Racism and Life-Changing Events: An Exploration of Discrimination Against the Asian Community in Relation to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Rachna K. Minhas[1]

Abstract

There has been a surge of hate crimes and discrimination against the Asian community in relation to the coronavirus pandemic in the past year. These are similar to hate crimes that occurred against Sikh and Arab communities after 9/11. Some research attributes the rise in hate crimes to the othering theory, where fear of outgroups invokes individuals to marginalize other groups. This study used the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) and the Assessment of Cultural Stereotypes Test to examine perceptions of society's beliefs of the Asian community during the Coronavirus pandemic. It was hypothesized that—given the Coronavirus Pandemic—non-Asian participants would perceive society's views of the Asian community as less warm and less competent compared to Asian participants, and that non-Asian participants would attribute more negative stereotypes to the Asian community than Asian participants. A total of 68 undergraduate students from Kwantlen Polytechnic University were recruited for this study. Asian and non-Asian participants did not differ significantly in their ratings of society's beliefs about the warmth and competence of Asians. The only significant adjective selected in assessing the Asian communities' cultural stereotypes was "bad drivers."

Keywords: COVID-19, racism, discrimination

Racism and Life-Changing Events: An Exploration of Discrimination Against the Asian Community in Relation to the Coronavirus Pandemic

The introduction of the Coronavirus pandemic shook the world to its core, and it was not long after the East Asian community began to face racism, prejudice, and discrimination. Negative acts against the East Asian community have come in a variety of forms, including racial slurs graffitied in Vancouver's Chinatown and physical assault (Harris, 2020). Assaults against the East Asian community began close to the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic. In East Vancouver, video surveillance at a 7/11 convenience store recorded a large man verbally assaulting an elderly East Asian man before shoving him out of the store and onto the ground (CBC News, 2020). After sustaining head injuries, the victim Vicha Ratanapakde—an Asian immigrant— later passed away (Lah & Kravarik, 2021). Hate crimes against minorities over world-changing events is not a new topic. For example, the tragedy of 9/11 led many Sikh men to feel the retaliation of societies' anger (Arora, 2013). In Arora's (2013) qualitative study of the experience of Sikh men, the participants reported feelings of elevated anxiety just going out and about after 9/11 and reported having difficulty making earnest and long-lasting relationships.

The ways life-altering events change how individuals associate race and retaliation is unclear. Helleiner (2012) conducted a qualitative study on White young adults and their perspectives involving extra interrogation of people of colour at the Canadian-United States (US) border after 9/11. Although many White young adults stated they had friendships with people of colour, many of the individuals interviewed worried about being mistaken as a person of colour at border crossings after 9/11—specifically being mistaken as South Asian or Middle Eastern. Helleiner's (2012) study involved interviews with individuals who were raised in predominantly White neighbourhoods, and though many felt that racism is a terrible construct, most were comfortable with people of colour being stopped and interrogated at National borders (Helleiner, 2012). As Bhatt and colleagues (2020) explained, institutions like border patrols may misuse their power to oppress minority groups like East Asian and South Asian communities.

Mr. Ratanapakdee was an elderly man who immigrated from Thailand, who—like South Asian and Arab men after 9/11—was assaulted for quick associations his aggressor made to him about the Coronavirus pandemic. Bhatt (2008) explains these quick associations to be a

product of categorization, or how the brain quickly grabs information needed to navigate in the world. The more familiar individuals are with their ingroup, the better they can separate differences amongst individuals in comparison to the outgroup (Bhatt, 2008). Bhatt and colleagues (2020) define prejudice as stereotypes people have in opposition to outgroups[2] that involve negative feelings and perspectives in relation to these clusters of individuals. Ratanpakdee's aggressor likely did not see past his facial features and attacked him solely off the base of his own individual associations to East Asian men and China; like Sikh and Arab men being terrorized because of individuals' quick associations of religious head coverings and 9/11. Sikh, Arab, and East Asian communities are all victims of discrimination and continue to be marginalized from other ethnic groups (Bhatt et al., 2020).

