INVITED EDITORIAL: A Call to Action for Psychology in the Wake of Anti-Asian Violence

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ABSTRACT. Anti-Asian violence has been on the rise since March 2020. Recent data on rates of discrimination and violence as well as the impact on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) mental health is presented and discussed in the context of common stereotypes about AAPIs. Suggestions for how the field of psychology can be helpful in responding to anti-Asian hate are offered. The article concludes with a message to AAPI psychology students about caring for themselves and finding community.

Keywords: Asian American, stereotyping, discrimination, COVID-19, unrest

Acts of discrimination, hate, and violence directed toward Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities have been on the rise since March 2020. These acts coincide with rhetoric from public officials tying COVID-19 to China by referring to COVID-19 as the “kung flu” and “Wuhan virus.” Yet anti-Asian discrimination and violence is not new in the United States. For instance, in 1875, 15 Chinese immigrants were lynched by an anti-Chinese mob in Los Angeles, the largest mass lynching in the United States to date. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was one of the first laws in the United States to ban immigration specifically based on race. Executive Order 9066 forced American citizens of Japanese ancestry into internment camps based on fear and racial prejudice. These historical moments have preceded more contemporary examples. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, South Asian Americans were targeted with profiling and violence including the 2012 murder of six Sikh members of the Oak Creek Gurdwara in Wisconsin. More recently, in January 2021, Vicha Ratanapakdee, an 84-year-old Thai immigrant, was attacked and killed in San Francisco. In March 2021, Vilma Kari, a 65-year-old Philipina woman was repeatedly kicked and stomped on while witnesses looked away. On March 17, 2021, six Asian women, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Hyun Jung Grant, Soon Park, Suncha Kim, and Yong Yue were murdered in Atlanta.

Recent Data
On March 17, the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center also released a new report documenting the nearly 3,800 instances of anti-Asian bias that occurred between March 2020 and February 2021 (Jeung et al., 2021). Reported incidents of bias occurred in all 50 states. Gender differences were also evident with women being 2.3 times more likely to report hate incidents than men. Most incidents (68%) involved some form of verbal harassment such as being sworn at or called derogatory slurs, although 11% reported physical assault such as being pepper sprayed, punched, and spat at. An April 2021 New York Times analysis breaking anti-Asian hate down by month found that, although there was an initial surge in hate crimes in March 2020, March 2021 has had the highest volume of hate crimes directed toward the AAPI community since the pandemic began (Cai et al., 2021).

A new follow-up study (Saw et al., 2021) conducted between January and March 2021 examined the psychological impact of experiencing these acts of bias with the approximately 1,400 individuals who initially reported incidents of bias to Stop AAPI Hate. Of the 413 respondents, 42% were currently experiencing anxiety symptoms, 30% were experiencing depression symptoms, and 95% felt less safe in their community. AAPI individuals reporting COVID-related discrimination were also more likely to report symptoms of posttraumatic stress, even after controlling for pre-existing mental health diagnoses. These findings make sense considering research that has demonstrated that the exposure and reexposure of race-based stress can lead to PTSD-like symptoms (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019).
Stereotyping and COVID

If the acts of violence themselves were not enough, much of the hate being directed at AAPI communities are directly tied to long-standing stereotypes about Asian Americans, which can bring up memories of similar incidents that have happened in the past. Hearing about act after act of discrimination can also bring feelings of dehumanization, fetishization, not belonging, silence, and invisibility. For example, the idea that, because COVID-19 originated in China, all Asian Americans are carrying COVID or are themselves a virus, harken back to the idea of the “Yellow Peril” and the stereotype that Asians are unclean. Initial media coverage of the murders in Atlanta focused on “sex addiction” as a motive and the fact that the shootings took place at spas. Although not directly alleging that the women who worked in these spas were providing illicit sexual services, it is not hard to draw that implication. This connection of AAPI women to sex work, despite there being no evidence of that being the case, can, specifically for AAPI women, trigger stereotypes about being considered “exotic,” “hypersexualized,” and “submissive.” It may also activate memories of a painful history of Asian women who were forced to engage in sexual acts due to military occupation or colonization (Lamothe, 2014).

The perpetual foreigner stereotype suggests that, regardless of how many generations an AAPI person has been in the United States, they can never truly be “American.” When Asian Americans are told to go “back to China,” this signals that AAPI people do not belong here and renders invisible the meaningful contributions AAPI people are currently making to this country as essential workers, teachers, students, medical personnel, and employees to name a few. When newscasters butcher Asian names, it reinforces the idea that Asian Americans are different or “other.”

However, the most well-known stereotypes about Asian Americans are those perpetuated by the model minority myth. This term was coined in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement. Asian Americans were stereotyped as quiet, hardworking, intelligent, and disciplined. Their economic success was used as a weapon against the argument that systemic racism disadvantaged non-White individuals, and also led to the perception that, because they were doing well economically, Asian Americans did not face barriers and did not need or deserve help. In actuality, the AAPI community experiences the largest income inequality out of all racial groups due to an extremely varied immigration history (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018). Income distribution can be visualized as a barbell with sizable groups at both the top and bottom of the distribution. The model minority myth erases the diversity that exists in the AAPI community. It perpetuates the idea that Asian Americans do not struggle or need help, and it sets the expectations that Asian Americans are quiet and do not make waves. The delay of attention and response to rising anti-Asian violence, perhaps out of a belief that Asian Americans have it “better” than other ethnic minority groups, is the rotten fruit of the model minority stereotype.

