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LOOKING FORWARD:
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STATEMENT ON ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

BY MADISON
THANTU

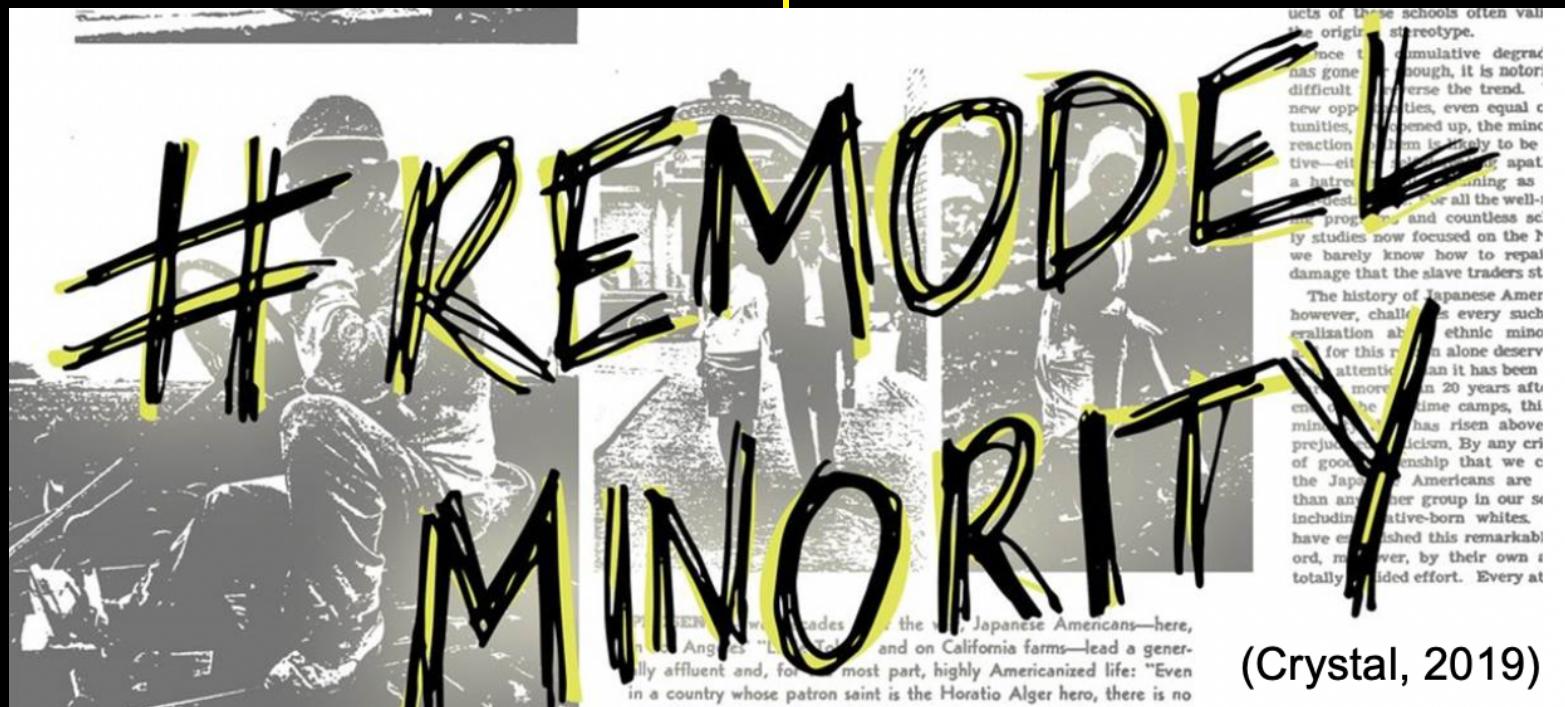
The hateful acts and beliefs that have precipitated from the COVID-19 outbreak have wreaked havoc on Asian American communities both nationally and globally. Based on the scientific literature linking stress, racism, and biology, it is likely that the pandemic will have socio-biological consequences that will endure long after the virus has been contained. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed deep-seated prejudices that have been previously ignored and normalized in the Asian American narrative. However, it is also opening up a space for critical dialogue, in which the country can challenge this sinister, covert racism, and create an accurate account of what it means to be Asian in America.

SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTING THE ASIAN AMERICAN "RACE"

While the social constructionist approach allows us to conceptualize race as being produced by a myriad of social interactions and institutions, scientific research has shown that race and racial discrimination have tangible, biological consequences. Despite a new breadth of research focusing on the physical ways in which the construct of race manifests itself, academics continue to define racial issues in binary terms, reducing these issues to a black and white dichotomy that neglects the narratives and experiences of other marginalized groups in the United States. More recent scholarly work has begun to recognize the prejudice and discrimination faced by Hispanic Americans in addition to African Americans. Notable, however, is that Asian Americans are systematically absent from the literature on racial issues. The Model Minority myth is responsible for this systematic exclusion—American society fallaciously assumes that, because Asian Americans have achieved success, as defined by Capitalist criteria and the fictitious American Dream, this minority group is not subjected to racial prejudice.

Alongside the misnomer of model minority is the assumption that racism against Asian Americans does not exist in American society. How can an ethnic minority that is quantitatively successful be discriminated against? This line of logic allows society to exclude Asian Americans from the discourse on racial issues. Consequently, the previously overt and intentional manifestations of racism have morphed into contemporary, subtle forms (Sue et al., 2007). While society at large condemns the former, it unabatingly denies the fundamental racism that underlies contemporary microaggressions and xenophobic sentiments. Only now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, are these implicit biases being brought to light, as many Americans have used the outbreak of disease to sanction overt and often violent manifestations of their deep harbored racist and xenophobic sentiments.

As anti-Asian sentiments have thrived below the American consciousness, Asian Americans have been systematically excluded from academic interests in racial issues. Therefore, the biological, psychological, and social consequences of racism in the Asian American community are poorly if at all understood. Professionals assume that the experiences of



(Crystal, 2019)

White and Black Americans can translate to all other ethnic minorities. However, the limited research that does exist has indicated that "the types of subtle racism directed at Asian Americans may be qualitatively and quantitatively different from other marginalized groups" (Sue et al. 2007). Therefore, understanding the racial hate evoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences will prove a significant challenge to both the Asian American community and the American public.

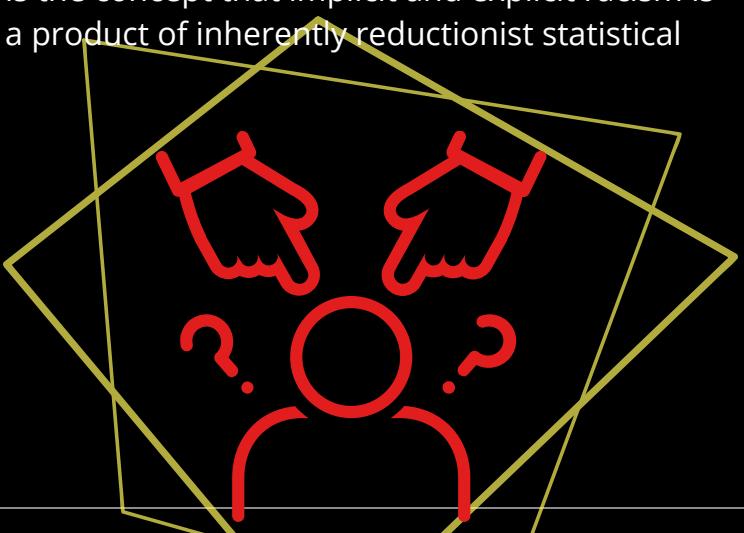
CONTAGIOUS DISEASE OUTBREAK AND RACIAL PREJUDICE