In today's society, people have strict views on discrimination and punish individuals who commit hate crimes. However, most people are generally unaware of the implicit biases people hold; biases that individuals are not consciously aware they have (Bhatt et al., 2020). In addition to having implicit biases, individuals may be fearful of those belonging to an outgroup. Recent literature about hate crimes against the East Asian community by Gover and colleagues (2020) explored the influx of hate crimes towards the East Asian community and attributed the rise of discrimination to the othering theory, where fear creates prejudice and discrimination towards certain groups through marginalization of that group. The article written by Gover and colleagues (2020), however, is exploratory, and does not test the implicit biases or test the theories discussed above. The theory the current research employed was the Stereotype Content Model (SCM), which uses perceived warmth and competence measures to chart people's ambivalent stereotypes of outgroups: individuals' positive and negative stereotypes that influence feelings towards outgroups (Fiske et al., 2002). Fiske and colleagues (2002) define warmth as the degree to which a group is characterized by attributes such as friendliness and trustworthiness, and competence as the degree to which a group is characterized by attributes such as capability and assertiveness. A pilot study by Fiske and colleagues found participants perceived the Asian community as more competent than warm; these findings were replicated in further studies (Fiske et al., 2002; Lee & Fiske, 2006). Erhart and Hall (2019) used the SCM to compare perceived warmth and competence of Indigenous Peoples and East Asians. Erhart

---

[2] Outgroups: Groups outside of an individual's identity; For example, an outgroup for an individual part of the East Asian community could be part of the White community.

and Hall (2019) also used Katz and Braly's assessment of cultural stereotypes to assess which adjectives are used to describe the Asian community. These adjectives included "intelligent," "family oriented," and "competitive," but Erhart and Hall's (2019) study was conducted before the Coronavirus pandemic, as was Fiske and colleagues' pilot study (2002) and Lee and Fiske's (2006) research. Beliefs about the warmth and competence of the Asian community, as well as adjectives used to describe the Asian community have most likely shifted (Fiske et al., 2002).

Current Study

The current study was the first to measure perceptions of society's beliefs about the warmth and competence of the Asian community during the Coronavirus pandemic. This study employed the SCM to measure individuals' perceptions of society's beliefs about the Asian community regarding their warmth and competence. Additionally, this study used Katz and Braly's assessment of cultural stereotypes to assess new adjectives participants believe society may use to describe the Asian community. It was hypothesized that non-Asian (including participants who identified as Black, White, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino) participants would perceive society's beliefs about the East Asian community as less warm and less competent compared to Asian participants' perceptions of society's beliefs, and that non-Asian participants would perceive society to attribute more negative stereotypes to the Asian community than Asian participants.

Method

Participants

Participants recruited for this study were students from Kwantlen Polytechnic University. As shown in Table 1 this study had 68 participants (42 Asian and 26 non-Asian). Most of the participants were female ($n = 57$). The Asian group consisted of participants who identified as South Asian and East Asian, while the non-Asian group consisted of participants who identified as Black, White, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, other, or they preferred not to say.

Materials

Following Fiske and colleagues (2002) survey design, the current research asked participants to rate society's beliefs about the Asian community. For example, one question asked, "Considering the Coronavirus pandemic: In your opinion, how much do you believe society agrees with the statements below." These statements showed positive and negative

statements such as "Asian attacks are warranted," and "Asians are resilient." To measure these statements, this study used a Likert scale from 1 (*extremely accurate*) to 5 (*not accurate at all*). In using the term "accurate," the present study sought to determine whether participants believed society would accept the statements being asked.

Following Erhart and Hall (2019), who adapted Katz and Braly's assessment of cultural stereotypes, this study also measured new adjectives that society may use to describe the Asian community. Erhart and Hall's study used 145 positive and negative adjectives linked to cultural stereotypes of the Asian community. The current study used 12 of those adjectives and added four new self-made adjectives that better relate to the world's climate today (coronavirus, bad drivers, resilient, and humble) to the list. These adjectives and stereotypes were terms I have heard used to describe the Asian community and were not found through literature reviews or articles. With the 12 adjectives from Erhart and Hall (2019) and the new self-made adjectives, the list now included 16 positive and negative adjectives: academic, family oriented, highly educated, ambitious, disciplined, competitive, quiet, analytical, socially awkward, uptight, bad drivers, coronavirus, resilient, and humble. Adjectives were split into groups of four, and the question for each went as followed, "Considering the Coronavirus pandemic: Given society today, select the adjectives you believe society uses to describe the Asian community (you may pick multiple)."

