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Anti-Asian Racism during COVID-19: Emotional Challenges, Coping, and Implications for Asian American History Teaching

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Abstract: Anti-Asian scapegoating, sentiment, and hate have caused devastating psychological and behavioral challenges among Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study aims to understand Asians' and Asian Americans' experiences of racial discrimination during the pandemic, examine their reflections on the impacts of anti-Asian racism on their emotions and coping, and explore their perspectives on teaching Asian American history in combating anti-Asian racism. The results of this study showed that the participants articulated an array of profound emotional challenges in response to the deleterious effects of personal and vicarious experiences of racism. They used varied coping strategies, exhibiting heightened vigilance and intentional proactive measures to protect themselves and their communities against anti-Asian racism. The participants also underscored the intersectionality between race and gender, highlighting the vulnerability of Asian women. Additionally, the participants advocated for the inclusion of Asian American history in the school curriculum to dismantle and disrupt systematic racism. This study reveals the emotional and behavioral effects of anti-Asian racism on Asian and Asian American individuals and communities. It illustrates the crucial role of amplifying Asian and Asian American voices in the school curriculum in combating anti-Asian racism beyond the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; anti-Asian racism; emotional well-being; coping; Asian American history; intersectionality; systematic racism; Asian and Asian American



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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Asians have been the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in the United States (US) [1]. According to the U.S. Census Bureau [2], Asians refer to “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam”. Asian American is an umbrella category that includes both US citizens and immigrants with ancestry from Asia [3]. The term “Asian American” was coined by activists Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka in the late 1960s to combat the use of the derogatory term “Oriental”, which held racist and colonialist connotations, and to unify a wide range of communities with shared experiences.

Since the coronavirus outbreak was first identified in Wuhan, China, the rise of anti-Asian sentiments has been a global phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic [4]. The climate of racism and xenophobia against Asians and Asian Americans has intensified in the US. Xenophobic messages (e.g., “China virus”) based on a stereotypical association

of Chinese individuals with coronavirus have shown up in political campaigns, news, and social media. This racially derogatory rhetoric quickly stigmatized and increased discrimination against all Asians and Asian Americans regardless of their actual ethnicities. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) documented a 70% increase in the reports of anti-Asian hate crimes in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. The Stop AAPI Hate Coalition received over 11,500 anti-Asian hate incident reports during the first two years of the pandemic [6].

Anti-Asian scapegoating, sentiment, and hate during the pandemic have caused devastating emotional challenges among Asians and Asian Americans, including fear, distress, depression, and so on [6–9]. The surge in anti-Asian racism has also affected how they cope with racism and associated stress, resulting in heightened vigilance, support seeking, and avoidance/withdrawal behaviors, such as social seclusion [10–12]. To understand the emotional and behavioral impacts of anti-Asian racism, some survey studies have been conducted [11–14]. Despite the valuable insights these quantitative studies offer, they have limited ability to capture the nuanced individual experiences.

Meanwhile, several states, such as New Jersey and Connecticut, have recently passed bills to mandate Asian American history in the public school curriculum. However, little is known about how Asians and Asian Americans perceive the role of teaching Asian American history in combating anti-Asian racism. Therefore, the present qualitative case study aims to (1) understand Asians' and Asian Americans' experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) explore their reflections on the impacts of anti-Asian racism on their emotions and coping, and (3) gain insight into their perspectives on teaching Asian American history in school.

1.1. Theoretical Frameworks

Asian American critical race theory (AsianCrit) [15], complemented by the race-based traumatic stress theory [16] and the school ethnic-racial socialization model (school ERS) [17], serves as the theoretical framework for this study. AsianCrit posits that racial discrimination prevails in the everyday experience of Asians and Asian Americans in the US, racializing them as model minorities and as perpetual foreigners at the same time [15]. The model minority stereotype portrays Asians and Asian Americans as model minorities or “honorary white”—hardworking, successful, and law-abiding—with narrowly defined educational and economic success [18]. The stereotype disguises their individual efforts while “rendering the segment of the Asian American population that is struggling irrelevant and unworthy of attention” [19] (p. 576). It downplays systematic barriers and excludes Asians and Asian Americans from discourse on racial justice [18,19]. Among all Asians in the US, 34.3% are US-born [20]. However, the perpetual foreigner stereotype portrays all Asians and Asian Americans as “others” and not as Americans, which excludes and denies their belonging in the US, regardless of nativity and immigration status [21–23]. The model minority and the perpetual foreigner stereotypes may serve as the underlying drive of hate crimes and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby perpetuating systemic racism.

Ethnic-racial socialization refers to the transmission of information to children and youth regarding race and ethnicity [24]. It instills cultural pride, prepares children for bias, and fosters intergroup attitudes [24]. In the face of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching Asian American history is essential to amplify Asian and Asian American voices and combat racism [25]. According to the race-based traumatic stress theory [16], racial discrimination as a powerful stressor may deteriorate the well-being of the affected individuals and influence how they respond to discrimination and stress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, being targets of hate crimes and xenophobic violence created a hostile environment for Asians and Asian Americans, causing emotional and coping challenges. The school ERS model underscores the role of schools in providing a crucial context of ethnic-racial socialization for students, transmitting important information about race/ethnicity to promote skills and strategies to combat racism [17]. Therefore,

to reduce racism and associated adverse impacts, teaching Asian American history in schools is essential to validate Asian and Asian American experiences, uproot anti-Asian racism, promote belonging and mental health among Asians and Americans, and create an inclusive environment for all [25].

