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Title: Lived experiences of Asian Canadian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative interview study

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Reviewer 1: Dr. Christina Loitz / Alberta Health Services

Reviewer comments and author response

Thank you for conducting this relevant, timely and important work! I enjoyed reading your manuscript and appreciated the use of qualitative methods to address this topic. The following is my review of this manuscript according to the CMAJ Open review questions. Please note: this content was also attached as a PDF.

Response: Thank you for reviewing our manuscript.

1. Does the background accurately represent current knowledge in this field?

The introduction was well written, logically formatted and rapidly built the case for the investigation. There are two areas that could be improved for clarity and/or accuracy.

i. Page 3: line 6-7. "The narrative that "others" from far-flung places are to blame for epidemics and pandemics, is a dramatic example of a long-standing tradition of hatred"

- This seems like an example of stigma rather than hatred. I strongly suggest the authors review this statement and consider stigma if this construct more accurately matches the intentions of the authors. Please provide a reference for this statement.

This Public Health report may help inform the decision of authors: Tam, T. (2019). Addressing stigma: Towards a more inclusive health system. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/corporate/publications/chief-public-health-officer-reports-state-public-health-canada/addressing-stigma-what-we-heard/stigma-eng.pdf>

Response: Thank you for this comment. Upon reviewing the provided resource, we have revised the sentence to read as follows: "The narrative that "others" from far-flung places are to blame for epidemics and pandemics is an example of a long-standing tradition of stigma." We have also removed the word dramatic and have added a reference to support our statement. This reference in particular describes that in the '80s, Haitians were blamed for bringing HIV/AIDS to the U.S., which is a theory that's considered unsubstantiated by many global health experts.

- Vance MA: Conflicting Views in Narratives on HIV Transmission via Medical Care. Journal of the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (JIAPAC) 2019, 18:2325958218821961.

ii. Page 3: line 18-23. “The objective of this study was to examine experiences and impacts of Asian Canadian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic on individual and Canadian (i.e., geographical) community sense of safety (the ability to engage with public spaces, in-person or online, without fear of discrimination, harassment, or violence) and belonging (concurrently identifying with a group or community that is important to them, and acceptance of that identity by other members of the group).”

- The objective may be easier to interpret by improving the readability of this sentence. The parenthesis with the operational definitions are distracting when attempting to get the overall sense of the objective. It may be easier for the reader if the operational definitions/examples are included separately.

- Please clarify the population of interest includes only Asian Canadian individuals and communities rather than all individuals and communities (i.e., on individual and Canadian (i.e., geographical) community).

Response: We have revised the objective of our work in the Abstract and the Introduction sections as described in our response to the Editor on page 1 of our manuscript.

2. Do the authors explain why they conducted the study?

The study rationale was provided in the introduction. This is a relevant and timely study.

Response: Thank you.

3. Is there a clear research question?

A research question is listed on page 3 in the study design section, “We applied a qualitative descriptive study design to understand how COVID-19 has affected Asian Canadians’ sense of safety and belonging.” For clarity, the research question could be explicitly identified and directly written as a question (e.g., How has COVID-19 affected Asian Canadians’ sense of safety and belonging?).

Response: We have revised the Study Design subsection of the Methods section of our manuscript to address comments from the Editor that are described in detail on page 3 of this response letter.

4. Is the study design appropriate?

The study design is appropriate for the objective of learning, exploring, and describing experience of discrimination of Asian Canadians and the impacts of those experiences on Asian Canadians over the COVID-19 pandemic.

Response: Thank you.

5. Are the methods described in enough detail? Did you find anything confusing?

The methods were described in an appropriate level of detail for the word limit.

Response: Thank you.