Procedures

This study was conducted anonymously and online through Qualtrics. After providing electronic consent, participants were taken to the beginning of the survey. Participants were first asked to state their gender and ethnicity. This study grouped South Asian and East Asian participants into the Asian group. South Asians also faced hate crimes after 9/11, so this research included this group with East Asian participants. Participants in the non-Asian group identified as Black, White, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, other, or they preferred not to say. The survey asked questions about participants perceptions of the Asian community concerning the Coronavirus pandemic and were later given a quick debriefing. Eligible students also received bonus credit.

Results

First, an independent *t*-test was conducted to compare Asian ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.55$) and Non-Asian ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.45$) participants on the measure of perceived warmth and showed

no statistically significant differences between the two groups, $t(67) = 1.22$, $p = .226$, Cohen's $d = 0.32$. A second independent t-test was conducted to compare the two groups ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.49$; $M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.62$) on the measure of perceived competence and also showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups, $t(67) = 1.36$, $p = .179$, Cohen's $d = 0.35$.

Second, the frequency with which participants selected certain adjectives was to describe society's beliefs of the Asian community in today's climate was analyzed. As seen in Table 2, the cultural adjective "Bad Drivers" was the only adjective that was statistically significant between Asian and non-Asian participants.

Discussion

Against expectations, findings from this study do not suggest differences between Asian and non-Asian participants in terms of how they believe society perceives the Asian community during the Coronavirus pandemic. The results in the current research were consistent with Fiske and colleagues (2002) study and Lee and Fiske's study (2006): participants in the current research rated society's perspectives of the Asian community as low in warmth and high in competence. The study conducted by Fiske and colleagues (2002) and Lee and Fiske (2006) found participants perceived the East Asian community with low warmth and high competence. Moreover, the results of the current research suggest that there was no difference in this population's perceptions of society's beliefs about the East Asian community. This population perceived society's judgements of the East Asian community with less warmth and more competence; the Coronavirus pandemic did not impact individuals' perceptions of society's beliefs of the East Asian community for both Asian and non-Asian participants.

The only difference that was found was that a greater proportion of non-Asian participants were more likely than Asian participants to rate society's perceptions of the East Asian community as bad drivers. However, it is also interesting to examine overall views of the participants' ratings of society's beliefs of the Asian community: Asian participants were most likely to select the adjective "resilient," while non-Asian participants more frequently selected "ambitious." Although these adjectives were more frequently selected for both Asian and non-Asian participants, based on participant ratings society's beliefs about the Asian community, the only adjective—in the current study—that was statistically significant was "bad drivers." Similar to Erhart and Hall's (2019) study using Katz and Braly's assessment of cultural

stereotypes, new adjectives used were more frequently selected. In Erhart and Hall's (2019) study, the adjective most frequently selected by the sample population was "academic." There are, however, implications in studying cultural adjectives including the adjective "bad drivers" which was significant. This could suggest that the general population attribute the cultural stereotype "bad drivers" when describing the Asian community.

This study had some limitations. First, this study was not able to recruit a sufficient number of non-Asian participants. Most participants in this study were Asian, leading to results of both measures to be skewed. The same issue is present in assessing adjectives, due to the bulk of the adjectives being selected by Asian participants. Because of this, the findings may not generalize to other populations. Recruiting enough participants may have been in part due to how participants were recruited because this research did not attempt to collect participants from outside Kwantlen Polytechnic University's psychology research pool. This study also had design errors: the multiple selection option did not initially work, and in the multiple selection portion, intelligence was measured twice. Furthermore, there is an issue with social desirability: This study did not attempt to hide its intentions through deception—questions were written as honest and upfront as possible. The hypothesis used had limitations of its own: Asian participants would likely have been more aware of negative stereotypes of the Asian community than non-Asian participants as they face during the coronavirus pandemic, and the hypothesis did not reflect this. The questionnaire items and response scales may have also led to confusion for participants. How individuals define "accurate" varies, and participants may have understood the questions asked to be to the extent they personally believed the statements to be accurate rather than how accurate society would perceive the statements. Therefore, how the questions were phrased, in addition to the current social climate, could have influenced how participants responded.