1.2. The Impacts of Racial Discrimination on Emotions and Coping

Since the coronavirus outbreak, a stereotypical association of Chinese people with the virus fueled racism and xenophobia against all Asians and Asian Americans, scapegoating them for bringing and spreading the virus. To date, there has been no conclusive evidence of this, but it was used to rationalize racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans. A nationally representative survey showed that one in five Asian Americans experienced at least one racial discrimination incident during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic [6]. Racial discrimination has been found to undermine emotional well-being among Asians and Asian Americans, including fear, stress, depression, anger, and feelings of hopelessness [6–9]. The 2020 report by America's Promise Alliance showed that Asian youth reported poorer emotional and cognitive health than Black, Latinx, and white youth [26]. Coping is defined as “a mechanism by which individuals understand, reframe, or react to the experience of a stressful event” [27], which involves emotional regulation and problem management [12]. Anti-Asian racism has also affected how Asian and Asian American individuals adjust their behaviors to cope with racism and associated emotional challenges, such as making an effort to avoid personal injury or seeking available support [10–12]. The study by Chiang et al. (2022) found that because of concerns about racist acts, some Asian American participants reported avoiding going out alone and always covering their faces to disguise their Asian appearance.

As the most salient stereotypes that fundamentally drive anti-Asian hate and sentiment, the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes are linked to racial discrimination in various forms (e.g., physical, verbal, and microaggression) and at different levels (e.g., interpersonal and institutionalized) [15]. The perpetual foreigner stereotype deteriorates Asians' and Asian Americans' mental health [21–23]. A strong message of exclusion and denial of American identity was conveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic by seeing all Asians as foreigners, blaming them for the coronavirus, and telling them to go back to China [28]. The model minority stereotype downplays structural oppression while blaming individuals for not “making it” [18,19,29]. Research has shown that the internalization of the model minority stereotype often results in the pressure to live up to the expectation of being a model minority [29,30]. The stereotype also impedes Asians and Asian Americans from being aware of structural racism and advocating for racial justice [9,31,32].

1.3. Combating Racial Discrimination by Teaching Asian American History

Research demonstrates that Asian American students experience the highest levels of peer discrimination of any racial and ethnic minority groups in schools [33–35]. They are also more subject to negative emotional outcomes as a result of racial discrimination than their peers of other races [36]. Schools provide crucial contexts of ethnic-racial socialization for students to combat racism [17]. However, the invisibility of Asian American experiences is a long-standing problem in the American educational system [37–40]. In a study with Asian American students in a California public high school, nearly all stressed the absence of Asian American history in their classes, which reinforced their feeling of being neglected and shrouded in stereotypes [41]. Furthermore, many scholars consider the narrative of Asian American experiences in U.S. history textbooks to be problematic and controversial [37,38,41]. Asians and Asian Americans are often portrayed as passive victims or industrious outsiders without interpreting their resistance and contribution [37,38]. These omissions and distortions marginalize Asians and Asian Americans from full civic identity and further perpetuate model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes [38–40].

To combat anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, several states (e.g., New Jersey and Connecticut) passed bills to mandate Asian American history in the public school curriculum. Teaching Asian American history in school is essential to amplify Asian American voices, acknowledge the diversity of Asian American populations, and fight against the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes [25]. In addition to dismantling anti-Asian racism, teaching Asian American history can also create an inclusive learning environment, fostering positive interracial relationships in the long run. However, little is known about how Asians and Asian Americans interpret the role of teaching Asian American history in combating anti-Asian racism.

1.4. The Present Study

This case study examined Asians' and Asian Americans' experiences of racial discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated emotional and behavioral challenges. It also investigated their perspectives on the role of teaching Asian American history in school in combating anti-Asian racism. Three research questions guided this study: (1) How did anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic influence emotions among Asians and Asian Americans? (2) How did Asians and Asian Americans cope with racism? (3) How does teaching Asian American history combat anti-Asian racism? With an intensive analysis of individual experiences, this case study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of anti-Asian racism, its influences, and educational implications to combat racism from Asian and Asian American perspectives [42].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 38 Asians and Asian Americans (see Table 1). They self-identified as being Asian and living, working, and studying in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants resided in different states, held varied immigration and generation statuses, belonged to different age and ethnic groups, identified with different genders, and attained different levels of education. Specifically, 23 participants self-identified as female, and 15 participants self-identified as male. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75 years old. A total of 25 participants were foreign-born, and 13 were US-born Asian Americans. Participants self-identified as being of East, Southeast, and South Asian descent, including Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian, and Korean. Their educational backgrounds ranged from "some schooling but no high school diploma" to "doctoral degree graduate".

