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Research Article

“We Haven’t Been the Squeaky Wheel”: Asian-Americans’ Responses to Asian-hate Incidents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative study used a narrative approach to document the experiences of 10 Asian-American working professionals before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and to examine how they made sense of the surge in Asian-hate incidents. Episodic narrative interviews were the main source for data collection. The findings revealed that the participants experienced stereotyping and discrimination in the pre-pandemic workplace which was influenced by gender and social class. During the pandemic, the group faced fear and anxiety and thus, they kept their circle small. Although the participants expressed their shock and disbelief on these incidents, they also felt a sense of guilt. Most believed that this was a resurfacing of systemic racism, but they shared their skepticism and fatigue on what the media showed. They also blamed the US and Chinese administrations for the uptick of these incidents. Finally, the participants empathized with other marginalized groups who have endured similar experiences.

***Keywords:* Asian-American, COVID-19, workplace, AsianCrit**

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the United States was fighting battle on three fronts: the first was the virus itself, misinformation was the second, and systemic racism was the last. Regarding racism, the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community was at the frontline of this fray as major metropolitan areas such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco experienced a surge of Asian-hate incidents. Stop AAPI Hate (2022) reported that there were almost 11,000 of these incidents nationwide from March 19, 2020, to December 31, 2021. These incidents included verbal harassment and shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. Thus, the pandemic became more than a public health concern; it was also a threat to social justice. Furthermore, critics of the Trump administration argued that the president's reckless use of the terms "Chinese virus" and "Kung-Flu" was to be blamed for the sudden uptick of the anti-Asian rhetoric (DeCook & Yoon, 2021). Other scholars on the other hand, expressed that racism towards the AAPI community has always been present in re-emerged and brought to recent events (Cho, 2021; Nicholson, 2021). This in the United States; globally, Asian discrimination and many pandemic (Miyake 2021; al., 2021). To clarify, the term *Asian* not only refers to people of Chinese descent but also includes people with heritage from other Asian countries.

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U.S. history but has now the forefront in light of Chun, 2020; Li & situation was not isolated studies also showed that communities experienced forms of racism during the Sun et al., 2024; Wang et

Purpose of the Study

To contribute to existing literature, I examined qualitative interview data from 10 Asian-American working professionals regarding how they perceived and made sense of Asian-hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study examined their experiences as Asian-Americans in the workplace and in the community before and during the pandemic and focused on how they navigated these spaces. These narratives are an important piece in understanding how they made sense of the Asian-hate incidents and rhetoric. To this extent, the research questions guiding this study are:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the experiences of Asian-American working professionals in the United States, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do they make sense of the surge in Asian-hate incidents and rhetoric?

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and views of the present issue. Examining their narratives contributes to extant knowledge about the Asian-American community which can be used by key stakeholder groups such as employers, educational institutions, and policymakers. The workplace, for instance, is a crucial area of learning for adults not only for occupational and technical skills but also in understanding the ever-changing challenges and demands of a diverse workforce. Thus, examining the narratives of Asian-American working professionals aims to bring employers, adult education practitioners, and higher educational institutions awareness of the matter at hand, engage them to take action on this social justice issue, and support their

employees and learners at these trying times. To conduct a thorough analysis of this study, it was also essential to review the history of Asian-Americans in the United States.

“They’re Stealing Our Jobs!’: A Long History of Discrimination Against Asian-Americans

The earliest recorded Asian immigrants to the United States were Filipino sailors who jumped ship from the Spanish galleons in the 1700s and settled in Louisiana. They were known as the Manila men (Araullo, 2021). Over time, the country experienced different waves of immigration from different Asian countries. While this meant new opportunities for these groups to better their families’ lives, the immigration and settlement process was not an easy task. Asian immigrants faced many challenges from exclusionary laws to overt discrimination and violent acts. The following are some critical events in Asian-American history which have influenced and shaped the current landscape for this group.

The Chinese Exclusion Act, 1850s

The California Gold Rush, which started in 1848, attracted many people to the United States, including Chinese migrants (Lee, 2015, p. 60). In the 1850s, a big wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in the country because of the construction of the Central Pacific Railroad. This period initiated an increasing hostility against the Chinese community. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was legislated which suspended Chinese nationals from entering the country for 10 years (Sabharwal et al., 2022). This remains the only law enacted that barred the immigration of a specific group to the United States (Martin, 2011).

