2022

White college students' ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic

Paul Youngbin Kim
Seattle Pacific University

Brittany Tausen
Seattle Pacific University

Recommended Citation

Kim, P. Y., & Tausen, B. M. (2022). White college students' ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian American Journal of Psychology, 13(3), 305–313. https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000246

White College Students' Ethnocultural Empathy Toward Asians and Asian Americans

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Paul Youngbin Kim & Brittany M. Tausen

Department of Psychology, Seattle Pacific University

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul Youngbin Kim, Department of Psychology, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Avenue West, Suite 107, Seattle WA 98119-1922. Email: paulkim@spu.edu

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in racist acts against Asians and Asian Americans. Given this troubling reality, it is important to identify how non-Asians, such as White individuals, can better understand the racialized experiences of their Asian and Asian American peers during this time. As such, we set out to examine White college students' ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans during the pandemic. Specifically, based on theorizing on normative influence, we examined how peer support might be associated with increased ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans. Additionally, leadership support and gender were included as covariates. Participants were recruited from a predominantly White institution located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Results based on hierarchical regression analyses indicated that ethnocultural empathy was predicted by gender and peer support. We also explored the moderating role of gender in the association between peer support and ethnocultural empathy, and we found that the positive association between peer support and ethnocultural empathy was greater for men compared to women. The findings of the present study have implications for advancing the research and practice around helping non-Asian students better understand and support their fellow Asian and Asian American students.

Keywords: ethnocultural empathy, Asians, Asian Americans, peer support

Public Significance Statement

This study found that White students' empathy toward Asian and Asian American experiences of racism during COVID-19 was related to how their peers spoke about and responded to this issue, and this was especially true for White men compared to White women. The findings suggest some practical ways to help non-Asian individuals to better understand the experiences of racism among Asians and Asian Americans.

White College Students' Ethnocultural Empathy Toward Asians and Asian Americans

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, racism targeting individuals of Asian descent has received increased national attention (e.g., Mostoles, 2020; Phillips, 2020). STOP AAPI HATE, a reporting site that tracks experiences of anti-Asian discrimination, announced that 2,583 incidents have been submitted between March 19 and August 5, 2020 (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020a). Moreover, according to Pew Research Center, 39% of Americans reported that the expression of anti-Asian racism is more common during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic days (Ruiz et al., 2020); although this statistic provides support for the notion that some Americans are aware of the increased racism directed at Asians and Asian Americans during this pandemic, it also suggests that there is considerable room for growth. Notably, the extent to which one's community addressed the anti-Asian racism that accompanied the COVID-19 outbreak has the potential to heighten awareness of Asian and Asian American experiences. Indeed, many colleges and universities made public statements condemning the discrimination (e.g., Asian American Studies Program at University of Minnesota, 2020; Yale University, 2020). Taken together, it is reasonable that a typical college student in the U.S. would be exposed to conversations at various levels about the discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The present study is an empirical investigation of how White college students perceived the various levels of engagement with the topic of anti-Asian racism, and the association between those perceptions and their empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans.

Ethnocultural empathy refers to the individual's ability to understand the experiences of others who are of a different race or ethnicity (Wang et al., 2003). A popular conceptualization

and assessment of ethnocultural empathy by Wang et al. (2003) include *empathic awareness*, or

knowledge of what individuals from other cultures are experiencing. Knowledge about the

experiences of individuals from other cultures is widely discussed as an important component of

multicultural competence (e.g., Sue, 2001; Sue & Torino, 2005). Moreover, increasing in

knowledge and awareness of other cultures is an important precursor to action. Prior studies

examining multicultural competence course training or intervention demonstrate that

multicultural knowledge is predictive of desirable behavioral outcomes (e.g., Alvarez &

Domenech Rodríguez, 2020; Kernahan & Davis, 2010; Linnemeyer et al., 2018). Given the

importance of knowledge or awareness of other cultures, combined with its association with

taking action, we decided to examine empathic awareness as ethnocultural empathy. Although

not all White Americans personally witness racism directed at Asians and Asian Americans

during COVID-19 or have the opportunity to intervene, they might still experience growth in

their knowledge about the issue during the pandemic; thus, we believe that this empirical

investigation into the correlates of ethnocultural awareness is a timely and worthwhile endeavor.

Prior studies suggest that various interventions can influence individual levels of

ethnocultural empathy. Some studies indicate that the classroom experience designed to increase

empathy can be effective, such as a multicultural psychology course (Alvarez & Domenech

Rodríguez, 2020) and helping-skills training (Lu et al., 2020). Similarly, but with a sample of

university staff, Cadenas et al (2018) found that interventions (a documentary film and a panel of

undocumented students) were effective in increasing ethnocultural empathy toward

undocumented immigrants. More centrally to our study, prior studies based on White samples

have identified correlates of ethnocultural empathy. For example, Chapman et al. (2018) reported

that an intervention (visuals accompanied by discussions) designed to decrease implicit and

explicit bias toward Latinx patients resulted in higher ethnocultural empathy for White individuals. Similarly, diversity training for nursing and dental (majority White) students increased ethnocultural empathy (Fleming et al., 2015). Finally, Lu et al. (2020) concluded that training in helping skills can be especially valuable for increasing the ethnocultural empathy of White students, by showing that White women and men experienced more growth in empathic feeling and expression after a semester of helping skills course compared to their non-White counterparts. Taken together, these studies suggest that it is possible for targeted interventions to increase ethnocultural empathy among individuals, including White individuals.

What is lacking in the literature, however, are investigations of normative or social influence on the ethnocultural empathy of White individuals. Although some of the prior studies (e.g., Alvarez & Domenech Rodríguez, 2020; Fleming et al., 2015; Lu, 2019) likely included a normative component in their intervention (e.g., classroom experience), they were not intentional in isolating the views of others as a key component of what is associated with ethnocultural empathy. We assert that the examination of how others' views impact ethnocultural empathy is an important area of inquiry.