Racist and xenophobic sentiment during times of disease outbreak is not a novel phenomenon. A historical analysis of past outbreaks allows us to situate COVID-19 within the archetypal structure of pandemics (Jones, 2020). The assignment of blame to a particular group is a common theme in this prototype, and in the past century, that blame has been frequently targeted at Chinese populations. Recent research in the social psychology discipline presents a novel explanation for why racial bias, both historically and at present, accompanies the outbreak of contagious disease. O'Shea et al. (2019) use a framework of infectious disease to understand how humans' behavioral immune system contributes to Bayesian models of racist in-group/out-group dynamics. Bayesian racism is the concept that implicit and explicit racism is a product of inherently reductionist statistical

inferences that every individual makes. This study was guided by the parasite-stress hypothesis, which predicts that the salience of disease is positively correlated with prejudice against groups associated with said disease and that exposure to diseases, in general, is correlated with "negative attitudes toward dissimilar others" (O'Shea et al, 2019, p. 345). The study found that the prevalence of infectious disease served as the most robust predictor for racial prejudice, and the research team posited that this correlation between infectious disease and racial bias stems from psychologically grounded race-based in-group/out-group dynamics. Together, the parasite-stress theory and the concept of Bayesian racism can provide an interesting framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms from which increased xenophobia and racism have precipitated amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of O'Shea can be used to understand the current racist precipitations and the historical linkages between disease outbreak and xenophobia. They in no way justify these trends, but understanding the causal roots can help inform the design of remedial interventions.

RACIAL HATE: A PRECIPITATE OF COVID-19

The American public's perception and reception of the COVID-19 pandemic are guided by implicit racism and xenophobic sentiments. The virus has renewed feelings of nationalism and patriotism, and both the government and the American public have desperately sought to hold China culpable for the outbreak. A report produced by the Pew Research Center in March 2020 (Devlin et al., 2020) indicated that Americans have increasingly negative views of China amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, and a growing share perceives China's power and



"The ways in which the American public has simultaneously blamed China and reaffirmed U.S. supremacy are representative of ethnocentric values that existed long before the disease outbreak. The pandemic did not cause these racist sentiments; rather, it has simply made pre-existing prejudices visible."

influence as a threat to the U.S. Conversely, a majority of participants believe that the U.S. currently is and should be the global leader. The results of this survey highlight the feelings of xenophobia and nationalism spurred by COVID-19. The ways in which the American public has simultaneously blamed China and reaffirmed U.S. supremacy are representative of ethnocentric values that existed long before the disease outbreak. The pandemic did not cause these racist sentiments; rather, it has simply made pre-existing prejudices visible.

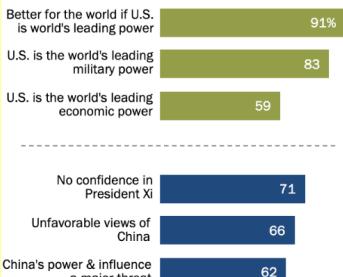
In addition to assigning culpability to "foreign" countries for the COVID-19 outbreak, the American public has also assigned blame to

Asian Americans. The blaming of Americans for the perceived misdeeds of their country of ethnic origin is absurd, yet it is something that is repeatedly observed throughout U.S. history, the most infamous case being the villanizing of Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor. However, what is currently at play amidst the COVID-19 pandemic may be even more racist (if racism can even be quantified or compared), as any member of the Asian American category, independent of their ethnic background, can be the victim of racial hate. The virus has demonstrated how the racial category of "Asian" has been constructed as a monolithic, homogenous cultural group. Membership is not determined by one's personal and ethnic identity but is rather dependent on whether others *perceive* that individual as being Asian.

A poll conducted by the New Center for Public Integrity and Ipsos (2020) examined Americans' sentiment regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Major findings from this dataset include that a majority of Americans consider the pandemic to be a natural disaster; however, despite these "natural" origins, three in ten Americans believe that China or Chinese people are responsible for the pandemic. This latter belief is observed at higher rates among republicans, retired individuals, and those with less education.

