

Asian critical theory in understanding the women victims of anti-Asian hate crimes

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journals.sagepub.com/home/isw**Sangeun Lee** 

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Abstract

Asian critical theory provides a conceptual lens to understand how racism affects Asian Americans and their communities as a racially marginalized population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian crimes were witnessed at a heightened level and highlighted by the Atlanta massacre. Six out of eight victims were Asian women. The author calls for the utilization of Asian critical theory to elevate the conceptualization of their challenges and provide an analytical tool to interpret the Atlanta massacre. Within the global practice, this tailored approach grounded in the fieldwork and theory can help the immigrants and their rights in the global context.

Keywords

Asian American, Asian critical theory, COVID-19

COVID-19 and anti-Asian hate crime

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans have been the target of many violent crimes. This act of violence against Asians is not something new. This kind of practice existed starting from the middle of the 19th century among Asian immigrants. Fourteen months after the World Health Organization's official announcement of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, the mass murder of Asians in Atlanta occurred on March 16, 2021. Eight Asian women were killed, and one was wounded. Since the first detection of several cases of pneumonia with unknown causes in Wuhan, China, on December 31, 2019, there have been concerns about racial blaming of Asians as the main carriers of COVID-19. It was fueled by President Donald Trump and his administration team's incorrect naming of the pandemic, with the media replicating these terms without any restriction. It is too early to understand the long-term impact of their exposure to these crimes. Discussions of any intervention for the Asian population are scarce, as studies on Asian Americans and their health and wellbeing are heavily under-researched. Nonetheless, this pandemic-driven rise in anti-Asian hate crimes is regarded as a 'secondary contagion' threatening this population (Chen et al., 2020).

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As a bicultural and bilingual social worker working with the Asian immigrant population with limited English proficiency (LEP), I have been helping my clients navigate adequate health and social services in one of the major metropolitan cities in the United States. I have witnessed the unique experience of Asian Americans caused by their racial positioning and racial realities that are very different from those of other minority populations. This racism will only reinforce ecological risk pathways that lead to adverse outcomes among Asians. For example, many of my clients refuse to seek other health and social services because of a commonly accepted perception that Asians do not have health and social issues. In the meantime, they also feel that they are regarded as foreigners no matter how many generations have been settled in the United States.

Critical race theory provides a framework to demonstrate the racist history of the United States and how it impacts the present racial dynamics between dominant and non-dominant groups. Critical race theory has been challenged for focusing on only Black and White binary conflicts. Now it has evolved into ‘Asian critical theory’, which captures the racial realities of Asians in the United States by adding nuanced challenges. So far, Asian critical theory is regarded as the most useful conceptual lens to understand better how racial oppression affects Asian Americans and their communities (Chae, 2013).

Core tenets of Asian critical theory

Asian critical theory has unique core tenets that present an analytical tool to examine how racism affects Asian Americans. I find that five tenets – Asianization, transnational context, strategic (anti) essentialism, intersectionality, and commitment to social justice – are mostly related to understanding Asian women victims of the Atlanta shooting.

Asianization focuses on how the US society racializes the Asian population as a monolithic model minority while promoting Asians as an exemplary group in the society. Because of specific Asian subgroups’ financial and academic success, it is often misinterpreted that Asians are ‘honorary whites’ and they cannot be the victims of racism or racial discrimination (Museus and Iftikar, 2013). Yet, in reality, depending on the current interests of the White majority, Asians are portrayed as a model minority against other marginalized groups, which may place the Asian population as the target of racism by not only the White supremacist but also other communities of color by bringing up as a fact that Asians belong nowhere as ‘perpetual foreigners’ in the United States.

Transnational contexts explain how diverse subgroups within the Asian communities are evenly impacted by the US society, regardless of their respective culture and language, which eventually makes both positive and negative impacts on the Asian community as a monolithic group, as has been the case with the US national policy favoring family-based immigration in 1965 (Museus and Iftikar, 2013). It can also be dangerous to regard Asians as one monolithic group since this practice may offend other Asian subgroups. During the pandemic, Chinese and Chinese-like Asians were first attacked as the carrier of COVID-19, but eventually, racial discrimination targeted all Asian people regardless of their subgroup belongingness (Gao and Liu, 2021).

Dominant socioeconomic and political agendas impact how Asian Americans are racially categorized (Lee and Johnson, 2021). Through this process, no two Asians gain the same experience. It is strategic anti-essentialism, while intersectionality addresses the notion that the condition of Asian Americans is shaped by the intersection of racism and other systems of oppression. Because of these intersections, Asian Americans’ racial identity and different social identities mutually frame Asian American experiences and their pressure. Like critical race theory, Asian critical theory pursues a commitment to social justice as an end goal.