Normative Influence of Peer Support

In our study, we draw from theorizing and research highlighting normative or social influence on racial attitudes. The influence of social norms on an individual's racial attitudes and behaviors has been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g., Blanchard et al., 1991; Blanchard et al., 1994; Sherif & Sherif, 1953). For example, based on experimental evidence, Blanchard et al. (1991, 1994) assert that when a White individual witnesses another person(s) expressing condemning or accepting views of racism, the individual will be more likely to also condemn or condone the racist views, respectively. Similarly, Stangor et al. (2001) reported that when

individuals believe that their preconceived notions about Black individuals are not shared by others, they reduce their generalization; when they are led to think, however, that others also hold similar generalizations, they increase their stereotyping. Collectively, these findings speak to the importance of social influences on the beliefs and behaviors of the individual around race and ethnicity. Although these assertions about normative influences have been made in connection to the reduction of unfavorable racial attitudes, it is also reasonable that the theorizing can be extended to the increase of favorable attitudes, such as ethnocultural empathy. Therefore, we set out to see if the White college students' perception of how others around them respond to anti-Asian racism during COVID-19 was associated with ethnocultural empathy.

We examined peer support as a normative influence on ethnocultural empathy. We defined *peer support* as fellow students' expression of support for Asians and Asian Americans during COVID-19. We reasoned that when White students observe this type of support from their peers, it will be associated with an increased level of empathy for the Asian and Asian American experience. Although there are studies demonstrating the importance of peer support for the psychological health of Asian American youths (e.g., Grossman & Liang, 2008; Tsai et al., 2017), the influence of expressed peer support for Asians and Asian Americans on a non-Asian sample has not been explored in the literature. Prior studies that have examined the impact of course-related experiences (e.g., Alvarez & Domenech Rodríguez, 2020; Lu et al., 2020) suggest that peer influences might be important in shaping ethnocultural empathy, especially Alvarez and Domenech Rodríguez's (2020) intriguing finding that the in-person modality was more effective in increasing ethnocultural empathy compared to an online one. Similarly, Muller and Miles (2017) found that individuals who found the other group members to be more engaged in intergroup dialogues tended to experience an increase in empathic perspective taking,

suggesting that peer influence is playing a role in shaping empathy. But because these studies did not intentionally examine peer support, a more purposeful examination of peer support as a normative influence on ethnocultural empathy is needed. We predicted that peer support would be related to a higher level of ethnocultural empathy among White college students.

Leadership Support and Gender as Covariates

Beyond peer support, we explored two additional predictors as covariates. First, we were interested in exploring the role of leadership support as a contrast to the normative influence of peer support in shaping ethnocultural empathy. We defined *leadership support* as campus leaders' (e.g., staff, professors, and administrators) expression of support for the Asian community during COVID-19. Although this type of support has been shown to be important for the adjustment of those directly impacted by discrimination such as students of color (e.g., Tausen et al., 2020; Trent et al., 2020) and international students (Yao et al., 2020), there is a lack of literature on how such support can also influence outcomes such as empathy among those who observe it. Social Impact Theory (Latane, 1981) posits that the strength, immediacy, and size of a group influence conformity to group norms. Based on this theorizing, we reasoned that leadership support will be related to ethnocultural empathy in our study but not as strongly as peer influence, because campus leaders are not as strong of a normative influence compared to peers. Second, we explored gender as a correlate of ethnocultural empathy. This was done based on prior literature suggesting women had higher level of empathy toward other cultural groups compared to men (e.g., Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008; Spanierman et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2003).

Taken together, these prior studies suggest that peer support, leadership support, and gender are all relevant factors that can be related to students' attitudes and beliefs about race and ethnicity. At the same time, two generally shared characteristics of prior studies served as the

impetus for the current study. First, most of these studies assessed ethnocultural empathy without a specific connection to a particular group. For example, the wording of the popular Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003) inquires participants about their empathy of others without specifying the racial or ethnic group, instead using phrases such as "other racial or ethnic groups" or "racially/ethnically different than me" (p. 225). It seems reasonable that racial attitudes differ depending on the target, and thus it makes sense to also measure ethnocultural empathy toward a specific racial group. Second, the prior studies did not necessarily focus on a specific event or period in history. Given the heightened attention to anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, we sought to capture how ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans might be shaped during this time. During COVID-19, the experiences of White individuals around race and ethnicity are notably different compared to the experiences of Asian Americans; for example, a Pew Research Center report noted that 39% of Asian Americans reported unfavorable reaction of others around them since the beginning of the pandemic, compared to only 13% of White individuals (Ruiz et al., 2020). Given this marked difference in experience, it is important to examine how the less impacted group (White individuals) might learn about the experiences of the more impacted group (Asian Americans) during the specific historical period. Therefore, empirical efforts like ours have the potential to contribute to the Asian American literature, by unpacking the factors that facilitate the empathic response of White students to their Asian and Asian American peers' experiences of racism during this time of COVID-19 pandemic.

In sum, our study captures White college students' ethnocultural empathy toward Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on normative influence theorizing,

we hypothesized that peer support will be associated with a higher level of ethnocultural empathy. We also explored leadership support and gender as additional correlates.

Method

Participant Characteristics

Four hundred and seventy White[1] undergraduate students currently enrolled at a small liberal arts institution located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States were invited to complete our study as part of a larger investigation probing perceptions of academic community support, subjective well-being, and ethnocultural empathy during the COVID outbreak. In total, 149 White students completed the study. Participants self-reported a wide variety of ethnic identities, with the majority reporting two or more prominent ethnic identities[2]. The majority of respondents (124) identified as women whereas a smaller number of respondents identified as men (24) or non-binary (1). Notably, the relatively small number of men in the current sample can be explained, in part, by an unequal distribution of men (33%) and women (67%) enrolled at the current institution during data collection (Seattle Pacific University, 2020). Participants were aged 18-50 ($M = 20.61$, $SD = 3.14$) and identified as predominately Christian (77.2%) or not religious (15.4%).