2.2. Procedure

This study used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling protocol to recruit participants through social media, Asian and Asian American forums, Asian American Studies programs, and online groups [43]. Participants were recruited who met the criteria of self-identifying as Asian or Asian American and living, working, or traveling in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom between June 2020 and March 2023. As our research team speaks English and Mandarin, participant recruitment materials were made available in both languages. Chinese interviews were conducted exclusively among participants who preferred Mandarin. An interview protocol was developed by the authors. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. All participants gave their informed consent before participating in this study.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants were given pseudonyms. Deductive and inductive coding methods were applied to analyze the interview data using NVivo 12 [44]. Based on the existing literature, a general draft

codebook was developed for deductive coding. Limited qualitative studies have been conducted on anti-Asian racism and its impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic, and very little is known about Asians' and Asian Americans' interpretations of Asian American history teaching in school. Therefore, inductive coding was also implemented to explore topics and themes that were not covered in previous literature. The bottom-up approach added new codes and revised existing codes in the codebook. Each researcher coded the data individually and discussed the coding in the weekly meetings to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings [45].

Table 1. Participant Information.

	Pseudonym	State	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Immigration Status	Generation Status	Years in the US	Education ¹	Family Income ²
1	Berry	NY	Chinese	Male	35–40	US citizen	1st	20	8	11
2	Wenxin	DE	Chinese	Female	25–30	Work Visa	-	10	8	11
3	Max	NY	Taiwanese	Male	25–30	US citizen	2nd	-	8	6
4	Ziwen	NJ	Chinese	Male	25–30	Student Visa	-	6	8	9
5	Wendy	NY	Chinese	Female	25–30	US citizen	2nd	-	8	7
6	Tu	NJ	Chinese	Male	25–30	Work Visa	-	7	8	11
7	Lingling	NY	Chinese	Female	25–30	Work Visa	-	5	8	-
8	Lilian	CA	Chinese	Female	51–55	Green card	1st	26	6	11
9	Jacklyn	MA	Taiwanese	Female	25–30	US citizen	2nd	-	8	4
10	Son	PA	Vietnamese	Male	18–24	US citizen	2nd	-	6	7
11	Kehua	PA	Chinese	Female	25–30	Student visa	-	4	8	3
12	Ying	PA	Chinese	Female	18–24	Green card	1st	6.5	8	9
13	Ze	CA	Chinese	Male	25–30	Work visa	-	7	8	11
14	Su	CA	Chinese	Female	36–40	US citizen	1st	20	8	11
15	Bowen	CA	Chinese	Male	31–35	Work visa	-	8	8	11
16	Anika	PA	Indian	Female	56–60	US citizen	1st	38	8	11
17	Aranya	PA	Indian	Female	25–30	US citizen	1st	27	3	11
18	Grace	CT	Chinese	Female	18–24	US citizen	2nd	-	4	11
19	Susie	DC	Mixed ³	Female	41–45	US citizen	1st	39	6	11
20	Tsiwen	PA	Chinese	Male	66–70	US citizen	2nd	-	8	9
21	Kai	PA	Japanese	Male	81–85	US citizen	3rd	-	8	11
22	Patrick	MD	Chinese	Male	41–45	US citizen	2nd	-	2	11
23	Vamsee	PA	Indian	Male	61–65	US citizen	1st	42	8	11
24	Elaina	PA	Indian	Female	61–65	US citizen	1st	35	8	11
25	David	CO	Taiwanese	Male	31–35	US citizen	2nd	-	8	11
26	Katherine	CO	Taiwanese	Female	25–30	US citizen	2nd	-	6	11
27	Peter	IL	Taiwanese	Male	31–35	US citizen	2nd	-	8	11
28	Yutong	FL	Chinese	Female	31–35	Work visa	-	6	8	-
29	Chan	NJ	Chinese	Male	25–30	Work visa	-	6	8	11
30	Hsin-yi	NY	Taiwanese	Female	25–30	Green card	1st	4	8	5
31	Huan	NJ	Chinese	Female	36–40	Green card	1st	9	8	11
32	Julia	NY	Chinese	Female	18–24	US citizen	2nd	-	6	4
33	Rachel	PA	Chinese	Female	18–24	US citizen	1st	4	4	-
34	Emma	PA	Chinese	Female	18–24	US citizen	2nd	-	4	11
35	Aoki	PA	Japanese	Male	71–75	US citizen	1st	41	8	11
36	Yiyi	PA	Chinese	Female	18–24	Student visa	-	2	8	3
37	Akari	NY	Japanese	Female	18–24	Student visa	-	5	6	9
38	Eun-Kyung	MA	Korean	Female	25–30	Student visa	-	4.5	8	5

Notes. ¹ Education: 1 = No schooling; 2 = Some schooling, but no high school diploma; 3 = High school diploma, GED, or equivalent; 4 = Vocational training or some college but no degree; 5 = Associate's degree; 6 = Bachelor's degree; 7 = Some graduate school but no degree; 8 = Master's, Doctoral, Medical, Law or other professional degree.

