

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

Asian American Studies Center

## Research Report

# Understanding the Racialized Experiences of Asian Americans at the University of Houston

## Status Report – August 2021

Rosa Nam, Ph.D.

Kristian Lenderman, Ed.D.

Abbey Bachmann, Ph.D.

**Acknowledgment:** This research was sponsored by the University of Houston's Asian American Studies Center Multicultural Success Initiative.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The proposed research sought to understand the daily racialized experiences of Asian Americans in the University of Houston community both on and off campus. With the resurgence of Anti-Asian violence through the United States, it was imperative to learn about the experiences of the Asian American community at UH. The data and findings can be used to identify areas of issues or concerns, facilitate dialogue, and develop recommendations for ways the university can evolve to support the Asian American community.

### **Methodology**

The proposed research utilized a mixed methods approach with a survey followed by individual and focus group interviews.

### ***Participants***

215 survey responses were collected via Qualtrics, including faculty, staff, and students who identified as Asian American at UH from November to December 2020. Additionally, 12 individual and 2 focus group interviews were conducted online in March and April 2021. Individuals selected for the interviews and focus group indicated on their initial survey that they would be willing to participate in follow up interviews. Of the 14 interview and focus group participants, 12 were students, 1 was a staff member, and 1 was a faculty member. All interview participants identified as Asian American and were affiliated with UH.

### ***Data Analysis***

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, and ANOVA among constructs and participant-level factors (e.g., ethnicity, generation status, and gender). Open ended survey responses and interviews were coded, analyzed, categorized, and grouped into themes emerging from the data.

### **Summary**

This research project sought to understand the daily racialized experiences of Asian Americans in the University of Houston community on and off campus. Through both survey and interview data, the research illuminates how COVID-19 and the rise of anti-Asian hate has impacted the daily lives of Asian American students, staff, and faculty at UH in a variety of ways. Participants reported experiencing a wide range of microaggressions during their educational careers and saw an increase in anti-Asian hate since COVID-19. Furthermore, participants expressed gratitude for the large Asian population in Houston and at the University of Houston and suggested ways that the university can take steps to support individuals and the community.

## Survey Item Findings

### *Likert Items*

The most common stereotypes fell under the constructs of Aliens in their Own Land or Assumptions of the Model Minority.

Among the responses to the Asian American Racialized Microaggression Survey (AARMS), the following items had the highest average means above 4 (often):

- (a) You encountered people that cannot distinguish between different Asian ethnicities. ( $M= 4.40$ ),
- (b) Someone assumed that you study hard (or studied hard when you were a student). ( $M= 4.40$ ),
- (c) Someone assumed that you are smart. ( $M= 4.37$ ), and
- (d) You felt compelled to work harder or do extra work to be on the same level as other people. ( $M= 4.27$ ).

There were significant differences among six items in the AARMS scale in the experiences between men and women that are consistent.

The following three were the most significant: (a) Someone stereotyped Asians as freaks in bed. ( $p=.012$ ), (b) Someone invalidated you for your collectivistic values. ( $p=.001$ ), and (c) You did not defend yourself when made fun of for fear of safety or repercussions. ( $p=.007$ ). This data is consistent with the intersectional oppression of Asian American women as Asians and women.

The Likert COVID-19 responses revealed varying degrees of racialized encounters or fears.

45.1% respondents felt having experiences of other individuals acting uncomfortable around them. Further, over 82.8% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed that "It is more common for people to express racist views of Asians and Asian Americans because of COVID-19 than before the pandemic." 83.7% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed that "There has been an increase in hostility towards Asians and Asian Americans because of COVID-19."

### *Open-ended Responses*

Along with the Likert questions, there were multiple open-ended questions on the survey to address individual experiences with COVID-19. In an analysis of these responses three themes emerged: increase in racist incidents, feeling dismissed and invalidated as Asian Americans, and former U.S. President Trump's racist rhetoric. The COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States in early 2020 when President Donald Trump was in office.

