

2020: Teachable moment in fight against anti-Asian, anti-Black racism

JUL 28, 2020

Timothy M. Smith

Senior News Writer

Anti-Asian racism was present when the first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in California more than 150 years ago, to work on the Transcontinental Railroad. Asian Americans have long been easy targets to blame, and the COVID-19 pandemic is the latest demonstration of that racism and xenophobia. Is it mere coincidence that it's happening at the same time that Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities are fighting for justice?

An "Ethics Talk" videocast from the *AMA Journal of Ethics*[®] (@JournalofEthics) features an interview with Jennifer Ho, PhD, director of the Center for Humanities and the Arts and professor of ethnic studies at University of Colorado Boulder. She provided insights into the roots of anti-Asian racism and the shared experience of Asian Americans with other communities of color affected by structural racism.

Racism written into law, language

Structural racism against people of color goes all the way back to the country's first immigration law, the Naturalization Act of 1790, which specified that citizenship was limited to "any alien, being a free white person." The interests of Chinese immigrants recruited to build the Transcontinental Railroad were cast aside by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was carried out through an executive order by President Roosevelt.

Besides being codified in U.S. law and governmental authority, Professor Ho added, racism persists in our vernacular.

"The mere fact of our hyphenation—as, say, Asian Americans or African Americans—means that there is a cultural assumption of who a real American is," she said.

A new expression of an old bias

The COVID-19 pandemic has reopened these festering wounds. A recent Pew Research Center [survey](#) found that a plurality of U.S. adults—nearly four in ten—said it is now “more common for people to express racist or racially insensitive views about people who are Asian than it was before the coronavirus outbreak.”

Racism, it has been noted, including [by the AMA](#), is an urgent public health threat. It also obstructs the advancement of health equity and is a barrier to excellence in the delivery of medical care. In other words, it’s a systemic disease.

“Racism doesn’t have a pathology in the way that cancer does. But just like poverty, it creates worse health outcomes,” Professor Ho said, noting that Asian Americans largely have not experienced the kind of racism that created the vast health inequities experienced by Black Americans, Native Americans and Latinx people. “What feels new in this moment is that Asian Americans are experiencing racism in new ways. They are worried about getting hurt physically—about bodily harm.”

Strength in numbers

In the same Pew Research Center survey, 38% of Black adults said someone had acted uncomfortable around them because of their race or ethnicity since the coronavirus outbreak—compared with 13% of white adults—and 20% feared someone might threaten or physically attack them.

This shared experience between Asian Americans and Black Americans makes 2020 a teachable moment, Professor Ho said.

“If you’re an Asian American and you haven’t really been thinking about race and racism before but are realizing that you are being targeted, I hope this is a moment when you also think about systemic racism that is impacting other communities and has impacted other communities for centuries,” she said.

There is a longstanding kinship between Asian American and African American activists, she added, such as when Asian Americans Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs fought alongside Martin Luther



King Jr. and Malcolm X during the civil rights movement.

“There has never been a social justice or human rights movement that has succeeded when only people of that group got involved,” Professor Ho said. “We always need allies.”

This episode of “Ethics Talk” is CME activity designated for 0.5 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™*. Listen to previous episodes of the “Ethics Talk” podcast or subscribe in iTunes or other services.