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Coronavirus and the Scapegoating of Asian-Americans

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~ 7 MIN READ

When societal order appears to be breaking down and life turns chaotic and unpredictable, we can be easily manipulated into buying into sociopolitical agendas that promote xenophobia and the scapegoating of innocent individuals and groups. This should concern us all...

The Coronavirus and the Scapegoating of Asian-Americans

One of my specialty areas as a Psychotherapist and Educator is integrating Eastern philosophy with Western psychological precepts. This, along with my B.A. in Far Eastern Studies and my background teaching graduate courses in Cross-Cultural Counseling and Diversity Awareness, eventually led to my having a significant number of Asian-Americans in my Psychotherapy and Life Coaching practices.

In the past few weeks (*prior* to United States citizens being advised to limit our activities and remain indoors), if one of my Asian-American clients had a common cold and thoughtfully wore a mask when out and about, they invariably reported to me later in session that they were the recipients of more than one scathing look and disdainful glance and that certain people seemed to go to great lengths to avoid them like the plague.

Some of my clients also shared that it felt strange to be treated as if they had committed a crime simply by being / looking 'Asian', wearing a mask, and being out in public. Others faintly joked that it was as if they suddenly had become a social leper, an 'untouchable', of sorts, and hence somehow undeserving of basic social courtesy, respect, or consideration (it should be noted that some of my clients who are not

Asian-American also wore masks during this time when out and they did not experience this sort of treatment at all).

As news of the coronavirus's global spread progressed, my Asian-American clients quickly became painfully and acutely aware that no matter what their actual ethnicity was (South Korean, Japanese, Thai, Hmong, etc), it was assumed that they were 'Chinese' and were therefore potentially a 'Coronavirus Carrier'.

These clients invariably shared their experience of xenophobia and racism with me in a matter-of-fact, detached manner, without any obvious associated emotional distress. You see, they had all been through this before. For example, several of my older clients were the only non-White students at their schools growing up as first-generation and second-generation Asian-Americans and were often treated as 'the other' ('foreign' / 'different') at school and elsewhere. They remember feeling ostracized and excluded, and remembered wanting desperately to fit in and be accepted among their Caucasian peers. My younger Asian-American clients expressed more sadness, disappointment, confusion, and surprise regarding the social ostracization they were now suddenly experiencing – but it was not the first time they had been treated in a 'less than', discriminatory way.

The Disturbing Rise of Coronavirus Hate Crimes

Scapegoating a person or an entire class of people allows the scapegoater(s) to displace their fears, anxieties, and negative feelings onto 'the other' (i.e., that which is seen a 'foreign' or a 'threat'). The scapegoater feels a sense of self-righteous indignation and a twisted form of justification which supports their targeting innocent individuals and committing violent acts.

Although the intensity of the societal rejection and silent condemnation my Asian-American clients have been subjected to these past few weeks may be more overt and obvious due to coronavirus fears, being the target of covert and overt forms of discrimination and social shunning is not a new experience for them. No matter that they were born and raised in the United States; each and every one of my Asian-American clients have been treated as 'the other' at one time or another in their lives due to [racial discrimination](#). And as their therapist and as a human being, it bothers me that they are "used to it." It's just not something that anyone, anywhere, should have to tolerate.

Yesterday, Anna Russell wrote an article for the *New York Times* entitled, [The Rise of Coronavirus Hate Crimes](#). She describes several

incidents of “racially aggravated assaults” and attacks. The fear and hatred fueling these assaults and attacks is both heartbreaking and rather horrifying to read, digest, and take in. And it’s not just Asian and Asian-American adults that are currently vulnerable. Asian and Asian-American children are vulnerable as well:

Last month, a boy of Asian descent was bullied about coronavirus at a San Fernando Valley school and beaten to the degree that he needed an MRI, said Robin Toma, the executive director of the county’s Human Relations Commission which works on hate crime prevention (<https://laist.com/latest/post/20200213/coronavirus-Los-Angeles-Asian-American>).

When Scapegoating an Entire Race Is ‘Par for the Course’

Just when I thought it couldn’t get much worse, it did. As of this week, President Donald Trump has taken to publicly calling the coronavirus “the Chinese Virus” (as evidenced in a tweet of his this past Monday as well as in [ensuing tweets and comments](#) made in the past two days), fueling the very same irrational fears and anxieties that have already led to the types of senseless hate crimes described in Russell’s article:

“The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!” [Trump wrote](#).

