Viral Racism via Videos: A Study of Asians’ Experiences of Interpersonal Discrimination Because of COVID-19

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Abstract
This study analyzes five publicly posted videos wherein Asians experience interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19. We think social scientists ignore how videos provide data for investigating interpersonal discrimination. We characterize the videos according to multiple features including context, characteristics, and responses of individuals involved, type of threat or mistreatment, and level of psychological and physical harm. We then summarize features across the videos. Among other things, analyses uncover implicit, explicit, and historically specific anti-Asian sentiment alongside evidence perpetrators are men and bystanders do not intervene typically. The Discussion contrasts Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19 against the interpersonal and institutional discrimination faced by American Indians, blacks, and Hispanics in the United States. That contrast brings Asians’ positionality into sharp relief.

Keywords
Asians, COVID-19, interpersonal discrimination, stereotypes, visual sociology, white supremacy

Introduction
Investigation of interpersonal discrimination represents one of social science’s most crucial contributions to explaining racial inequality (Brown 2001; Feagin 1991; LaPiere 1934; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Reskin 2012; Williams et al. 2019). Across diverse methodologies, including experiments and field studies (Ayres and Siegelman 1995; Besbris, Faber, and Sharkey 2019; Gaddis 2019; Pager 2003), and social surveys (Deng et al. 2010; Farrell 2020; Grollman 2014; Jackson et al. 1996; Kressin et al. 2008; Lee et al. 2019; McMurtry et al. 2019; Shariff-Marco et al. 2019).
2011; Williams et al. 1997), scholars explain how interpersonal discrimination sustains racial disparities in health, wealth, education, and incarceration. Thus, they demonstrate the durability of racism, racialization, and white supremacy. In fact, the literature investigating interpersonal discrimination is one of the fastest growing areas of social scientific inquiry, particularly in health disparities research (see Goosby, Cheadle, and Mitchell 2018; Jones et al. 2016; Kressin, Raymond, and Manze 2008; Paradies 2006; Pascoe and Richman 2009; Williams et al. 2019).

Despite the rapid growth of studies, the literature neglects certain things. First, scholars ignore how videos capture interpersonal discrimination. Invoking visual sociology (see Becker 1974; Harper 1988, 2012; Martiniello 2017; Pauwels 2010, 2015, 2019), we argue videos reveal how interpersonal discrimination happens in situ and in real-time. Second, the literature overlooks those who perpetrate interpersonal discrimination. The field fixates on the study of discrimination without discriminators (Brown et al. 2022). Videos can reveal, heretofore unknown, information about perpetrators (and their interactions with victims, interveners, and bystanders, see Paull, Omari, and Standen 2012). Third, the study of interpersonal discrimination focuses largely on blacks’ and Hispanics’ experiences. Consequently, Asians’ experiences of mistreatment receive less systematic attention. We define Asians consistent with the Census: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam. We argue studying Asians’ experiences exposes their positionality in the U.S. racial hierarchy. For instance, Asians are viewed as superior to blacks but as cultural outsiders (Chen, Zhang, and Liu 2020:1625; Kim 1999; Nicholson, Carter, and Restar 2020).

This study analyzes five publicly posted videos capturing Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19, an exogenous shock exposing prejudice, privilege, vulnerability, and white supremacy. Although we recommend caution when generalizing from our small sample size, we address the following research question: With visual data, what can scholars learn about interpersonal discrimination, generally, and the interpersonal discrimination Asians face because of COVID-19, specifically?

**Interpersonal Discrimination and Asians**

The interpersonal discrimination literature sprouted from a small number of studies specifying how mistreatment caused poor health and well-being and restricted economic mobility. The first published studies examined blacks and Hispanics and addressed psychological and physical harm caused by exposure to interpersonal discrimination (see Amaro, Russo, and Johnson 1987; Brown et al. 2000; Jackson et al. 1996; Johnson 1989; Williams et al. 1997). The literature has grown exponentially over the past several decades, becoming more inclusive, and simultaneously, measurement of interpersonal discrimination evolved. For example, studies consider intersectional mistreatment (Grollman 2012, 2014); separate unfair treatment from its attribution (Shariff-Marco et al. 2011; Williams et al. 1997); contrast prevalence of alternate perceived discrimination measures (Brown 2001; Kressin et al. 2008; Lee et al. 2019; Shariff-Marco et al. 2011); link interpersonal discrimination with biomarkers (Chae et al. 2014; McFarland et al. 2018); and analyze how exposure to interpersonal discrimination varies by context (Farrell 2020; Jones et al. 2016; Kwon 2020). Meta-analyses and review articles confirm the psychological and physical harm resultant from exposure to interpersonal discrimination (Gee et al. 2009; Goosby et al. 2018; Jones et al. 2016; Paradies 2006; Pascoe and Richman 2009; Williams et al. 2019).

