

Students report racism, xenophobia in wake of coronavirus concerns

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Body

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In the days following the identification of a coronavirus case in Maricopa County, ASU students are reporting incidents of racism and xenophobia toward Asian students on campus.

Aretha Deng, a junior supply chain management and business data analytics double major, experienced microaggressions while studying at the Business Administration building.

Deng asked a group of students on one side of a long table if they would mind her sitting on the other side. They nodded, but as soon as she sat down she noticed the group became tense and shortly after she arrived, the group packed up and left.

"I was like, 'Wow, this actually still happens to this day,' " Deng said.

Racist reactions to disease outbreaks are not new. Researchers at Lehigh University found that the media coverage during the SARS outbreak from 2002-04 led to Asian communities being ostracized in countries like Canada.

In 2009, due to a swine flu outbreak, racially insensitive and anti-immigrant comments directed toward Mexican people were commonly expressed from certain media outlets.

"Historically, socially disadvantaged groups have fared the worst of any population during influenza pandemics," according to a 2012 analysis from the American Public Health Association. "They will most likely continue to do so; this certainly held true for the 2009 influenza A (H1N1) pandemic. Although that pandemic was relatively mild, its disparate impact on certain populations raises significant ethical concerns."

A few years later, The Washington Post reported in 2014 that the fear surrounding the Ebola virus stigmatized West African immigrants in Washington, D.C.

"In both the United States and Europe, Ebola is increasing racial profiling and reviving imagery of the 'Dark Continent,'" Robin Wright wrote in an opinion column for CNN. "And as panic deepens, the danger is that racism - on planes and public transportation, in lines, on streets, in glances - deepens further, too."

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Tevinh Nguyen, a senior double majoring in Asian Pacific American studies and political science, is president of the Asian/Pacific American Students' Coalition and said he noticed similarities between reactions to the severe acute respiratory syndrome and the novel coronavirus.

"It's kind of ironic that the coronavirus is a bit similar to SARS because the same racist rhetoric is being propagated again," Nguyen said, adding that students have reported experiencing passive racism to him in the days since the virus came to Arizona.

"We've heard people have been looking at Asian-appearing people differently," Nguyen said, citing incidents like students telling him that people have said they don't want to sit near them because they appear Asian.

"There seems to be no real reason other than it plays into the pre-existing archetypes of Asians always being foreigners, exotic, different, and that somehow makes it inherently more dirty," Nguyen said.

Nguyen said there is a stereotype that certain aspects of Asian cultures are unsanitary. He said since the novel coronavirus started to spread in China, people's assumptions about Asian culture are incorporated into their attitudes about the virus.

He also said he thinks some people are making casual, unintentionally racist jokes while others who have internalized prejudice are now speaking about it more openly.

"I would say people have those racial beliefs pre-existing, this is just something that gives them justification and kind of triggers it," Nguyen said.

the corona virus doesn't give you an excuse to be racist towards asians Imfaoooo - Glenn ?? (@maaba_g) January 28, 2020

Jeweleana Murphy, a sophomore social work major, said she has seen people post on Snapchat making derogatory statements about students who they assume are Asian.

"I've actually seen actual Snapchats of people covering their faces with their shirts and saying 'ew Asians are around' or there's been more people taking pictures saying, 'I bet they're storing the coronavirus,'" Murphy said.

Moderators of the ASU subreddit page stated that they have had to remove several racist posts from the site, writing that, "Casual racism is not acceptable and blatant racism (toward) Chinese students and really any race for that matter will result in an instant ban."

Racist posts will result in an instant ban. from r/ASU

Murphy said fear is a common reaction and some students' attitudes are based on misconceptions about the virus, but the comments are racist regardless of their intent.

There is an association between Asian people and masks, Nguyen said, because masks are commonly worn in some parts of Asia to protect from poor air quality.

Deng said insensitive comments and jokes about masks subtly single out international students from Asia.

"It's just ostracizing and targeting a specific demographic of people even if they're not from that region," Deng said.

Deng said she's been deeply affected by the fallout of the coronavirus worldwide since the targeting of Chinese people is not specific to ASU.

"I am Chinese American, but I was born in New Jersey and I don't have any family members that live in Wuhan, but it still pains me to see the members of my community just be so targeted essentially," Deng said.

Nguyen said the targeting on campus is based on people's assumptions about others' appearances.

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"How would you know what race or ethnicity someone is or where they've been?," Nguyen said.

Deng said because ASU is such a diverse place, people generally see international students as "foreign," and this makes them easy to target.

"Because it's China and because of physical characteristics and stuff people tend to point international students out more and they passive aggressively avoid them and target them in a way," Deng said.

Nguyen encouraged students who experience incidents of racism or are generally feeling tense because of the campus climate to reach out to the Asian/Pacific American Students' Coalition.

"The coalition is always here for the community, we always stand against orientalism, racism, xenophobia, and just kind of any of those social oppressions," Nguyen said. "We're always here for students to be listened to and especially if they want to work anything out with the University we're the liaisons for that."

The University did not respond to request for comment at the time of publication.

Deng said students need to be mindful about the impact they're having on others when they make assumptions about large populations.

"I think that can create a lot of unnecessary tension because you're not willing to have these conversations," Deng said. "Just don't make assumptions, and obviously look out for yourself but don't do that in a way that harms other people."

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