

Rising Xenophobia and Anti-Asian Racism amid COVID-19: A Theoretical Lens

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Abstract

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, news articles have reported increased incidents of racial abuse, verbal harassment, cyberbullying, vandalism, physical assault and other forms of mistreatment toward others, particularly Asians. People of Asian descent and appearance have been stigmatized for spreading the virus. Sinophobia, xenophobia and anti-Asian racism have become widespread in the shadow of the current pandemic. This article attempts to explain the rising instances of racism and discrimination through the lenses of information asymmetry, political opportunism, social stigma and social identity theories. Such a discussion in the context of COVID-19 allows a deeper understanding of how racism against people of colour operates and legitimizes at individual and institutional levels.

Keywords

COVID-19, xenophobia, sinophobia, racism, stigma, social identity

The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. The ICS Analysis aims to encourage debate and provide informed and balanced inputs for policy formulation and is based on extensive research and interactions with a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel in India and abroad.

Introduction

COVID-19, brought about by a novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, represents a public health disaster globally. But its repercussions have extended beyond the health sector and the pandemic has given rise to many social, political and economic issues. One of such issues is the rising instances of xenophobia, sinophobia, and anti-Asian racism in many countries around the world. Xenophobic behaviour and stigmatizing certain groups during health-related crisis is not a new phenomenon as similar incidents can be traced back to couple of centuries ago (Huang and Liu 2020). Considering the fact that COVID-19 was first detected at a Chinese city, major victims of COVID-19 related xenophobia and racism are people from Chinese or Asian descents (Roelen et al. 2020). To keep track of anti-Asian racism and xenophobic incidents, the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate Reporting Center was launched in USA in mid-March 2020. Since then, just within a span of 45 days, the Center received 2,583 reports of anti-Asian incidents throughout different parts of USA (Stop AAPI Hate 2020). This is just the tip of the iceberg because from the beginning of COVID-19, media outlets across the globe continuously published reports of anti-Asian racism that took place in different corners of the world (Crockett and Grier 2021).

Such discriminatory behaviour can cause significant mental and physical harm to the

victims as they may experience mental trauma, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, temporary or permanent disability and even death (Suleman, Garber, and Rutkow 2018).

A holistic explanation of xenophobic incidents with relevant theoretical perspectives is thus missing in the current literature.

Considering the implications of xenophobic behaviour for the society, it is imperative to assign utmost importance in investigating the issue. Several studies have already focused on COVID-19 driven xenophobic, sinophobic and anti-Asian incidents, but studies have mostly looked into the widespread nature as well as the repercussions of such incidents on individual and social wellbeing. However, explaining the underlying reasons of pandemic-induced xenophobia can be a daunting task, as there are institutional, political, individual and social factors that are intricately tied to each other and individually or collectively lead to xenophobia. A holistic explanation of xenophobic incidents with relevant theoretical perspectives is thus needed which is missing in the current literature. The present article uses information asymmetry, political opportunism, social stigma and social identity theories in explaining COVID-19 driven anti-Asian sentiments prevalent in different countries. Such an approach is expected to help researchers and policy makers to have an in-

depth theoretical understanding of the phenomenon which can be instrumental in designing remedies and required policy interventions.

Case reports

As already mentioned, incidents of xenophobia and sinophobia have become widespread since COVID-19 outbreak. This section presents some of the case reports of COVID-19 driven xenophobic, anti-Asian incidents that took place in different countries across continents.

A report made by Berg and Farbenblum on temporary migrants in Australia revealed that over 1,600 respondents personally experienced verbal or physical abuse.

In North America, according to a report by BBC on COVID-19 related racism in the USA, over 100 incidents of racism against people of Asian descent were reported by the media and verbal assault was found to be the most common form of xenophobic reaction (Cheung, Feng, and Deng 2020). Incidents such as a stranger yelling at a Chinese American woman by saying “I am not scared of the virus that you people brought over”, a Vietnamese American getting spat upon while walking down the road, two Asian women getting attacked physically for not wearing face masks and so on, were documented (Cheung, Feng, and Deng 2020). On top of these

incidents, statements such as “Chinese virus”, “Kung-Flu” made by the US president also fuelled the anti-Chinese sentiment in USA. In the South America, Brazilian president’s son Eduardo Bolsonaro also used the term “Chinese virus” in one of his twitter posts which ultimately fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment in the country, resulting in diplomatic tensions between Brazil and China (Patrick, 2020). Other countries in Latin America also reported incidents of xenophobia and sinophobia, such as in Argentina a local resident called a Chinese businessman as “coronavirus” which led to violent fight between the two parties, and in Mexico a lawmaker referred to COVID-19 as the god’s punishment for Chinese people (Patrick 2020).

A report made by Berg and Farbenblum (2020) on temporary migrants in Australia (which included international students and other temporary visa holders) revealed that over 1,600 respondents personally experienced verbal or physical abuse and became victims of racism during COVID-19, encountering remarks such as “Chinese virus”, “Asian virus” and “Chink virus”. Majority of the respondents felt that their Asian or foreign appearance led to such treatments. African countries of Egypt and Kenya also witnessed anti-Asian and sinophobic incidents. In Egypt, out of the fear of virus, an e-hailing driver forced a Chinese passenger to get down from the car on a busy highway, whereas in Kenya, a video went viral which showed an Asian couple getting verbally

bullied by another person shouting “You are corona” (Al Sherbini 2020; Solomon 2020). In the United Kingdom, a Singaporean student got severely beaten by four men who shouted at him saying “we don’t want your coronavirus in our country” (Haynes 2020). A Chinese woman living in Germany for past six years got verbally assaulted where the perpetrator made statements like “Corona comes from China” and “It’s shit, what you brought here” (Xu 2020). In Italy, Chinese communities were victims of such discrimination as insults, assaults, vandalism and business boycotts, fanned by claims that Chinese were responsible for the pandemic (Liu 2020).