6. You may wish to consider: participants, intervention, exposure, comparator, outcome, confounders, bias

Contextual limitations were discussed. Two areas would benefit from a review and update by authors.

i. Page 9, line 1: “our sample was comprised of primarily highly educated, single Asian Canadians.” The demographic characteristics presented in Table 1 indicates the sample included 18 (56%) single people, 18 (56%) from Ontario and 18 females (56%). To improve accuracy I would suggest removing single from this description of the sample (i.e., primarily highly educated Asian Canadians). Authors could include a second sentence that indicates “more than half the participants were female, single and/or living in Ontario”.

ii. Page 9, line 7-9: “Fourth, we conducted interviews in English and French only, and perspectives from non-English speaking Asian Canadians were missed, which likely excludes experiences of new immigrants”. Please update to “non-English and/or non-French speaking Asians Canadians were missed”.

Response: We have revised the first paragraph of the Results section of our manuscript to address comments from the Editor that are described on page 7 of this response letter.

7. Are the results reasonable? Interesting? Surprising?

The results were interesting and included a range of perspectives. I appreciated reading the quotes directly from the participants. Thank you for including the table with the exemplar quotes.

Response: Thank you.

8. Is the interpretation supported by data in the results?

The interpretations in the manuscript were supported by data.

Response: Thank you.

9. Do tables and figures accurately represent the data? Would some other visual be more helpful?

The two tables include data that support the interpretation of the findings.

Response: Thank you.

10. Are any important limitations not mentioned?

Yes – please include the limitations of the participants being recruited from a previous/recent study sample.

Response: We have revised the Limitations section of our manuscript to address comments from the Editor that are described on page 10 of this response letter.

11. Did you spot any fatal flaws? That is, errors you do not believe the authors could overcome. Please explain clearly.

No.

Response: Thank you.

12. For whom are these findings relevant?

This is a very important topic. The addition of actionable recommendations, actionable next steps, and/or strategies would improve moving the knowledge gained from this study into practice, decision making and/or the development of future research.

Response: We have added two sentences in the Interpretation section of our manuscript on page 8 to provide direction for additional research in this area. These two sentences read as follows:

“Further research should disentangle the differential impact of indirect discrimination from direct discrimination; normalizing the reporting of racial harassment, while making reporting more accessible through a unified database gathering details of anti-Asian attacks across Canada is an important next step.” ... “Future work should seek to understand the influence of social media effects on treatment and attitudes toward Asian Canadians.”

13. Do the authors place their findings in the context of the literature?

The authors contextualize the findings according to literature on racism and discrimination in general and in social media. Expanding the discussion to compare the findings of this study with other COVID-19 specific Canadian or International study findings may improve the discussion and support the development of implications (i.e., changes in practice, decision-making, future research).

Response: We have added statements with supporting references to contextualize our findings within existing literature on this topic. The two statements are on page 7 and page 8 of our revised manuscript. The statements and supporting references are included below:

“In line with earlier research we found that although Canada prides itself as a multicultural country, discrimination has been common among Asian Canadians during the pandemic and that Sinophobia during COVID-19 is not simply because of the racialization of the virus (e.g., Chinese virus), but also historical anti-Asian racism.”

(Lou NM, Noels, K. A., Kurl, S., Zhang, Y. S. D., & Young-Leslie, H. Chinese Canadians' Experiences of the Dual Pandemics of COVID-19 and Racism: Implications for Identity, Negative Emotion, and Anti-Racism Incident Reporting. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*. 2021;Advance Online Publication)

“Relatedly, another study on Asian health care workers described contending with the burden of COVID-19-related racial microaggressions, and verbal and physical violence, feeling that their experiences had been mostly ignored and struggling with challenging the harassment that they and their colleagues were facing while maintaining their dedication to patient care.”

(Shang Z, Kim JY, Cheng SO. Discrimination experienced by Asian Canadian and Asian American health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative study. *CMAJ Open*. 2021;9:E998.)

Reviewer: 2 Mr. Christian Hui / Ryerson University / CIHR Canadian HIV Trials Network

Thank you for submitting a manuscript on an important topic.

Please see attached file for feedback and comments.

1. Does the background accurately represent current knowledge in this field?

Strengths:

Clear background and justification for the need to examine the experiences of discrimination as faced by Asian Canadians as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Authors provided definition of racial discrimination.