Moving forward, scholars should consider perpetration of interpersonal discrimination (Brown et al. 2022) and make stronger theoretical connections to institutional discrimination
Further, scholars should study additional groups (see, for example, Niwa, Way, and Hughes 2014). Of relevance here, Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination receive some scholarly attention (Deng et al. 2010; Gee et al. 2007; Kwon 2020; Niwa et al. 2014; Noh, Kaspar, and Wickrama 2007; Ong et al. 2013), but there remains considerable ground left to cover (Chen et al. 2020:1626; Gee et al. 2009; Hong 2020; McMurtry et al. 2019). For example, examining their experiences ethnically, there are instances of xenophobic immigration policy (e.g., Chinese), internment (e.g., Japanese), war and displacement (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian), profiling (e.g., Chinese during McCarthyism and South Asians after 9/11), and cultural exclusion (e.g., Hmong, Koreans, and Filipinos). These instances make Asians a provocative case for studying exposure to interpersonal discrimination.

We also assert social scientists should theorize more carefully about Asians because their positionality in the U.S. racial hierarchy seems ambiguous (Aspinall 2003; Bhopal, Phillimore, and Kohli 1991; Bonilla-Silva 2004; Budiman and Ruiz 2021; Chen et al. 2020:1625; Takaki 1998; Wu 2003). In part, ambiguity occurs because Asians are heterogeneous. For example, their ethnic variation overlaps with differences in English proficiency, multigenerational household living arrangements, immigrant versus refugee status, population size, and regional residential patterns, among other things (Bhopal et al. 1991; Budiman and Ruiz 2021). Beyond these indicators, socioeconomic disparities exist by ethnicity within the Asian population (Barringer, Takeuchi, and Xenos 1990; Budiman and Ruiz 2021). Several ethnic groups possess household incomes below the U.S. median household income (about US$61,937): Bangladeshi (US$49,800), Hmong (US$48,000), Nepalese (US$43,500) and Burmese (US$36,000). In addition, poverty rates vary: Hmong (28.3%), Bhutanese (33.3%), and Burmese (35.0%) communities experience higher poverty rates than Filipino (7.5%), Indian (7.5%), and Japanese (8.4%) communities.

Still the Asian population possesses US$1 trillion in spending power and it will increase to US$1.3 trillion by 2023 (Lam 2019). Despite being more than double the size of the Asian population, the black population possesses only US$1.3 trillion in spending power. Further, Asian median income equals US$87,243 (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). In contrast, American Indian median income equals US$29,097 on reservations (Muhammad, Tec, and Ramirez 2019) and US$40,315 off reservations. Black median income equals US$41,511 and Hispanic median income equals US$51,404 (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). In addition, Asians possess high levels of education. For instance in 2016, 54% of Asians earned at least bachelor’s degrees, compared to 35% of whites, 21% of blacks, and 15% of Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Natives (de Brey et al. 2019).

Due to deracialization practices (i.e., Asians ought not be described in racial terms because they are too heterogeneous), scholars lack a robust theoretical framework for describing them in racial terms. In response, we invoke a Latin Americanization framework. Bonilla-Silva (2004) theorized the U.S. racial hierarchy resembles a pigmentocratic Latin America-like racial order with three loosely organized strata (i.e., whites, honorary whites, and the collective black). In this framework, whites can access scarce resources because institutions represent their best interests; thus, they hoard opportunities to improve their lifestyles and life chances. Exemplar whites (Bonilla-Silva 2004:933) include whites, new whites (e.g., Russians and Albanians), assimilated white Latinos, some multiracials, assimilated (urban) American Indians, and a few Asian origin people. Honorary whites share whites’ material and immaterial interests, while distancing themselves from the collective black. Exemplar honorary whites (Bonilla-Silva 2004:933) include light-skinned Latinos, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Asian Indians, Chinese Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, most multiracials, and
Filipino Americans. The collective black are economically, politically, and socially marginalized. Racial trauma and exposure to institutional and interpersonal discrimination define their lived experiences historically and today. Exemplars in the collective black (Bonilla-Silva 2004:933) include blacks, Hmong Americans, Laotian Americans, dark-skinned Latinos, new West Indian and African immigrants, and reservation-bound American Indians.

