Investigating the Effects of COVID-19 Blame and Racist Language on Asian Americans

By

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ABSTRACT

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We conducted a study to test our hypothesis that racist language and blame related to the COVID-19 pandemic might have a negative impact on Asian Americans' sense of belonging in the United States. We presented Asian American participants (total $N = 271$) with a non-racist or racist language flier, paired with a low blame or high blame passage of text with fabricated statistics about how much the average White American blames Asian Americans for the COVID-19 pandemic. We predicted that participants in the racist language and high blame condition would report greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, greater negative esteem, and lower sense of belonging compared to participants in the non-racist language and low blame condition. Generally, there were small to weak effects of language/blame condition on our dependent variables. However, we did find that greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were strongly associated with lower sense of belonging, greater discomfort, greater fear, and greater negative esteem suggesting that the increases in prejudice Asian Americans feel have negatively impacted their lived experiences in the United States since the start of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Asian Americans, Sense of belonging, Racist language, Blame, Discrimination, Racial Slurs, Prejudice

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**Investigating the Effects of COVID-19 Blame and Racist Language on Asian Americans**

"Just Chinese, I don't feel American" is one of the responses we obtained from our current study when we asked participants to select or report the ethnic group (e.g., Chinese American, Korean American) they identified with the most as Asian Americans. This response highlights the reality of the experience of many Asian Americans during this pandemic. Since the COVID-19 virus began to rapidly spread in the early months of 2020, there has been a sharp and disturbing increase in the xenophobia, racism, and discrimination directed toward Asian individuals on a global scale (Brown & Marinthe, 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Tessler et al., 2020). For example, Asian individuals report, and statistics confirm, increases in physical attacks, verbal harassment, vandalism, and discrimination (Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate; Tessler et al., 2020). These effects are also associated with increased use of racist language related to the virus such as the "Chinese Virus" or "Kung Flu" by Americans including the former United States, President Donald Trump (De la Cretaz, 2020; Stop AAPI Hate; Young & Hagan, 2020). This hate has been exacerbated by claims that the virus originated in a lab in Wuhan, China, which has led many Americans to overtly blame Chinese people, the Chinese government, and the Asian population more broadly for the detrimental effects of the virus in the United States (Tessler et al., 2020). The purpose of our study is to extend research related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Asian Americans, and to gain a better understanding of how the discrimination experienced during this pandemic affects Asian Americans' well-being. Specifically, we examined how blame expressed by White Americans toward Asian Americans for the COVID-19 virus might affect Asian Americans' sense of belonging, well-being, and comfort in the United States. We hypothesized that participants presented with racist language paired with higher levels of blame would report greater perceived

increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, greater negative esteem, and lower sense of belonging compared to participants presented with non-racist language paired with low levels of blame.

**History of Prejudice Toward Asian Americans**

The prejudice and discrimination that Asian populations within the United States have been experiencing throughout this pandemic is not new (Chen et al., 2020; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Hua & Junn, 2020; Sue et al., 2009; Tessler et al., 2020). The pandemic has only brought attention to some of the various issues faced by Asian and Asian American individuals which often go unnoticed. Since larger Asian populations started immigrating to the United States in the mid 19th century and later in the 1960s, these populations have been regarded as foreigners and non-American (Chen et al., 2020; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Fong, 1965; Hua & Junn, 2020; Huynh et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2009). This was primarily due to White Americans fears that Asian immigrants would change American values and ways of life, and because of preconceived notions of these groups (Pew Research Center, 2012; Tessler et al., 2020). For example, Asian Americans have been and continue to be perceived as threats, carriers of disease, and as an inferior racial group compared to White Americans (Chen et al., 2020; Chow, 2017; Hua & Junn, 2020; Tessler et al., 2020).