² Family income: 1 = \$10,000 or less, 2 = \$10,001–20,000, 3 = \$20,001–30,000, 4 = \$30,001–40,000, 5 = \$40,001–50,000, 6 = \$50,001–60,000, 7 = \$60,001–70,000, 8 = \$70,001–80,000, 9 = \$80,001–90,000, 10 = \$90,001–100,000, 11 = more than \$100,000. ³ White and Asian.

2.4. Researcher Positionality

It is important to acknowledge the researcher's positionality [44]. To improve the fidelity of this study, our research team varied by age, ethnicity, immigration and generation status, and region of residency. Among the five researchers, one is a US-born second-generation Asian-Chinese American, one is a first-generation Asian-Indian American, one is a foreign-born Georgian immigrant, and two are foreign-born Chinese immigrants. All researchers have extensive experience working with Asians and Asian Americans.

3. Results

In the sections below, we first present findings related to emotional and behavioral challenges among Asian and Asian American participants in response to anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Then we discuss Asian and Asian American participants' interpretation of teaching Asian American history in combating anti-Asian racism.

3.1. Anti-Asian Racism and Emotional Challenges

The participants articulated an array of profound emotional challenges in the face of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their accounts conveyed a deeply distressing narrative, characterized by feelings of vulnerability, disrespect, anger, fear, sadness, confusion, and exclusion.

3.1.1. Asians and Asian Americans as Scapegoats

The scapegoating of Asians and Asian Americans brought various forms of aggression during the pandemic. This was due to the association of the pandemic with the "China virus" that was generalized to all Asians. For example, Emma, a second-generation Chinese American youth, shared her college professor's derogatory and disrespectful speech:

"The teacher went, 'I don't understand why people are so offended by the use of the 'China virus' in the media. It's factual. It doesn't harm. Why are people just so sensitive about that language.' I don't think he understood the magnitude of that. It was a large classroom with over 60 people, and there were a couple of Asian Americans. We felt very attacked and targeted. I felt he was spreading the word that we should blame Chinese people for this virus. It was very disrespectful."

Emma shared the power teachers had in shaping student experiences, both by incorrectly associating and blaming COVID-19 on Chinese people and also alienating the Chinese students in their classes. Some participants shared stigmatization reactions they faced associated with the coronavirus. Rachel, a first-generation Chinese American adoptee, shared that she always kept her mask on because she was afraid people would associate her coughing with the coronavirus:

"My sister had a cold at one point but was afraid to cough. She was afraid that somebody would say something rude about how she was Chinese and coughing. I am afraid that is going to happen to me. When delivering food, I always keep my mask on, even if the rules state that it is okay to take your mask off."

Rachel demonstrated the harm of associating COVID-19 (a virus) with Chinese people and the fear of being targeted for being Chinese. Many participants reported being avoided by strangers and feeling targeted. Wendy, a second-generation Chinese American young adult, shared her feelings and highlighted the model minority stereotype as an underlying reason behind anti-Asian racism:

"A delivery man walked everywhere, with no mask. But when he came into our building, because we are an Asian building, he wore a mask. It's sort of like saying, 'Oh, you guys have a disease. Don't give it to me.' We felt targeted and discriminated against, even though it was not too obvious. . . . We don't need to research what this disease is from, what this virus is, and how this is spread. . . . We just know that if you are Chinese, you have the virus. You look weak. You don't speak up. You're very quiet. Let's blame it on you. That's very disturbing, very bothersome, and definitely a very wrong myth. . . . We sort of internalize it [the model minority stereotype]. We're the ones that usually keep silent. If someone does something to us, we take it in, and we try to process it. We move on. We don't try to fight back. We just like, 'OK. While this happens, tomorrow is another day.'"

Wendy's experience clearly demonstrated the harm of the "Chinese virus" myth on Chinese individuals.

In addition, participants from Asia shared that they had trouble identifying racism, but could share experiences that made them question if their interactions were shaded by their race since they had not experienced it in their home countries where they belonged to the dominant group. Kehua, a Chinese international student, shared, “I have never experienced racial discrimination in China. It is difficult for me to comprehend why individuals who do not know us would target us solely because of our different skin colors”. Hsin-yi, a first-generation Taiwanese immigrant, expressed her uncertainty about spotting racism:

“When I got in the car, the Uber driver would open the window. I’m not sure if that’s because there is just someone in the car, so this driver needs to open a window. But that makes me wonder why and whether it’s because I’m an Asian.”

Hsin-yi’s experience highlighted her discomfort and concern about being treated differently based on the way she looked.

The scapegoating of Asians and Asian Americans manifested in various forms and contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic. It left an indelible mark on the participants, yielding profound emotional ramifications. Emma found it unsettling that a figure of authority (i.e., a teacher) could wield such influence over students’ beliefs while espousing discriminatory remarks. Others were also exposed to a toxic atmosphere perpetrated by strangers, leaving them feeling targeted, disturbed, and frustrated.