Each category in this framework contains Asians. “A few-Asian origin people” are whites; Japanese, Korean, South Asian, Chinese, and Filipino Americans are honorary whites; and Vietnamese, Hmong, and Laotian Americans occupy the collective black stratum (Bonilla-Silva 2004:933). The majority of Asians are honorary whites because of their own intra-Asian biases, high average socioeconomic status, prestigious occupational segmentation, high interracial marriage rates, low levels of residential segregation from whites, and endorsement of generalized anti-black attitudes (Bonilla-Silva 2004:938–939). Further, assimilation and acculturation play an important role. We speculate whites view certain Asians as distant from the collective black, and that distance translates into seeming acceptance. Acceptance would be unlikely for any Asians occupying the collective black stratum (and, by extension, those least assimilated and acculturated). We recognize some scholars bristle at Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) approach to theorizing about Asians. Our response is anti-blackness remains fundamental to the organization of every society and person therein. This logic is sound and deracialization practices in typical studies involving Asians diminish racism as a fundamental cause. Historically and today, locally and globally, racism trumps and transforms socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Consequently, if we want to understand racism, then we should privilege generalizable frameworks accentuating its impact. Finally, Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) Latin Americanization framework examines racial hierarchy, positioning multiple groups with reference to each other rather than specifying detailed experiences of one racial group.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Exogenous Shock

COVID-19 acted as an exogenous shock, exposing prejudice, privilege, vulnerability, and white supremacy (Bromley 2020; Delaney 2020; Lim and Fortson 2020; Roberto, Johnson, and Rauhaus 2020). Similar to Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and Barack Obama’s 2008 or Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential elections, the pandemic widened cracks in the U.S. melting pot. Asians are protagonists because the pandemic originated somewhere near a market in Wuhan, the sprawling capital of Central China’s Hubei province. Unsurprisingly, yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes resurfaced (Mallapragada 2021; Takaki 1998; Wu 2003). The yellow peril stereotype insinuates Asians are a disease-carrying menace. The perpetual foreigner stereotype presumes Asians are incapable of assimilation, and therefore can never become “American.” Both increase xenophobia. In addition, political relations between the United States and China deteriorated when the Chinese government obstructed work of international health care professionals investigating the virus’ origin. That obstruction not only affected foreign-born Chinese immigrants but impacted many others due to the belief (those racialized as or mistaken for) East Asians spread COVID-19 (Ho 2021; Mallapragada 2021; Roberto et al. 2020).

To sum, COVID-19 incited anti-Asian sentiment in the form of boycotts of Chinatowns and Asian businesses. In addition, politicians including Donald Trump called COVID-19 the “Chinese coronavirus” or “Kung-Flu” (Al Jazeera News 2020; Haltiwanger 2020). Mistreatment of Asians increased (see https://www.aapicovid19.org/ and https://stopaapihate.org/). For example, the AAPI COVID-19 Project gathered 3,795 reports of interpersonal discrimination (e.g., verbal harassment, shunning, and physical assaults) between March 2020 and February
2021. We assert COVID-19 caused Asians to be viewed negatively and uniformly. Theoretically, some white and honorary white Asians provisionally experienced collective black status.

**Study Contributions**

This study analyzes videos documenting interpersonal discrimination toward Asians because of COVID-19. In doing so, it makes several contributions to the interpersonal discrimination literature and scholarship on racism more broadly. First, we provide evidence suggesting interpersonal discrimination is prevalent. Second, we build a methodological bridge to the perceived discrimination literature by visually validating how it occurs (Ball and Gilligan 2010; Martiniello 2017). Third, we integrate Asians into conversations regarding prejudice, privilege, vulnerability, and white supremacy. It seems Asians’ heterogeneity deters scholars from theorizing about them as a racial group (i.e., deracialization practices). Yet, there is incredible ethnic, socioeconomic, and other variation within American Indian, black, Hispanic, and white populations. Scholars still analyze those groups. We hypothesize video data would confirm some Asians experienced provisional revocation of their white or honorary white statuses because of COVID-19.