Indeed, despite the changing makeup of the United States, which is becoming increasingly diverse, Asian Americans are still stereotypically seen as foreigners within their own country (Tessler et al., 2020). When considering the racial hierarchy that exists within the United States, Asian and Asian American individuals have come to occupy a unique position within American society (Hua & Junn, 2020). They find themselves higher in hierarchical status

compared to other racial and ethnic groups such as Black and Latinx individuals, but lower in hierarchical status compared to White individuals (Hua & Junn, 2020). This creates an interesting juxtaposition between racial groups. On one hand, Asian individuals are seen as having more privileges and opportunities compared to the races lower in the racial hierarchy which can lead to intergroup conflicts and tensions. On the other hand, Asian individuals are not perceived as being at the same hierarchical level as their White American peers (Hua & Junn, 2020). Given Asian individuals' proximity to White individuals in the racial hierarchy, they have come to be regarded as the model minority (Alvarez et al., 2006; Barringer et al., 1990; Delucchi & Do, 1996; Junn, 2007). This term refers to a minority group that has excelled in various domains of society despite the inequities and inequalities the group has faced (Delucchi & Do, 1996). For example, Asian Americans tend to obtain higher levels of education and incomes compared to White Americans and other races in the United States (Asante-Muhammad & Sim, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2012). Other racial and ethnic groups, and individuals within the Asian American racial group, are then expected to *model* themselves based on the actions and accomplishments of their Asian counterparts.

This stereotypical concept, although potentially seen as positive to some, can be detrimental especially for Asian individuals (Alvarez et al., 2006; Czopp et al., 2015; Delucchi & Do, 1996; Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997). Repeated exposure to "positive stereotypes" can lead to negative outcomes such as greater distress (especially if one feels the need to conform to these stereotypes or if one does not meet the expectations imposed by these stereotypes), lack of sense of self, role restriction and lower well-being (Czopp, 2008b; Czopp et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2007). "Positive stereotypes" such as the model minority contribute to Asian and Asian American issues and struggles often being dismissed, overlooked, and not taken seriously (Delucchi & Do, 1996).

In brief, Asian and Asian American individuals have been seen as "foreigners" for a significant period of time despite having lived in the United States for generations. The stereotypes of Asian individuals being considered as the model minority, being naturally intelligent, spreaders of disease, wealthy, takers of jobs, and not American have made matters worse (Chen et al., 2020; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Chow, 2017; Devos & Banaji, 2005; Hua & Junn, 2020; Huynh et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2009). The use of these stereotypes has intensified with the pandemic causing additional distress to Asian Americans besides general concerns about health and safety. These salient stereotypes have made it easier for many Americans to use Asian Americans as scapegoats and to blame them for the pandemic we are currently experiencing.

**Expressions of Overt Prejudice and Discrimination**

Over the years, as norms and society have changed, overtly expressing one's own genuine prejudices has become less frequent in the United States, while expressing covert prejudice has become more common (Saucier et al., 2017). Prejudices are often suppressed to ensure that one is conforming with societal and personal expectations and norms (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003). For example, our society has expectations for its citizens to not be racist and this has led people to have personal desires to appear unprejudiced to others as well as themselves (Crandall et al., 2002; Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998). However, despite changes in society, values, and norms, people still exhibit overt prejudice (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Saucier et al., 2017). Although prejudices are often suppressed, these thoughts can still be expressed when seen as justifiable or when no longer inhibited (Brief et al., 2000; Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Saucier et al., 2017). Individuals justify prejudice by claiming that their comments are "just jokes" or feel entitled to express prejudice if certain contexts make it more acceptable such as following a terrorist attack, large scale

economic downturns, or times of social change (Apte, 1987; Saucier et al., 2017). In other words, people tend to exhibit prejudice when they feel like the situation allows for it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals have felt justified to be prejudiced against Asian and Asian American individuals for various reasons. These include emulating the racist behaviors of peers or political leaders such as former President Donald Trump, projecting one's own frustrations and anger onto an easy target (i.e., scapegoating), or viewing outgroup members as threats (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003; Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). These justifications make it seem more acceptable to express prejudices that have long been repressed and increase the likelihood that these beliefs will continue to be expressed.

**"The Chinese Virus"**

Unfortunately, one perceived justification of prejudice toward Asian Americans since the onset of the pandemic that has intensified the effects of attributional scapegoating, is the racist language that many exhibit when referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, former President Donald Trump often referred to the pandemic as the "Chinese Virus" instead of the COVID-19 virus. Research has shown that the use of racist language toward a particular group by prominent figures can increase perceptions of the acceptability of discrimination toward that group (Crandall et al., 2018). In this case, the "Chinese Virus" brings attention to Chinese individuals and as we have seen, has increased the prejudice and discrimination directed toward Chinese and Asian individuals more broadly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Slurs like this are words that are used to refer to a particular individual, group, or class of people in a derogatory manner (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Croom, 2013; O'Dea et al., 2015; Rappaport, 2019). Slurs generally have a negative connotation, and their use is taboo and heavily condemned in modern American society (Croom, 2011). Impacts of slurs