Watsonville Riots, 1930

Immigration from the Philippines increased in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Lee, 2015). During this time, Filipino immigrants faced hostilities as they were seen as a threat to replacing domestic workers, especially in the agricultural sector in California. In addition, Filipinos experienced discrimination because of “...severe racial stereotyping based on sexual, cultural, and public health myths. Filipinos were criticized for carrying disease, committing crimes, and leading young white girls astray. In particular, miscegenation became a strong focus for anti-Filipino bias” (Showalter, 1989, p. 342). This fear of the intermarriage between Filipinos and whites sparked outcries from native-born white men. This tension mounted, and in January 1930, hundreds of white men attacked a Filipino dance hall in Watsonville, California. Many Filipinos were beaten, and one died after four days of these riots.

Japanese Internment Camps, 1942-1945

One of the most heinous atrocities committed against Asian Americans was the establishment of Japanese internment or concentration camps from 1942 to 1945. More than 120,000 people of Japanese descent were sent to prison camps as the U.S. government responded towards the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Part of the reason was also because of greed as thriving Japanese-owned farms were targeted to be taken over (Spickard, 1986). This injustice cemented the crippling concept of “otherness” for Asian Americans, especially for

people of Japanese heritage. For them, despite being born in the country and being U.S. citizens, they will always be regarded as perpetual foreigners (Tsuda, 2014).

Seadrift, Texas, 1979-1981

Vietnamese refugees flocked to the United States towards the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 including in small towns like Seadrift and Kemah at the Texas Gulfcoast (Alperin & Batalova, 2018; Lee, 2015). These refugees were met with hostility soon after, as disputes between Vietnamese and local Texas fishermen ignited because of fishing practice differences. When two Vietnamese fishermen who were accused of killing a local fisherman were acquitted of the charges, the verdict caused an uproar among some residents. Many Vietnamese refugees ended up fleeing the town because of this situation (Eldridge, 2014; Massey, 2009).

The Murder of Vincent Shin, 1982

Shin was of Chinese origin and the victim in this brutal case of mistaken identity where two white men assumed he was Japanese. They blamed him for being laid off from a Chrysler plant in Detroit. At that time, the Japanese automotive industry was gaining popularity and success in the country, which caused U.S. auto industry workers to be out of work (Zia, 2000, pp. 58-60). This caused anti-Asian sentiments to resurface as native-born Americans feared that once again, foreigners were taking over their jobs (Lee, 2015, p. 382).

The Los Angeles Riots, 1992

What set off the LA riots in 1992 was the acquittal of four white police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department even after video footage showed excessive force used on the arrest of Rodney King, a Black American motorist. The riots lasted for six days and caused the death of 63 people and billions worth of property damages. Throughout the riots, Korean business owners standing on the rooftops of their shops defended their stores from looters and rioters. During this time, Black Americans and Korean Americans were pitted against each other by the mainstream media. When the smoke cleared, more than 2,000 Korean-owned businesses were destroyed and more than 10,000 Korean-Americans were displaced from their homes (Lee, 2015, p. 375). Although tragic, this became an important historical event because it portrayed Korean-Americans as a minority group that was ready to defend their livelihood. It dispelled the Asian stereotype of being submissive and reticent.

These five events represent a fraction of countless discriminatory acts against Asian-Americans throughout U.S. history. Over time, Asian-Americans experienced discrimination in society in different forms such as racial microaggressions in the workplace (Wu et al., 2023). Furthermore, this group continues to feel “othered” and regarded as perpetual foreigners (Huang, 2021; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). Recent studies also point to issues of intersectionality and gendered racism such as damaging tropes and stereotypes like Asian women are regarded as exotic, sexualized, and passive while Asian men are weak (Azhar et al., 2021).

With the spread of COVID-19, Asian-Americans faced new challenges. Research on the experiences of Asian-Americans during the pandemic started to be voiced (Sun et al., 2024), yet their perspectives on Asian-hate incidents are still scarce. Thus, the goal of this research is to document the stories of study participants and their responses to the anti-Asian sentiments during the pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on two theories that served as the theoretical framework. The first is Asian Critical or AsianCrit, which is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT). This theory provides a lens for viewing and understanding the experiences and treatment of Asian-Americans in society (An, 2017; Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus, 2014). According to Museus (2014), AsianCrit consists of seven tenets (pp. 23-27). *Asianization* suggests that racism is prevalent in U.S. society and that it promotes Asian stereotypes such as the model minority, perpetual foreigner, and the yellow peril. *Transnational contexts*, on the other hand, focus on how historical, social, economic, and political aspects, both nationally and internationally have shaped the environment for Asian-Americans. *(Re)constructive history* centers on re-evaluating history using an Asian-American lens to highlight the racism experienced by this group and thus, forging identity and awareness. *Strategic (anti)existentialism* is similar to transnational contexts in the sense that it assumes that race is socially constructed and is influenced by socioeconomic and political forces. However, this tenet also advocates for a better understanding of Asian-Americans as a combined and bigger racial category while building on knowledge that is distinct and complex for this group. *Intersectionality* acknowledges the presence of other social constructs and categorizations such as gender, class, and sexual orientation, and how these intersect with racism and affect the situations for Asian-Americans. The next tenet, *story, theory, and praxis*, suggests that these three elements are inextricably linked and are crucial in evaluating the Asian-American experience: “stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes” (Museus, 2014, p. 27). This also means that AsianCrit highlights the voices and narratives of Asian-Americans, which have been historically silenced and marginalized. Finally, *commitment to social justice* implies that at its core, AsianCrit like CRT, aims to end oppression in all its forms.

