

The Social Symbolism of Mask Wearing During the Pandemic in the East Asian Community and Their Intervention Against COVID-19 Racism

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, racism against East Asians has been detected and the need for intervention is evident. The Korean American Association of Greater Philadelphia (KAAGP) and Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation (PJMF) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, initiated mask wearing and donation programs to fight racism while building the public health infrastructure within the broader community. The sustainability of these programs beyond the pandemic depends on the attention to culturally nuanced service delivery by policymakers.

Keywords:

COVID-19, Racism, East Asian Community, Community Resilience, Public Health Measures

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unforeseen racism against East Asians globally as a result of the first case of the virus being detected in Wuhan, China. There was no official name for the COVID-19 virus until February 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) gave it an official name. Before and since then, the virus has been referred to in racist terms, such as the "Wuhan Virus," "China Virus," and "Kung Flu." The impact of racism on health is significant (Riechmann 2020). While the effects of COVID-19 on physical health are evident, its effects on mental health are not. Even so, there is a clear indication that there has been a significant disruption of mental health service delivery globally (WHO, 2020). The need for intervention for COVID-19 related racism against the East Asian community during and beyond the pandemic is evident.

Mask Wearing Practice and COVID-19 Racism against East Asians

Members of East Asian communities have kept their distinctive cultural and linguistic identities as immigrants in the U.S. One of their public health practices, which existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, is wearing masks. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) in 2002 had solidified face masking as personal protection (Wong 2020). Besides, recent increased awareness of particulate matter (PM) and a higher level of PM through Yellow Dust, a natural source of PM, have bolstered this mask wearing practice in South Korea and Hong Kong (Lim et al. 2020). This practice is common for people living outside of their East Asian native countries. As the global death toll resulting from COVID-19 continues to rise, racism against East Asians has increased. There have been reports of physical and verbal attacks against East Asians wearing masks in the United States of America, Canada, and Europe. About four in ten Asians report that they have experienced racism after the COVID-19 outbreak (Ruiz et al. 2020). Misunderstanding of the social symbolism of wearing masks and the misconception that masks identify the wearers as virus carriers brought even more discrimination onto East Asians in the early days of the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 related racism has yet to be determined and discussions of any intervention are scarce (Lee 2020). Yet, Chen (2020) describes this pandemic-driven racism as a "secondary contagion" that threatens this population. Two Korean community-based nonprofit organizations have initiated distinctive community intervention programs to fight racism against their communities. Their programs focus on removing misconceptions of East Asians by distributing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks and reaching out to Korean War Veterans in the U.S. to share their appreciation.

Mask Making and Donation Programs as Intervention Against COVID-19 Racism

The Korean American Association of Greater Philadelphia (KAAGP) initiated a program called "Make a Mask Campaign" in April 2020. Wearing masks is strongly recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an effective public health measure against the COVID-19 virus. However, there was a large shortage of masks during the early months of 2020. To help those in need of masks, KAAGP called on their community members. More than seventy community members, as young as seven years and as old as eighty-three years, along with other Chinese community members, joined to make fabric masks. Individuals, business owners, and other community organizations soon joined in. Before long, KAAGP donated fabric

masks, disposable masks, and N95 masks to local healthcare networks, including hospitals and nursing facilities, as well as township officers, police stations, the county commissioner's office, the senior association, senior subsidized housing programs, and local schools. Now it has been expanded to a drive-through "Mask Distribution Campaign" in commercial areas. By the end of 2020, 45,000 masks were delivered to the broader community.

In March 2020, the Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation (PJMF) started the "Happy Call" Program as a way of reaching out to and checking in with older Korean adults living in the community and addressing potential mental health issues, including loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Through this program, Korean American middle and high school students connected with older adults. Additionally, young students wrote personal letters to Korean War Veterans to share their appreciation and sent them care packages that included Personal Protection Equipment (PPE). PJMF also donated 6,000 masks and 250 bottles of sanitizer to hospitals and nursing homes serving predominately black communities.

Building Public Health Infrastructure in the Broader Community

These intergenerational and interracial efforts to fight COVID-19 and COVID-19 related racism help to build the public health infrastructure under the pandemic by encouraging more community members to wear masks in public. The social symbolism of wearing masks, which adversely impacted the Korean community, has been elevated to the core of these intervention programs against COVID-19 related racism. These culturally nuanced intervention programs within the Korean community could have easily been overlooked before the pandemic.

Unexpected Benefits within the Korean Immigrant Community

The impact of these programs on Korean communities, as well as other Chinese and Indian communities, are evident in terms of much stronger social cohesion, social capital, and social support. These intergenerational and interracial programs have promoted levels of psychosocial and mental health well-being that are unprecedented in the Asian immigrant history in the Greater Philadelphia area.

Programs' Sustainability beyond COVID-19 and Public Health Significance

There is a lack of bicultural and bilingual health professionals serving the Korean community. They are essential to providing culturally sensitive health services, especially in regard to mental health services. It is repetitively reported that low mental health services utilization in the Asian community is due to its shortage of bicultural and bilingual health professionals (Lee 2020). These programs could not be sustained beyond the pandemic without the understanding of policymakers of the importance of bicultural and bilingual professionals and local ethnic community organizations. Building a public health infrastructure has been underway for the past 30 years (DeSalvo et al. 2016) and many state and local agencies are using federal grants to remediate and address local needs by implementing tailored practices. However, more consideration of local needs during the pandemic and COVID-19 related racism against East Asian communities is needed. By working at the local level through programs like KAAGP and PJMF, marginalized populations could influence public health leaders to promote more culturally and linguistically appropriate services and intervention programs at the state and national level. Building these public health infrastructures could only reduce ever-widening gaps in health equity, especially in field of mental health.

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