Weakness:

Solely focusing on racial discrimination, while it may be adequate for this article, leaves out factors such as historical and structural considerations that maintain systemic racism and discrimination as faced by BIPOC Canadians. Currently Asian Canadians as a group is used as a marker of identity under categorization that was created based on “race”.

The article may benefit from providing a more nuanced presentation of Asian-Canadians as a blanket term vs. recognizing the diversity that exists within the broad groups which fit under the Asian-Canadian category.

Table 1 provided various ethnicities (e.g. East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian; West Asian), yet the draft did not mention about the commonalities or differences which may exist between these groups except in the limitation section.

It was also confusing to note in the limitation section which noted the perspectives of South Asians were not included in the article, despite they made up of 31% of the interviewees.

Response: Thank you very much for your thoughtful comments about our work. We agree that contextualizing systematic racism and discrimination is a tremendously important part of this area of research that was previously not highlighted within the Background section of our manuscript. To address your concern we have added the following three sentence to the second paragraph of our Background section:

“Racial discrimination is not the result only of private prejudices held by individuals,¹⁰ but produced and reproduced by rules, laws, and practices, sanctioned and often times implemented by various levels of governments—embedded in cultural and societal norms as well as the economic system.¹¹ Confronting and combating racial discrimination in Canada requires changing individual attitudes as well as dismantling the institutions and policies that underpin the Canadian racial hierarchy.¹²”

The following three references were added as support:

10. Bailey ZD, Krieger N, Agénor M, Graves J, Linos N, Bassett MT. Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions. *Lancet*. 2017;389:1453-63.
11. Gee GC, Ford CL. Structural racism and health inequities: Old issues, New Directions¹. *Du Bois review: social science research on race*. 2011;8:115-32.
12. Williams DR, Lawrence JA, Davis BA. Racism and Health: Evidence and Needed Research. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2019;40:105-25.

As the participants for this work were recruited from our earlier, preliminary survey, we did not assess commonalities or differences that may exist between these groups considering our limited sample for ethnic groups of Asian Canadians. The following statement has been added to our revised limitations section on page 7 of our manuscript:

“Second, the participants for this work were recruited from an earlier, preliminary study; considering our limited sample for ethnic groups of Asian Canadians we were not able to meaningfully assess commonalities or differences that may exist between these groups.”

Finally, we have removed the limitation of South Asians as this was added in error. The revised Limitations section of our manuscript can be seen in our response to the Editor that is on page 10 of this response letter

2. Do the authors explain why they conducted the study?

Yes. “The objective of this study was to examine experiences and impacts of Asian Canadian discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic on individual and Canadian (i.e., geographical) community sense of safety (the ability to engage with public spaces, in-person or online, without fear of discrimination, harassment, or violence) and belonging (concurrently identifying with a group or community that is important to them, and acceptance of that identity by other members of the group). 3,6,7”

Response: Thank you.

3. Is there a clear research question?

Yes. See answer above.

Response: Thank you.

4. Is the study design appropriate?

Strength:

The authors noted the use of qualitative descriptive study design.

Weakness:

While the study notes it utilizes an intersectionality framework, this information was not mentioned under the Study Design section. Instead, it currently appears in the Data Management and Analysis section. Perhaps the intersectionality framework, as a theoretical or conceptual framework guiding the study, would be better placed to be noted in the Study Design section. As well, some elaboration about the theoretical framework would be helpful..

Since the study explores racial discrimination, it was interesting to note that the study team did not employ critical race theory (CRT) or Asian critical race theory, but opted only to utilize intersectionality as its conceptual framework.