**Methods**

Most studies of interpersonal discrimination rely on victims’ perceptions captured in social surveys. This approach welcomes two biases related to construct validity. First, how can scholars be certain perceptions are accurate? Reality is socially constructed. Second, how can scholars be certain the perpetrator meant to mistreat the victim because of their race, ethnicity, or skin color? Intent should matter. We use visual sociology to overcome these limitations.

Visual sociology is a method reliant upon visual data (Ball and Gilligan 2010; Becker 1974; Grady 1996; Harper 1988, 2012; Martiniello 2017; Pauwels 2010, 2015, 2019). Caulfield (1996) and others (Becker 1974; Grady 1996; Harper 1988) suggest photographs within ethnography are the most commonly used medium. Although relatively new (see Harper 1988 and Martiniello 2017 for a brief history), a recurring theme of visual sociology is “valid scientific insight in society can be acquired by observing, analyzing and theorizing its visual manifestations: behavior of people and material products of culture” (Pauwels 2010:546). While its parameters are well-defined, it lacks directives dictating how scholars should collect, archive, and process visual data (i.e., pictures, videos, websites, advertisements, and documentaries, see Caulfield 1996). Consequently, sociologists undervalue visual data.

Visual sociology signals what society views as worth seeing (Ball and Gilligan 2010; Grady 1996:16–17; Harper 1988, 2012). It focuses on how the visual is captured or produced, and how it intersects with verbal and other communication forms. Köktürk (2013:1201–2) wrote visual sociology operates at a five-dimensional intersection: (1) culture, (2) people, (3) time, (4) space, and (5) the person capturing the visual data. Hence, visual sociology is postmodern because meaning is interpreted and equivocal. Harper (1988) and Grady (1996) suggest visual sociology is more than a method—it is a social movement toward a more visual discipline.

Grady (1996) argued visual sociology stands upon three pillars: (1) seeing, or study of sight and vision in construction of social organization and meaning; (2) iconic communication, or study of how spontaneous and deliberate construction of images and imagery communicate information, and structure relationships in society; and (3) doing sociology visually, or concern with how the production and decoding of images can be used to investigate social organization, cultural meanings, and social psychological processes. Visual sociologists are adamant social interactions, structure, relations, and inequality can be investigated if scholars respect how humans experience their lives in visual terms. It reminds us of Cooper’s (1892) admonition to be “open-eyed” in reference to
the social world—to see things more closely and for what they really are and, most important, to see them from alternate vantage points.

Visual sociology holds special promise for scholars of inequality (Martiniello 2017; Pauwels 2010), including those who study racism. For example, we recall a video capturing the brutalization of Rodney King. It garnered little attention inside sociological circles. We recall videos showing Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, George Floyd, Patrick Lyoya, and too many others’ fatal encounters with police officers. Unfortunately, sociologists grant scant attention to such videos showing state-sanctioned executions. Ubiquity of cell phone cameras obliges sociologists to consider the meaning of data, ethnmethodology, sensuality, Verstehen, and the production and consumption of culture (Ball and Gilligan 2010; Grady 1996; Harper 1988, 2012; Pauwels 2015).

To that end, we collected 20 publicly posted videos from diverse sources, including social media platforms and news media outlets from February 2020 to September 2020. We applied the following selection criteria: (1) must be first-hand video account (i.e., cannot be a video of someone describing an incident of interpersonal discrimination), (2) must demonstrate a preponderance of evidence the incident is COVID-19-induced, (3) the victim must be referred to as Asian, (4), must have a clear line of sight, and (5) must have audible and intelligible sound. Applying these criteria resulted in a final sample size of five videos. Application of these criteria clarified our contribution to explaining interpersonal discrimination, generally, and the interpersonal discrimination Asians face because of COVID-19, specifically.

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Table 1 shows URLs for the original videos, mainstream news coverage, and the reported date of the incident. The original videos are available upon request from the authors. We make no claims about generalizability. We recognize not all COVID-19-induced instances of interpersonal discrimination toward Asians are videotaped and/or posted. Similarly, we acknowledge the videos include sound, and two have accompanying captions and comment sections. Those additional forms of “iconic communication” facilitated our visual data analyses.