Procedure

---

[1] White students were selected for the current study rather than non-Asian students for theoretical and practical reasons. First, as the majority racial group in the United States and at the institution in question, it is valuable to assess the awareness of the historically privileged group. Further, White students perceive campus climate to be less negative than students of color (Rankin & Reason, 2005), and combining groups may artificially inflate the perceived ethnocultural awareness of a predominately White institution. Practically, these data are part of a larger study that sought to compare Asian and White students' perceptions of campus racial climate given known COVID outbreaks in Asian and European countries preceded known outbreaks in the U.S. Participants were eligible to be randomly selected for participation if their undergraduate record had them indicated as Caucasian / European American. Race and ethnicity information was additionally probed in the current study.

[2] The most frequently reported identities were German (12.1%), American (4.0%), British (2.7%), Irish (2.7%), Scandinavian (2.7%), and Norwegian (2.6%). A substantial number of participants (6.7%) chose not to respond to the ethnic identity question.

All data was collected over a three-day period (April 9th, 2020 - April 12th, 2020) during the university's spring break and prior to the commencement of spring quarter. This timing afforded the opportunity to assess perceptions of the academic community's initial responses to the COVID outbreak prior to all major operations being suspended on campus. April 13th marked the beginning of online learning and the start of spring quarter. As of this date the school library was closed, and the majority of students were no longer living on campus. The timing also enhanced the likelihood that participants would reflect on the initial response of their academic community from March and April 2020 – when 1700 racist and xenophobic incidents had already been reported to STOP AAPI Hate (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020b).

Online survey methodology was utilized to collect data. After completing a non-documented informed consent, participants read a brief description of the study and completed a series of demographic questions (age, racial and ethnic background, gender identity & religious affiliation). Participants who indicated that they identified as European American received a follow-up open-ended question asking them about their European ethnicity. Specifically, participants were asked, "what is your European ethnicity (e.g., Italian, French, British)" and were given a textbox to write in their own response. Participants then completed a short questionnaire that was constructed to investigate college student perceptions of their academic community's response to racism and xenophobia prevalent during the COVID outbreak. The questionnaire also explored ethnocultural empathy (Wang et al., 2003). Additional measures, beyond the scope of the current manuscript, including subjective well-being of participants and interpersonal needs were also collected. Upon completion of these measures, participants were provided a link to a separate survey such that they could be entered into a raffle to win a $250

gift card for their participation. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and given a list of

resources in the event that they would like to find professional psychological help.

Measures

Peer and Leadership Support

Four questions assessed perceptions of peer support for Asians and Asian Americans on

campus during the COVID outbreak[3] (see Tausen et al., 2020). Specifically, the questions

included 1) My peers (fellow students) at [current institution] *openly addressed* issues of racism

and xenophobia pertaining to Asian and Asian Americans during the COVID 19 outbreak, 2) My

peers (fellow students) at [current institution] *strongly condemned* racism and xenophobia

pertaining to Asian and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 outbreak, 3) My peers (fellow

students) at [current institution] *expressed genuine compassion* for Asian and Asian Americans

experiencing racism during the COVID-19 outbreak, and 4) My peers (fellow students) at

[current institution] expressed a *clear commitment to support* Asians and Asian Americans

experiencing racism during the COVID-19 outbreak. To assess leadership support, these same

four questions were also asked about leaders (administration and professors). Questions were

assessed using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The order in

which respondents encountered items featuring support originating from institutional leaders vs.

peers was counterbalanced across the sample. Measures for Leader Support (Cronbach's α =

.894) and Peer Support (Cronbach's α = .837) demonstrated strong internal consistency in the

present study.

Ethnocultural Empathy

---

[3] These items, designed to assess forms of support that could be communicated remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, are face valid, correlate with related concepts such as campus racial climate (Tausen et al., 2020) and demonstrate strong internal reliability.

To measure ethnocultural empathy, we combined the Empathic Awareness subscale (4 items) from the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE; Wang et al., 2003) with two additional items that we created designed to assess awareness of the xenophobia and racism affecting Asians during the current health crisis. Items from the original SEE subscale (Wang et al. 2003) were adapted to refer specifically to individuals of Asian descent (e.g., I recognize that the media often portrays *individuals of Asian descent* based on racial or ethnic stereotypes). The additional questions, also tailored specifically to Asian individuals read, "I am aware of how individuals of Asian descent are currently regarded in US culture" and "I am aware of the unique challenges that individuals of Asian descent are facing during the current health pandemic." For consistency with Leadership and Peer Support measures, responses to all ethnocultural empathy questions were collected on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), which is a modification from the 6-point scale of the SEE (Wang et al., 2003). The internal consistency of the combined 6 items to assess ethnocultural empathy was good, Cronbach's $\alpha = .925$.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 displays the bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations for the study variables. Ethnocultural empathy was significantly correlated with gender (gender coding: 0 = female, 1 = male, 2 = non-binary; $r = -.23$, $p = .004$) and peer support ($r = .45$, $p < .001$).

Main Analyses

Gender, Leadership Support, and Peer Support as Predictors of Empathy

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether gender, leadership support, and peer support predicted ethnocultural empathy. We entered the predictors in the regression model in the following order: gender (Step 1; gender coding: 0 = female, 1 = male, 2 = non-binary), leadership support (Step 2), and peer support (Step 3). We decided to

enter leadership support before peer support because it is a more distal predictor compared to peer support. Gender was entered first as a demographic variable.