3.1.2. Vicarious Racism

All participants reported experiencing vicarious racism—reading or hearing about anti-Asian incidents that happened to other Asians. Max, a second-generation Taiwanese American young adult, described his anger and disappointment in response to racism in social media, “I am hearing a lot of news about people being attacked or robbed for looking Asian. That makes me pissed off and upset about people who might be going out there without being able to work at home”. Emma echoed and elaborated on the perpetual foreigner stereotype that casts Asians as outsiders:

“It’s heartbreaking to see people of your race being attacked. They’re living in the US, and the number of ties they have with their home countries is so limited. The current climate is very toxic and derogatory towards Asian Americans. It makes people feel very unsafe within America, which is supposed to be a melting pot of cultures. It makes people feel unsafe in the place that they’re supposed to be calling home.”

Max and Emma were aware of how being in the US became more unsafe for Asians and Asian Americans during the pandemic. Eun-Kyung, a Korean international student, reflected on her emotions about discriminatory speeches and hate crimes posted on social media,

“It’s definitely horrible. The violent verbal and physical things make me feel really sick, frustrated, angry, and annoyed. I am depressed with how the world is going.”

Additionally, participants in a parenting role were fearful of potential discrimination against their children due to their Asian heritage. For example, Patrick, a Chinese American father of four children, described his feelings:

“Just reading news articles about verbal attacks toward Asian Americans by people who assume that the virus came from China, I worry that I’ll encounter someone who believes that. I’m sad and get fearful for my kids.”

Eun-Kyung and Patrick shared their reactions of frustration, anger, and fear to hearing so much about the discrimination Asians and Asian Americans faced during the pandemic. Kehua, a Chinese international student who gave birth to a son, expressed that the surge in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic intensified her feelings of not belonging:

“A persistent feeling of not belonging has always accompanied me. The thought of returning to our home country has frequently crossed our minds. Anti-Asian racism during the pandemic made us more certain of it.”

Kehua shared how the anti-Asian racism made her feel not welcome.

The experiences of vicarious racism were prevalent among the participants during the pandemic. They articulated a range of emotions, such as anger, disappointment, depression, fear, and a sense of not belonging, which reflected the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Parents expressed concerns about the safety of their children. At the time we wrote this paper, Kehua and her family had returned to China, hoping to provide a safer and less discriminatory environment for their child.

3.2. Coping with Anti-Asian Racism

The rise of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the coping strategies employed by the participants. They responded differently to the fear of discrimination, with some exhibiting hypervigilance and others taking precautions to protect themselves and their communities.

3.2.1. Heightened Vigilance and Avoidance of Places

Due to the surge in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic, all participants expressed heightened vigilance while in public, and some tried to avoid specific locations or circumstances. For example, Ryan, a second-generation Taiwanese American youth, shared:

“You got to keep an eye over your shoulder when you go out. When the pandemic started, I really did not leave my apartment, because I did not feel comfortable being out. I did not want to have a mentality that every person I see in the street is going to jump at me or sneer at me or do something racist.”

Ryan demonstrated the added fear and expectation Asian Americans felt that they would be treated poorly in public, simply based on their cultural background. In anticipation of being the target of anti-Asian discrimination, many participants changed their behaviors. Akari, a Japanese international student, avoided the subway because of hate crimes:

“I read in the news that a lady was walking her dog in the morning. She got attacked by strangers because she was racially Asian. Then, I am scared to go out. It takes me about 20 min to walk to school. Most people take the subway, but I choose to walk to campus every day because I am scared and want to minimize the risk.”

Haruto, a first-generation Japanese American, reflected on his choice to avoid Chinatowns and highlighted the shared experience of discrimination among Asians:

“During the peak of the pandemic, I avoided going to Chinatowns. Because people cannot distinguish Japanese, Chinese, and Korean, I feel the same kind of threat that Chinese people face. If we were going there, I would be very cautious watching the surroundings and make sure there were no strange guys coming to us.”

Akari and Haruto shared the change of routines they made and avoidance of being around Asians, for fear of being discriminated against.

In addition, some participants expressed feelings of insecurity about being an Asian woman. Julia, a second-generation Chinese American youth, shared her reaction to reading about incidents, “Whenever I read about something that happens to an Asian woman, I feel very sad. It can be anyone of us”. Hsin-yi echoed Julia’s sentiment:

“I feel particularly vulnerable because I couldn’t protect myself. Normally, I wouldn’t go out. My boyfriend would be like, ‘You just shouldn’t think too much about it. It’s not helping you.’ He wouldn’t really understand how I feel differently from him.”

Hsin-yi's account sheds light on the intersectionality between race and gender in the context of racial discrimination. Her boyfriend's support, while well-intentioned, fell short of grasping the unique fear and vulnerability Hsin-yi faced as an Asian and as a woman. Emma further elaborated on the intersectionality between race and gender:

"I saw the news about one Asian American woman pushed into the subway track. That was something I was very cognizant of. I am making sure to be very aware of my surroundings, especially being a female. I also think people take advantage of Asian females. There's just so much that goes around, even sexually. As a female, you already feel unsafe in our society, and then race makes it more complicated. In general, I feel very vulnerable in that position."

Emma highlights the unique experience of being a female and Asian American and the sexualization of Asian American females. The experiences she encountered were shaped by the convergence of her racial and gender identities, resulting in a multi-faceted form of prejudice.