We used Grady’s (1996) three pillars when analyzing the five videos. In service of context (not content) analyses (Grady 1996:20), we characterized what we see, what is communicated, and how sociology is done. Specifically, we examined these features in each video: (1) duration, (2) setting, (3) perpetrator characteristics, (4) victim characteristics, (5) perpetrator actions, (6) victim responses, (7) bystander and intervener responses, (8) type of threat or mistreatment, (9) level of psychological harm, and (10) level of physical harm. We watched and analyzed the videos as a team and co-constructed our interpretations—it was a phenomenological process where we each experienced the incidents as vicarious victims, perpetrators, interveners, and bystanders. We paused and rewound the videos repeatedly, while writing the Results section. When we disagreed about what happened or the meaning of something said, we negotiated to reach consensus. These videos are not ethnographic data but are experiential data. Finally, because we know personal biases influence the research process (including what we see or fail to see), the Appendix contains the authors’ Subjectivity Statements.

Results
We split the Results into a Descriptive Coding section and Thematic Coding section. In the former, we analyzed the videos individually and in the order in which they occurred temporally using visual sociology tenets. In the latter, we analyzed the videos collectively identifying three themes across them, again using visual sociology tenets. We encourage readers to watch (i.e., experience) the videos before proceeding.

Descriptive Coding
Los Angeles Subway. Two videos captured an incident experienced by an Asian woman (the victim) because of COVID-19. Two persons from different angles at asynchronous
Table 1. Publicly posted videos capturing Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19.

| Original video URL | Mainstream news coverage | Date of incident |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Los Angeles Subway  
Part 1: https://twitter.com/TannyRJ/status/1224929040022159361  
Part 2: https://twitter.com/TannyRJ/status/122493169304949648 | https://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/world/2020/03/12/coronavirus-whats-spreading-faster-than-covid-19/5035135002/ 
https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/02/21/coronavirus-attack-recording-la-train-jirapapasuke-acfc-sot-vpx.cnn | February 1, 2020 |
| 2. Super 8 Motel https://www.facebook.com/100000242186055/videos/pcb.3758105097540859/3758092282940867/ | https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/14/us/hmong-men-hotel-refusals/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3H0cvN2VwHcQQ85gZbe88DpsU3MUg7bAb3IZCqXmcG4X3EdXoIgksgX4 | February 13, 2020 |
| 3. Target Superstore https://twitter.com/TheJackfroot/status/1240497167757795330?ref_src=twsrc%5Etew%7Ctwterm%7Ctwcon%7Ctwsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eteweetembed%7Ctwterm%7CE1240407167757795330&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fsfi.st.com%2F2020%2F03%23Asian-americans-in-sf-and-elsewhere-see-new-wave-of-racist-attacks-stemming-from-pandemic/ | https://sfi.st.com/2020/03/23/Asian-americans-in-sf-and-elsewhere-see-new-wave-of-racist-attacks-stemming-from-pandemic/ | March 18, 2020 |
| 4. New York City Subway https://www.facebook.com/9310494/videos/10121822316330034/ | https://www.nbcnews.com/news/Asian-america/video-shows-passenger-defending-asian-woman-facing-racism-new-york-n116296?cid=googlenews-usnews | March 25, 2020 |
| 5. 7-Eleven Convenience Store https://www.facebook.com/sungmin.kwon.27/posts/1975546645911114 | https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/nyc-man-called-racial-slur-told-asians-dont-belong-in-racist-attack-caught-on-video/2472697/ | June 13, 2020 |
timepoints recorded the videos inside a Los Angeles, CA subway train. The first video was a 34-second clip. An unseen bystander (later identified as the victim’s friend), sitting behind a Latino man (the perpetrator, who was also seated), captured an interaction between the perpetrator and the victim (a Thai American woman named Tanny Jiraprapasuke, who recorded the second video). The victim sat across the aisle from the perpetrator. The perpetrator expressed distaste for foreigners bringing COVID-19 to “our country.” His language reified the perpetual foreigner stereotype. The perpetrator shouted while looking at the victim, “Wipe your ass. Then, fuck you, go wipe your ass, nigga,” an epithet directed toward the victim. Next, an unseen bystander attempted to diffuse the situation, saying what toward the victim. He talked to the now visible, seated victim. He asked the victim, “So, what does that have to do with us?” The staff person then informed the victim hotels are trying to prevent the virus spread. The victim responded, “If you’re from China, I need to re Oriental...or we’re Oriental...,” but did not complete the sentence. The staff person replied with concern, “If you’re from China, I need to know.” The victim replied, “Because why?”

