

How behavioral science can inform policies to prevent discrimination against the Asian community in the era of COVID-19

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abstract

The Asian community in the United States has seen an enormous uptick in discriminatory experiences since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian individuals have reported discrimination within their workplaces, in their communities, and against Asian-owned businesses. Many for-profit organizations have failed to acknowledge this surge. We argue that organizations should adopt policies to protect their Asian employees and clientele. On the basis of behavioral science research and knowledge of best practices for promoting diversity and inclusion, we suggest that organizational leaders create crisis task forces to find ways to reduce discrimination against Asian employees and that the leaders more generally reaffirm organizational commitments to diversity and inclusion, communicate those commitments to stakeholders, visibly enact expected organizational norms related to diversity and inclusion, and establish or reassess accountability systems to ensure that policies and norms are followed.

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In early February, the leadership of Tufts University Medical Center sent an e-mail reminding employees of the importance of treating patients and colleagues with respect and civility, regardless of national origin. Tufts's goal was to prevent bias against members of Asian communities, who were facing increasing discrimination and violence in the United States because of COVID-19's origin in China.¹ America's leaders have generally ignored this uptick in discrimination or even exacerbated it, such as by referring to the novel coronavirus as the "Chinese virus." The heads of businesses and other organizations can and should step up by demonstrating and conveying to employees and clients that their organizations value diversity and inclusion and will not tolerate discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity.

In this article, we highlight instances of COVID-19-related anti-Asian xenophobia in the United States in general and within organizations. Next, we describe various organizational responses, the majority of which have been undertaken by nonprofits rather than for-profit businesses, which have been surprisingly silent on the subject. Finally, having outlined both the problem and the limited scope of responses to date, we offer behavioral science-backed recommendations for how organizational policymakers can intervene to reduce anti-Asian discrimination.

Instances of Xenophobia Toward Asian Individuals During the Pandemic

In April, the FBI noted that there had been an increase in hate crimes targeting Asian individuals as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic.² In fact, so many anecdotal accounts surfaced that organizations such as Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, and OCA—Asian Pacific American Advocates joined together to launch an online reporting website. Within four weeks of the launch, nearly 1,500 COVID-19-related incidents of discrimination against Asian individuals in the United States were reported.³ These attacks ranged from verbal harassment (70% of reports) to physical violence (9% of reports); more than 40% took place in private businesses.³

The incidents targeted Asian individuals of many different backgrounds, including those who are Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Filipino.³ Asian women were harassed 2.3 times as often as Asian men were; 80% of the reported targets were 20–40 years old.³ As Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University, commented in a press release from the site's organizers, "combining cases of workplace discrimination and being barred from businesses indicates that Asian Americans' civil rights are being violated."⁴

Three forms of anti-Asian bias are spiking: (a) discrimination against Asian employees in the workplace, (b) discrimination against Asian individuals in the general population, and (c) discrimination against Asian-owned businesses. Acts of workplace discrimination include being targeted with derogatory comments, excluded from events and meetings, blamed for the spread of coronavirus, and laughed at by colleagues.³

Discrimination against Asian individuals in the general population has taken place in grocery stores, subways, public transit, and taxis.⁵ Some businesses have even denied services to Asian clientele because of their race and the belief that they might have COVID-19. Additionally, delivery drivers and customers alike have experienced grocery and fast food orders being canceled or unfulfilled because of their perceived race.⁶ Meanwhile, college campuses have reported increases in racist and discriminatory statements against Asian students, faculty, and staff.⁷ Even the U.S. president has made jokes at the expense of Asian individuals, referring to the coronavirus multiple times as the "Kung flu."⁸

In terms of discrimination against Asian-owned businesses, in early February and March, Asian business owners reported a significant drop in revenue.⁹ Because fewer than 20 cases had been diagnosed in the entire country at the time of these downturns, the hits taken by these Asian businesses do not seem to have been based on evidence that COVID-19 was spreading here. Rather, stereotypes, bias, and xenophobia exacerbated by fear seem to have been the driving forces behind the reduced patronage.