A prevailing sense of heightened vigilance was evident among the participants. Many participants also refrained from going to certain places where anti-Asian hate crimes occurred more frequently, even though it caused some inconvenience. Furthermore, some female participants shared their sadness and insecurity as Asian women, highlighting the vulnerability they felt and the different situations they faced compared to their male counterparts.

3.2.2. Fostering Personal and Community Safety

Most participants expressed concerns about violent anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to ensure their own safety, some considered using weapons or other protective equipment to ensure their own safety, while others took the initiative to protect their communities. David, a second-generation Taiwanese American youth, shared:

"I have not personally experienced racial discrimination yet, but I acknowledge the possibility that there's a higher likelihood of those experiences, not only in frequency but in depth. They could be more violent or have deeper impacts on my life. When I leave the house, I am more prepared than I ever had been. I'm more alert. I will also carry pepper spray or weapons. Particularly when entering spaces where I think there's a chance of escalation. There's definitely a fear response. ... If I'm going to go to a drive-thru, I might have equipment. If I'm going out into a store, I might almost certainly at this point have equipment. This may be an interesting anecdote. I have been equipped every time I've left the house since COVID started, and that was not the case before."

David shared how he carried weapons when he was in public, in anticipation of experiencing anti-Asian discrimination. Barry, a Chinese immigrant, shared how his community group took the initiative to protect each other, particularly vulnerable members:

"We have a community group of 500 people. Because people hold the stereotype that Asians are rich and use cash, we established an anti-racism group to avoid robbery and other hate crimes. If any Asian gets robbed, they can ask for help in the group. We all have guns and can arrive immediately. It is more convenient and much quicker than calling the police. We may not need to shoot. We can have 50 cars honking at the same time to scare robbers away. We have another more aggressive group. No one is allowed to talk. If someone presses anything in the group, neighbors are ready to help immediately. Even the elders who do not speak English or know how to use WeChat can press anything. A strong group can protect vulnerable members."

This proactive decision to arm themselves stemmed from an urgent need to defend themselves and their community members against potential anti-Asian threats and acts of violence during the pandemic. In Barry's example, he proudly shared how his community

group took action to regain a sense of control and felt empowered to be able to protect vulnerable members in need. By taking such measures, participants not only exemplified a keen sense of self-defense but also embodied a strong commitment to social responsibility, thereby cultivating a safer environment for all.

3.3. Advocate for the Inclusion of Asian American History to Combat Anti-Asian Racism

In response to anti-Asian racism and associated emotional and behavioral challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, many participants advocated for the inclusion of Asian American history in the school curricula, emphasizing its importance in dismantling deep-rooted systematic racism. Haruto shared his experience about how the underrepresentation of Asian American history in American classrooms made him feel alienated:

“When I was in primary school fifty years ago, I was so afraid that they mentioned Japan. If they said Japan, everyone would look at me. They felt strange toward Japan. The school did not teach about Japan at all.”

Haruto shared his experience of being viewed as a foreigner because of his heritage and appearance, even though he was an American citizen.

Lilian noted the important role schools could play to help to have conversations about racial discrimination. Julia discussed the lack of Asian American history teaching and highlighted the significance of teaching Asian American contributions to uproot the perpetual foreigner stereotype and foster a sense of belonging:

“I took a class about Asian American history in college. That was the first time I learned about the history, which wasn’t just we immigrated here and built a railroad. I was upset when I was going into high school, there wasn’t really any mention of that. In world history, teachers glossed over it. They never mentioned the contributions that Asian Americans made to the US. I definitely think that teaching Asian American history is important because we’re also a very big part of American history. Not teaching Asian American history, we feel not like a part of our history.”

Julia explained the harm of not including Asian American history in US history classes, not knowing Asian American contributions to the US herself, and also for non-Asian Americans.

Eun-Kyung advocated for teaching Asian American history from a multidimensional perspective to empower Asians and Asian Americans:

“I think it’s so important to learn about not just white- and Western-centered history but learn about different histories of people who are always relegated to the margins and be able to think about history from all these different perspectives and lived experiences. It is so important to help students feel affirmed, and they are able to see history from diverse perspectives. It is also very important for higher education to have Asian American studies and ethnic studies programs so that people can start creating these critical lenses of understanding the world, understanding America, and being able to understand how structures of oppression are so deeply intertwined in the making of the country and where we are now. It almost gives you a lens and counter-narratives to be able to speak in your voice. It is important for everyone.”

The participants expressed a keen awareness of the absence of representation of Asian American voices and experiences in American classrooms. Haruto’s reflection on his experience fifty years ago and Julia’s recent experience suggested that Asian American voices have not historically been heard. They underscored how the absence of Asian American history perpetuated stereotypes, marginalized Asians and Asian Americans, and hindered their understanding and appreciation of their rich cultural heritage. Moreover, they highlighted how the exclusion of Asian American history results in a lack of cohesive sense of belonging.

