



HEALING THROUGH HISTORY: THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT AMONG ASIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS

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The hate towards Asians has been more visible since the outbreak of Covid-19; however, it was not acknowledged until March of 2021 when the media began covering selected attacks. Despite the rise in public awareness regarding Asian hate, the seemingly lack of response from various institutions, particularly academic institutions, was disappointing. The way professors continued to teach and expected students, especially Asian students, to progress throughout their day as normal was heartbreaking. When the Black Lives Matter was at its peak, time was dedicated towards discussing the current events and checking on the well-being of the students. However, the same could not be said when the Stop Asian Hate movement garnered attention. Any response that was produced radiated the aura of performative allyship - another equity inclusion task checked. The authenticity of including the pain Asians and Asian Americans were experiencing in the narrative, was absent. Although nothing could have prepared professionals and students of the Asian community for the terror that has been unraveling, there was an expectation to at least hold conversations to perhaps suggest how to support individuals hurting from the current events.

The neglect to discuss the current events is a covert act of oppression that further perpetuates the Model Minority Myth that most, if not all, Asians fall victim to. The discrimination and hate crimes towards Asians are not new - perhaps the name Vincent Chin, may now ring a bell. Despite President Biden's condemnation of xenophobia - he called it "unacceptable and un-American," hate crime is continuing, and the damage of "Kung-Flu" and "Chinese-virus" is spreading like wildfire. The types of discrimination that the community have been experiencing included verbal harassments, physical assaults, civil rights violations, and online harassments. There have been, almost daily, reports of individuals being called derogatory names, told to "go back to where they came from" as if they are perpetual unwanted foreigners. Reports of elderly Asian individuals being shoved, Asian individuals getting punched while simply walking down the streets, backpacks getting lit on fire while waiting for transportation, and many more - yet, the media only covered a few. For Asian individuals, there are news outlets such as NextShark

on social media that allow the community to be informed about the frequent attacks and unite. Without a doubt, such experiences have detrimental impacts on the mental health and well beings of Asians and Asian Americans. A Stop AAPI Hate follow-up survey conducted by Saw et al. 2021, concluded that one in five Asian Americans who have experienced racial trauma show the signs of the psychological and emotional harm caused by racism (Saw et al., 2021). Asian American individuals who have experienced racism possess increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and physical symptoms (Liu et al., 2021). Not only that but, experience of racism during Covid-19 is found to be more associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Hahm et al., 2021). Between mid-March and early August 2020, over 2,500 hate incidents against the AAPI community have been recorded - and that number increased to 6,603 reported incidents by March 31, 2021 (Jeung et al., 2021).

The Biden Administration passed a new bill to address hate crimes against Asian Americans. The law mainly strengthens administrative systems intended to identify and provide consequences on hate crimes as well as encourage the creation of state-run hate crimes hotlines, provide grants to law enforcement agencies to train officers to identify hate crimes and provide public education campaigns about bias against people of Asian descent. Illinois, just recently, became the first state to require an Asian history curriculum via the Teaching Equitable Asian American History Act (TEAACH Act). Despite the long history and footprint that Asians have left in the foundations of America, the stories are just now being required to be taught in school. It is interesting that even though research suggests a function of teaching children about their race and identity is to help them recognize societal discrimination (Hughes et al, 2006), there is a lot of hesitancy to be inclusive in schools' curricula.

Personally, the events have impacted me tremendously both emotionally, mentally, and physically. I was, and still live in constant fear for my safety as well as my family's and friends'. As I think about each trip outside, I think about self-defense strategies, I think about all of the possible dangers that can happen, I think about whether or not I should dye my hair to make me look less Asian from behind to prevent an attack, and sadly, I also think about the potential goodbye if the worst case scenario happens. Each day has been traumatic, and I notice that my body has responded to the trauma. I noticed that I am shutting down in more ways than one, yet I have to put on a brave face to work with clients and be in class. It has been extremely exhausting because with clients, some of my clients are of Asian descent and they share with me their fears about the current world events, and in class and at work, I must provide the educational and advocacy piece for the community. Every corner I turn, everywhere I look, I am being bombarded with this sense of fear and hopelessness and it definitely is taking a toll. During the forums that my academic institution held and the conversations that I have had with peers in classrooms as well as at training sites, I could not help but think how lucky some people are because they are White or White passing. The way they look does not make them an automatic target; it takes a little bit more investigation before they are deemed a target. That is not to say they do not have their own pains and struggles; it is to say that race is one factor that they do not need to worry about when they are walking down the street or sitting in front of a client in fear of being a target.