The increase in discrimination against Asian individuals probably does not represent a novel bias that first arose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, the presence of COVID-19 did not create or lead to anti-Asian xenophobia; rather, the disease seems to have revealed and provided perceived justification for preexisting xenophobia. Indeed, Asian individuals are the racial group that has the second lowest hospitalization rate from COVID-19,¹⁰ a pattern that supports the probability that anti-Asian xenophobia in the United States is based not on logic or evidence but on bias and bigotry.

Organizational Responses to Discrimination

At the time of this writing, most for-profit organizations have not taken a stand against anti-Asian xenophobia during the pandemic. In general, the for-profit and nonprofit organizations that have issued public responses to anti-Asian sentiment have missions that already involve civil rights advocacy, are committed to equitable treatment, or have been directly affected by racial animosity. Examples of organizations making public statements specifically in response to increased incidents of bias against Asian individuals include the following:

- The NAACP and several other leading civil rights groups issued a joint statement asserting that “as our nation grapples with the coronavirus, we are deeply concerned that recent incidents of racism and discrimination against Asian Americans threaten our collective public safety. In recent weeks, Asian Americans have been subjected to violent attacks, discrimination against their businesses and xenophobic portrayal by the media and our elected leaders.”¹¹
- The Justice and Diversity Center of the Bar Association of San Francisco issued a press release stating that the “stakes are simply too high to allow racism and xenophobia to distract from what is most vital: Focusing our collective energies on getting through this pandemic and lifting up the most vulnerable among us.”¹²

- The American College of Surgeons published a condemnation of bias and discrimination, writing that the organization “supports all health care personnel who provide essential services in our communities at this time and maintains that they should be able to continue to do so without the specter of hatred and violence resulting from xenophobia, racism, and bigotry.”¹³

- Harvard University issued a statement saying that the signatories (several university centers and institutes) “strongly condemn xenophobic and racist acts arising from the global COVID-19 pandemic,” including those directed at people of Asian ancestry.¹⁴

- In March, about a dozen Asian politicians, academics, and leaders of nonprofits individually spoke out against the racial hostility that had become pervasive since the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁵

- After Costco received negative press in response to a boy being turned away from a free-sample station because the representative of the product thought the boy was Chinese and could transmit coronavirus, a Costco representative told a news outlet that a company executive had spoken to the family, adding that “we are very sorry this incident occurred in our location. The comments to the boy were made not by a Costco employee but by an employee of an independent demo company. The demo company is taking appropriate measures with its employees.”¹⁶

In one exception to the paucity of antidiscrimination responses from for-profit companies, 130 Silicon Valley executives released a statement decrying anti-Asian rhetoric and incidents.¹⁷

The overall lack of attention by for-profits is surprising because such organizations have commonly responded publicly during other periods of racial tension in recent history. For example, after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police, Amazon, Netflix, and Twitter, among many other for-profit organizations, not only publicly denounced discrimination toward Black individuals but also

made notable changes in organizational policy and donated millions of dollars to combat racial injustice in America.⁹ In 2018, organizations such as Apple, IBM, and PepsiCo sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security expressing their concerns about unfair changes in immigration policies and their detrimental effects on the companies' workers.¹⁸

Such public stances on racial issues in support of other stigmatized groups raises the question of why for-profit organizations have generally failed to respond to anti-Asian sentiment and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in light of the large number of reported instances of bias and discrimination. The lack of response may be driven by fear (of getting sick or putting employees at risk), existing implicit biases toward Asian employees (who may be stereotyped as cold and may evoke jealousy for their perceived superior competence), and the tendency to give lower priority to diversity and inclusion efforts during periods of financial strain.^{19,20}

Action to reduce bias and discrimination is even rarer than the issuing of statements. Among the few overt actions taken to support Asian people we can point to are social media campaigns such as #WashTheHate²¹ and steps taken by a handful of organizations to offer some proactive support to Asian individuals. For instance, the University of Wisconsin–Madison held a town hall to show solidarity and point people to resources,²² and other organizations have directed staff members to Asian employee resource groups to discuss concerns.^{23,24}

Policy Recommendations

Although no simple solution will enable organizations to eliminate all COVID-19-related discrimination against Asian individuals, we have identified several actions that organizational leaders should take. Our recommendations are not exhaustive. We focus on those suggested by a synthesis of existing behavioral science research and by consideration of established diversity and inclusion best practices for promoting equity and combating discrimination.