AMERICANS SEE U.S. AS A GLOBAL LEADER, HAVE MAJOR DOUBTS ABOUT CHINA

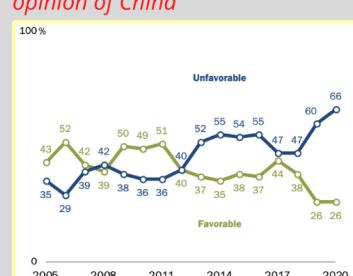
% who say...



XENOPHOBIA EXPOSED IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

NEGATIVE VIEWS OF CHINA CONTINUE TO GROW IN U.S.

% who say they have a ___ opinion of China



MOST SAY THAT THE U.S. IS AND SHOULD BE THE WORLD LEADER

% who say ___ Is the world's leading military power

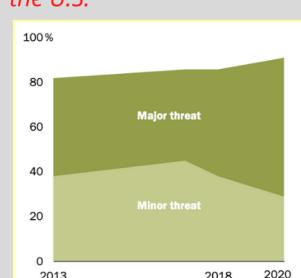


% who say It is better for the world if ___ Is the world's leading power



GROWING SHARE OF AMERICANS SEE CHINA AS A MAJOR THREAT

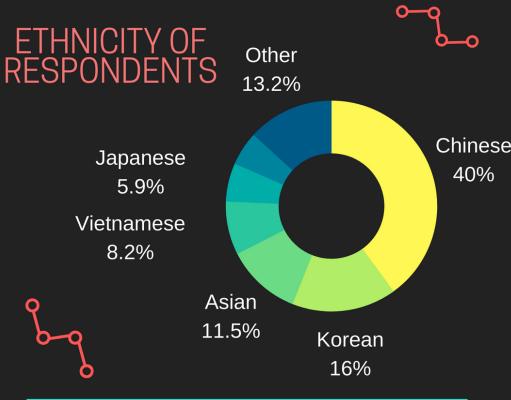
% who say China's power and influence are a ___ to the U.S.



24% of respondents said that “they would be concerned about coming in close contact with someone of Asian ancestry in public” (New Center for Public Integrity & Ipsos, 2020). Respondents are not concerned about coming into contact with a particular ethnic group (i.e., Chinese Americans specifically); rather, it is an entire “racial” group, composed by an agglomeration of East Asian ethnicities, that is subjected to these prejudicial inclinations. This racially-generalized concern emphasizes the previous point that those who believe China is at fault—a racist homogenizing assignment of blame, to begin with—are holding accountable nationally American individuals who have no ethnic ties to China. These findings evidence the anti-Asian and anti-Asian American sentiment that has precipitated from COVID-19. While increased cases of explicit racism and violence have been documented globally, this poll emphasizes the implicit racism that has become widespread and broadly normalized in American society.

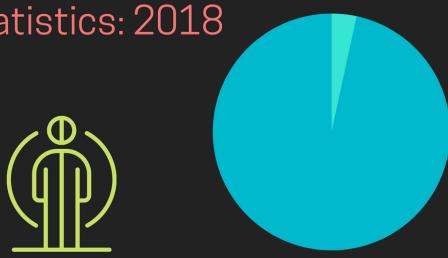
This covert racial prejudice has thrived long before the COVID-19 outbreak, garnering little public attention during its lifespan. Conversely, the pandemic’s onset has seen a dramatic increase in explicit and often violent forms of racism directed at the Asian American community. In response to this proliferation of racial hate, in March 2020, the

ASIAN AMERICAN DISCRIMINATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19



HATE CRIMES BEFORE COVID-19

FBI Hate Crime Statistics: 2018



INFORMATION PROVIDED BY: MADISON THANTU

SOURCES: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018; Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, 2020

Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON) created the online tool STOP AAPI HATE to track hate incidents targeting the Asian American community. The organization published its first monthly report on April 23rd, summarizing the 1,497 reports of coronavirus discrimination that had been submitted (Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, 2020). Currently, this report is the most comprehensive publicly available collection of data on discrimination against Asian Americans in the era of COVID-19. Nearly 70% of incidents occurred as forms of verbal harassment; 24% as shunning, and 8.5% as physical assault. Businesses were the most frequent site of discrimination, and a majority of expected reasons for discrimination were race (89.8%) and ethnicity (68%). The details of these reported incidents are striking, as is their sheer frequency. Moreover, 40% of respondents were ethnically Chinese. The remaining 60% were of Asian ethnicity from a variety of other countries, and a small fraction was white. This ethnic variation returns back to the recurring theme of ethnic generalization that guides anti-Asian prejudices throughout the country.