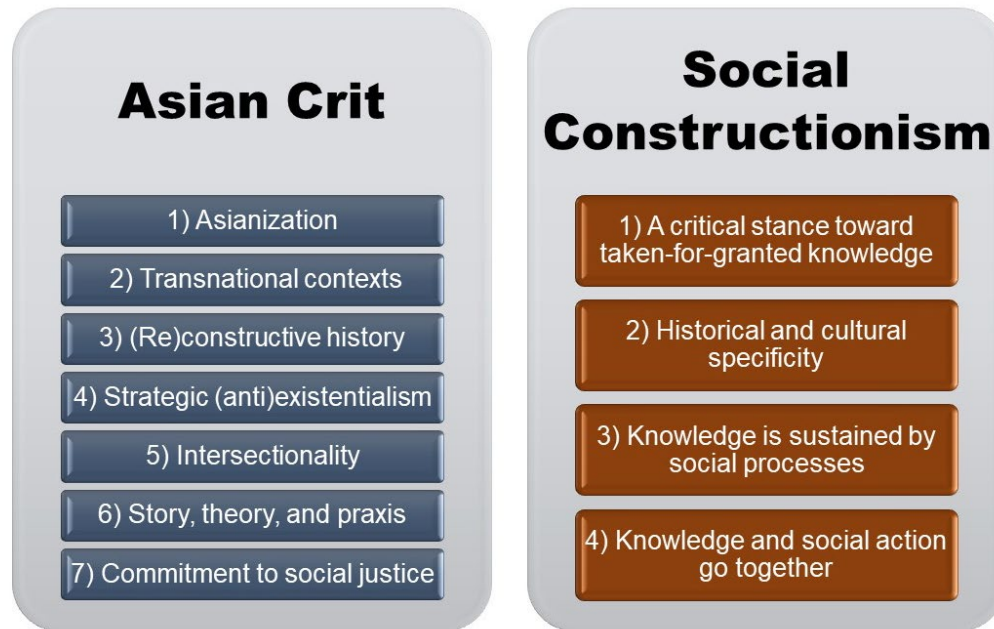
Asianization suggests that racism is prevalent in U.S. society and that it promotes Asian stereotypes such as the model minority, perpetual foreigner, and the yellow peril.

In the simplest sense, social constructionism can be thought of as how knowledge and understanding are created through social relationships and contexts. According to Burr (2015), social constructionism has four key assumptions (pp. 2-5). First, *a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge* calls for us to question the views that have been ingrained in us and challenge them. Next, *historical and cultural specificity* suggests that the way we understand the world is bound to a specific time and culture. *Knowledge is sustained by social processes* places value on the social interactions between and among people to create, understand, and interpret knowledge. Lastly, *knowledge and social action go together* explains the relationship between knowledge construction and power relationships. It means that creating knowledge and/or interpreting it influences actions that unequivocally impact people.

The tenets of the theories presented complement each other (See Figure 1). I was able to make connections among them, which provided deeper insights for analysis. For example, *transnational contexts* from AsianCrit and *historical and cultural specificity* aligned perfectly. Combined, these two tenets provided an understanding of the Asian-American experience in a particular time and culture, which was influenced by national and international events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, *(re)constructive history* from AsianCrit worked well with *a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge* from social constructionism because both tenets disrupt the existing narratives and knowledge, and thus creating new ones from the Asian-American viewpoint.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Overall, AsianCrit and social constructionism as a framework allowed me to examine the experiences of Asian-Americans in the workplace and the community and investigate how they navigated these spaces as well as their perceptions of Asian-hate incidents during the pandemic.

Methods

This qualitative study used a narrative approach; it was imperative to explore the participants' narratives to understand how these stories shaped their perspectives and responses to these incidents. Therefore, their experiences influenced and informed their

beliefs and attitudes toward the present situation. Qualitative research methods, specifically narratives, were employed for this study because it was critical to hear the participants' accounts in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 68-69). It was important to gain the participants' deeper understanding of the topic which has not been studied extensively. This gave the study participants a voice to illuminate their experiences and their interpretations of the events that happened. Ethical considerations and confidentiality were important to this research. The participants were aware that this study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any point. Verbal consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews, in which they were asked if they agreed to participate in the study and to be recorded. The participants were allowed to ask questions and voice their concerns before the interviews were conducted. To protect their identity, pseudonyms were used in the entire study. To adhere to social distance protocols at the time, all the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Only the audio portions of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. This data was only available to the researcher.