Response: Thank you for these comments. The wording of the study objective in this subsection has been revised to align with prior mention of the objective in the Abstract and Introduction sections. We have mentioned our use of intersectionality theory as the underpinning framework for this study and that the data for this study was analyzed and interpreted using inductive thematic analysis. In addition, we have added a citation for COREQ and removed reference to the COREQ checklist as a formal appendix. The revised Study Design subsection (page 3) reads as follows:

“We applied a qualitative description study design¹⁹ using semi-structured interviews that were conducted from March 23 to May 27, 2021. Intersectionality is the assertion that social identity (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality) are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalization.²⁰ For the current study we used intersectionality theory²¹ as the underpinning framework to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Asian Canadians’ sense of safety and belonging in their Canadian (i.e., geographical) communities. The data was analyzed and interpreted using inductive thematic analysis²² to closely examine the data and identify, analyze, and interpret repeating patterns of meanings.²³ The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research was followed for this work.²⁴”

As well, a new subsection entitled “Ethics Approval” is now included directly prior to the Results section (i.e., last subsection of the Methods section) that includes the following information about ethics approval for this work: “The University of Calgary Conjoint Health and Research Ethics Board (ID:REB20-0358) and Dalhousie University Health Science Research Ethics Board (ID:REB2020-5120) approved this study and permitted participants to provide oral consent in lieu of written consent.”

Further, our revised Data Analysis subsec includes additional details regarding reflexivity (in team data analysis and the use of memos) and clarification (using initials) of which members of the research team were involved in which stage of data analysis. The revised portion of the subsection reads as follows:

“... Meetings were held (among CDG, FT, AD, JNK, AB, JPL) after coding of every three transcripts for the duration of analysis to address new codes, consolidate ideas, and rectify disagreements by consensus, thereby drawing on the combined insights of those ‘handling’ the data closely (FT, AD) and members of the team (CDG, JNK, AB, JPL) with a wider perspective of methodological and racial discrimination issues. The complete dataset (n=32 transcripts) was then coded in duplicate (FT, AD) with the finalized codebook. The careful use of memos (by CDG, FT and AD) during initial stages of analysis provided a visible ‘audit trail’ as the analysis moved from ‘raw’ data, through interpretation, to the production of findings. Transcripts of all participants were analyzed to increase diversity of data.”

We have revised the Data collection subsection of our manuscript to indicate that intersectionality theory served as the underpinning framework for development of the interview guide.

5. Are the methods described in enough detail? Did you find anything confusing?

Strength:

Purposive sampling was used to reach potential participant pool of another study who consented to be contacted for related study

Methods: Use of Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research

REB approval.

Weakness:

Table 1 notes 31% of participants identify as South Asian, yet the limitations section (paragraph prior to conclusion) notes that “we did not include participants from South Asian Communities”.

Response: Thank you for your comments. We have made several revisions to our Methods section to address concerns from the Editor that are described through pages 3 through 7 of this response letter. We have removed the limitation of South Asians as this was added in error. The revised Limitations section of our manuscript can be seen in our response to the Editor that is on page 10 of this response letter

6. You may wish to consider: participants, intervention, exposure, comparator, outcome, confounders, bias

Strength:

Participants: Last two sentences on interviewing all participants who agreed to participate, and the following sentence on data saturation may be better suited for Data Collection and Data Management and Analysis sections respectively.

The article may benefit from providing a more nuanced presentation of Asian-Canadians as a blanket term vs. recognizing the diversity that exists within the broad groups which fit under the Asian-Canadain category.

Weakness:

If a more nuanced approach will be taken by the authors for the revision, it would be beneficial to see the breakdown of ethnicities of the sample elaborated within the text..

Response: As the participants for this work were recruited from our earlier, preliminary survey, we did not assess commonalities or differences that may exist between these groups considering our limited sample for ethnic groups of Asian Canadians. The following statement has been added to our revised limitations section on page 7 of our manuscript:

“Second, the participants for this work were recruited from an earlier, preliminary study; considering our limited sample for ethnic groups of Asian Canadians we did not assess commonalities or differences that may exist between these groups.”

7. Are the results reasonable? Interesting? Surprising?

First paragraph of results focuses on participants who took part in the study. Content should be listed under participants under the Methods section.

Response: This text has been moved as requested by the Editor that is described on page 7 of this response letter.

Second sentence on Asians of higher SES were more likely to face direct discrimination does not reflect what is described in the third sentence and quote. Do you mean Asians of higher SES were less likely to face direct discrimination?