Over the past decade, reports of anti-Asian discrimination have been declining; however, the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a dramatic increase. According to the FBI’s most recent report on

hate crimes, of the 5,155 victims of hate crimes in 2018, 3.4% were victims of anti-Asian bias (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). These 175 incidents, which occurred in one year, are dwarfed by the incidents reported to A3PCON in its short one-month lifespan. While only a small fraction of discriminatory interactions reach the threshold to be categorized as a hate crime, the magnitude of A3PCON's findings is guaranteed to alter the FBI's 2020 hate crimes profile significantly.

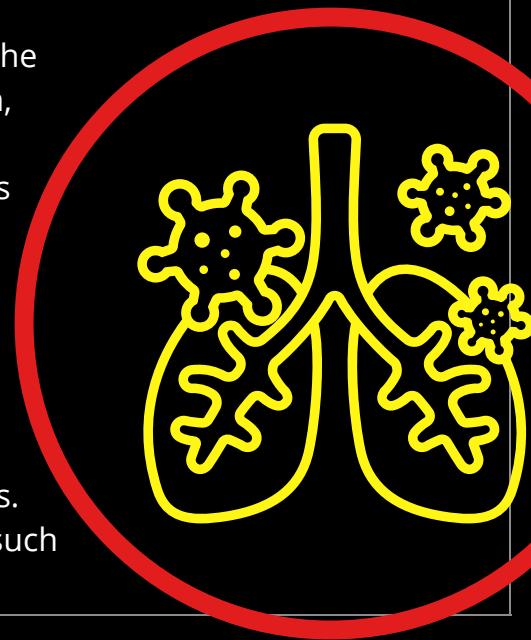
The data published by A3PCON is unsurprising—it is an aggregation of the individual incidents of anti-Asian discrimination that have spanned media coverage over the past four months. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, minimal attention was paid to anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S. Therefore, there is limited research and data on the prevalence of such attitudes, which would be valuable in understanding the racial tension produced by this pandemic. History has shown us that in times of crisis, American society is eager to hold non-white Americans responsible for the misgivings of their ethnic country. This assignment of blame is absurd, and yet it consistently occurs alongside disease outbreak. This fallacious culpability is further problematized by the homogenous categorization of Asian American, which is demonstrated by the ethnic breakdown of A3PCON's respondents. Not only are Chinese Americans being blamed for what some Americans perceive as malpractice by the Chinese government, but the vastly heterogeneous Asian American community is being victimized. The xenophobic and racist attitudes that have precipitated from the COVID-19 pandemic are having severe consequences for the safety and wellbeing of Asian Americans. This time of crisis is revealing a deep state of social fragmentation, and the sinister ramifications of normalizing anti-Asian sentiment.

THE BIOLOGICAL INTEGRATION OF STRESS

The current victimization of the Asian American community is not just an experiential process limited to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social stressors such as racist encounters and community fear have consequences that can alter human biology; **chronic stress is biologically integrated**.

Stress serves an adaptive function for an organism—it is essential in activating pathways of the immune system, which protect the body from foreign pathogens. However, when experienced long-term or chronically, stressors like anxiety and fear can have deleterious effects on the organism or individual. Scientific research has shown how the unnatural and sustained presence of stress can result in one's immune system harming itself instead of any foreign pathogen. Moreover, sustained stress can have epigenetic consequences that alter one's biological and genetic construction. Understanding how immune pathways are activated by and interact with stress is informative in two distinct ways. First, it illustrates how the social and environmental facets of life are integrated into biology. Second, it problematizes the human biological condition as a social construct.