like this include a lower sense of belonging, feeling threatened, feeling like one's existence and experiences are devalued, and increased perceptions of hate (Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Bianchi, 2014; Croom, 2011; Croom, 2013; O'Dea et al., 2015; Rappaport, 2019). Researchers have even found that simply witnessing others use racial slurs to speak about a particular individual can lead another person to view the target in a less favorable way (O'Dea et al., 2015; Crandall et al., 2018). The witness attributes the negative connotations associated with the slurs to that person performing poorly or experiencing certain troubles rather than considering other factors that may be at play in a given situation. Applying this research specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic, slurs related to the virus such as the "Chinese Virus" have led many Americans to associate the negative outcomes of the pandemic with Asian Americans and to view using such language as acceptable.

**Attributional Scapegoating as a Justification of Prejudice**

Scapegoating is when an individual or group of people blame other individuals or groups for society's ills or certain misfortunes (Crandall et al., 2003; Crandall et al., 2005; Rothschild et al., 2012; Saucier et al., 2017; Zawadzki, 1948). Scapegoats allow people to transfer blame, anger, frustrations and other troubles onto a specific target or group, which allows accusers to take that same distress away from themselves and more importantly increases perceptions of the acceptability of discrimination toward certain individuals or groups (Calavita, 1996; Green et al., 1998). Often, scapegoats have nothing to do with a given situation, but are simply an easy target (Saucier et al., 2017). Attributional scapegoating has been used by various populations in recent historical events (Saucier et al., 2017; Tennen & Affleck, 1990). Examples of scapegoating include the Salem witch trials and McCarthyism in the United States, and the genocide of approximately six million Jews during World War II in Europe (Saucier et al., 2017). Jewish

populations were blamed for the downfall and misfortunes of German society in the years following World War I. They were senselessly killed because of myths, stereotypes, and discrimination perpetuated by the Nazis who viewed Jewish people's eradication as the only "logical solution" in order to create a pure race (British Library, n.d.). When a group of people share similar troubles and bond over those shared experiences, they will feel a sense of belonging and feel further justified to express their suppressed thoughts (Saucier et al., 2017). An extreme example of this is the formation of hate groups (Saucier et al., 2017). By bonding over shared troubles, negative views can intensify. Once a scapegoat is determined, the frustrations of a majority group can be applied to a target group and violence can escalate rapidly (Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Tessler et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021).

Like the increase in prejudice during moments of upheaval, scapegoating frequently accompanies difficult times in society and is what we have been witnessing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Saucier et al., 2017; Zawadzki, 1948). Many Americans blame Chinese Americans and China for the impact the coronavirus has had on the United States and other countries (Tessler et al., 2020). Instead of assessing the efficacy of the actions taken by the American government to prepare for and handle the COVID-19 virus, many Americans have found a simple alternative - blaming Asian individuals for their difficulties and the unexpected outcomes of this virus (Tessler et al., 2020). As stated previously, this group has been the target of blame because of speculations that the virus started in a lab in Wuhan, China (Tessler et al., 2020). This theory has been viewed as unlikely by several scientists but has been widely spread by American media (Cohen, 2021). What is striking about this phenomenon is that Americans have not only blamed Chinese individuals but the Asian population for the detrimental effects of the pandemic. Unfortunately, scapegoating Asian and Asian American individuals during this pandemic has

proven to be a terrible reality for people who are members of these groups. What started out as claiming to simply be expressing where the virus originated from, turned into slurring terminology to blame groups for the origins of the virus, which has since turned into violent, and at times fatal, hate crimes directed toward those who are members of these racial and ethnic groups (Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Tessler et al., 2020). These forms of prejudice, discrimination, and violence are known to have significant impacts on targeted group members. For example, attributional scapegoating directed at Asian Americans is known to affect their physical, mental and emotional well-being (Chen et al., 2020; Hwang & Goto, 2008; King, 2005; Liu & Modir, 2020; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Williams et al., 2003). This includes lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Park et al., 2013).

Taken together, some Americans believe that Asian Americans and Asian populations more broadly are to blame for the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This belief has led to attributional scapegoating, where a group attributes blame for society's ills onto a target group, which has exacerbated the expression of prejudice toward Asian Americans. Regrettably, as the pandemic has continued to impact our lives over the past two years, initial acts of prejudice have turned into violent acts of discrimination directed toward these minority groups.