Create a Crisis Task Force to Address Discrimination Against Asian Employees

Each organization should create a task force that includes representatives of different stakeholders (that is, people who have an interest in ensuring success, such as a human resources specialist, legal counsel, and a media spokesperson). At least one individual (such as the human resources representative) should be responsible for monitoring reports of employee concerns in an effort to enhance employee safety, mental health, and well-being.^{25,26} The task force should work to fully understand the fears, threats, and anxieties that Asian employees may be experiencing and ensure that organizational action is taken both proactively and responsively. In other words, the purpose of such task forces is to tune in to and support the organization's most important assets: its people.

Our task force recommendation is extrapolated in part from behavioral science research into actions toward employees that enhance organizational functioning. Behavioral science research has shown that when employees feel supported by their employers, they become motivated to exert greater effort, engage at work, and recommend their organizations as good places to work; they are also less likely to leave their organizations.²⁷ Also, workers who feel valued, secure, supported, and respected are more productive, miss fewer workdays, make fewer work errors, and have fewer accidents.²⁸ Simply stated, when employers demonstrate concern for their employees' well-being, the employers build trust and a sense of safety.^{28–30} It is under these conditions that employees are able to focus and do their best work.^{31–33} A recent Gallup assessment of the COVID-19 responses of more than 200 members of the Chief Human Resources Officer Roundtable indicates that many companies have created task forces that focus not only on the business impact, travel requirements, technology, and training issues related to the pandemic but also on employee well-being, engagement, morale, and communication.²⁴ It makes sense for companies to also establish a task force to specifically address COVID-19-related discrimination against Asian individuals.

Reaffirm Leadership's Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion

Seventy-nine Fortune 500 companies list diversity and inclusion as part of their core values,³⁴ yet evidence suggests that economic downturns tend to be accompanied by companies' devoting decreased attention and fewer resources to supporting these values. The business and moral cases for diversity provide a rationale for consistently championing diversity across company ups and downs.³⁵ Specifically, ample research has shown that organizations that are diverse and inclusive are characterized by greater innovation and resilience³⁶—capabilities that organizations will need to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, diversity and inclusion enhance both business performance and organizational health and contribute to broader efforts to revitalize economies and protect social cohesion.^{34,37} Thus, strategic responses to the COVID-19 crisis should reflect enduring core values, including the fair and respectful treatment of all people.

The critical role of diversity in successful business recovery is evident from a review of organizational responses to the 2008–2009 financial crisis. For example, banks with a greater proportion of women on their boards were more stable throughout the financial crisis than their competitors were.³⁸ Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, cities, states, and countries led by women appear to be managing the pandemic better than those led by men.^{39,40} Although these specific examples relate to gender and not race, the business case for diversity and the other evidence already discussed suggest that similarly positive outcomes would be expected for organizations with various types of diversity. Likewise, although reaffirming leadership's commitment to diversity and inclusion does not specifically address Asian xenophobia, it should enhance the effectiveness of actions directed specifically at that problem.

Communicate Leadership's Continuing Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion

Organizations should denounce the recent rise in discrimination against Asian individuals by reminding their employees that such

discrimination is not only against organizational policies but also illegal. The organization should encourage all employees to speak out against racist jokes, hostile and aggressive behavior, and racism itself.⁴¹ Furthermore, if the company is a service provider, leaders should remind staff that they are not permitted to refuse to serve or in any way decrease the quality of service they provide to the company's clientele. Indeed, research has shown that antidiscrimination policies and legislation can profoundly reduce subtle interpersonal discrimination even when such policies and laws explicitly address only overt and formal types of discrimination.^{42,43} Therefore, reminding employees of antidiscrimination policies and laws should go a long way toward ensuring equitable treatment of Asian individuals.

