

[Monkey Cage](#)

Analysis

Asians are stereotyped as ‘competent but cold.’ Here’s how that increases backlash from the coronavirus pandemic.

Leaders can make this better — or worse



From left: Jessica Wong, Jenny Chiang and Sheila Vo of the Massachusetts Asian American Commission join in a March 12 protest on the steps of the statehouse in Boston. (Steven Senne/AP)

By **Yuhua Wang**

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Last week, the [FBI warned](#) that hate crimes against Asian Americans are likely to increase as the coronavirus pandemic spreads. That’s not theoretical. Since the covid-19 outbreak, people of Asian descent have been [spit on, yelled at and attacked](#) throughout the United States. Here’s what you need to know about how racist stereotypes are

fueling attacks on the Asian American community — and how political rhetoric could make things worse.

Asian Americans have come under attack

Asian Americans are, on average, the [highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing minority group](#) in the United States, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center, which was “designed to contain a nationally representative sample of each of the six largest Asian-American groups by country of origin — Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, Korean Americans and Japanese Americans.”

In the popular [stereotype](#), people of East Asian descent “work hard,” “follow rules” and “never complain.” Chinese Americans have finally shed a 19th-century image in which they were denigrated as “coolies,” Japanese Americans have finally moved beyond a World War II image that viewed them as an “enemy race.” Korean Americans have finally escaped the misunderstanding that they have a “kimchi temper.” By the 21st century, Asian Americans had become considered a respected “model minority” — a term many [reject](#).

The covid-19 virus originated in China, and many blame the Chinese for bringing the virus to the rest of the world. Because it is difficult for many non-Asian people to distinguish among different Asian subgroups, all Asians are treated as culprits. For instance, in February, two motels [refused rooms](#) to two [Hmong](#) men — a Southeast Asian ethnic group — because they looked Chinese.

In mid-March, Russell Jeung, a San Francisco State University professor, helped launch a website called [Stop AAPI Hate](#). In the first eight days, the site received more than [650 reports](#) of discrimination — largely against Asian Americans. Of course, since few people have heard of the website, we can assume that most cases are not being reported.

Underlying stereotypes make racialized attacks easy

This type of “faulty and inflexible generalization” that associates an individual with the perceived wrongs of an entire ethnic/racial group is almost the [textbook](#) definition of prejudice. Princeton University psychologist Susan Fiske and her collaborators published a [series](#) of [articles](#) examining stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. They [show](#) people usually assess a group along two dimensions: warmth (are they sincere and sociable?) and competence (are they capable and intelligent?). For example, her work finds the elderly are stereotypically perceived as warm but incompetent; middle-class white Americans as warm and competent; Asians and Jews as [cold but competent](#), and homeless people as cold and incompetent.

People who are not friendly are more dangerous to others than are people who are not competent, who are more dangerous to themselves. When majority-group members with high levels of bias encounter members of minority groups they perceive as cold, biased individuals can feel they must react by verbally harassing, bullying or attacking them. That’s especially true if that minority group is being touted or perceived as

threatening — the way some leaders are painting Asian Americans as responsible for spreading the pandemic.

Using a nationally representative, random-sample telephone survey that interviewed 571 respondents in the United States in 2003, Fiske's research [found](#) Asians, along with Jews, are consistently stereotyped as competent but cold (unsociable, evil, conniving, cunning, slippery and so forth). Biased individuals, confronted with people stereotyped as competent-cold, often feel envy and resentful admiration. Envied groups are often scapegoated during periods of widespread social instability, because biased majority-group members perceive those groups as having both the ability and intention to disrupt society.

Envy is often accompanied by anger, which can push biased people to act aggressively against those they envy — something that increases when a society is under great stress or enduring circumstances that increase competition among groups for resources. Lawrence University professor Peter Glick has [suggested](#) that when a society is enduring difficult conditions, biased majority-group members become especially likely to scapegoat groups perceived as competent competitors.

The stereotypical image of Asians and Asian Americans as competent and lacking warmth, therefore, alongside the idea they are to blame for the virus, means they are the group most likely to be targeted for the ongoing pandemic. They are perceived as competent enough to disrupt society's existing order; the perception that they lack warmth — which can be heightened by [wearing a mask](#), something many East Asian and Asian American people feel is [culturally appropriate](#) — can prompt those who are already biased to perceive them as hostile and respond with anger and harm.

How politicians make things worse

Even people harboring racist views know that it is not polite to express anti-Asian sentiment openly. People typically monitor their language and behavior because of social pressures — a phenomenon that [social scientists](#) call “social desirability pressure.” Research has demonstrated that if people are worried about sounding sexist or racist, they do not even provide sincere answers in surveys about these issues. In 2015, social scientists Yanna Krupnikov, Spencer Piston and Nicole Bauer used a [technique](#) to make people feel comfortable expressing their prejudices by designing a setting in which the respondents are given an “out” — a chance to say why they don't like certain candidates that isn't about gender or race. Their study reveals biases that people did not feel comfortable expressing openly, thereby showing how widespread such pressure is currently.

But social pressures can change. President Trump's racial rhetoric has emboldened many Americans to more openly express and act on their prejudices — a phenomenon that some have labeled the “[Trump effect](#).” Benjamin Newman, Jennifer Merolla, Sono Shah, Danielle Casarez Lemi, Loren Collingwood and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan recently reported here at TMC that their [research finds](#) Trump's rhetoric does encourage open prejudice and bias — and when other politicians don't object, it amplifies that

“Trump effect” — and increases the likelihood they will discriminate based on those biases.

Prominent U.S. political figures have further heightened the dangers for Asian Americans and Asians in the United States. On the morning of March 18, Trump pointedly insisted on calling covid-19 the “Chinese Virus” in a [pair of tweets](#). When the president and [GOP lawmakers](#) used the phrases “foreign,” “Chinese virus” and “Wuhan virus” to describe the virus causing the pandemic, [social media mentions of anti-Chinese rhetoric increased](#) — precisely as the research suggests.

The covid-19 pandemic will eventually end. But the hate it has inflamed may haunt us for a long time.

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