“...we were not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic”

~Director-General, WHO

Theoretical lens

The rising incidents of xenophobia, sinophobia, discrimination, prejudice, and racism against people of Asian descent and appearance can be looked and explained through four theoretical lenses: information asymmetry, political opportunism, social stigma and social identity theories.

The problem of asymmetric information—a deviation from perfect information—can be more acute in a crisis situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health

Organization (WHO), Director-General commented on the propagation of misinformation about the pandemic in February 2020, saying that we were not “just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (Freckelton QC 2020). Information asymmetries are a major cause of misinformation which leads to fear and panic, and the situation can be exacerbated by monopolies of knowledge when key information networks and communications technologies are controlled by a particular class and not shared with mass people (Akerlof 1970; Lightfoot and Wisniewski 2014; Watson 2006). Media outlets also contribute to the asymmetry and may engage in propaganda campaigns or may fail to include diverse viewpoints in their news, largely due to political influences or ownership structures.

Information asymmetry sets the ground for opportunist political behaviour. Political opportunists capitalize asymmetry to make political gains and to increase political power or influence. Political opportunism flourishes in a situation where unknowns and ambiguities prevail and no broad agreement exists on how one should respond to the situation. The COVID-19 pandemic has a political dimension, and the responses so far reveal opportunism and a lack of unity in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe (Dodds et al. 2020; Paces and Weimer 2020). A number of prominent figures played and continue to play a massive role in spreading misinformation

about COVID-19 (Brennen et al. 2020). Their actions demonstrate that political opportunism was seized in light of tackling the pandemic, and such opportunism has not only provoked hatred and division but also complicated a unified response to COVID-19 (Grundy-Warr and Lin 2020; Klein et al. 2020).

The greater the in-group identification,
the greater the likelihood of out-group
dehumanization

Many policy responses taken to curb the spread of COVID-19 rely strongly on practices of separating and labelling which lay the foundation for stigma (Roelen et al. 2020). In his theory of social stigma, Goffman (1963) viewed stigma as a characteristic or attribute that is outside of a society's 'normal' expectations, leading to a 'spoiled identity'. It triggers disapproval in social contexts and those who possess such undesirable traits are identified as 'others'. Social stigma thus emphasizes the concept of 'otherness' and, in the media and through political philosophy, those 'others' are presented as outsiders (Jordan 2008). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a particular group of people, based on their race, ethnicity, nationality or place of origin, have been stigmatized for spreading the virus. They are arbitrarily identified and blamed to be carriers of virus. Such behaviors are rationalized by opportunist political leaders who, often in an attempt to hide their response

failures during pandemic, reinforce the idea of 'otherness, bias and racial stereotypes'. An inevitable consequence of this is that the stigmatized groups will be subjected to discrimination, prejudice and unfavorable treatment.

Stigmas serve as the cognitive basis of social grouping. Individuals categorize others based on stigmas which helps identifying negative out-group characteristics. Social identity theory suggests that people categorize themselves as belonging to certain groups (in-group), constantly evaluate their in-group relative to other out-groups, and compare the value (Tajfel and Turner 1979). They perceive positive distinctiveness when the in-group is evaluated positively (in-group favoritism) and out-groups negatively (out-group derogation). Social identity is thus the combination of social categorization and social comparison which influences an individual's self-esteem (Treppe and Loy 2017). The greater the in-group identification, the greater the likelihood of out-group dehumanization (Roberto, Johnson, and Rauhaus, 2020) which leads to the legitimization of cruel behaviours toward out-group members. During this COVID-19 pandemic, the discrimination and aggression toward 'others' are increasing globally. Such behavior is legitimized by stereotyping, derogating and dehumanizing out-groups, particularly Asians, who face the backlash for the spread of the virus.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the issue of COVID-19 driven xenophobia, sinophobia and anti-Asian racism across continents and provides an in-depth explanation of such incidents through the lens of four theories namely, information asymmetry, political opportunism, social stigma and social identity. The objective was to illustrate the prevalence of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic and how concepts of the selected four theories are well-suited in explaining the xenophobic incidents. The article draws on key theories in order to provide a holistic understanding of the overall COVID-19 driven xenophobia and to show how racism in such a context is operated and legitimized at individual and institutional levels. The paper adds significant value to the body of knowledge because a theoretical explanation of the underlying determinants of COVID-19 related racism was lacking in the literature. The theoretical explanation used in this paper can also be applied to obtain an improved understanding of other crisis-led racism incidents.

It is beyond doubt that incidents of racism and xenophobia can have a devastating impact on the victim's well-being. However, such incidents are not only a threat to personal welfare, but they also pose possible threats for the economic stability and social harmony of a country. Future researchers can investigate how the current pandemic-induced xenophobia and sinophobia can have a detrimental impact on

different sectors of a country such as economic, education, and tourism sectors.

Finally, considering the far-reaching implications of xenophobia and community-based racism, collective effort is required from everyone to address the problem. Apart from strengthening family-oriented anti-racism values, institutional level (e.g. academic, workplace) interventions are required to promote stance against every kind of racism. Governments of each country must play pivotal roles in minimizing xenophobia by upholding strict anti-racism laws as well as conducting anti-racism campaigns.

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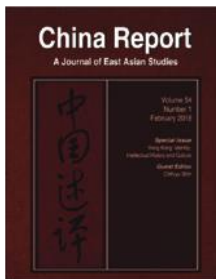


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