The Introduction to Asian Cultures: The Asian Experience in the United States course — which debuted through William James College's Asian Mental Health program, the first psychology graduate program with a concentration on Asian mental health — was my savior during the difficult time. The novel course introduced current research on Asians, including

history, impact of colonialism, community life, language experience, arts, education, politics, economics and health and well-being. Core issues such as intra-Asian diversity, the role of family, immigrant versus refugee status, acculturation, culture shock and social adjustment, generational influences, the “Model Minority” myth, and racism and discrimination as they impact Asian identity formation were addressed. When practicum site failed to provide support from the get-go even though it has a large Asian patient population, when school failed to include Asians in the narrative - this course became a security blanket. To be able to partake in this class has provided an incredibly safe space for me to be vulnerable and explore what it means to be Asian American. I believe that through this class, I was able to grow into my Asian identity and become prouder to be Vietnamese American. There used to be a part of me that was embarrassed that I was an immigrant — a nagging piece that told me *you’re not good enough, you’re not like the others*. Reflecting now, the only feeling I should have ever felt was pride and gratitude. The sacrifices that my parents made and continue to make allowed me to be where I am today. What a privilege it has and continues to be to be able to help and support my parents in achieving the notorious American dream. Those moments of balancing the two cultures, both struggles and successes, are part of my immigration story that I should highlight, embellish, and cherish.

Prior to these past few years, I never truly thought about what it meant to be an Asian in America — and that was a privilege to be *that* blissfully ignorant. When I was prompted to think about the hyphen between the words “Asian-American,” it was as though Pandora’s Box had opened. Something about that hyphen suddenly made my experience here in the US make a lot more sense. A part of me has always felt that you needed to pick a side because I was always too this for that and too that for this so it was a constant switching on and off — wearing different hats to accommodate whatever space I was in. Thinking about that little punctuation allowed me to recognize that I can be *both* at the same time and that it was *okay* to be both without needing to “switch” identities depending on my environment. Deep down, I believe I have always been genuine and treasuring both the Vietnamese me and the American me, but I think being able to visualize the hyphen as a balance with Asian and American as sides of a scale brought that belief to cognition.

I do not think there will ever be another experience or moment like this class. The way we all were supportive of one another, the way we learned and grew together, the bond that we all formed with each other is indescribable. I have never enjoyed a class so much and I have never been challenged so much to look at myself, my identity, and what that all means for Thanh as a clinician. The welcoming environment truly enabled us to dive deeper and explore our histories and experiences. Although I have had diversity courses and disparity courses, not a single class allowed this level of discussion and exploration. Aside from the academic gains, I am struck at how we all have bonded and befriended one another. I have never been in a class in which all of the students share similar stories as I do and *look* similar to how I look. To be in a room in which we do not explain ourselves or our experience or provide details but yet we understand each other, is just so refreshing. To be in a room where you feel like you belong is like breathing in fresh air. To read reading assignments and be able to identify and relate to and feel represented has been exhilarating. The Asian history was never taught in history class or mentioned in any classes throughout my academic career. To be able to learn about Angel Island was validating that Asians belong and will always belong here – we have history, and we have deeply ingrained roots. To experience all of that during the time of division - to be able to speak my truth despite my voice shaking and my words possibly falling on empty ears - to be able to grow and make my mark as

as an Asian American woman, and one who unequivocally deserves her space in this Melting Pot, has been profoundly transcendent.

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