Study Participants

Participants for this study were selected through referrals from professional colleagues and snowball sampling. They were identified by the following characteristics: (a) be 25 years or older; (b) be legal residents of the United States; (c) be of Asian heritage; and (d) be working professionals. I chose participants from different Asian ancestries, ages, genders, and professional backgrounds to account for diverse and richer perspectives. Green card holders and U.S. citizens were included in the sample to account for similarities in their experiences; undocumented individuals may encounter a different set of challenges and thus offer different perspectives because of their distinct experiences. Participants were not required to have experienced a first-hand Asian-hate incident to participate in the study. To that effect, 10 Asian-American professionals served as study participants (See Table 1). Their ages ranged from 29 – 51. Six were female and four were male. Their ethnicities can be traced back to seven Asian countries. Half of the participants were born in the U.S., while the other half were immigrants.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Self-Reported Ethnicity	Profession	Nativity
Joyce	29	Female	Vietnamese/ Filipino/ Chinese	Process Improvement Leader	U.S.A.
Hana	29	Female	Korean	Doctoral Student, ESL Teacher	South Korea
Julissa	30	Female	Chinese	Speech Language Therapist	U.S.A.
Shane	31	Male	Korean	Software Engineer	U.S.A.
Patrick	36	Male	Vietnamese	Data Analyst	U.S.A.
Lena	37	Female	Chinese-Cambodian	Pharmaceutical Sales	U.S.A.

David	44	Male	Chinese-Indonesian	Software Engineer	Indonesia
Pamela	45	Female	East Indian/Asian	Nurse, Media Personality	India
Hien	51	Female	Vietnamese	IT Project Manager, Performance Artist	Vietnam
Gabriel	51	Male	Filipino	Software Tester	Philippines

Data Collection

Data sources for this study included participant interviews and a research log. Interviews were 90-minute individual sessions with the study participants. These were episodic narrative interviews. The purpose of episodic narrative interviews is to better understand a phenomenon by generating individual stories of experience about that phenomenon. That is, the participant provides narrative accounts of their experiences “within the context of a bounded situation or episode” (Mueller, 2019, p. 1). In this study, the episode referred to Asian-hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. All questions asked during these interviews were open-ended to avoid leading questions. A research journal was used to document observations, thoughts, and keep track of the research process.

Data Analysis

The study used Cresswell and Poths’ (2018) approach for narrative research analysis, specifically looking at the chronology of events and epiphanies in the participants’ stories. According to them, there are seven steps:

1. Create and organize files for data.
2. Read through the text, make margin notes, and form initial codes.
3. Describe the patterns across the objective set of experiences.
4. Identify and describe the stories into a chronology.
5. Locate epiphanies within stories.
6. Identify contextual materials.
7. Restory and interpret the larger meaning of the story. (p. 199)

To this effect, four points were the focus of the interviews: 1) the participants’ life stories, 2) their workplace experiences, 3) their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 4) their perspectives on the Asian-hate incidents. Throughout this process, elements from participants’ narratives were collected and used to retell their stories in a chronology. These stories presented a continuity – a beginning, a middle, and an end. These retold stories became the basic unit for data analysis. After rereading these stories, common aspects were identified which formed the emergent codes. After identifying codes, they were classified into different themes according to their similarities, cohesion, and relevance to the research questions. Once the themes were established, epiphanies or turning points were identified (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 198). After this step was completed, the researcher used these themes to make meanings of the stories, interpret them, and make connections to the current study while keeping the research framework in mind.

This study adhered to Cresswell and Poth (2018) recommendation to employ at least two strategies for validation in qualitative research (p. 259). The first was *clarifying researcher*

biases or engaging in reflexivity. Here, the researcher critically examined his experiences and opinions about the research topic. The attention was on telling the participants' stories as they were presented without involving the researcher's interpretations and prejudices. The next strategy used was *member checking* or *participant feedback*. After the interviews, part of the findings was shared with participants and they were allowed to provide edits to ensure that the research findings accurately reflect their experiences and perspectives. To sustain reliability, the researcher stayed faithful to the study's research design and kept thorough records of the research process and documents including the interview transcripts, research log, and coding procedures. Coding sessions were repeated for the same data at different times to ensure consistency and to review any code that may have been initially missed or misinterpreted.