The first theme is that individuals experienced an increase in racist incidents during COVID-19. Both an increase in open attacks and macroaggressions were experienced by participants:

*"Any time I've gone to a public place this year, I've been stared at & avoided as if I had created Covid-19. On multiple occasions, cashiers at grocery stores closed their registers when they saw my mom & I were next in line. Any time I've put my 2 cents in about our country's current situation, I'm attacked on social media & have racial slurs hurled at me, as if it's my fault we're in this mess."*

*"It's extremely frustrating to see former high school classmates joke about the "Chinese virus" especially when the majority of those that joke do not have many, if any, Asian American friends. They do this and then say that people who are bothered by it are "too sensitive" and that it was "just a joke" and they "can post whatever [they] want". Even though I'm not Chinese, I worry that*

*these statements perpetuate aggression towards Asian-Americans that may affect me since most Americans cannot differentiate between different Asian ethnicities.”*

The second theme that emerged from the open-ended responses was that many participants felt ignored and frustrated. They felt that discrimination against Asian Americans is often underreported and not taken as seriously as others’ experiences:

*“I feel like people don’t think Asian Americans struggle financially and emotionally. I don’t think my professors realize that I worked 40-60 hours a week during my entire undergraduate experience (I’m in my fifth year of architecture school now). I’m not sure if they care either, but I know that it’s assumed that I don’t work. I also felt so uncomfortable at the beginning of COVID-19 before masks were mandatory. I wore a mask anyways but felt like non-Asians were judging me.”*

*“COVID-19 has taught me that many people like to put the blame on one specific race. It’s hard enough knowing that many Asian Americans that have had experienced racism know that it gets swept under the rug.”*

*“I feel that my experiences have been even more minimalized during the pandemic. I lost my job, almost lost my mom’s house, and had to start a business, but I don’t think anybody cares.”*

The final theme that emerged was the negative impact of former U.S. President Trump’s language around COVID-19. Trump’s language created an atmosphere where participants felt unsafe because his words were used to justify anti-Asian attacks:

*“COVID-19 is a very hard time, even more so with so much racism and a president with his administration being so polarizing and encourages so much hatred and racism in our country. It seems like this unfair treatment is going largely unpunished, as our own president has used the same rhetoric.”*

*“I’m Chinese. With Trump consistently and vocally calling COVID-19 the “Chinese flu” and blaming China for COVID-19 it feels like there’s a target on my back; just waiting any day for someone to actually vocalize and speak their opinions on my race. Basically, there’s small amounts of fear in the back of my mind that someone is going to single me out in public and humiliate me because I’m Asian.”*

*“Felt afraid for myself and my siblings at the beginning of the pandemic. Felt anger towards Trump for calling it the ‘China Virus.’”*

*“I’m sad the current president calls the virus the kung-flu.”*

These responses showed the magnitude of the impact of COVID-19 on participants and how it directly influenced the rise in experiences of anti-Asian hate.

### **Interview Data**

The research team completed 12 individual interviews and two focus groups with participants who qualified for and agreed to the interviews. Using open ended questioning, the interviews focused on the impact of COVID-19 and the racialized experiences of participants. Each interview and focus

group lasted approximately 45 minutes. The data was transcribed using NVivo and then coded using open coding by the research team. The following are the preliminary findings from the study.

### ***Early Experiences with Racism***

Many of the participants mentioned racist experiences they had in elementary and middle school such as being called racial slurs and having perpetrators pull at the sides of their eyes to mock Asian eyes.

*“I do also remember always being called at that time, I think it was childish, like childish jokes and stuff, but wrinkled like banana, or I do remember at some point like having the chink and stuff or like the inner eyes. And I remember when I was a kid growing up with that, that was just what I lived with. In addition to whenever I brought food for lunch, the food would be different. And so my classmates would also comment on that as well.”*

*“I was made fun of a lot. Very much so. It was constant. I think the first time I remember being really made fun of was probably third grade. I didn't notice it or people didn't do that as much when I was in kindergarten first grade or I just don't recall. But, you know, a lot of making fun of the language, watching, challenging things like that and pulling out their eyes.”*

When asked about how participants responded to the various racist experiences, multiple participants mentioned that they ignored the taunts and bullying at the time in the hopes that they would disappear.