Many other participants also emphasized Asian American history teaching. For example, Rachel shared that she did not receive any education about Asian American history in school and underscored that it should be a part of the school curriculum. Aoki described teaching Asian American history as “a positive process” for students. Hsin-yi elaborated that mandating Asian American history in public schools was “fantastic” because “there are so many different Asian groups that are going to take a great part of the history textbook”. Anika, as a first-generation immigrant, underscored the importance of improving the awareness of discrimination so that Asians and Asian Americans can address it. She explained, “It is better to understand that discrimination is ingrained in the fabric of society and then be able to deal with it right from the beginning... You have to be able to learn to face it, deal with it, and move beyond it”. Some participants, like Julia and Eun-Kyung, advocated for highlighting Asian American contributions and teaching Asian American history from a critical lens, challenging biases deeply ingrained in American society.

4. Discussion

America finds itself amid a dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racial violence. The spike in anti-Asian xenophobic rhetoric, violence, and hatred has resulted in devastating impacts on Asian and Asian American individuals and their linked lives. From the perspectives of Asian Crit, the race-based traumatic stress theory, and the school ERS model, this case study is dedicated to understanding Asians’ and Asian Americans’ experiences of racism, probing associated emotional and behavioral challenges, and investigating their perspectives on the role of Asian American history teaching. Our findings revealed that both personal and vicarious experiences of racism yielded profound emotional challenges among Asians and Asian Americans during the pandemic. Anti-Asian racism also resulted in varied coping strategies, including heightened vigilance and the implementation of proactive measures of self-protection and community safety. Meanwhile, the participants emphasized the importance of teaching Asian American history in combating anti-Asian racism beyond the pandemic.

4.1. Emotional Effects of Anti-Asian Racism: The Past, Present, and Future

The present study demonstrated that Asian and Asian American individuals experienced racial discrimination in various forms and contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with previous research [6–9], the participants in the present study reported a variety of negative emotions in response to racism, such as feeling targeted, depressed, angry, frustrated, and fearful. The present study also showed that both personal and vicarious racism was detrimental to the emotional well-being of affected individuals [8,12–14]. As anti-Asian sentiments were widespread on social media during the pandemic, vicarious racism may post a profound influence, exposing most Asians and Asian Americans to racial trauma regardless of their personal experiences [14]. Also, encounters with racism are linked to not only immediate emotional issues but enduring consequences beyond the pandemic [9,46].

The present study also highlights that anti-Asian hate crimes and sentiments during the pandemic revealed and perpetuated pre-existing patterns of inequalities and marginalization, especially the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, which have historically marginalized these groups. This finding suggests the importance of contextualizing the adverse emotional impacts of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic within the broader framework of long-standing systemic racism. Although the COVID-19 pandemic as an international health emergency is over [47], the racialized pandemic continues. Therefore, it is imperative to uproot and dismantle systems of oppression and support mental health among affected individuals with continuous efforts.

Additionally, the present study found that individuals who did not grow up in the US struggled to identify racial discrimination and comprehend the underlying causes of racism. Previous research illustrated that language and cultural barriers faced by immigrants are of-

ten associated with more discriminatory treatments and emotional distress [48–50]. During the pandemic, immigrants may have been at greater risk of emotional consequences of anti-Asian racism than their US-born counterparts [51]. Meanwhile, regardless of actual ethnic backgrounds, Asian and Asian American individuals are frequently erroneously labeled as “Chinese” and collectively experience racial stress [28]. Some participants who were not of Chinese descent in the present study (e.g., Haruto) expressed empathy toward Chinese individuals and reported a sense of solidarity among Asians and Asian Americans in the fight against racial discrimination. The shared consciousness of discrimination as a common fate can contribute to awareness of oppression and harness collective psychological resilience among Asians and Asian Americans to cope with racism [51].

4.2. Coping with Anti-Asian Racism: Individuals, Families, and Communities

The present study illustrated that Asians and Asian Americans exhibited notable behavioral changes to cope with racism and accompanying stress. Consistent with a recent study by Chiang et al. (2022), some participants displayed increased vigilance while in public and avoided certain places and situations. The present study also revealed the intersectionality between race and gender. Based on the Stop AAPI Hate National Report, hate incidents reported by women made up 61.8% of all reports [52]. Our female participants expressed feelings of vulnerability and indicated their inclination toward adopting extra precautions. Asian women have been historically sexually objectified and fetishized (e.g., “yellow fever”), portraying them as exotic and submissive. Asian women have also been seen as subservient and meek (e.g., “lotus blossom”) who would not speak up or stand up for themselves. The intersectionality between racism and sexism renders Asian and Asian American women prone to a greater predisposition towards racial trauma and behavioral challenges during the pandemic [53].

Asians were found to be less likely to carry weapons for self-defense than other racial groups before the COVID-19 pandemic [54]. However, some participants in the present study reported carrying a weapon more frequently in the face of violent and life-threatening anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic. A recent survey study also found that Asian American individuals who perceived or anticipated more racism were more likely to purchase a gun, while one-third of gun owners reported more frequent gun carrying since the start of the pandemic [55]. Moreover, the participants in the present study reported arming themselves, not only for their personal safety but to defend their communities. While previous research has primarily focused on coping at the individual level [10–12], the present study indicates that anti-Asian racism exerts a profound influence on coping in larger communities, suggesting an increase in Asian and Asian American solidarity to facilitate collective action to combat racism [53].