Table 2 displays the results. In Step 1, gender was a significant predictor of ethnocultural empathy, $b = -0.65$, $t = -2.91$, $p = .004$. In Step 2, leadership support was a significant predictor of ethnocultural empathy, $b = 0.13$, $t = 2.06$, $p = .041$, and gender remained a significant predictor. In Step 3 (final step), peer support was a significant predictor of ethnocultural empathy, $b = 0.40$, $t = 5.66$, $p < .001$. Gender remained significant, but leadership support was rendered nonsignificant when peer support was entered into the regression model. The addition of peer support resulted in 16.70% increase in variance explained, and the overall variance explained in Step 3 was 24.80 percent. Thus, based on Step 3, our hypothesis that peer support would predict empathy was supported. Gender emerged as a significant predictor of empathy.

Exploratory Analysis: Gender as a Moderator

Given the prior literature on gender differences in cultural empathy (Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008; Spanierman et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2003), combined with its significant correlation with ethnocultural empathy in our data, we explored the moderating role of gender between peer support and empathy. Because only 1 participant identified as non-binary, we excluded this case from our moderation analysis and examined the conditional effects associated with identifying as woman or man. We used the PROCESS macro v3.4 (Hayes, 2018) in SPSS v. 27 to test the moderating effect, and Table 3 displays the results. Prior to the regression analysis, peer support was mean centered. Our results indicated that the interaction term (peer support x gender) was a statistically significant predictor of ethnocultural empathy, $b = 0.45$, $t = 2.54$, $p = .012$, providing evidence for a significant moderating effect. Simple slopes analysis indicated that for both women and men the peer support-empathy link was statistically significant and in

the expected positive direction, but the slope of the association was steeper for men compared to

women (see Figure 1). Based on these results, we concluded that for both men and women,

empathy was positively associated with observing their student peers speak up against racism

directed toward Asians and Asian Americans, but this positive association was greater for men.

Discussion

As many historically White institutions become increasingly diverse in their racial and

cultural makeup, it is valuable explore factors associated with the racial awareness or knowledge

of the White majority group (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Spanierman et al., 2009). During the

COVID outbreak, probing how White students perceive the treatment of Asian students

compared to their own group can be meaningful given known outbreaks in predominately White

(i.e., Italy) and Asian (i.e., China) countries preceded known outbreaks in the U.S. Yet, it was

individuals of Asian descent that experienced increased discrimination (Mostoles, 2020; Phillips,

2020).

The present study demonstrated an association between White students' perceived peer

support for Asians during COVID-19 and their ethnocultural awareness. Gender also predicted

ethnocultural awareness and moderated the relationship between peer support and empathy.

Explanation of Findings

Research on the power of social norms to shape attitudes and behaviors may help to

explain the relationship between perceived peer support and ethnocultural awareness

demonstrated in our study (Cialdini et al., 1990). Previous research has demonstrated that

prejudice and discrimination can be significantly affected by the behavior of one's peers. For

example, hearing a peer condemn racism reduces another individual's tolerance for racist speech

(Blanchard et al., 1994), yet simply overhearing a racist or sexist joke can increase tolerance for

discrimination against women and minorities (Ford & Ferguson, 2004; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998). Beyond direct observation of peers' actions, the mere perception of peers' attitudes is also consequential. In one study, White individuals' perceptions of their peers' attitudes about interracial interaction was associated with self-reported racial attitudes and observed friendly interracial interactions (Fendrich, 1967). Corroborating and extending this earlier work, here we demonstrated that peers' condemnation of racism and xenophobia is also associated with White students' ethnocultural awareness. While not directly assessed in the current study, at least two potential mechanisms could be at play. Participants' self-reported ethnocultural awareness could be the result of normative social influence (conforming to be liked) or informational social influence (conforming to be correct). Given attitudes were assessed in private (when normative social influence tends to be less powerful), there is reason to suspect that peers' speaking out against the racism and xenophobia directed at Asians and Asian Americans more permanently shifted White students' beliefs and understanding about the treatment of Asians and Asian Americans during the pandemic. Of course, given the correlational nature of or findings, future experimental work will be critical to assess the causal role of peers' condemning racism and xenophobia on ethnocultural empathy. It will also be important for future work to explore the potential for normative social influence to be amplified during times when social distancing is required and online/remote interactions are normative.

Consulting the social psychological literature may also help shed light on the fact that, in our study, leader support was not a significant predictor of ethnocultural empathy when also considering the influence of peer support. According to Social Impact Theory, individuals are most likely to conform when a group is high in importance, physically proximal and made up of at least 3-4 individuals (Latané, 1981). Consistent with this theoretical framework, in-person

interactions generate stronger normative influence than online interactions (Alvarez &

Domenech Rodríguez, 2020) as do the racial attitudes of in-group members (Stangor et al.,

2001), close friends (Paluck, 2011) and friendly experimenters (Sinclair et al., 2005). Unlike

fellow classmates, leaders on campus may be relatively low in importance and proximity for the

majority of our participants. As a result, the actions of leaders may have been less likely to evoke

the power of any form of social influence above and beyond the role of peers in our study.

Gender's significant association with ethnocultural empathy (e.g., greater empathy for

women compared to men), and its moderation of the association between peer support and

empathy were partly congruent with prior findings that there are gender differences in levels of

empathy toward other cultures (e.g., Cundiff & Komarraju, 2008; Spanierman et al., 2012; Wang

et al., 2003). However, our finding is novel because it suggests that ethnocultural empathy might

be differentially related to peer support, depending on gender. Although both White men and

women reported a positive association between peer support and ethnocultural empathy, the

association was greater for men. One reason for this intriguing finding might be because women

in our sample had higher levels of ethnocultural awareness. In contrast, men who were less

aware might be more influenced by their peers on the topic of COVID-19 racism. In other words,

we wonder if the White men had "more room to grow" in terms of ethnocultural empathy

compared to the White women in our sample. At the same time, given the imbalance in the

number of men and women in our study, we present our gender-related finding and any

interpretations of it tentatively, and we encourage future work that considers gender differences

in the normative influence of peers on ethnocultural empathy with larger representations across

different genders.