Findings

The Asian-American Experience

This section answers **RQ1**: What are the experiences of Asian-Americans in the United States, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic? The first three themes emerged from the data analysis. These themes marked what it was like living as an Asian-American in the United States before the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Asian Stereotypes: Invisible, Reticent, and Voiceless

The participants' stories were rich with experiences of being stereotyped. Hien and Joyce for example, told stories as young Asian-American females in the workplace. Hien felt that she was viewed as a stereotypical Asian woman who was nice, sweet, not aggressive, and will not rock the boat. Joyce on the other hand, succumbed to this stereotype and admitted that she was voiceless on multiple occasions at her workplace. They share,

I was very vocal, and I was very assertive. I found my voice, and I loved my voice. And I was going to use it wherever. I think that shocked a lot of people, especially Caucasian management because of the Asian stereotype – an Asian person who's going to go along with everything and not make waves. They would just do their job, work hard, produce great quality work and that's it! And here I was, challenging them and questioning them. I'm very vocal and I think that in that way, I shatter the stereotype of the demure, quiet model minority myth stereotype. (Hien)

I felt voiceless multiple times when I first started working. Sometimes, I was the only minority in the room. I was either just laughing along at some jokes, or just not saying anything and not laughing. I think that kind of affected my professional growth. Looking back, I should not have to put up with some of the things I experienced. I should have stood up for myself. I should not have shut down. (Joyce)

The model minority myth depicts Asians as submissive, quiet, and reticent. It is more damaging than flattering. This stereotype exacerbates the limitations in the workplace for Asian-Americans and creates unpleasant workplace experiences for them.

Discrimination

This theme ranged from covert to overt acts. There were silly jokes, like “if you smile or laugh, I can barely see your eyes” to not being invited to birthday parties or being called nicknames like “*China Girl*” and “*Sweet and Sour Chicken*”. The participants also shared experiences of physical bullying. While some of these stories were experienced during the participants’ younger years, some continued to experience in their communities and workplaces

The participants also shared experiences of physical bullying.

as adults. For example, at a grocery store, a cashier would talk to Hana very slowly as if she were a child insinuating that all Asian-Americans cannot speak English well. The participants also told stories of ignorance in their workplace, like Pamela who is Indian-American being called an *Arab* by a coworker. On the other hand, Julissa was asked by a coworker to translate for a Vietnamese patient. After explaining to her coworker that she was in fact Chinese-American and did not speak Vietnamese, she was told, “But y’all look the same.”

The male participants experienced little to no discrimination at all, and if any, they were covert form of discriminations such as jokes, microaggressions, or the feeling of being the token Asian. On the other hand, the female study participants experienced more covert forms of discrimination such as physical bullying and verbal harassment. Lena, who works in pharmaceutical sales shares her story,

I was dropping off pharmaceutical samples to a doctor's office, so the front desk personnel called the doctor to sign off. The doctor was like, “Oh the *chink?*”. He was calling me a *chink!* At that moment I was so shocked because I was like yes, I dealt with racism my whole life but to be an adult in a professional environment... to have a doctor say that - I was shocked. It hurt my feelings because I worked my ass off to get to where I am, only to be discriminated and be called that. It kind of ruined my day.

Intersectionality with Gender and Social class

Some participants did not attribute the discrimination that they felt or perceived to their race. Gabriel, for instance, did not experience anything overtly discriminatory in his younger days but comments on his complexion. He recounts,

It was more about me not being “Asian”. Every now and then I would get a comment. It was like, “Oh, you know you’re dark!”. It was mostly my skin color that people noticed, if they noticed anything, and that was about the extent of it. I guess I've been lucky it's been very mild.

However, later in life, he observed that it was not a race issue but rather a social class issue. That is, if he was around people of the same social class, his ethnicity was not in question. When he was in groups or certain communities below his socio-economic class, he would get certain looks from people that would make him feel uncomfortable: “The lower the social class you go, the more you get the looks.”

This was the opposite for other participants who experienced poverty earlier on in life and stressed that some of the discrimination that they experienced was a result of the intersectionality between race and social class. Lena was made fun of in school because her family could not afford to buy school lunches, and her mother used to make dresses for her and her sister growing up. She continued,

...it was tough and then we wore the same shoes until it tore down to its sole. We couldn't even afford Payless at the time. At one point when we told our mom that the girls at school are making fun of me and my sister's clothes, she felt bad. So, she was like, "Okay, I'll buy you some real American clothes". When we did buy clothes, we had to put them on layaway because she wanted us to have better clothes.

Regarding gender, the female participants underwent more negative experiences being Asian-Americans. The male participants on the other hand, experienced fewer to no negative experiences.

The next two themes summed up what it was like for the study participants during the pandemic. Like many workers in the United States, most of them were able to work remotely. Thus, the following themes centered on their interactions with their community instead of their workplace.