With regard to the immune system, numerous research studies have identified specific ways in which immune functions are impaired when subjected to chronic stress. An example of such



is the function of β 2-adrenergic receptors (Bucsek, 2018). These protein molecules are activated by epinephrine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters that the sympathetic nervous system releases in response to stress. The β 2-adrenergic receptors are located on adaptive immune cells and are essential to the immune response. Chronic stimulation of these receptors enables the progression of infectious diseases, whereas insufficient activity allows autoimmune diseases to advance (Bucsek, 2018). In the context of COVID-19, where a state of chronic stress already characterizes stringent social distancing measures and government stay-at-home orders, Asian American communities face added stress from fears of and experiences with racist encounters and discriminatory rhetoric. Therefore, such biological consequences may be potentially heightened.

In addition to immune system responses, chronic stress has been shown to have epigenetic effects, where non-genetic or environmental factors influence gene expression and genetic composition. Therefore, the biological consequences of experiencing sustained stress can have indefinite effects on an individual's genetic makeup. Scientific research has observed these epigenetic effects on the genes of individuals who have experienced a natural disaster. Looking at the epigenetic marker of DNA methylation, a robust cellular mechanism to regulate gene expression, Cao-Lei (2014) examined the effect of prenatal maternal stress on the child approximately ten years later. The DNA methylation patterns on T cells, which serve a critical immune function, were examined in children whose mothers lived through the 1998 Quebec ice storm. The study found that *objective* evaluations of prenatal maternal stress were significantly correlated with offspring T cell DNA

methylation levels. Surprisingly, no significant correlation between the mother's *subjective* evaluation of stress and the child's DNA methylation was found. These results show the robust inter-generational biological consequences of stress, a finding that has important implications in the context of widespread discrimination against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the lack of significance between mothers' *subjective* stress evaluations and DNA methylation patterns in Cao-Lei's (2014) study indicate that, although many members of the Asian American community may not emphasize their racist reality, the integration of stress into the body does not require conscious recognition. Moreover, while the participants in this study experienced an ice storm, a majority of Americans similarly consider the COVID-19 pandemic to be a natural disaster (New Center for Public Integrity & Ipsos, 2020). One can imagine how sustained racial tension and community-wide fear among Asian Americans can be compounded with the stressors of a natural disaster to produce similarly significant epigenetic effects.

While the scientific literature demonstrates a multi-faceted relationship between stress and human biology, one could cite the lack of disparate health outcomes between Asian Americans and other racial groups in the U.S., which are used to emphasize the consequences of racism for other minorities, as evidence against the potential biological consequences of racism in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this absence of health disparities is by no means an indication of the absence of discrimination. Different mechanisms of coping can mediate the interaction between environmental stress and biological composition. These differences are observed beyond humans. Looking to non-human primate species lends insight into the multifaceted and heterogeneous ways that social hierarchy can influence health among

several non-human primate species (Sapolsky, 2005). There are various ways in which aspects of species' social structures, such as resource distribution, social rank stability, coping strategies, personality, and atmosphere and culture, can affect members' health. All of these components can also be used to characterize the structuring of human society (Sapolsky, 2005). Just as non-primate species are not homogenous, there is great heterozygosity across human social systems. These social mediators are similarly at play in the human species. Looking at the variety of ways in which societal structure can affect the relationship between environmental stress and physical health can aid in the understanding of why health outcome disparities in Asian American populations are not observed, despite ongoing racial discrimination.

