims to coordinate meaning with their listeners, whether family, friends, or school officials. Through this process, victims not only share their emotional distress but also receive empathy, advice, and support that help them construct a narrative to make sense of the bullying experience. This coordination of meaning between the victim and their support system becomes essential in reshaping their emotional response and finding strategies to cope with ongoing bullying.

In the context of biracial adolescents who experience racial bullying, communication plays a crucial role in helping them understand and cope with the emotional impact. Through conversations with family, friends, or school authorities, victims use language and symbols to

express their experiences and interpret the emotional responses of others. When victims share their bullying experiences, the support and validation they receive allow them to reframe the negative messages they have internalized. This communication helps victims redefine their experiences, transforming bullying from a source of isolation into an opportunity for emotional release, self-reflection, and validation from their social network. . By sharing their stories, victims of racial bullying seek emotional release and support. The act of storytelling helps victims process their lived experiences, articulate their emotional struggles, and receive external perspectives that facilitate coping.

CONCLUSION

The research shows how receiving and interpreting racial-based bullying messages involves a process of coordinating the understanding of these initial harmful messages. The perpetrators of such bullying are usually classmates or other children at school. The research findings indicate that the interpretation of racial-based bullying messages among victims reveals a significant connection to deeply ingrained racial stereotypes within society. Victims perceive these bullying messages not merely as isolated acts of aggression but as reflections of broader societal attitudes that perpetuate racial biases and discrimination.

Victims of racial-based bullying interpret these messages as a reflection of wider racial biases. They see the bullying as an act of alienation, emphasizing the need for societal change to combat harmful stereotypes. These messages, often focused on the victim's appearance, are perceived as efforts to damage self-esteem, leading to psychological harm. Victims internalize these negative messages, resulting in lower self-worth and identity struggles.

Communication in this context is more than just sharing information; it is about creating meaning through social

interactions. Victims of racial-based bullying use communication to make sense of their experiences, shaping their self-image and understanding of their social environment. By discussing their experiences with trusted individuals, they can articulate their feelings, seek validation, and develop coping strategies. The study shows that how victims interpret their experiences is influenced by the reactions of their social circles—family, friends, and peers. These interactions provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and play a crucial role in their emotional well-being and ability to cope with the bullying.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research examines how biracial adolescents interpret racially based bullying messages. For future studies, several recommendations are proposed. First, future research should include biracial adolescents from more diverse cultural and racial backgrounds to gain a broader understanding of different bullying experiences. It would also be valuable to explore how factors like socioeconomic status, religion, and gender influence how biracial victims perceive bullying. Second, future studies could focus on the long-term psychological and social effects of racial bullying, particularly its impact on self-identity in adulthood. Using different research methods, such as quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, could help gather more comprehensive data and improve validation. Finally, future research could examine effective interventions, such as the roles of teachers, counselors, and educational programs, in helping victims manage and recover from the effects of bullying.

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