A Call to Action

Although these statistics and the times we are in may feel sobering, I hold great hope that psychology students and faculty are particularly well-positioned to offer the tools needed to begin to address the epidemic of hatred and violence. First though, we must agree that we cannot fix the problem simply by punishing the perpetrators. That is like trying to fix a broken arm by prescribing pain killers, chasing after symptom reduction rather than the root cause. Psychologists need to start speaking out about what we see as those root causes of hate and violence. Psychologists are experts in human behavior and development. We study cognitive biases, stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. We develop interventions and evaluate outcomes. We are immersed in understanding mental health and the factors that increase both risk and resilience. It is time that we make our voices heard in national conversations on these topics, speaking from a position informed by evidence. Here are some steps, both long-term and short, that psychology faculty and students can take to help:

1. Understand what unique and valuable skills you possess given your training in psychology and leverage that training in an applied and meaningful way to help address hate and discrimination.

Use your research skills to more deeply understand factors that perpetuate discrimination or help to combat bias. Use your ability to synthesize information to understand patterns and identify needs. Use your verbal and written communication skills to share your knowledge with others. Students, if given the option to select your own topic, focus your term paper or final project on an issue that advances this conversation (or another social issue that you care about); write an op-ed for your local paper; or partner with a community organization and offer
your skills. For those further along in their training, give expert testimony rooted in psychological science to lawmakers. Look at programs like The Green Dot bystander intervention program and Hollaback for inspiration and examples of psychological knowledge informing training programs that combat harassment and violence.

2. Operationalize aspirational practices. Many campuses are putting out statements denouncing hate and reaffirming a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The current American Psychological Association (APA) Guidelines for Undergraduate Psychology Majors includes the learning goal, “ethical and social responsibility in a diverse world,” with the subgoal of “adopt values that build community at local, national, and global levels” (APA, 2013). It is wonderful that we have started talking about these issues. Now we need to decide how we will translate these intentions into specific, measurable action. Psychology faculty should have conversations with their colleagues about how ethical and social responsibility is operationalized, embedded in the curriculum, and assessed. Given the skills mentioned above, psychology faculty may also emerge as natural leaders for campus-wide conversations about translating good intentions into sustainable action. Students, do not be afraid to hold your faculty and administration accountable by asking hard questions. If you have suggestions or advice about what you would like to see in your department or on your campus, organize and present your ideas. If your school has a student body government, that may be a helpful outlet for making a collective request.

3. Continue to educate yourself. The AAPI story is often erased when we talk about American history. See Figure 1 for a list of resources, which includes readings to learn more. Do not feel you have to limit your learning to academic readings; also check out music, films, fiction, and poetry that center AAPI stories, and not just stories around struggle or immigration.

4. Support your Asian American peers. As discussed earlier, invisibility and the denial of struggle are intricately woven into the AAPI experience. Believe and acknowledge the experiences of AAPI students, faculty, and staff.

A Message to AAPI Students
I want to end with a message directly to the AAPI students who may be reading this article. If you are feeling increased levels of stress, anxiety, or depression in response to hearing about ongoing racial violence directed toward your community, know that you are not alone or making a “big deal” out of nothing. A robust body of research supports the idea that racial discrimination is linked with distress and mental health symptoms (see Vines et al., 2017, for a review). Take your health seriously. Help is available. It may feel confusing and frustrating to try to process anti-Asian hate in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement of the summer. Some of you may feel angry about the lack of a similar wave of outrage and public demonstration. Others may feel conflicted about centering the struggle of AAPIs when Asian Americans as a monolithic group tend to enjoy relative privilege compared to other communities of color. Our struggles are not the same, but they are interconnected. You might need to take care of yourself right now so that you can continue to show up for others in the future, and that is okay.

It is important, especially now, to have a community where you feel supported, seen, and valued. The need for community applies both personally and professionally. The idea of a professional community may be new to you, but having a community of scholars, sometimes beyond the walls of your university, who share your interests and value your work and ideas can help sustain you on your academic journey. Find the people who will help keep you going professionally because there is much work to be done. For some of you, Psi Chi may be that community. Personally, I have found my professional home within the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA), an organization founded in 1972 by brothers Derald Wing Sue and Stanley Sue. AAPA strives to advance the mental health and well-being of Asian American communities through research, professional practice, education, and policy. APA’s Division 45: The Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity and

FIGURE 1
Resources for Support and Continued Learning

- https://stopaapihate.org/actnow/
- https://www.ncfr.org/resources/resource-collections/resources-dismantle-racism-asian-american-community
- https://apidisabilities.org/recent-events/aapi-community-resources/resources
- https://www.napaba.org/page/HateCrimeResources/
  (See resources on page 1.)
- https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/08/arts/asian-american-photos-low.html?referringSource=articleShare (This is a beautiful photo essay that depicts love within the AAPI community in a time of hate.)
Race, and the other ethnic minority psychological associations: the American Arab, Middle Eastern and North African Psychological Association; the Association of Black Psychologists; the National Latinx Psychological Association; and the Society of Indian Psychologists may also be important sources of community. Many of these associations offer mentoring opportunities for students, culturally informed professional development, and have annual conferences where you can learn about new research in the field or present your own work. Beyond just being your major or your academic focus, psychology can also be your community if you want it to be.

References


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*Online programs are available.

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