Returning to humans, the literature indicates that both intrapersonal and interpersonal mediators of stress can either positively or negatively impact an individual's immune function (Reed & Raison, 2016). In particular, the intrapersonal processes of emotional

regulation, dispositional optimism, and psychological stress, as well as the interpersonal component of close relationships, can provide insight into racial differences in the prevalence of disease and health outcomes (Reed & Raison, 2016). It is well known that the African American population's overall health status is adversely affected by socio-environmental stressors. Fewer disparities among the Asian-American community are observed, and therefore less so investigated. A discussion on interpersonal and intrapersonal mediators can shed light on this seeming absence. Many cultures in Asia practice a culture of collectivism, placing added emphasis on group wellbeing and less focus on attributes of American culture that may cause chronic stress for others. Studies have identified such cultural differences as important factors in the methods of coping with racial discrimination. Kuo (1995) conducted a systematic exploration of the coping mechanisms used by Asian Americans to manage encounters with racial discrimination. Results demonstrated that this demographic generally uses emotion-focused strategies, which involve the "cognitive reconceptualization



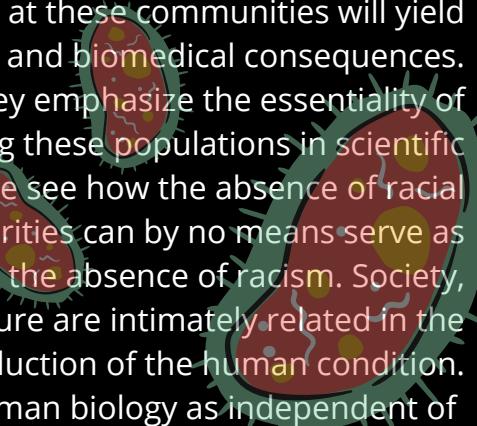
of problems, avoidance, and optimistic comparison" (Kuo, 1995, p. 125). This finding demonstrates how traditional values of Asian cultures are reflected in the coping strategies of Asians and Asian Americans. When discussing racial health disparities in the United States, research almost uniformly focuses on the African American and Latinx communities. The Asian American demographic is largely ignored, seeing that disproportionate rates of disease and health conditions are not observed. Relatively equal health outcomes may persist as a function of how social stressors are internalized and coped with by Asian-Americans, in spite of the pervasiveness of racism against this community. This coping strategy further elaborates on why and how racism against Asian-Americans has been allowed to quietly proliferate throughout American society. The COVID-19 pandemic is ultimately exposing this xenophobic sentiment: normalized implicit racism has been emboldened, sanctioning overt discrimination against Asian-American communities.

The effect of culture on the psychological integration of racial discrimination is similarly observed in the physiological integration of chronic stress. Returning to epigenetic markers, studies have demonstrated how individual variation in coping and resilience are correlated with DNA methylation patterns. Elliott (2010) studied the impact of social stress on the DNA methylation in mice at the Crf gene locus, which codes for the neuropeptide corticotrophin-releasing factor (CRF). This hormone plays a central role in the neuroendocrine stress response's integration in the brain, and chronic over-activity of CRF has been linked to stress-related emotional disorders. Exposure to

chronic social stress was observed to induce DNA methylation. Subsequently, a process of demethylation was observed in "defeated" mice only, or subjects that exhibited post-stress and antisocial behavior. Noticeably, demethylation was not observed in "resilient" mice, or those that did not later demonstrate these behavioral patterns. These findings illustrate how variations in the behavioral response to stress correlate with different epigenetic effects. Therefore, the cultural differences observed between humans and coping mechanisms may similarly influence how the human body integrates chronic stress. Understanding this genetic element in congruence with cultural variability can inform the larger understanding of and investigation into how different populations respond to stress, and the long-term consequences of such exposure.

This survey of scientific literature illustrates the numerous ways in which chronic stress interacts with the human condition. Cultural distinctions may be reflected in the ways that Asian Americans have historically as well as are currently dealing with racial prejudice. As an onslaught of discrimination incites fear among Asian Americans, this knowledge can and should inform contemporary hypotheses about how rising anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes directed at these communities will yield biological and biomedical consequences. Moreover, they emphasize the essentiality of including these populations in scientific research: We see how the absence of racial health disparities can by no means serve as evidence for the absence of racism. Society, biology, and culture are intimately related in the co-production of the human condition. Investigating human biology as independent of





the experiences it undergoes is the failure to understand the authentic human condition. Social and environmental context exerts a powerful influence over biology, and the disparate distribution of stressors is reflected by such. This understanding allows us to launch a genuine investigation into the biological implications of racism. The particular onslaught of discrimination against Asians and Asian-Americans, as spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, can re-distribute these socio-environmental stressors in novel ways.