Utilizing Asian critical theory in understanding Asian women victims

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been frequent reports of physical and verbal attacks against Asians and their descendants, and these attacks have worsened in severity and frequency. Utilizing the lens of Asian critical theory, the Atlanta massacre symbolizes racial positioning and racial realities of Asian women in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 16, 2021, a shooting spree occurred in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia, United States. Eight people were killed, six were Asian women, and one was wounded. At first, police reported that this criminal act was conducted by a White male driven by his sex addiction. Many activists saw the attack as another example of violent attacks targeting Asian Americans and criticized law enforcement's stance as rationalizing the perpetrator's actions. Making the case as such, the six Asian women victims were portrayed as sex industry workers who were not worthy of humanity from the initial investigation process. Also, the media repeatedly reported the phrase 'Asian massage parlors', while the suspect was described as a customer with a mental health history who 'patronizes the same parlors'.

Framing this crime with a male perpetrator against multiple female sex industry workers implies that these women do not reflect society's 'model minority' perception. Rather, they are portrayed as sex workers or even immoral temptresses, devoid of humanity (Kang, 2021). The political movement to paint this racially motivated hate crime as an ill person's random act of violence only reinforces this frame of the model minority of Asians. Those who are seen as a weak fit in this frame can be an easy target of racial discrimination and victims of lethal attacks because there is another perception of Asians: Asians are foreigners no matter how much they are Americanized culturally and linguistically through multi-generational residence.

The massacre is also an example of gun violence against women of color. According to Kaiser Family Foundation's (2021) report on the death tolls by firearms from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States in 2019, 2.9 Asians were killed per 100,000 US standard population, compared with 11.9 Whites. While the Asian demographic composes 7 percent of the nation's overall population, Whites comprise 61.6 percent (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Also, gun violence targeting women victims, especially women of color, increased due to easy access to firearms by misogynistic and racist individuals before the pandemic. During the pandemic, there has been a spike in gun violence against women resulting from COVID-19 and its impacts on society. Thus, this Atlanta gun attack has catalyzed the discussion around gun reform and legal measures prohibiting violence against women.

In addition, Asian immigrant women workers in the service industry are often exposed to labor exploitation due to a lack of education and legal status, unlike the predominant image of Asian immigrants from Korea, China, India, and other Asian countries – highly skilled workers with high education. The Asian women victims of the Atlanta shootings were reported to work for long hours with low wages while surviving economically for their family members. A family member of one of the women victims was reluctant to share that the victim worked in the service industry and was killed (Lee, 2021).

No two victims of this massacre had experienced racism in the same way. Each Asian woman victim must have had multiple challenges due to their own racial, gender, class, and linguistic discrimination in the United States. However, their experience can be interpreted as victims of anti-Asian hate crimes, gun violence, and labor exploitation within the context that they are Asian immigrant women with limited English proficiency. Figure 1 illustrates how the Atlanta massacre can be interpreted using the lens of Asian critical theory.



Figure 1. The interpretation of Asian women victims of the Atlanta massacre using Asian critical theory.

Implications to social work in the global context

Asian immigrant women I have encountered as a bicultural and bilingual social worker in the community share a similar concern that the women victims may have had. I adopted Asian critical theory in order to demonstrate the true nature of the Atlanta massacre and the impact on women victims. These victims' racial positioning and racial realities are very different from other minorities like Latino/a populations and African Americans in the United States. The framing of Asian Americans as 'model minority' and 'perpetual foreigners' could have negatively impacted the six Asian women victims of the Atlanta shootings. Another point that I underscore is that these women's intersectionality may have caused another layer of oppression and marginalization within their own Asian subgroup community – with their own agenda unknown to the mainstream. Because of all these factors, narrowing this massacre as a random act of gun violence by a person with a mental health history could be an ideal choice for the public. This oppressive practice of Asians, immigrant workers, and women in the United States is aligned with what I have witnessed in the field as a bicultural and bilingual social worker.

I find that Asian critical theory provides a conceptual framework to confirm what I have experienced in the field, which is tailored to the population who are marginalized in multiple ways. It is often challenging to locate a theory that elevates my conceptualization of clients' issues while it provides an analytical tool to interpret a case concerning cases related to my target populations. Through my trials and errors, I have found that Asian critical theory could be the best fit to raise awareness of the challenges of Asians in the United States. I also have demonstrated how Asian critical theory could be applied in understanding the case and the victims (Atlanta shooting and Asian women victims).

The longer I work with these people, the clearer I see the need for a theoretical framework to evaluate these cases for both social workers and various stakeholders in the larger context. The perception that Asians are supposed to be the model minority free from financial challenges and health problems, not to mention domestic and labor issues, may bring another layer of discrimination. Asian women do suffer from their immigration status, linguistic barriers, and financial difficulties against this perception. Thus, they are accustomed to being forced to make peace with their environment and learn to suffer, tolerate, and swallow their reactions.

At this crucial moment in US history, protecting Asians from multiple challenges is very timely. To effectively assist Asians in the United States, social workers, researchers, and policymakers need to conceptualize Asian critical theory that critiques the shared beliefs about Asians. In doing so, these professionals can indeed observe how racism uniquely impacts Asians. We face many global issues, such as immigrants' rights in many countries. Immigrants' social, economic, and racial positioning and realities may differ from one country to another. However, as a helping professional with the same goal of achieving social justice, it is critical to locate a theoretical framework grounded in the field and tailored to the target population so social work professionals can further advance critical analyses of racism against immigrants at the individual national level.

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Author biography

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