## Current Study Overview

Expanding on the findings of the literature done on prejudice, scapegoating, slurring, Asian Americans, and the impact of racist language related to the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian Americans' sense of belonging, we examined how the salience of blame for the COVID-19 pandemic affects Asian Americans' sense of belonging in the United States. Our hypothesis was that participants who are presented with racist language ("Chinese Virus") and a high level of

blame from White Americans (80%) that Asian and Asian American individuals are responsible for the virus (compared to non-racist language ("COVID-19 Virus") and a low level of blame; 20%) would report greater perceptions of prejudice/discrimination, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, greater negative esteem, and lower sense of belonging.

## Methods

### Participants

Our study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework website (osf.io/pzt38). Participants were recruited from CloudResearch (Litman et al., 2017). To participate, participants had to self-identify as Asian, be CloudResearch approved participants, have 90% approval rate or higher on CloudResearch, and pass five captchas. 5,543 participants accessed our survey on Qualtrics and 271 qualified for the study by passing all five captchas and self-reporting their ethnicity as Asian. Of the participants that qualified for our study, one was removed for reporting their regional affiliation within Asia as "Mexican American". Our sample of participants included 137 cisgender women, 117 cisgender men, 4 transgender women, 2 transgender men, and 10 non-binary individuals. Moreover, we also investigated whether regional differences within Asia would affect participants' responses to the various items included in our study. Specific regional affiliation of participants is shown in Table 1. The average age of our sample was 35.71 ($SD = 11.07$).

### Materials

All measures described below used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A composite score was calculated by averaging participants'

Table 1

Reported country heritage of participants.

| | |
|---|---|
| Chinese | 76 |
| Filipino | 43 |
| Korean | 38 |
| Indian | 36 |
| Vietnamese | 27 |
| Japanese | 18 |
| Taiwanese | 5 |
| Cambodian | 3 |
| Indonesian | 3 |
| Pakistani | 3 |
| Hmong | 3 |
| Bengali | 1 |
| Siberian | 1 |
| Nepalese | 1 |
| Other | 1 Half-White, Half-Japanese |
| | 1 "Just Chinese, I don't feel American" |
| | 1 Taiwanese/White |
| | 1 South Asian |
| | 1 Taiwanese/Pakistani American |
| | 1 Preferred not to disclose |

responses to each of the items after reverse scoring antithetical items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the construct being measured.

**Sense of Belonging.** Participants completed nine items that we created specifically for this study designed to measure participants' general sense of belonging in the United States. Items included statements such as "I feel like I don't belong to any given group in the United States" and "I am seen as a foreigner in the United States."

**Prejudice.** Participants completed six items that we created specifically for this study designed to measure participants' perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Items included statements such as "There has been no change in prejudice against Asian Americans from before and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States" and "I feel that prejudice toward Asian Americans in America is more acceptable by society since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic."

**Discomfort.** Participants completed five items that we created specifically for this study designed to measure participants' discomfort when interacting with White Americans since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Items included statements such as "I find it more difficult to be around White Americans than any other race" and "I feel most comfortable interacting with Asian American peers."

**Fear.** Participants completed six items that we created specifically for this study designed to measure participants' fear related to the anti-Asian prejudice and harassment that has become prominent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Items included statements such as "I am more afraid of becoming a victim of violence now in the United States than I was before the COVID-19 pandemic" and "I am scared that the harassment against Asian Americans will only get worse in the United States."

**State Self-esteem.** Participants completed the seven social subscale items selected from the 20 item State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). Items included statements such as "I am worried about what other people think of me" and "I feel inferior to others at this moment."

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited using CloudResearch (Litman et al., 2017) and completed our study on Qualtrics. A brief description of the study was provided to participants and informed consent was obtained. Participants then had to pass five captchas and answer three demographic questions to know whether they qualified (i.e., must self-identify as Asian) for the study. After qualifying for the study, participants were randomly assigned to view one of two fliers paired with one of two passages of text with fabricated statistics about how much the average White American blames Asian Americans for the COVID-19 pandemic (see Appendices A and B). One flier provided information about the pandemic using the racist term "Chinese Virus" while the other used the term "COVID-19 Virus". One passage of text stated that statistics from February 2022 show that "at least 80% of White Americans blame Asian Americans for the coronavirus pandemic" while the other stated that "only 20% of White Americans blame Asian Americans for the coronavirus pandemic." After viewing the fliers and reading the passages of text with the fabricated statistics, participants were presented with items designed to get them to think and reflect on the fliers and statistics. For example, after viewing a randomly assigned flier, participants were presented with the following items, "Please describe what the flier is saying" and "Please tell us what you find most shocking about the flier." Then, after reading the passage of text paired with the randomly assigned flier, participants were presented with the following item, "Please write your thoughts to the above statistic below. Try to be as specific as possible