Implications

That the perception of peers' support for Asians and Asian Americans is associated with enhanced ethnocultural awareness has a number of implications at both the individual and institutional level. In terms of individual behavior, it is critical to recognize that words (or lack thereof) can establish a climate of awareness about racist and xenophobic behaviors. As such, these findings emphasize the importance of individual voices speaking out against injustice and the power that each person has to shape the attitudes and beliefs of those around them (Blanchard et al., 1994; LaFrance & Woodzicka, 1998; Stangor et al., 2001). In the current study, it was not simply what was said (e.g., condemning racism, offering commitment and support), but also who expressed the sentiments (peers as versus leaders) that was associated ethnocultural awareness. Each person has a unique sphere of influence given their importance and physical proximity to those around them (Latané, 1981). As such, knowing that other leaders or peers on campus are addressing issues or racial injustice should not alleviate the burden to speak out oneself.

At the institutional level, training student leaders to identify and speak out against racist and xenophobic rhetoric may be particularly important to establish ethnocultural awareness (see Paluck, 2011 for related intervention). Such trainings may focus on equipping students with strategies to openly addressing and strongly condemn racism in the moment as well as ways to offer empathy and support for those affected. Peers, in particular, may have a unique influence that transcends what can be communicated by university leaders. While this should not discourage university leaders from openly condemning racism as leader support is associated with other important psychological outcomes such as the experience of positive and negative affect (Tausen et al., 2020), it should encourage them to embolden students to speak out against prejudice and discrimination. This encouragement could help amplify the power of student voices to shape the ethnocultural awareness of their peers – a strategy that may be particularly

effective in spaces with a large number of men. Knowing the power of social norms to influence racial attitudes and beliefs, it is also incumbent upon institutions to establish strong boundaries around acceptable behavior. Institutions may approach this aim through both a preventative and punitive lens by employing anti-discrimination training and policies as well as clear and consistent consequences when violations occur (see Jeung et al., 2020 for a list of additional recommendations). Institutions may also consider policies of mandatory reporting, scaffolding mechanisms for anonymous reporting, and campaigns championing speaking out against racism and injustice to create a culture where prejudice and discrimination are confronted and condemned.

Whether at the individual or institutional levels, words and actions have the power to establish both injunctive (what is morally acceptable) and a descriptive (what is common in this social context) norms (Nolan et al., 2008). Combined, injunctive and descriptive norms are powerful mechanisms for social change and increase the likelihood that individuals will conform as a function of informational social influence rather than simply normative social influence (Cialdini et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2012). The benefits of informational social influence include longer lasting changes in attitudes and behaviors that transcend a highly observable group setting (Sherif, 1936). Thus, institutions and individuals can work together to generate a social climate conducive to ethnocultural awareness through demonstrating that condemning racism and offering support to affected groups is both common on campus and morally right. The fruit of this labor is likely to manifest in more positive treatment of Asians and Asian Americans as increased knowledge or awareness is an essential precursor to favorable behavioral outcomes (e.g., Alvarez & Domenech Rodríguez, 2020; Linnemeyer et al., 2018; Toomey & Storlie, 2016) and actions that defend or protect marginalized groups, such as activism (O'Brien, 2001).

Particularly because of their current majority status in the U.S. and their political and social positioning, the work of enhancing the ethnocultural empathy of White individuals is critical to attenuating racist and xenophobic ideologies as well as precipitating meaningful structural changes.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despites its contributions, the present study has limitations that should inspire future empirical efforts. One, our study measures were modified (Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy by Wang et al., 2003) or created (leadership and peer support items) for the purposes of this study. In particular, although the modification of the existing measures was due to the specific research questions about COVID-19 racism and thus was justified, we also recognize that the results should be interpreted in light of this potential limitation terms of the study instruments. Future studies should examine the psychometric properties of the items in the study or utilize existing measures without modification as a replication and extension effort to the current findings. Two, our study did not consider other intrapersonal factors that might influence how our study variables might be related to ethnocultural empathy. The percentage of variance explained by gender, leadership support, and peer support in our hierarchical regression model was around 25% total (see Table 2), which implies that there are other intrapersonal correlates of ethnocultural empathy. For instance, Helms' ethnic identity statuses has been shown to interact with openness to diversity to predict ethnocultural empathy in White individuals (Chao et al., 2015). In addition, our sample was limited to college students and future research will be necessary to explore whether the same pattern of results exists in samples of varying ages or education levels. There is some evidence to suggest that college students benefit more from direct interventions to improve empathy than do high school students (Hatcher & Galea, 1994). While it is possible that the varied improvements reflect differences in developmental readiness

to learn empathic skills, opportunities afforded by higher education such as courses that enhance

multicultural awareness (Alvarez & Rodríguez, 2020; Patterson et al., 2018) and internships that

provide high-quality interracial interactions (Simons et al., 2012) may also be critical factors.

Another example of an intrapersonal factor to examine is the racial and ethnic composition of

White students' peer relationships, given its association with racial attitudes (Fischer, 2011).