It should be evident to any clear-thinking, rational person that Trump’s calling the coronavirus “the Chinese Virus” is not only ill-advised and unnecessarily racialized (some would say it was even unapologetically xenophobic); it is also an incredibly dangerous thing to do, as emphasized by Eugene Cho in his tweeted reply to Trump this week, (which I am re-posting in it’s entirety here):

“Mr. President: This is not acceptable. Calling it the “Chinese virus” only instigates blame, racism, and hatred against Asians – here and abroad. We need leadership that speaks clearly against racism; Leadership that brings the nation and world together. Not further divides.”

Later, when interviewed, Cho, (who was born in Korea and immigrated to the United States when he was 6), said he knows three people who have been assaulted in the past couple weeks, incidents he believes are tied to the spread of the coronavirus.

"I can't speak for all Asians," he said. "I know for myself and my family, we're not just contending with a health crisis . . . there might be backlash verbal and physical."

He said there's a growing sentiment that Americans' fear is intensifying into anger, not just toward those who are of Chinese descent but toward anyone who is Asian. There's already an undercurrent of animosity, he said, toward people of Chinese descent, which has been exacerbated by recent trade wars.

"I'm not here to call President Trump a racist. I don't know him. I know some will say I'm being a coward," he said. "[The tweet was] certainly racialized and very unfortunate"

(<https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid19-trump-chinese-virus-eugene-cho-20200317.html>).

It's not just the U.S. President promoting xenophobic ideas related to the coronavirus. The *University of California's* health services department posted on Instagram that xenophobia is a "normal" reaction during a virus outbreak. *Huh?!?* This is a school that is located in Berkeley, arguably one of the most liberal and "woke" places on the planet! This post, which basically "normalizes" racist, scapegoating thoughts and behavior has since been deleted. And the scapegoating of Asians is not happening only in America. A quick google search reveals that hate crimes against Asians are occurring at this time in many parts of the world, [including in the UK](#).

Be Careful of "The Beast" Within

All this got me to thinking about William Golding's 1954 novel, *Lord of the Flies*.

The novel told the story of a group of adolescent boys stranded on a deserted island after a plane wreck. 'Lord of the Flies' explored the savage side of human nature as the boys, let loose from the constraints of society, brutally

turned against one another in the face of an imagined enemy. Riddled with symbolism, the book set the tone for Golding's future work, in which he continued to examine man's internal struggle between good and evil (<https://www.essaysauce.com/english-literature-essays/symbolism-william-goldings-lord-of-the-flies/>).

In *Lord of the Flies*, the stranded boys (who have been suddenly deprived of authoritarian structures and all sense of adult-driven social order) project all of their repressed fears and anxieties onto what they term 'The Beast'.

'The Beast' (which is actually just the corpse of an aviator attached to a parachute) featured within the story is significant in that it serves as a representative symbol of scapegoating: The true "beast" in this story is actually the boys themselves. Meaning, 'the beast' symbolizes the evil that is always latent within our human nature, projected onto an external entity (which can be real or imagined).

Toward the end of the novel, the boy who remains most 'civilized' on the island (nicknamed "Piggy") is labelled a "bag of fat" by the boys. Piggy is deliberately killed by a peer who drops a boulder on him. His death firmly illustrates how seemingly inconsequential 'microaggressions' can lead to aggressive attacks and even murder when we objectify and dehumanize others while denying our own darkness within.

It is my assertion that in labeling the coronavirus "the Chinese Virus" in a tweet seen by millions, President Trump didn't just open up a symbolic "bag of fat", but a xenophobic can of worms. And in doing so, he is contributing to the creation of senseless and needless personal and collective suffering – the kind of suffering presented by my Asian-American clients everyday in therapy: A deep, intrapsychic suffering that is most often born in solitude and steadfast, socially conditioned silence.

I can only hope that Americans are smart enough to see through Trump's latest blatant and obviously manipulative sociopolitical ploy. Because in a time in which we all need to unite and work together to minimize the physical, mental, and emotional discomfort and distress caused by what is now a global health emergency, it is not only dangerous, but possibly even deadly, to buy into concepts, terms, and ideas that are designed to scapegoat and divide.

Update 03-31-2020: I highly recommend the below (linked) article by
Chris Gayomal

The New Fear for Asian-Americans Going Out in Public

-RCM

Are you an Asian-American in need of more support? OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates is dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic well-being of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (APIs). [Visit OCA National – Asian Pacific American Advocates](#) – for resources and advocacy information.

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To learn more about *Family Scapegoat Abuse* (FSA), it's signs and symptoms, and recovering from this most damaging form of systemic familial abuse, read my eBook **The Invisible Wounds of the Family Scapegoat** (available via my secure website; see my profile, below).

APA Reference

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