Anxiety and Fear for Self, Family, and Friends

Eight study participants expressed feelings of anxiety and fear not only for themselves but for their family and friends during the pandemic. Lena shared how this impacted her daily life,

I pay attention to my surroundings more than I've ever had in the past. And that's just everywhere I go - at my job, even the grocery store. I don't really go out at night for reasons but now that it's happening during the day, *I'm living in fear*. I can't go to the grocery store to shop because there's a potential attack.

Similarly, Joyce expressed that there were many things that heightened her anxiety during the pandemic including perceived racism in the community: "It was too much. I would feel anxious for many reasons, racism was one of them."

Keeping the Circle Small

Many of the study participants disconnected with friends and kept to themselves. They limited their social interaction and kept their circle small. Hana shared, "I felt anxious, but also disconnected with everything and just thought, "let me just survive through this time." As a graduate student, she also felt unsafe on campus during some instances because of the perceived presence of extremist groups. She was terrified to go to the parking lot alone.

While on vacation when the pandemic was just developing, Shane was worried that things will start to get problematic after reading reports that some rideshare drivers were

canceling rides for Asian customers. When the pandemic hit, his primary concern was his and his wife's safety, so they limited their interactions with everyone: "My wife and I stocked up on frozen food and really tried not to go out. We really didn't interact with any outside people. We didn't have any other things in mind other than being safe".

Responses to Asian-Hate Incidents and Rhetoric

In this section, the study participants shared their responses to Asian-hate incidents. It answers RQ2, "How do they make sense of the Asian-hate incidents and rhetoric?" Four themes emerged from data analysis. They were: (1) Disbelief and guilt (2) A resurfacing of racism, but with skepticism and fatigue, (3) Blaming presidential and national administrations, and (4) An inkling of what it feels to be Black in America, to be a Muslim after 9/11.

Disbelief and Guilt

The participants thought that what was happening was unfathomable, especially for this day and age. They explained that it was a backward step for a developed and free country. Shane was confused when he started seeing news articles and video footage of Asian-Americans being attacked in many cities: "I tried to process it, and it just doesn't compute. How can someone just attack the elderly or stab someone just based on what they look like?" Other participants like David also found these attacks inconceivable:

Assuming that the virus did come from China, what's the point of the violence? Are you going to save lives by slapping Asians? Some of these victims have not even set foot in China. Some of them are not even Chinese!

Julissa who is Chinese-American also expressed feelings of guilt when people were being attacked, and they were not even Chinese:

When I see people getting attacked on TV and they're not actually Chinese, I feel even guiltier. I feel like it sucks. Like my friends who are Korean, if they got attacked on the street and then told to "Go back to China!" - their families are not even from China so that makes me even more mad! They're not even Chinese and they're just getting grouped into this group and just getting yelled at...not that it's appropriate for Asian-Americans who are Chinese to be yelled at.

A Resurfacing of Racism, but with Skepticism and Fatigue

Study participants anti-Asian sentiments They believed that to resurface when the participants, like Lena these hate incidents are now are now captured on camera. She shared,

Study participants voiced out that racism and anti-Asian sentiments never left the U.S. society.

voiced out that racism and never left the U.S. society. they were always there ready opportunity came. A few mentioned that the only reason more apparent is because they

I think Asian-hate crimes have been happening since the 70s when they were all coming here during the Vietnam War. They were just never addressed the way they are now because everyone has cameras on their phones and taking pictures of things. I wasn't like hurt by it where I'm like, "Oh my God I can't believe this is happening!". I was just more like, "Thank God people are starting to see this."

However, some participants questioned the authenticity of what is being reported because of their distrust with the mainstream media. They voiced out their doubts on what is being shown and expressed their concerns on how Asian-Americans are being portrayed. Gabriel explained,

I feel bad if that's happening, but I want to know what is happening and why. I'm not sure because these days I don't trust what comes out of the news. Sometimes, they go for the headline first and then they then dissect it later then we'll find out that it wasn't quite as bad as we thought, or it got misinterpreted. We're having fatigue...it's like every minority group is having a turn...like who's being oppressed now?

Blaming Presidential and National Administrations

More than half of the participants attributed hate incidents to presidential and national administrations. For one, they blamed the Trump administration for exacerbating the anti-Asian rhetoric at the time of pandemic. Hien, who claimed that she is neither a Trump supporter nor a hater, believed that when the president used harmful rhetoric and stigmatizing language, he marked the Asian-American community as a target for people who do not know how to think critically. Patrick supported this view,

You may have more people that were already racist, but now they are slightly more comfortable putting it out there in the public or expressing themselves some more because of the past administration. Trump is not one to mince words and he's not one to use soft words, so he just used whatever comes off the top of his head, and he thinks it's hilarious. So, when you have a leader that says those things happily, it makes other people that normally would check themselves just go like, "Oh my president did it, it means I can do it too."