Three, our study assessed gender categorically. However, variables such as gender socialization

might influence ethnocultural empathy, and the relation of peer support with ethnocultural

empathy, and provide a more nuanced picture regarding how gender socialization or norms

might shape ethnocultural empathy. Four, we examined White students' perception of support

for Asians and Asian Americans at a single timepoint early on in the pandemic. We are curious

what the empirical associations, and the level of ethnocultural empathy, might be like if the study

had been conducted later into the pandemic as sociocultural and political[4] factors evolved. Fifth,

due to our study's cross-sectional design, we are not able to definitively conclude the

directionality of the findings. Although our conclusions are consistent with the theoretical

framework of our study – namely, that perception of others expressing support can increase

empathy – it is also possible that those who are already empathic might be more likely to pick up

on the support toward Asians and Asian Americans shown by other people. Alternatively, it

could also be that those participants who are highly empathic might already be connected to

others who are similarly empathic. Future longitudinal studies might be able to clarify this issue

of directionality.

Conclusion

---

[4] For example, the U.S. House of Representatives recently passed a resolution speaking out against racism directed toward Asian Americans (Stracqualursi, 2020).

Our study highlighted the importance of peer condemnation of racism and voicing support for Asians and Asian Americans as a predictor of ethnocultural empathy, and gender as a moderator of this association. We hope that our findings will contribute to the collective effort to better support Asian and Asian American college students during this challenging time of the COVID-19 pandemic, by inspiring researchers and practitioners alike to continue to address ways that White individuals can become more effective allies to Asians and Asian Americans.

References

Alvarez, M. d. l. C., & Domenech Rodríguez, M. M. (2020). Cultural competence shifts in multicultural psychology: Online versus face-to-face. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science, 6*(2), 160–174. https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000229

Asian American Studies Program, University of Minnesota (2020). Statement regarding campus climate and Covid-19 (Coronavirus). https://cla.umn.edu/asianamerican/news-events/press-release/statement-regarding-campus-climate-and-covid-19-coronavirus

Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (2020a). *STOP AAPI HATE National Report: 3.19.20-8.5.20.* Retrieved from http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/STOP_AAPI_Hate_National_Report_3.19-8.5.2020.pdf

Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council (2020b). *STOP AAPI HATE Press Release: 5.13.20.* Retrieved from http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press_Release_5_13_20.pdf

Blanchard, F. A., Crandall, C. S., Brigham, J. C., & Vaughn L. A. (1994). Condemning and condoning racism: A social context approach to interracial settings. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*(6), 993-997. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.79.6.993

Blanchard, F.A., Lilly, T., & Vaughn, L. A. (1991). Reducing the expression of racial prejudice. *Psychological Science, 2*(2), 111-115. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1991.tb00108.x

Cadenas, G. A., Cisneros, J., Todd, N. R., & Spanierman, L. B. (2018). DREAMzone: Testing two vicarious contact interventions to improve attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *11*(3), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000055

Chao, R. C.-L., Wei, M., Spanierman, L., Longo, J., & Northart, D. (2015). White racial attitudes and White Empathy: The moderation of openness to diversity. *The Counseling Psychologist, 43*(1), 94–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000014546871

Chapman, M. V., Hall, W. J., Lee, K., Colby, R., Coyne-Beasley, T., Day, S., ... & Thomas, T. (2018). Making a difference in medical trainees' attitudes toward Latino patients: A pilot study of an intervention to modify implicit and explicit attitudes. *Social Science & Medicine, 199*, 202-208. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.05.013

Cialdini, R. B., Reno, R. R., & Kallgren, C. A. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*(6), 1015–1026. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.6.1015

Cundiff, N. L., & Komarraju, M. (2008). Gender differences in ethnocultural empathy and attitudes toward men and women in authority. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 15*(1), 5-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051808318000

Fendrich, J. M. (1967). Perceived reference group support: Racial attitudes and overt behavior. *American Sociological Review, 32*(6), 960-970.

Fischer, M. J. (2011). Interracial contact and changes in the racial attitudes of white college students. *Social Psychology of Education, 14*(4), 547-574. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-011-9161-3

Fleming, B. D., Thomas, S. E., Shaw, D., Burnham, W. S., & Charles, L. T. (2015). Improving ethnocultural empathy in healthcare students through a targeted intervention. *Journal of Cultural Diversity, 22*(2), 59–63.

Ford, T. E., & Ferguson, M. A. (2004). Social consequences of disparagement humor: A

     prejudice norm theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 8*(1), 79-94.

     https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0801_4

Grossman, J. M., & Liang, B. (2008). Discrimination distress among Chinese American

     adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 37(*January*)*, 1–11.

     https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-007-9215-1

Hatcher, S. L., & Galea, J. T. (1994). The teaching of empathy for high school and college

     students: Testing Rogerian methods with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

     Adolescence, *29*, 961 – 974.

Hayes, A. F. (2018). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis.*

     (2nd Ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.

Jeung, R., Yellow Horse, A. J., Lau, A., Kong, P., Shen, K., Cayanan, C., Xiong, M., & Lim, R.

     (2020). Stop AAPI Youth Report 9.14.20. Retrieved from

     http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Stop-AAPI-

     Hate-Youth-Report-9.14.20.pdf

Kernahan, C., & Davis, T. (2010). What are the long-term effects of learning about racism?

     Teaching of Psychology, *37*(1), 41-45. https://doi.org/10.1080/00986280903425748

LaFrance, M., & Woodzicka, J.A. (1998). No laughing matter: Women's verbal and nonverbal

     reactions to sexist humor. In J. Swim & C. Stangor (Eds.), *Prejudice: The target's*

     perspective (pp. 61-80). Academic Press.