with how you feel about this statistic." Participants were then asked to complete items for our dependent variables (see Appendices C through G) that were randomized. Further, participants completed an item related to the country that they identify with the most in Asia which we used to group participants based on region (East [e.g., China, Taiwan] and Southeast Asian [e.g., Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines] participants were placed into one group and all other regional affiliations [e.g., India, Pakistan] were placed into another group). We examined the effects of region within Asia because Asian American is a broad term and we thought that people might be placing blame primarily on individuals who reported having ties to more Eastern Asian countries, such as Japan and Taiwan compared to other Asian countries such as India and Pakistan. Lastly, participants were debriefed, and thanked for their participation in our study. In the debriefing section of our survey, participants were informed about the fabricated statistics that were used within our study (participants had to acknowledge that they understood the statistics did not represent actual data) and were provided with resources in case they had any questions or experienced negative responses to our survey which does deal with an upsetting topic.

**Results**

We hypothesized that presenting participants with a high level of blame and racist language regarding the COVID-19 pandemic would significantly negatively affect Asian American participants compared to a low blame condition with non-racist COVID-19 language. To test our hypothesis, we conducted independent samples t-tests using JAMOVI. The independent variable that was entered was the condition that participants were randomly assigned to (i.e., a high blame, racist language or low blame, non-racist language condition). The five dependent variables which were tested in separate independent samples t-tests were sense of

belonging, perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, discomfort when interacting with White Americans, fear, and negative esteem. These analyses were conducted using one-tailed t-tests and are shown in Table 2. Inconsistent with our hypothesis, there was no significant effect of condition on increased perceptions of prejudice, discomfort, fear, or negative state self-esteem. However, consistent with our hypothesis, there was a significant effect of condition on sense of belonging such that Asian Americans reported lower sense of belonging in the high blame condition that was paired with the racist language compared to the low blame condition paired with the non-racist language.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, t-tests examining the impact of COVID-19 blame on Asian Americans.

| Dependent Variable | $M_{low\ blame}$ | $SD_{low\ blame}$ | $M_{high\ blame}$ | $SD_{high\ blame}$ | $t(265-266)$ | $p$ | $d$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Increases in Prejudice | 4.34 | 1.29 | 4.49 | 1.25 | 0.96 | .168 | 0.12 |
| Discomfort | 3.72 | 1.29 | 3.81 | 1.24 | 0.61 | .270 | 0.07 |
| Fear | 4.13 | 1.69 | 4.28 | 1.61 | 0.74 | .231 | 0.09 |
| Negative Esteem | 3.65 | 1.57 | 3.54 | 1.64 | -0.55 | .708 | -0.07 |
| Sense of Belonging | 4.45 | 1.24 | 4.19 | 1.12 | -1.84 | .034 | -0.23 |

*Note*. These t-tests were conducted using one-tailed independent samples t-tests such that the high blame condition was predicted to result in greater increases in prejudice, more discomfort, more fear, more negative state self-esteem, and lower sense of belonging.

**Effects of Increased Prejudice on Asian Americans**

We then extended these findings by conducting correlations among each of our dependent variables. We hypothesized that greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic would predict lower sense of belonging, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, and greater negative esteem. The relationships among these variables are presented in Table 3. Consistent with our hypothesis, greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the pandemic was significantly positively correlated with discomfort, fear, and negative state self-esteem. Further, greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the pandemic was significantly negatively correlated with sense of belonging. Taken together, these correlations generally supported previous findings (Wong et al., in preparation) and our hypothesis by showing that increases in perceptions of prejudice since the start of the pandemic were associated with greater negative outcomes for our Asian American participants.