Second quote may be confusing as the interviewee does speak of himself having higher SES after immigrating to Canada. Consider replacing the quote with one that does not contain elements in the actual quote content that may create ambiguity on what you are trying to convey.

Response: We have clarified in this subsection that SES was self-determined; this was not consistently asked of the participants but rather the participants brought it up consistently as a form of reference to their experiences. SES is about access to resources, including social and economic positioning; this was both initiated and described/determined by participants in response to the fourth question in our interview guide that asked if the pandemic had impacted them or their community economically. The additional sentence in our revised manuscript reads as follows on page 5 including the following revised sentences:

“While SES in this study was self-determined, the nature and extent of discrimination experienced by Asian Canadians was expressed in relation to SES. ... One participant of self-determined lower SES commented on their direct experiences with discrimination (Table 2, Q2).”

Politics, media, and the COVID-19 pandemic

For the second quote, it may be more apt to describe the quote as “One participant reflected on the effects of the rapid dissemination of misinformation across media platforms”.

Response: The statement has been revised as suggested that is seen on page 6 of our revised manuscript: “One participant reflected on the effects of the rapid dissemination of misinformation across media platforms.”

Effects of discrimination on mental, physical and social health.

After reading the first quote, I felt the point conveyed by the interviewee was more on the need for the community to stand against and resist systemic and structural racism collectively (rather than on resiliency alone).

Response: The statement has been revised as suggested that is seen on page 6 of our revised manuscript: “One participant described their efforts to cope with the psychological impact of discrimination through resiliency, conveying the need for their community to stand against and resist systemic and structural racism collectively.”

Implications of physical and psychological safety and sense of belonging

Second quote: the “being Canadian” was an integral part of some of the interviewees' identities. Could this have been influenced by the internalization of the model minority myth?

Response: Thank you for this excellent suggestion. We have added a statement to the first paragraph of our Interpretation section of our revised manuscript (page 7) that reads as follows: “Research is needed to uncover if Asian Canadian’s sense of belonging, despite experiencing discrimination, is related to the model minority myth that has long dominated the racial framing and perceptions of Asian Canadians.” And the following reference has also been provided: Sakamoto A, Takei I, Woo H. The Myth of the Model Minority Myth. Sociological Spectrum. 2012;32:309-21.

8. Is the interpretation supported by data in the results?

Currently, the results appear to report findings based on the inductive thematic analysis. However, it is not fully apparent how the intersectionality framework has guided the interpretation of all of the presented results or thematic domains.

Response: We have mentioned our use of intersectionality theory as the underpinning framework for this study and that the data for this study was analyzed and interpreted using inductive thematic analysis.. The revised Study Design subsection (page 3) reads as follows:

“We applied a qualitative description study design¹⁹ using semi-structured interviews that were conducted from March 23 to May 27, 2021. Intersectionality is the assertion that social identity (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality) are interconnected and operate simultaneously to produce experiences of both privilege and marginalization.²⁰ For the current study we used intersectionality theory²¹ as the underpinning framework to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Asian Canadians’ sense of safety and belonging in their Canadian (i.e., geographical) communities. The data was analyzed and interpreted using inductive thematic analysis²² to closely examine the data and identify, analyze, and interpret repeating patterns of meanings.²³ The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research was followed for this work.²⁴”

9. Do tables and figures accurately represent the data? Would some other visual be more helpful?

- Table 1 provides descriptive data.
- Table 2 provides a summary of the emergent themes. I would have been helpful to see other quotes not already used in the body of the paper that fit under thematic areas.

Response: We have revised our Table 2 to include quotes only (i.e., not in the main text of the manuscript) that is described on page 8 of this response letter in our response to the Editor.

10. Are any important limitations not mentioned?

Strength:

Authors provided a number of limitations. The section should have its own heading.

Weakness:

Despite the authors noted this was a qualitative descriptive study design, it nonetheless employed concepts that are more appropriate for quantitative studies.

First point: limited transferability. This is not a quantitative study. Qualitative study would not aim for transferability or generalizability but depth.