RACIAL HATE: A PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUE

The social stress that ensues from experiencing chronic racism has serious consequences on individuals' health as well as biology. A vast array of literature in population epidemiology and public health examines this interaction, but the Asian American community is (obviously) excluded. "The way in which this [community] has been ignored in research in general, and health research in particular, means that an important element of social disadvantage has been inadequately explored" (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002). Moreover, research largely focuses on race, ignoring the relationship between ethnicity and health. Understanding Asian Americans as an ethnic group that has become racially defined in American society underscores the dangers of reducing ethnicity to a racial construct in public health studies. Distinct aspects of "the structural context of ethnicity," which current research leaves unaccounted for, can be identified: the accumulation of disadvantage over the lifetime; the ecological effects of deprived geographic minority enclaves; and "the effects of living in a racist society" (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002). This last aspect is of crucial importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, where structural racism is being brought to light.

"Everyday discrimination," or the comparatively subtle racist encounters that characterize peoples' daily lives, has documented effects on the physical and mental health of individuals (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002). Studies indicate an association between experiences of racism with raised blood pressure, increased psychological distress, poorer self-rated health, and increased frequency of major depressive episodes, to name a few (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002; Singh et al., 2017). Moreover, these associated health effects are observed with the mere anticipation of prejudice. From this, we can appreciate the robust consequences of simply existing in a racist society, independent of direct experiences of discrimination. Sawyer (2012) found that "the mere threat of prejudice is sufficient to elicit a physiological response." This finding has serious implications for Asian Americans during the COVID-19 outbreak. As members of the community both consciously and subconsciously alter their daily behaviors and social interactions in response to widespread discrimination, we can understand how this fear and anxiety is internalized, having downstream consequences that are detrimental to the psychological and physical health of these individuals.

In light of the absence of health and population studies that include Asian American groups, studies on other ethnic and minority groups can illustrate how exacerbated racism that is

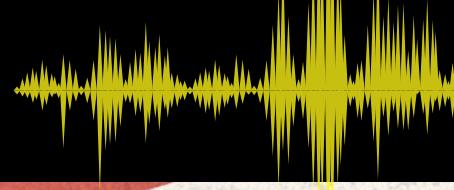


associated with national crises can yield tangible health effects. The September 11 terrorist attacks can serve as an important and informative case study. Lauderdale (2006) examined the frequency of poor birth outcomes among Arabic women before and after the 2001 attacks. Results show that an infant's given name was a strong predictor for the risk of low birth weight among newborn babies after the attacks, such that infants with Arabic names demonstrated a higher frequency both when compared to infants with non-Arabic names and those with Arabic names born before 9/11. Similar to September 11, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a sharp rise in discrimination aimed at a particular ethnic group. The proliferation of anti-Asian sentiment results from racist rhetoric employed by the media, political leaders, and general society. Lauderdale's findings among the Arabic community shed light on long-term health consequences that precipitate from national energies and their racialization. As Asian Americans continue to be othered and blamed by the greater American public, one can begin to imagine how the chronic experience and mere anticipation of racism will have significant ramifications for the minority group, as well as the greater American social fabric.

(Yes Magazine, 2020)

LOOKING FORWARD: RACISM AFTER COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth the dismantling of the Asian American model minority trope. The economic and educational achievements as well as the absence of health disparities relative to other minority groups, cannot be used to ignore the racial reality of being Asian in America. Explicit racial hate and violence have precipitated from this outbreak of disease, and these products will have both biological and social consequences. Political leaders and the scientific establishment must address the Asian American plight, implement measures to protect this community, and condemn the racist and xenophobic rhetoric. This community has been systematically excluded from the racial discourse, which has allowed racial bias to become normalized and wholly ignored. Lastly, members of the Asian American community must demand recognition—insisting on scientific and political inclusion, and publicizing their own unique racial reality.



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