**Exploratory Analyses comparing Chinese Americans to non-Chinese Asian Americans**

We also tested whether Chinese American participants differed from non-Chinese Asian American participants on each of our dependent measures[1]. Specifically, we conducted a series of 2 (blame condition: high, low) x 2 (regional affiliation: Chinese American, non-Chinese Asian American) factorial ANOVAs predicting each of our dependent measures. As can be seen in Table 4, there was no significant interactions between whether someone was a Chinese American or non-Chinese Asian American participant and blame condition on any of the dependent

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[1] We also tested whether there were regional differences between East Asian and non-East Asian countries which showed no significant main effects of region and no region*blame interactions on any of our dependent variables. We also tested whether there were regional differences between East/Southeast Asian and non-East/Southeast Asian participants which showed no significant main effects of region and no region*blame interactions on any of our dependent variables. These analyses are available upon request from the corresponding author.

Table 3

Means, standard deviations, correlations, and reliabilities for each of the variables in The

Impact of COVID-19 Blame on Asian Americans' Sense of Belonging study.

| Variable | *M* | *SD* | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Increases in Prejudice | 4.42 | 1.27 | (.79) | | | | |
| 2. Sense of Belonging | 4.32 | 1.19 | -.56*** | (.90) | | | |
| 3. Discomfort | 3.77 | 1.26 | .58*** | -.64*** | (.77) | | |
| 4. Fear | 4.20 | 1.65 | .78*** | -.52*** | .64*** | (.93) | |
| 5. Negative Esteem | 3.59 | 1.61 | .29*** | -.31*** | .44*** | .37*** | (.93) |

*Note.* *p* < .05, **p* < .01, ***p* < .001, McDonald's omega levels are presented in parentheses

along the diagonal.

variables. However, there was a significant main effect of whether someone was a Chinese

American or non-Chinese Asian American participant on fear and negative state esteem, such

that Chinese Americans reported significantly greater fear (*M* = 4.61, *SD* = 1.58) and

significantly greater negative state self-esteem (*M* = 3.91, *SD* = 1.45) than non-Chinese Asian

American participants (*M* = 4.05, *SD* = 1.66; *M* = 3.44, *SD* = 1.65 respectively). There was also a

marginally significant effect of whether someone was a Chinese American or non-Chinese Asian

American participant on discomfort such that Chinese Americans reported marginally more

discomfort (*M* = 3.99, *SD* = 1.20) than non-Chinese Asian American participants (*M* = 3.67, *SD*

= 1.29). Lastly, there was no significant difference between Chinese Americans and non-Chinese

Asian American participants on increases in prejudice (*M* = 4.58, *SD* = 1.24; *M* = 4.35, *SD* =

1.29 respectively) and sense of belonging ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.96$; $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.27$ respectively).

Table 4

Factorial ANOVAS testing the effects of Blame and Chinese American Affiliation on each of our outcome variables.

| Variable | Increase in Prejudice | Sense of Belonging | Discomfort | Fear | Negative Esteem |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $F(1, 256)$ | $F(1, 256)$ | $F(1, 256)$ | $F(1, 256)$ | $F(1, 256)$ |
| Model | 1.19 | 3.02* | 1.80 | 2.57 † | 1.65 |
| | (.01) | (.03) | (.02) | (.03) | (.02) |
| Chinese | 2.23 | 2.31 | 3.39 † | 6.87* | 4.19* |
| | (.01) | (.01) | (.01) | (.03) | (.02) |
| Blame Condition | 1.39 | 1.97 | 0.10 | 1.20 | 0.15 |
| | (.01) | (.01) | (.00) | (.00) | (.00) |
| Chinese*Blame Condition | 0.00 | 2.12 | 1.15 | 0.00 | 0.24 |
| | (.00) | (.01) | (.00) | (.00) | (.00) |

*Note*. Analyses were conducted using the GAMLJ add-on for JAMOVI. Each dependent variable was tested in separate analyses. The Chinese variable was simple coded as -0.5 = Chinese American, 0.5 = Non-Chinese Asian American. The Condition variable was simple coded as -0.5 = High Blame, Racist Language, 0.5 = Low Blame, Non-Racist Language. *$p$ < .05, †$p$ < .08.