*“But when I was little, we were taught to just ignore them and not react.”*

One participant, a transracial adoptee, was even explicitly instructed by her white parent to ignore outright racist comments by her mother's friends when learning about the participant's decision to study abroad in China.

*“And so we had some friends over, my mom's good friends. And so they were like, oh, ok, don't eat dog. And I was like, what? I was like, they don't eat dog over there. And they were like, yeah, they do. And then I was so upset because, you know, this is in our house and, you know, basically the good friends are saying this. And then so I talk with my mom later. And she was like, you know, that was rude of you to go and, like, storm off. And I was like, do you not understand how this affects me? And then she was like, they just don't know. And then I was like, is it my responsibility to educate them? And she said, no, but just give them grace.”*

The realization that many of these actions were examples of racism did not occur to some participants until later in high school and university.

*“[I] took pride in [the model minority myth] growing up. I really liked the idea of like trying hard and being like very smart and whatever, because I like stereotypes. I perceived it as good things for sure, working hard. But like growing up, now I'm realizing it's harmful not only to people who don't fit in with the model minority or whatever, but also against other minorities. It's pretty harmful.”*

For other participants, the current state of the world allowed them to be confident in standing up to these blatant racist expressions.

*“And so I just have learned when I was little, I wasn't very proud of what I look like. But now I kind of embrace it. And I'm like, well, you know, this is who I am. Please stop being so harsh. And, you know, like, it's not fair that you treat me X, Y, Z. And so I've started to stand up for myself and also the people in the Asian community.”*

### ***Fear of Safety for Self and Others***

With the rise in Anti-Asian violence as well as the threat of COVID-19, participants expressed concern about their own safety and that of their loved ones.

*“I would say in terms of being proactive [it has] just been looking out for my family and really doing the best that I can to look out for my family. I would say in terms of physical safety, what I've been doing is really just, I guess, making sure that my family is taken care of in terms of like do they have their vaccinations, things like that, or I'm really looking out for my grandparents since, of course, I've been hearing of a lot of elderly Asian Americans or elderly Asian people being attacked in the streets for getting killed.”*

*“My mom, she knows she is going to work at a restaurant and she's also old. So I'm very worried about her because anything can happen to you. And I mean, ever since I came here, I've been bullied quite a bit. So I knew that it was always like an Anti-Asian sentiment. But now that it's getting worse, I just feel very unsafe and I do go out a bit. So it's just no one knows what's going to happen to you.”*

One participant described how she feels safe among Asian people but is still worried about what could happen.

*“So I've been trying to support Asian owned businesses recently and...yeah, nothing has happened to me personally. There was an incident like this I've just been like looked at. That's basically it. So I feel I feel safer being in Houston because there's a lot of Asian or other Asian people, you know, so lucky in that sense. And. So I don't feel that unsafe, but there's always a possibility, which is scary.”*

One participant developed a panic disorder which was exacerbated after the Atlanta massacre.

*“I actually developed like a panic disorder last August due to like all these like political pressures. And so I was able to like kind of go to therapy, take medications to start getting through it. But actually within and I was able to kind of like get over it a little bit. But then, like, because of all the events, especially within the past week and a half, I've kind of like started to feel those like symptoms again just because it's like something that's like directly relates to me and it's like something that it could.... it could happen to anybody that I know. And it's just like really disheartening.”*

### ***Participant Views on UH's Response to Anti-Asian Racism***

Participants discussed both the community that they found at the University of Houston and the need for action among leaders. Houston is one of the most diverse cities in America and

participants emphasized the importance and benefits of living in such a place. The diversity of UH specifically helped participants find their community, voice, and identity as an Asian Americans:

*“I just wanted to be like the people around me. I just wanted to be like white, essentially, like have that white characteristic and not be as Asian as possible. But then it wasn't and so when I went to [UH], where I was just like, no, I like being Asian, like I'm different. I love my culture. I love who I am and I love that I'm different from other people and that I need to start embracing that rather than trying to be something or someone that I'm not.”*

They also discussed the ability to find community both in UH and outside of UH:

*“And like just like the community or the communities in the Houston area, like whenever I go to, like Chinatown to shop, it feels very normal to me.”*

When asked about the university response to the rise in anti-Asian hate, there were mixed responses. Some participants thought that the university was doing a good job in responding via the emails from college deans and the communications team through the UH email listservs.