Latané, B., 1981. The psychology of social impact. *American Psychologist, 36*(4), 343-365.

     https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.36.4.343

Linnemeyer, R. M., Nilsson, J. E., Marszalek, J. M., & Khan, M. (2018). Social justice advocacy among doctoral students in professional psychology programs. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, *31*(1), 98-116. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2016.1274961

Lu, Y., Hill, C. E., Hancock, G. R., & Keum, B. T. (2020). The effectiveness of helping skills training for undergraduate students: Changes in ethnocultural empathy. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 67*(1), 14–24. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000404

Mostoles, T. (2020, June 24). An Asian-American author talks about racism in the pandemic. *New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/us/asian-american-racism-coronavirus-kelly-yang.html

Muller, J. T., & Miles, J. R. (2017). Intergroup dialogue in undergraduate multicultural psychology education: Group climate development and outcomes. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 10*(1), 52–71. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040042

Nolan, J. M., Schultz, P. W., Cialdinia, R. B., Goldstein, N. J., & Griskevicius, V. (2008). Normative social influence is underdetected. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*, 913-923. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208316691

O'Brien, E. (2001). *Whites confront racism: Antiracists and their paths to action*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Lu, Y., Hill, C. E., Hancock, G. R., & Keum, B. T. (2020). The effectiveness of helping skills training for undergraduate students: Changes in ethnocultural empathy. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *67,* 14-24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cou0000404

Paluck, E. L. (2011). Peer pressure against prejudice: A high school field experiment examining social network change. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47*(2), 350-358. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.11.017

Patterson, C. A., Papa, L. A., Reveles, A. K., & Rodríguez, M. M. D. (2018). *Undergraduate*

    student change in cultural competence: Impact of a multicultural psychology course.

    Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, *4*, 81-92.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/st10000108

Phillips, K. (2020, March 28). 'They look at me and think I'm some kind of virus': What it's like

    to be Asian during the coronavirus pandemic. *USA Today*. Retrieved from

    https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/28/coronavirus-racism-asian-

    americans-report-fear-harassment-violence/2903745001/

Rankin, S. R. & Reason, R. D. (2005). Differing Perceptions: How student of color and white

    students perceive campus climate for underrepresented groups. *Journal of College*

    Student Development, 46(1), 43-61. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0008

Ruiz, N. G., Horowitz, J., & Tamir, C. (2020, July 1). Many Blacks and Asian Americans say

    they have experienced discrimination amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

    https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/wp-

    content/uploads/sites/3/2020/07/PSDT_07.01.20_racism.covid_Full.Report.pdf

Seattle Pacific University (2020). *Undergraduate student profile 2020-2021.*

    https://spu.edu/diversity/faq/student-profile

Sherif, M. (1936). *The Psychology of Social Norms.* New York: Harper and Row.

Sherif, M., & Sherif, C. W. (1953). *Groups in harmony and tension; an integration of studies of*

    intergroup relations. Harper & Brothers.

Simons, L., Fehr, L., Blank, N., Connell, H., Georganas, D., Fernandez, D., & Peterson, V.

    (2012). Lessons learned from experiential learning: What do students learn from a

practicum/internship? *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *24*, 325-334.

Sinclair, S., Lowery, B., Hardin, C., & Colangelo, A. (2005). Social tuning of automatic racial attitudes: The role of affiliative motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*(4), 583-592. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.4.583

Smith, J. R., Louis, W. R., Terry, D. J., Greenaway, K. H., Clarke, M. R., & Cheng, X. (2012). Congruent or conflicted? The impact of injunctive and descriptive norms on environmental intentions. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 32,* 353-361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2012.06.001

Spanierman, L. B., Beard, J. C., & Todd, N. R. (2012). White men's fears, White women's tears: Examining gender differences in racial affect types. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 67*(3–4), 174–186. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0162-2

Spanierman, L., B., Todd, N. R., & Anderson, C. J. (2009). Psychological costs of racism to whites: Understanding patterns among university students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 56*(2), 239-252. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015432

Stangor, C. & Sechrist, G. B., Jost, J. T. (2001). Changing racial beliefs by providing consensus information. *Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin, 27*(4), 484-494. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201274009

Stracqualursi, V. (2020, September 17). House passes resolution condemning anti-Asian sentiment. *CNN*. Retrieved from https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/17/politics/house-resolution-condemn-anti-asian-sentiment/index.html

Sue, D. W. (2001). Multidimensional facets of cultural competence. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *29*(6), 790-821. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000001296002

Sue, D. W., & Torino, G. C. (2005). Racial-cultural competence: Awareness, knowledge, and

    skills. In R. T. Carter (Ed.), *Handbook of racial-cultural psychology and counseling, Vol.*

    2. Training and practice (p. 3–18). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Tausen, B. M., Jin, J., Kim, P. Y., Law, K. C., & Kendall, D. L. (2020). Academic community

    support, campus racial climate, and subjective well-being during the coronavirus

    outbreak among Asian American college students. *Journal of Asian American Studies,*

    23(3), 367-385. https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2020.0030

Toomey, R. B., & Storlie, C. A. (2016). School counselors' intervention in bias-related incidents

    among Latino students. *Journal of School Violence, 15*(3), 343-364.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2015.1049354

Trent, F., Dwiwardani, C., & Page, C. (2020). Factors impacting the retention of students of

    color in graduate programs: A qualitative study. Advance online publication. *Training*

    and Education in Professional Psychology. https://doi.org/10.1037/tep0000319

Tsai, W., Nguyen, D. J., Weiss, B., Ngo, V., & Lau, A. S. (2017). Cultural differences in the

    reciprocal relations between emotion suppression coping, depressive symptoms and

    interpersonal functioning among adolescents. *Journal of Abnormal Child*

    Psychology, *45*(4), 657–669. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-016-0192-2

Wang, Y.-W., Davidson, M. M., Yakushko, O. F., Savoy, H. B., Tan, J. A., & Bleier, J. K.

    (2003). The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy: Development, validation, and reliability.

    Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50(2), 221–234. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-

    0167.50.2.221

Yale University (2020). Statement regarding anti-Asian racism and COVID-19. https://rtim.yale-

    .edu/news/2020-04-08/statement-regarding-anti-asian-racism-and-19

Yao, C. W., Briscoe, K. L., & Rutt, J. N. (2020). In the aftermath of a racialized incident:

Exploring international students of color's perceptions of campus racial climate. *Journal*

of Diversity in Higher Education. Advance online publication.

https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000179

Table 1

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender [a]			-				
2. Age	20.61	3.14	.03	-			
3. Leadership support	4.55	1.43	.03	.22*	-		
4. Peer support	5.15	1.21	-.03	-.07	.32***	-	
5. Ethnocultural empathy	5.81	1.11	-.23**	-.01	.16	.45***	-

[a] 0 = woman, 1 = man, 2 = non-binary.

* *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression for Ethnocultural Empathy Predicted by Gender, Leadership Support,

and Peer Support

Variable	b	$SE\ b$	t	p	$R^2\ (F_{sig})$
Step 1					.06 (.004)
Constant	5.92	0.10	60.93	< .001	
Gender	-0.65	0.22	-2.91	.004	
Step 2					.08 (.002)
Constant	5.34	0.30	18.00	< .001	
Gender	-0.66	0.22	-3.00	.003	
Leadership support	0.13	0.06	2.06	.041	
Step 3					.25 (< .001)
Constant	3.78	0.39	9.83	< .001	
Gender	-0.62	0.20	-3.08	.003	
Leadership support	0.02	0.06	0.31	.757	
Peer support	0.40	0.07	5.66	< .001	

Table 3

Results of the Moderating Effect of Gender on the Relationship Between Peer Support and
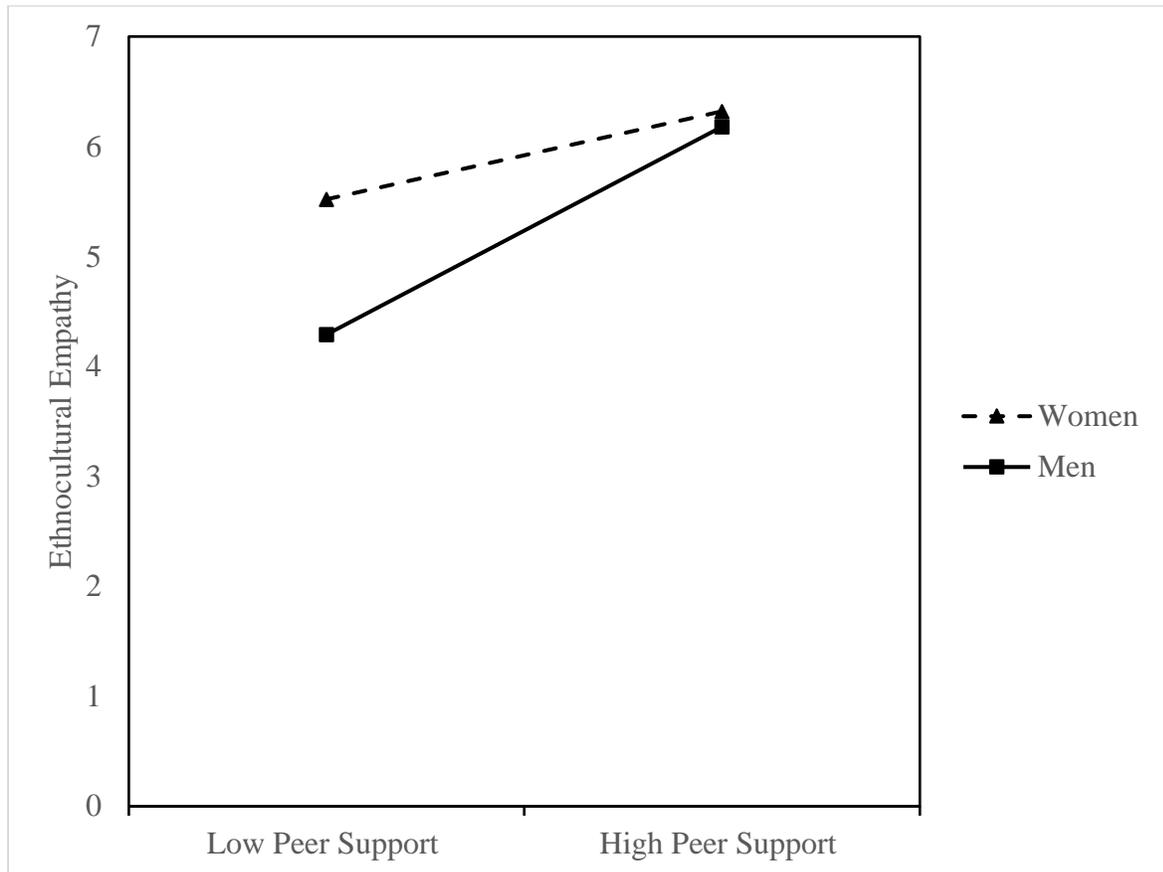
Ethnocultural Empathy (N = 148)

	b	$SE\ b$	t	p	95% CI's	
					Lower	Upper
Constant	5.92	0.09	69.27	$< .001$	5.75	6.09
Peer support (centered)	0.33	0.07	4.67	$<.001$	0.19	0.47
Gender	-0.69	0.21	-3.24	.002	-1.11	-0.27
Peer support x gender	0.45	0.18	2.54	.012	0.10	0.80
Conditional Effects						
Female	0.33	0.07	4.67	$< .001$	0.19	0.47
Male	0.78	0.16	4.82	$< .001$	0.46	1.10

Note. $R^2 = 0.29$. CI = confidence interval based on 10,000 bootstrapped estimates. $N = 148$

because 1 participant who identified as nonbinary was not included in the interaction analysis.

Figure 1

Relationship Between Peer Support and Ethnocultural Empathy, Moderated by Gender (N =

148)

Note. N = 148 because 1 participant who identified as non-binary was not included in the

interaction analysis.