**Discussion**

We examined the impact of racist language and blame related to the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian Americans' sense of belonging. Inconsistent with our hypothesis, we found that a high level of blame and racist language regarding the COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly negatively affect Asian American participants compared to the low blame condition with non-racist COVID-19 language. However, consistent with our hypothesis, we found that participants in the high blame and racist language condition reported lower sense of belonging compared to the low blame and non-racist language condition, although this finding had a small effect size. Moreover, consistent with the findings from Wong et al. (in preparation), we found that greater perceptions of increased prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with lower sense of belonging, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, and greater negative self-directed esteem. Further, Chinese Americans tended to report greater discomfort, fear, and negative esteem than other non-Chinese Asian Americans suggesting that these effects might be moderately more negative for Chinese Americans. Thus, while priming participants with racist language did not significantly affect their scores on our dependent variables, Asian Americans are reporting increases in prejudice since the start of the pandemic, and this is associated with many negative outcomes.

**Limitations**

Our study has a few limitations that should be taken into consideration. The first limitation is the strength of our manipulation. Exposure to racist language (i.e. the Chinese Virus) and fabricated statistics of blame may not have been a strong enough manipulation to elicit a significant change in the outcome variables from our participants. The COVID-19 pandemic has been ongoing for over two years at the time that we are writing this paper, and

regrettably anti-Asian discrimination has escalated drastically compared to when the virus originally began to spread and when the use of the phrase "Chinese Virus" was at its highest point (i.e., being used by former president Donald Trump). Given the severity of discrimination that several Asian Americans have experienced since the onset of the pandemic, a stronger manipulation may be necessary in future research to test our hypothesis more effectively. A second limitation are the items that were used for four of the dependent variables in this study. These items were created specifically for this study and have not undergone rigorous validation. Nevertheless, our items did reliably measure the various dependent variables for our experiment.

A third limitation is that our study recruited participants on CloudResearch and was designed and run on Qualtrics, both online websites. This likely limited the individuals who had access to our study and may have impacted the strength of our manipulation given that participants were viewing materials online. Our results may have been different if participants were to experience the racist language and blame in person, maybe experiencing greater reactions. A fourth limitation is that we believe our study design would have been stronger had we had a control group within our study. Having a third group presented with a flier and statistics that were not related to the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., a flier and statistics that do not prime participants at all) could have helped us have a better understanding of whether our manipulation was really affecting Asian Americans' responses to our items – it could be that any discussion about COVID-19 could prompt negative reactions by participants. Lastly, our study was conducted in English, further limiting the people who could complete our survey. Had our survey been available in multiple languages, we would be able to reach a wider range of people and better understand how the discrimination of this pandemic has affected Asian American individuals of different backgrounds.

**Implications and Future Directions**

Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans have faced a surge of discrimination which has escalated from the use of racist language that we observed toward the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to increased violence, hate crimes, and at times fatal incidents (Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate; Tessler et al., 2020). As we mentioned previously, this escalation in violence might be why we found null effects for most of our dependent variables because Asian individuals are no longer only facing discrimination in the form of words (Hong & Bromwich, 2021; Stop AAPI Hate), they are also facing discrimination in the form of physical violence and aggression which may have desensitized some participants to the racist language they were presented with in this study. Further, because of the stigma of the COVID-19 pandemic, the non-racist terminology used for this study (i.e., "The COVID-19 Virus") might have similarly primed participants like the racist terminology (i.e., "The Chinese Virus").

Future research should examine whether White Americans feel more justified to express their prejudices during the pandemic due to various factors such as attributional scapegoating and former president Donald Trump using derogatory speech toward China and disparaging language when referring to the COVID-19 virus (Crandall et al., 2003; Crandall et al., 2018; De la Cretaz, 2020). These various factors have likely exacerbated the poor treatment of Asian Americans and might have an impact on White individuals' perceived justification of prejudice. The Justification Suppression model explains that when people feel like they are justified in exhibiting their prejudices, these individuals might then express those prejudices more often, which in turn can impact their perceptions of the acceptability of the expression of prejudice (Crandall & Eshelman, 2003). For example, a study could examine the impact that exposure to

the slur the "Chinese Virus" might have on White individuals' tolerance of prejudice toward Asian Americans. It could be thought that when White Americans are presented with similar manipulation materials as the ones used in this study, these materials might heighten White Americans' negative attitudes and their perceptions of prejudice toward Asian Americans which might make these individuals feel more justified to express prejudices in the future. In fact, this might be what is causing some of the discrimination and violence that we have been witnessing since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In further extending our initial research question in future studies, we want to better understand the processes that lead and allow White individuals, or majority group members, to feel justified in their expressions of prejudice so that we can stop similar unfortunate situations, as the one we have been witnessing during this pandemic, from happening in the future.