*“I remember always getting emails of people higher up, showing support for that movement and showing that they're aware of what's happening and just like showing that they are of the mindset that they know things aren't where they need to be...I appreciate that. You know, I go to a school that is not only willing, but seems very like they're desiring to move forward and learn and be, you know, basically just to learn and change...I feel really positively about how UH has handled things.”*

Others noted how the statement on the Atlanta massacre was late and felt forced.

*“Yeah, I almost feel like because we've been, you know, the invisible minority for so long that. People are not taking the violence against Asians as seriously. Right, because compared to some of the other more recent violent acts like George Floyd that attained national news, I don't feel like, you know, anything really happened until the killings in Georgia right at the spot. And so but this has been going on for quite some time, right. Personally spurred on by the past president, President Trump calling it the China virus and all this stuff. So the reaction has been slow, the reaction has been generic, and it feels more like a let me have an official stance instead of I really care.”*

Additionally, participants thought that UH could better support the Asian American community by supporting more programs and initiatives that educated faculty, staff, and students about common Asian stereotypes, how to intervene as a by-stander, and offered race-based affinity spaces for students and staff. Many individuals highlighted the invisibility of the Asian American community and the need for specific statements in support of Asian American students and faculty. Furthermore, participants thought the UH should move beyond using email listservs as a means to communicate diversity and equity programming and instead utilize all of their platforms to speak out anti-Asian hate:

*“[The] university has to do better on their social media accounts...They just post a bunch of stuff about like the bookstore, about their sports team, about just university fees. And in general, why*

*don't you use that page, which is the most followed page on all universities and social media pages, and use that to advocate for workshops that are actually going on within UH... It would still look really good that the university is posting on their main page about diversity workshops, about cultural workshops, about career workshops."*

### ***Participant Responses to This Moment***

Many participants chose to respond to the noticed increase in Anti-Asian sentiments and violence by posting, sharing, and commenting on various social media platforms.

*"For me, I've definitely been really active on Instagram... I do share my story posts and with the crime in New York and even recently, this one in Houston, where the Korean owner, she was hit by one of her customers. But something that I've noticed is that only my Asian friends share the same crimes like on Instagram, but less so of my non-Asian friends that."*

Others saw this moment in time as an opportunity to advocate for the Asian American community and educate those who demonstrated microaggressions or any Anti-Asian behaviors or comments.

*"So I think the very first [microaggression] is the question of where were you from originally? And what I have realized is that I have either answered it with I'm from Houston, Texas, and I was born and raised there, or I have also reversed it back on the other person to ask where are they from originally? And that is how I have been mitigating it and trying to help the other party understand that for me and myself, I am born raised in America, and you should not question that otherwise. But if you want to ask where my family is from, then you should directly ask where is my family from and not where are you from?"*

Some participants also mentioned the feeling of being obligated to speak on behalf of all Asian Americans when placed in a situation where they were the only Asian or one of very few Asians in a group of people.

*"I think the biggest thing for me is that because there is such a smaller group of Asian-Americans here, it was a very heavy feeling that I felt of having to represent everyone. But I can't represent everyone. And so whatever little ways that I can divert the microaggressions, sometimes I don't I don't consciously think about them, then I will."*

### **Next Steps/Discussion**

These findings reflect the start of a conversation about how to best understand and support the racialized experiences of Asian Americans at UH and across the country during this resurgence of Anti-Asian hate to do better moving forward. We have shared the findings with the Asian American Studies Center to submit to the Provost office, the UH Race relations and Social Justice Committee, and the Center for Diversity and Inclusion.

The next steps in this research are to draft articles for publication to contribute to the national conversation on supporting the Asian American community.