Gabriel on the other hand, pointed the finger at the Chinese government's lackadaisical approach to handling the situation and not taking accountability for the matter. According to him, "They did a piss poor job of managing their reactions to the pandemic. They're blaming everybody else except themselves".

An Inkling of What it Feels Like to be Black in America, to be a Muslim after 9/11

The last theme centered on the participants' realizations of how other minority groups in the U.S. must feel or must have felt in times of distress. They pointed to the Black American community, who has a long history of discrimination in the U.S. and the Middle-Eastern/Muslim community after the 9/11 attacks.

I also like to remind myself that this is just a glimpse of what African-Americans go through. It's nothing comparable to that, but I can't imagine walking down the streets and someone just avoids you because of the color of your skin or the way you look. That's a reality for them, so I will tell myself, "Okay ... COVID will not last forever, but for black people, they deal with this daily. (Julissa)

It's the same thing with what happened after 9/11. I was working at the hospital then, and people came up to me and asked, "Are you OK? Well you know your people they bombed everything so I just wanna make sure". I'm from India - it's not even the same area, it's completely different people. They just lump everyone together. Back then, they were beating up Punjabi and Sikh people. So, when COVID was coming around, I knew they were gonna do this same thing to Asians. (Pamela)

Discussion

Experiences Before and During the Pandemic

The study participants shared many experiences of discrimination, harassment, and stereotyping before the pandemic started. However, the female participants experienced more overt discrimination than their male counterparts. These findings align with studies that show the prevalence of Asian-American discrimination especially females in the community and the workplace (Buchanan et al., 2018; McMurtry et al., 2019; Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). Although the participants' ages varied from 29-51 years old, the differences in terms of their experiences and perspectives were minor. That is, the older participants had more to share in terms of their workplace experiences than the younger counterparts. Moreover, the participants' responses to some of the undesirable incidents they encountered in the workplace also varied. For example, Hien was more vocal about her situation than Joyce. While the participants were a mix of immigrants (5) and native-born (5) Asian-Americans, most of the immigrants like Hien, moved to the U.S.A. at an early age, or have been in the country for a long time like David who went to school here. Newer immigrants may face different experiences and challenges than the participants in the study due to issues on cultural adaptation and English proficiency. Thus, future research should explore the differences in the experiences between newer immigrants and native-born Asian Americans.

Many participants suffered fear and anxiety during the pandemic which affected their mental health. Thus, a critical point that this study brings to light is the mental health situation of many Asian-Americans during the pandemic. Many studies reported that discrimination and racism incidents had serious effects on Asian-Americans' mental health (Huynh et al., 2022; Nie, Shimkhada & Ponce, 2022). This is also congruent with studies that during the pandemic, coping strategies such as disconnecting to escape the social stigma (Bresnahan et al., 2022; Ponder et al., 2021). However, these may have detrimental consequences on their health and well-being as they may refuse to seek treatment (Chen et al., 2020). Thus, employers and higher

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education institutions must be proactive in supporting their workforce and their learners who are gravely impacted by these social situations. An important piece is providing adequate resources to ensure their physical safety and mental health.

Making Sense of Asian-hate Incidents

This study revealed the participants' shock at the Asian-hate incidents during the pandemic. However, this should not have been a surprise. This connects to the concept of Asianization where Asian-Americans have been subject to negative stereotypes and tropes. The "Yellow Peril," for instance, stigmatizes Asians as a danger to Western society. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the blame was pointed to Asian-Americans even though they had no responsibility (Cho, 2021). Thus, their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic are a continuation of discriminatory acts in history, which frames this group as unwanted and a threat to society.

An important theme from the research was the resurfacing of racism but with skepticism and fatigue. This re-emergence became evident during the pandemic when once again, Asian-Americans were "othered" and viewed as a perpetual foreigner (Williams et al., 2022). Social constructionism's tenet of historical and cultural specificity was prominent in analyzing this theme as the study participants' ways of understanding the world are bound to their experiences and what they witnessed during the pandemic. This finding also alludes to the issue that Asian-hate incidents are underreported because of two reasons. First, there is a stigma and a cultural stereotype that come along with it (National Public Radio (NPR), 2021; Petru & Slotnik, 2021). Asian-Americans typically do not want to cause any trouble; they just want to keep their heads down and consider themselves as survivors despite being victims. The second reason is the language barrier. Ever too often, victims of Asian-hate incidents do not report them because they are either unable to communicate what happened to them or they do not trust local authorities to act (NPR, 2021).

