


10-2020

Xenophobia and Racism against Asian Americans During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mental Health Implications

Hsiu-Lan Cheng
hcheng13@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jips>

 Part of the [Clinical Psychology Commons](#), [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Multicultural Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Citation Information

Cheng, Hsiu-Lan (2020) "Xenophobia and Racism against Asian Americans During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Mental Health Implications," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jips/vol3/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives and Scholarship by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Anti-Asian sentiments have spiked since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council received over 18,00 reports of COVID-19 related discrimination from Asian American individuals across the U.S. in an 8-week period (Borja et al., 2020). Examples include Asian Americans being physically assaulted, verbally harassed, coughed on, kicked out of shops and restaurants, discriminated at jobs, and subject to property vandalism (Cheung et al., 2020). Xenophobic insults demand Asian Americans to “go back to [their] country,” which reflects ostracization of Asian Americans as foreigners (i.e., the perpetual foreigner stereotype) despite their citizenship and ancestry in the U.S. (Gover et al., 2020; Tessler et al., 2020). The politicization of COVID-19 (e.g., “Chinese virus”) by the Trump administration (Rogers et al., 2020) further instigates anti-Asian racist incidents (Borja et al., 2020).

Although the measured psychological impact of COVID-19 anti-Asian xenophobia and racism is presently unknown, it poses an additional stressor that could seriously compromise Asian Americans’ psychological well-being on top of the already formidable pandemic itself (Misra et al., 2020). Previous research on massive trauma and disease outbreaks indicates an increased likelihood of mental health concerns (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse) and subclinical stress responses (e.g., anger, fear, sleep issues) that can last for months or years (Goldmann & Galea, 2014; Jeong et al., 2016). For Asian Americans, vulnerability to these mental health concerns is compounded not only by existing mental health access disparities (e.g., White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, 2014), but also by COVID-19 anti-Asian racism. The alienation resulting from pandemic politicization and scapegoating (e.g., propaganda asking people to avoid Asian-owned businesses; Hay & Caspani, 2020) can have severe and long-lasting negative impacts (Z. Chen et al., 2008) and may result in heightened suicidal thoughts and ideation (Z. Chen et al., 2020).

Further, Asian Americans may experience race-related traumatic stress (Carter, 2007) from being cast as the “enemy” and cause of the national health crisis. They are also taxed with witnessing and experiencing anti-Asian verbal and physical assaults (Ahrens, 2020) and feeling unwelcome or endangered in their own homeland (i.e., America)—a psychological state that predisposes them to developing acute stress or traumatic symptoms like hypervigilance, anxiety, persistent fear, anger, guilt, or shame. A helpful parallel to understanding the cumulative consequences of COVID-19 anti-Asian xenophobia and hostility is seen in research on Asian American Vietnam War veterans, who encountered racial ostracization due to their phenotypic resemblance to Vietnamese opponents. These experiences predicted symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder and general psychiatric concerns above and beyond war exposure and military rank (Loo et al., 2001).

COVID-19 anti-Asian xenophobia and racism will negatively contribute to Asian Americans’ mental health and sense of self and identity, particularly among youth and young adults. For example, there is evidence indicating that higher levels of racism experiences (e.g., discrimination) are associated with lower levels of self-esteem, especially for youth (Benner et al., 2018; Schmitt et al., 2014; Priest et al., 2013). Moreover, the xenophobic ostracization of Asian Americans can heighten Asian Americans’ self-consciousness, discontent, or even shame, about their body image and phenotypic features. Pertinent studies found greater levels of racism experiences (e.g., discrimination, racial teasing, perpetual foreigner stereotyping) were associated with increased body image concerns (e.g., body dissatisfaction, body image scrutiny, body shame) in Asian American young adults (Cheng, 2014; Cheng et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2017; Reddy & Crowther, 2007), even after adjustment for controls (e.g., body mass index, self-esteem).

Mental health professionals will need to understand COVID-19 anti-Asian xenophobia and racism so that they discern rather than dismiss the added layer of racial stress that their Asian American clients might be dealing with. Educators are recommended to affirm their Asian American students' personal worth and identity, particularly because incidents of COVID-19 racial bullying of Asian American youth have been reported (e.g., Capatedis, 2020). Finally, Asian American parents are advised to familiarize themselves with Asian American history and systemic racism, and also to help their children understand and situate COVID-19 anti-Asian sentiments within the broader context of structural racial injustice. Parenting practices should also include coaching Asian American youth on coping with COVID-19 racial bias and discrimination so that the youth can thrive during and beyond the pandemic.