4.3. From Victimhood to Advocacy: Teaching Asian American History

To combat anti-Asian racism and amplify Asian and Asian American voices, our participants advocated for the inclusion of Asian American history in the school curriculum. They emphasized that the marginalization of Asian and Asian American experiences was a long-lasting problem in the American educational system. Most participants highlighted that teaching Asian American history was crucial for Asian and Asian American students to see themselves and their communities represented in the curriculum [38–40]. Given that anti-Asian hate crimes and sentiments during the COVID-19 pandemic were driven by deep-rooted systematic racism, the participants also stressed that teaching Asian American history was crucial to uproot racism embedded in American history [25]. For example, learning that Asians and Asian Americans were here at the formation of the US can help break down the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Understanding the heterogeneity of Asian and Asian American communities regarding languages, ethnicities, cultural practices, socioeconomic statuses, and so on can equip students with the knowledge to challenge the model minority stereotype and advocate for racial justice [9,31,32].

Furthermore, our participants addressed the issue that the description and explanation of Asian American events are incomplete, incoherent, and inaccurate, without interpreting the contributions that Asian Americans have made [38]. These omissions marginalize Asian and Asian American experiences, reinforce the feeling of being neglected, and perpetuate stereotypes against Asians and Asian Americans [38,39]. Asian American history should be taught from a decolonial lens and from Asian and Asian American perspectives to foster a more comprehensive, nuanced, and accurate understanding of Asian and Asian American communities [38,56]. So, Asian American history teaching can empower Asian and Asian American students to conscientize about their social positions and learn about how Asians and Asian Americans have contributed to the fabric of America, cultivating a sense of racial and ethnic pride [57]. The multi-dimensional story of history will also provide all students with a new view of the world while promoting racial justice for all [38].

4.4. Limitations and Implications

This study should be considered in the context of limitations. First, our participants were mainly from middle-class backgrounds, and most of them resided on the East and West Coasts. There were a smaller number of participants of Southeast and South Asian descent compared to those of East Asian descent. It is crucial to acknowledge that their perspectives may not represent the viewpoints of Asians and Asian Americans from other backgrounds. It is also pivotal to highlight that despite their relatively higher socioeconomic status, the participants in our study experienced racial discrimination and associated emotional and behavioral challenges. The finding further challenges the model minority stereotype that denies systematic racism and barriers faced by Asians and Asian Americans. Second, the present study focused on the experiences of Asian and Asian American individuals, while pan-Asian communities also consist of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPs). The lack of representation of NHP voices prevents us from capturing a holistic view of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on pan-Asian communities. Future studies should recruit participants from more diverse backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, this study has important implications. Consistent with Asian-Crit [15], the participants in our study underscored that racial discrimination affected their everyday life, especially the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, which served as the underlying causes of anti-Asian hate and sentiment during the pandemic. The present study validates the application of the race-based traumatic stress theory [16] to examine and understand the impacts of racism on the emotional and behavioral challenges of Asians and Asian Americans. In alignment with the statement of the school ethnic-racial socialization model (school ERS) [17], our participants also stressed the importance of schools in conveying messages regarding race and ethnicity and empowering Asian and Asian American voices.

The present study also has important practical implications. Many participants suggested teaching Asian American history in schools as a way to combat racism against Asians and Asian Americans. This approach has its merits and usually marks an early phase of curriculum reform and restructuring [58]. However, other measures must also be taken to inculcate a mindset that values diversity and views the fabric of society as a mosaic of multiple worldviews, frameworks, and perspectives. Studying the history of any specific group would build the knowledge base about a specific ethnic group. However, to develop a diverse, equitable, and inclusionary lens, a comprehensive system of policies, standards, and implementations needs to be set in motion to bring about change. The present study also highlights the importance and need for the integration of culturally responsive, equitable, and sustainable knowledge, skills, and practices in the curriculum of teacher training programs. Current educators should be provided with professional development opportunities to build knowledge, skills, and understanding about the growing diversity of the children and families they serve. Adequate resources and systems should be in place for the dissemination, implementation, and evaluation of these new programs to monitor their effectiveness.

Additionally, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers will be informed by this study to collectively promote culturally targeted programs, interventions, and policies to mitigate the adverse impacts of anti-Asian racism on emotional well-being and promote adaptive coping strategies among Asian and Asian American communities. Furthermore, the present study underscores the importance of uprooting racism and its associated impacts beyond the pandemic, contributing to the development of a transformative approach that is infused with the spirit of social justice and equity [58]. Anti-Asian racism, especially the perpetual foreigner stereotype, is a result of an institutionalized system of white supremacy, where mainstream white culture is privileged as superior to other racial and ethnic cultures [9]. The efforts to combat anti-Asian racism will not amplify Asian and Asian American experiences but foster an inclusive environment for all, benefiting individuals from racially and ethnically diverse groups.

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