The study participants blamed both the US administration and the Chinese government for the increase of anti-Asian rhetoric during this time. President Trump's use of the term "Chinese virus" for example was regarded as xenophobic and stigmatizing, which fueled anti-Asian sentiment and racism. This observation aligns with a study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2021), which showed an increase in anti-Asian bias after officials used the term "Wuhan virus" and the "China virus" in the news and social media. Looking back at the research framework, specifically on AsianCrit's concept of transnational contexts, it is important to foreground the increasing tension between the U.S. government and China even before COVID-19 due to trade conflicts and nationalistic views (Boylan et al., 2020; Yang, 2021). In other words, the brewing economic and political conflicts between these two countries possibly contributed to the negative treatment of Asian-Americans during the pandemic.

As a final point, the study participants made sense of the Asian-hate incidents by putting themselves in the shoes of other historically marginalized and discriminated groups like Black Americans and Muslim-Americans. This response displays their empathy for other racialized groups' challenges and struggles. While racial tensions between the Asian community and the Black community are evident (DeCook & Yoon, 2021; Vang & Myers, 2021), events in US

history also show that through empathy, these two communities can come together and champion social justice. For example, one of the first large-scale Asian and interracial campaigns, including Black Americans was organized after Vincent Shin's murder to condemn race related hate-crimes (Lee, 2015, pp. 382-383). In the killing of George Floyd, although race relations between the Hmong and Black communities were heightened, the Hmong community displayed solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, citing their connectedness as racial minorities (Vang & Myers, 2021). Connecting to the study framework, this theme supports the social constructionist tenet that knowledge is sustained by social processes. That is to say, the study participants attempted to make sense of their experiences through the experiences of others and their interaction with them.

Implications

These findings reveal several implications. First, they illuminate that the Asian-American experience is not monolithic; they have certain patterns and similarities but are special and distinct on their own accord. In addition, Asian-Americans have different

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perspectives on certain issues. Therefore, it is critical that we continue to tell the stories of the Asian-American experience and their perspectives on social issues that affect them. Ultimately, we amplify the voices of Asian-Americans that are often not heard. As Hien succinctly points out,

We have been the good child. We have been the good student. It is the student who is

struggling or who acts out that gets the attention. We have not been getting attention because we have been good. The squeaky wheel gets the oil, and we have not been the squeaky wheel, so we're forgotten... we are dismissed. And I am tired of that.

Study findings implore that it is crucial for key stakeholder groups such as employers and educational institutions to be vigilant and proactive in combating anti-Asian rhetoric and perceived discrimination. Several actions can be taken by these stakeholders to ensure that their AAPI employees and students feel safe and supported. For example, they must condemn any form of hate incidents and continue to communicate this message clearly to their organizations. They must notify their employees and students to report any hateful behavior or threat without fear of retaliation. Stakeholders must also review their protocols and threat assessments for employees who are field workers who interact with clients, customers, and vendors. Finally, steps should be undertaken to support the mental health and well-being of AAPI employees and students, such as creating spaces, opportunities, and support groups to discuss issues and hold meaningful conversations.

More than just raising awareness, policymakers must increase efforts to ensure the safety of the AAPI community, especially for Asian-owned businesses. They must also enhance data collection and reporting efforts. This includes making reporting more accessible for victims and witnesses of hate incidents. Most importantly, Asian-hate and rhetoric is a social justice issue. Policymakers must ensure that hate crimes are handled appropriately and expeditiously.

Asian-Americans continue to be virtually invisible and underrepresented partly because of trauma due to discriminatory events in U.S. history. An example would be the distrust of the national census because of the group's sensitivity to discriminatory policies like the Japanese internment and the Chinese Exclusion Act (Lopez, 2020). As such, AAPI and its history are also heavily underrepresented or poorly represented in education and textbooks. Takeda (2015, 2016) reported that only an average of 1.13 pages per book are covered in introductory American government textbooks. Thus, for change to happen, AAPI history must also be accurately represented in U.S. history and government books.

Conclusion

History has shown us that racism and anti-Asian sentiment have recurred throughout U.S. history in waves and have affected different minority groups at various times and in different contexts. Through the study participants' stories, it can be concluded that racism, discrimination, and damaging stereotypes continue and are still prevalent for Asian-Americans in their workplaces and their communities. The participants' responses to Asian-hate incidents call for increased conversations. Civic engagement, mobilization, and participation among Asian-Americans must happen to combat the acts of violence and discrimination and to champion social justice for all. As a final note, this research built on concepts from AsianCrit and social constructionism and generated a theoretical framework which to the researcher's knowledge has not been used before. Thus, it moves the needle for these two theories and adds to the growing literature on the experiences of Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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