References

- Ahrens, R. P. (2020). COVID-19 impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander mental and physical health. <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/sites/democrats.waysandmeans.house.gov/files/documents/OCA%20Testimony.pdf>
- Benner, A. D., Wang, Y., Shen, Y., Boyle, A. E., Polk, R., & Cheng, Y.-P. (2018). Racial/ethnic discrimination and well-being during adolescence: A meta-analytic review. *American Psychologist*, 73(7), 855–883. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000204>
- Borja, M., Jeung, R., Yello Horse, A., Gibon, J., Gowing, S., Lin, N., Navins, A., & Power, E. (2020, June 17). *Anti-Chinese rhetoric tied to racism against Asian Americans: Stop AAPI hate report*. <http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-China Rhetoric Report 6 17 20.pdf>
- Cheung, H., Feng, Z. & Deng, B. (2020, May 27). *Coronavirus: What attacks on Asian reveal about American identity*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52714804>
- Gover, A. R., Harper, S. B., & Langton, L. (2020). Anti-Asian hate crime during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the reproduction of inequality. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45(4), 647-667. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09545-1>
- Capatedis, C. (2020). *Bullies attack Asian American teen at school, accusing him of having coronavirus*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-bullies-attack-asian-teen-los-angeles-accusing-him-of-having-coronavirus/>
- Carter, R. T. (2007). Racism and psychological and emotional injury: Recognizing and assessing race-based traumatic stress. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(1), 13–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006292033>
- Chemtob, C. M. (2001). Measuring exposure to racism: Development and validation of a Race-Related Stressor Scale (RRSS) for Asian American Vietnam veterans. *Psychological Assessment*, 13(4), 503–520. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.13.4.503>

- Chen, Z., Poon, K.-T., DeWall, C. N., & Jiang, T. (2020). Life lacks meaning without acceptance: Ostracism triggers suicidal thoughts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000238>
- Chen, Z., Williams, K. D., Fitness, J., & Newton, N. C. (2008). When hurt will not heal: Exploring the capacity to relive social and physical pain. *Psychological Science*, 19(8), 789-795. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02158.x>
- Cheng, H.-L. (2014). Disordered eating among Asian/Asian American women: Racial and cultural factors as correlates. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 42(6), 821-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000014535472>
- Cheng, H.-L., McDermott, R. C., Wong, Y. J., & La, S. (2016). Drive for muscularity in Asian American men: Sociocultural and racial/ethnic factors as correlates. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 17(3), 215-227. <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000019>
- Cheng, H.-L., Tran, A. G., Miyake, E. R., & Kim, H. Y. (2017). Disordered eating among Asian American college women: A racially expanded model of objectification theory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(2), 179-191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000195>
- Goldmann, E., & Galea, S. (2014). Mental health consequences of disasters. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35(1), 169-183. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182435>
- Hay, A., & Caspani, M. (2020, February 13). *Fake flyers and face-mask fear: California fights coronavirus discrimination*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-usa-discrimination/fake-flyers-and-face-mask-fear-california-fights-coronavirus-discrimination-idUSKBN208063>
- Jeong, H., Yim, H. W., Song, Y.-J., Ki, M., Min, J.-A., Cho, J., & Chae, J.-H. (2016). Mental health status of people isolated due to Middle East Respiratory Syndrome. *Epidemiology and Health*, 38, e2016048. <https://doi.org/10.4178/epih.e2016048>
- Leary, M. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). *The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory*. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 32 (p. 1-62). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(00\)80003-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(00)80003-9)
- Loo, C. M., Fairbank, J. A., Scurfield, R. M., Ruch, L. O., King, D. W., Adams, L. J., & Misra, S., Le, P. D., Goldmann, E., & Yang, L. H. (2020). Psychological impact of anti-Asian stigma due to the COVID-19 pandemic: A call for research, practice, and policy responses. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(5), 461-464. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000821>
- Priest, N., Paradies, Y., Trenerry, B., Truong, M., Karlsen, S., & Kelly, Y. (2013). A systematic review of studies examining the relationship between reported racism and health and wellbeing for children and young people. *Social Science & Medicine*, 95, 115-127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.11.031>
- Reddy, S. D., & Crowther, J. H. (2007). Teasing, acculturation, and cultural conflict: Psychosocial correlates of body image and eating attitudes among South Asian women. *Cultural*

Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 13(1), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.13.1.45>

Rogers, K., Jakes, L., & Swanson, A (2020, March 18). Trump defends using ‘Chinese virus’ label, ignoring growing criticism. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.

Schmitt, M.T., Branscombe, N.R., Postmes, T., & Garcia, A. (2014). The consequences of perceived discrimination for psychological well-being: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(4), 921-948. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035754>

Tessler, H., Choi, M., & Kao, G. (2020). The anxiety of being asian american: Hate crimes and negative biases during the covid-19 pandemic. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 45, 636–646. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-020-09541-5>

White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. (2014). *Building the American mosaic: Report from the President’s advisory commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*. U.S. Department of Education. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/american-mosaic_digital_lores.pdf