Model Inclusive Behavior for Employees to Emulate

Leaders who display inclusive behavior convey the organization's cultural norms to everyone in the organization. For example, those who explicitly condemn subtle acts of discrimination against Asian employees or customers demonstrate that such behavior is inconsistent with the organization's norms. Visibly supporting Asian employees or clients with positive feedback, attention, and care is another way to model expected organizational norms.

Empirical research has shown that diversity-related initiatives are more successful when leadership support is modeled.⁴⁴ For instance, in an experiment assessing attitudes and behaviors regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, subordinates of leaders who set goals related to supporting LGBT individuals (such as speaking up against slurs, stepping up as an ally, or attending an LGBT group meeting) reported more positive attitudes and behaviors than did subordinates of leaders who did not set such goals.⁴⁴ These results bolster those of previous studies demonstrating the benefit of having buy-in from those in positions of influence.^{45,46} Empirical studies that demonstrate the value of having leaders model norms are also consistent with the tenets of social learning theory,⁴⁷ which holds that people learn how to

Table 1. COVID-19-related problems, solutions for organizational leaders, & behavioral principles related to the policy recommendations

Problem	Solution	Behavioral principle
Asian employees may experience threats to their safety, well-being, and productivity.	Create a crisis task force to address the discrimination.	The existence of the task force should increase employee trust in the organization. Trust-building leads to focused and productive work.
Economic downturns can result in decreased attention to and resources for diversity and inclusion.	Reaffirm leadership's commitment to diversity and inclusion.	Diversity and inclusion enhances employees' positive attitudes toward their jobs and improves organizational outcomes.
Overt discrimination may become more prevalent within organizations.	Communicate leadership's continuing diversity and inclusion commitment.	Policies and laws influence not only the dictated behaviors but others as well.
Subtle discrimination may become more prevalent within organizations.	Model inclusive behavior.	Modeling by leaders sets social norms that employees emulate.
Discrimination may be overlooked in organizations.	Establish or reassess accountability systems to ensure that policies and norms are followed.	Employees learn social norms by observing the outcomes that result from following or defying norms.

act by observing others' behaviors and attitudes. Leaders can further model the norm of ongoing support by ensuring that Asian employees are represented in the task forces or other entities charged with addressing the challenges that COVID-19 raises for the organization.

Establish or Reassess Accountability Systems to Ensure That Policies & Norms Are Followed

It is not enough to simply say that an organization does not tolerate xenophobia; the organization must also have processes and procedures for assessing inclusivity (such as holding focus groups and conducting surveys) and addressing discrimination (such as following established procedures and taking appropriate actions against wrongdoers).⁴⁸ As social learning theory implies, it is important for employees to see that people who discriminate are held accountable for their actions.⁴⁷ By observing others, people learn not only which attitudes and behaviors are acceptable but also what the outcomes of these attitudes and behaviors are. Thus, when people see others either getting away with or being punished for discriminatory behaviors or attitudes, they come to expect similar outcomes for themselves. Moreover, simply having systems of accountability signals to employees who might be targets of discrimination that they belong and that discrimination against them will not be tolerated.⁴⁹ Studies have shown that having a person or department that is responsible for diversity-related efforts

can help to increase organizational diversity⁴⁸ and may maximize the organization's ability to emerge from crises with outcomes that are in line with its diversity and inclusion goals. See Table 1 for a summary of our recommendations and the behavioral science principles behind them.

Concluding Thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a significant rise in discrimination against Asian individuals. The diversity and inclusion most organizations claim to value are threatened when prejudice and bias are left unchecked and allowed to flourish without response. Behavioral science reveals actions leaders can take to prevent such discrimination: gathering a crisis team, reinforcing organizations' commitment to diversity, communicating this commitment to stakeholders, visibly enacting antidiscrimination norms, and ensuring systems of accountability. By heeding these policy recommendations, organizations can fight long-standing and increased anti-Asian xenophobia and ensure that fairness, inclusion, and belonging persist during a time of great uncertainty.

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