Conclusion

Although findings from this study did not support its hypothesis, it is still possible that society's beliefs about the Asian community have been impacted during the Coronavirus pandemic. Heidinger and Cotter (2020) found that visible minorities became more aware of harassment based on race after the introduction of the Coronavirus pandemic. The additional fear of walking alone is still of concern: Heidinger and Cotter (2020) reported that participants who were Korean, Filipino, and Chinese felt more anxiety walking alone in the streets at night

after the Coronavirus pandemic began in 2020. Racism in relation to life-altering events like the Coronavirus pandemic is still an important topic to explore while the world rapidly changes. New and shocking events may change individuals' perspectives of out-groups.

Tables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Participants (N = 68)

Participants		n	%
Gender	Female	57	83.8
	Male	11	16.2
Ethnicity	Asian	42	61.8
	Non-Asian	26	38.2

Table 2

Adjectives about Society's Beliefs Selected by Asian Participants and Non-Asian Participants

Adjectives	Asian	Non-Asian	χ^2	p	Cramer's V
Academic	47.1%	30.9%	0.19	.658	0.05
Bad Drivers	57.1%	80.8%	4.0	.045	0.24
Resilient	70.6%	29.4%	0.74	.387	0.10
Highly Educated	58.8%	41.2%	0.24	.618	0.06
Family Oriented	65.9%	34.1%	0.90	.341	0.11
Humble	66.7%	33.3%	0.30	.578	0.06
Intelligent	68.0%	38.2%	3.11	.078	0.21
Ambitious	56.7%	43.3%	0.59	.442	0.09
Disciplined	69%	31%	2.47	.116	0.19
Quiet	61.1%	38.9%	0.01	.906	0.01
Coronavirus	57.8%	42.2%	0.89	.344	0.11
Workaholics	54.8%	45.2%	1.16	.282	0.13
Intelligent	64.8%	35.2%	1.03	.309	0.12
Analytical	60.7%	39.3%	0.02	.881	0.01
Socially Awkward	68.0%	32.0%	0.065	.420	0.09
Uptight	69.7%	30.3%	1.71	.191	0.15

References

Arora, K. S. K. (2013). Reflections on the experiences of turbaned Sikh men in the aftermath 9/11. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, *5*(1), 116–121. https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.5.1.116-121

Bhatt, G. (2008, March 4). *The world of 'us' versus 'them'* [PSYC 3343 class handout]. Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Bhatt, G., Sadfar, S., Berry, J., Yampolsky, M. A., & Tonks, R. (2020, October 12). *What is racism? What can we do to address it?* [Fact sheet]. Canadian Psychological Association. https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-racism/

CBC News. (2020, April 23). *Vancouver police ID suspect in alleged racially motivated attack against elderly Asian man with dementia*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-police-id-suspect-racially-motivated-attack-elderly-asian-man-dementia-1.5542763

Erhart, R. S., & Hall, D. L. (2019). A descriptive and comparative analysis of the content of stereotypes about Native Americans. *Race and Social Problems*, *11*(3), 225–242. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-019-09264-1

Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., Glick, P. & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*(6), 878–902. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.878

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

Harris, S. (2020, October 30). *Reported anti-Asian hate crimes up 878% in Vancouver: Police*. Huffington Post. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/anti-asian-hate-crimes-2020_ca_5f9c3403c5b61b5109e705a6

Heidinger, L., & Cotter, A. (2020, July 8). *Perceptions of personal safety among population groups designated as visible minorities in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00046-eng.htm

Helleiner, J. (2012). Whiteness and narratives of a racialized Canada/US Border at Niagara. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *37*(2), 109–135. https://doi.org/10.29173/cjs10016

Lah, K., & Kravarik, J. (2021, February 16). *Family of Thai immigrant, 84, says fatal attack 'was driven by hate.'* CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/16/us/san-francisco-vicha-ratanapakdee-asian-american-attacks/index.html

Lee, T. L., & Fiske, S. T. (2006). Not an outgroup, not yet an ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *30*(6), 751–768. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2006.06.005