Response: Thank you for bringing up this important point of discussion. Indeed, the results presented in our paper are not statistically generalizable to the entire Canadian population given our use of qualitative methods and our non-representative sample. However, there is methodological reason to support the transferability of our results, which refers to the extent to which our results can be applied or applicable in other contexts, situation, times, or populations (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>). For example, our use of purposive sampling to increase diversity across participants ensured that our participants in this study were representative of a variety of Canadian regional areas. Furthermore, since the national cross-sectional survey from which this study sample is derived is representative of the Canadian population, it is arguable that the results of our study are applicable and transferable more broadly (e.g., to future infectious disease outbreaks). Further revisions to our Limitations section of our manuscript can be seen in our response to the Editor that is on page 10 of this response letter.

Second point: It was also confusing to note in the limitation section which noted the perspectives of South Asians were not included despite they made up of 31% of the interviewees. Table 1 provided various ethnicities (e.g. East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian; West Asian), yet the draft did not mention about the commonalities or differences which may exist between these groups.

Response: We have removed the limitation of South Asians as this was added in error. The revised Limitations section of our manuscript can be seen in our response to the Editor that is on page 10 of this response letter.

Third point: On the uncertainty on extent and directionality of the impact of social media on Asian Canadians. As a qualitative study, the team would be better placed to note that seeking certainty may not be the objective of the approach. Instead, more nuanced analysis of the data based on theory, even if findings may seem contradictory, will be welcomed.

Response: We have revised the third point on our Limitations section to read as follows: "Third, while seeking certainty was not the objective of our approach, our study was unable to fully uncover the extent and directional impact of social media on Asian Canadians."

I was also surprised to see that despite a majority of the researchers are based at a university in the Atlantic Canada region, that none of the interviewees came from that region.

Response: Unfortunately, despite or best attempt to recruit participants from the Atlantic region, none of the eligible individuals from Atlantic Canada were interested in participating in an interview. We have added this point to the Limitations section of our paper through with the addition of the following statement: "Also, despite or best attempts to recruit participants from the Atlantic region of Canada, none of the eligible individuals from Atlantic Canada were interested in participating in an interview and as such their perspectives were missed."

11. Did you spot any fatal flaws? That is, errors you do not believe the authors could overcome. Please explain clearly.

Authors stated they utilized COREQ as part of its methodology, yet did not fully expand some of the elements on the checklist. Areas that seem weak or missing include: Domain 1: 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; Domain 2: 9 (weak), 15, (17), 18, 20; Domain 3: 25, 28, (29).

Currently, the conclusion section is weak. Can expand more and perhaps provide at least 3 points of recommendations.

Response: We have revised in part our Methods and Results sections to include all components of the COREQ as requested by the Editor. These revisions are described through the first 11 pages of this response letter. As well, we have revised our Conclusion section in response to a request from the Editor that is described on page 10 of this response letter.

12. For whom are these findings relevant?

The conclusion notes that “It is imperative that Canadians are aware of the risk of scapegoating during times of crisis including the role of media and need for strategies including societal leadership to counteract.” It is assumed that the authors would find their primary audience as the Canadian public and decision makers. It was unclear if the study team believed the study’s primary target, Asian Canadians, should be a primary beneficiary of the study’s findings.

Response: We have carefully reviewed and revised our Conclusion section to align better with the implications of our study. The revised Conclusion is on page 8 of our manuscript and included below:

“Through the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Canadian participants in our study felt unsafe due to the uncertain, unexpected, and/or unpredictable nature of discrimination. Participants in our study who did not directly experience discrimination felt impacted by discrimination towards other Asian Canadians while also feeling a strong sense of belonging to Canadian society, and well connected to their Asian Canadian communities. Future work should seek to understand the influence of social media on treatment and attitudes toward Asian Canadians as the information dissemination process can affect emotions and behaviors that directly impact how public opinions are formed.”

13. Do the authors place their findings in the context of the literature?

Yes, the authors have integrated relevant and current literature to support its findings in the discussion sections.

Response: Thank you.