Additional research should also continue to examine the various impacts of COVID-19 discrimination on Asian Americans by country affiliation. As mentioned above, when we conducted exploratory analyses between Chinese and non-Chinese Asian Americans on our dependent variables, we did find some significant results. Generally, Chinese Americans participants reported more negative outcomes compared to non-Chinese Asian Americans, but there were no significant differences in perceptions that prejudice has increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic between Chinese and non-Chinese Asian Americans. Thus, future research could examine whether the prejudice experienced during this pandemic is more impactful toward Chinese Americans than non-Chinese Asian Americans. It would be interesting to further explore this finding and conduct research aimed at better understanding the different ways in which COVID-19 discrimination has affected different groups of Asian Americans.

**Conclusions**

In this study, we have examined the impact of racist language and blame related to the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian Americans' sense of belonging. We hypothesized that racist language paired with higher levels of blame would lead to greater perceptions of increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, greater negative esteem, and lower sense of belonging compared to non-racist language paired with lower levels of blame. We further examined the relationships between increased perception of prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and our other dependent variables. We predicted that greater perceived increases in prejudice since the start of the pandemic would be associated with lower sense of belonging, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, and greater negative esteem. We found that racist language and higher levels of blame did have a small yet significant effect on Asian Americans' sense of belonging but did not have a significant effect on any of our other dependent variables. Asian Americans did report that prejudice they have experienced during the pandemic has heightened compared to pre-pandemic levels which predicted lower sense of belonging, greater discomfort when interacting with White Americans, greater fear, and greater negative esteem. Further, these effects were strongest for those reporting Chinese American regional affiliations. Indeed, our results reflect the reality of the comment by an anonymous participant when asked to indicate their regional affiliation as an Asian American, "Just Chinese, I don't feel American."

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**Appendix A**

Non-Racist Versus Racist Language Fliers

**Appendix B**

Low Blame Versus High Blame Passages of Text

**Low Blame Passage**

You may have heard people blame the COVID-19 pandemic on China. Inconsistent with this, based on a public poll conducted by Ipsos (the third largest market research company in the world) in February 2022, only 20% of White Americans blame Asian individuals and Asian Americans for the coronavirus pandemic.

**High Blame Passage**

You may have heard people blame the COVID-19 pandemic on China. Consistent with this, based on a public poll conducted by Ipsos (the third largest market research company in the world) in February 2022, at least 80% of White Americans blame Asian individuals and Asian Americans for the coronavirus pandemic.

**Appendix C**

Increases in prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

1) I feel that prejudice toward Asian Americans in America is more acceptable by society since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2) Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I am no longer surprised if I witness an act of discrimination toward Asian Americans in the United States.

3) There has been no change in prejudice against Asian Americans from before and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

4) I have noticed an increase in prejudice toward Asian Americans since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

5) I have experienced more prejudice since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

6) I am worried about my own safety because there has been an increase in anti-Asian discrimination since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic

**Appendix D**

Sense of belonging

1) I feel as though my peers view me as an American.

2) I feel a sense of belonging in the United States.

3) I feel a sense of unity/community in the United States.

4) I feel like others see me as a foreigner in the United States.

5) I feel like my culture is accepted in the United States.

6) I often feel misunderstood by my American peers.

7) I feel like I don't belong to any given group in the United States.

8) I feel like my presence is valued in the United States.

9) I feel like people respect my perspective on various topics and issues in the United States.

**Appendix E**

Discomfort when interacting with White Americans

1) I find it more difficult to be around White Americans than any other race.

2) I am uncomfortable if I am the only Asian American in a room.

3) I feel most comfortable interacting with Asian American peers.

4) I find it difficult to talk about certain topics with White Americans.

5) I find it easy to have interactions with White Americans.

**Appendix F**

Fear

1) I am more afraid of becoming a victim of violence now in the United States than I was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

2) Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I fear for the safety of my Asian American family members living in the United States.

3) I am scared that the harassment against Asian Americans will only get worse in the United States.

4) I have been afraid of living in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic because I am Asian American.

5) I feel more safe when out with a group of Asian American peers since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

6) I am afraid of being personally harassed because of my race since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Appendix G**

State Self-Esteem

1) I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure.

2) I feel self-conscious.

3) I feel displeased with myself.

4) I am worried about what other people think of me.

5) I feel inferior to others at this moment.

6) I feel concerned about the impression I am making.

7) I am worried about looking foolish.