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Super 8 Motel. This video was a 3-minute, 21-second clip. Here we witness an exchange between a motel staff person (the perpetrator and a white man) and an Asian man looking for a place to stay. The man was Kaopra Lor (the victim) and he identifies as Hmong. Kaopra and his uncle Lee Lor traveled through Indiana en route to pick up a car and stopped to get a room at a Super 8 Motel in the northern city of Plymouth, IN. The video started when the staff person asked the victim, “Are you from China?” The victim responded, “Why is that?” The staff person replied incredulously with, “You haven’t heard of the coronavirus?!” The victim responded, “So, what does that have to do with us?” The staff person then informed the victim about the company policy. He then told the victim to give him a hard time. The victim denied calling the staff person a liar.

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In the second video, which was a 45-second clip, the perpetrator now stood farther from the victim. He talked to the now visible, seated bystander from the first video. The bystander was a black and/or Latino man. Whether the perpetrator knew the bystander was unclear; however, they shared a high level of familiarity, as indicated by the perpetrator’s use of the descriptor “homie.” He sought affirmation from the bystander. The bystander listened to the perpetrator and at one point, nodded in agreement when the perpetrator said, “I am breathing everything that they fucking—that they are bringing to our country...and now I’m going to share it with my family. That’s a pandemic. You know what a pandemic is?” In the background, bystanders talked on their cell phones, oblivious apparently. Threats the victim experienced in the two videos included hate speech and language alluding to yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes. The interaction between the perpetrator and victim did not involve physical contact but seemed to cause psychological harm. First, the victim may have experienced harm from exposure to the epithet. Because this epithet is not typically directed toward Asians, its usage may imply the perpetrator’s superiority. Second, the perpetrator used an aggressive tone likely eliciting fear in the victim. Third, the bystander nodded in agreement and did not intervene, which may have caused the victim to feel alone. Finally, allusions to hygiene and cultural habits signaled Asians’ foreignness.
and reiterated he just wanted to see the company policy. The staff person rumbled through papers as if looking for the company policy, but failed to produce it. The staff person and victim continued to dialogue. The staff person asked the victim several more times if he was from China. The victim did not respond and insisted on seeing the company policy. At the end of the video, the victim informed the perpetrator he would contact someone to verify the company’s policy. Throughout the video, the staff person spoke confidently as if he was only doing his job. Kaopra’s interaction with the staff person did not involve yelling, cursing, or physical contact. However, the victim likely experienced psychological harm. This video reminded us of LaPiere’s (1934) study addressing whether hotel staff would allow Asians to stay at their establishments. The video exemplified a civil incivility common to some interpersonal discrimination incidents.

**Target Superstore.** This was a 2-minute, 21-second clip showing a group of bystanders diffusing a situation between a white man (the primary perpetrator) and Asian man (the victim) in a retail store. According to Twitter geocoding, the Target Superstore is in Dale City, CA. The video began with the two men face-to-face when the perpetrator says, “You got in my face.” The victim responded, “You’re the one who started it.” The perpetrator then said, “Walk away.” One female bystander (a white woman) wearing a hoodie approached the victim and stated, “If you’re scared, why not just walk away. And with the pandemic going on (inaudible).” The victim said, “He’s racist and I don’t like that.” The perpetrator responded, “Why don’t you just walk away. What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re not even intelligent.” The perpetrator and victim shouted at each other regarding what occurred before the recording began. Apparently, the victim coughed near the perpetrator and the perpetrator reacted. Viewers received confirmation when “Asian guy coughed and all hell broke loose” flashes across the screen at 10 seconds. Neither the perpetrator nor victim wore a mask. Two bystanders, both white women, asked the two men to walk away. The bystander wearing a hoodie focused specifically on the victim, telling him repeatedly to walk away. She said to the victim, “The way to solve this problem is if you walk away... You’re being an asshole by not walking away.” At this moment, we see the two women bystanders become interveners and perpetrators and then transition back into bystanders. Thus, these are fluid roles. Basically, interveners can make things better or worse. Efforts to de-escalate the situation failed. A white man, potentially a customer or a Target employee, approached the victim, the perpetrator, and the two women bystanders. He informed the women they made the situation worse and encouraged everyone to walk away. Hearing the commotion, a white male Target employee walked over and positioned himself between the perpetrator and victim. The perpetrator removed his jacket to indicate preparation for fisticuffs. A third white woman, a Target employee, approached the scene. She also positioned herself between the perpetrator and victim. Seven people were present now: the victim, perpetrator, two women (original bystanders), a customer (a man), a target employee (a man), and a target employee (a woman). At this point, the victim again called the perpetrator “racist.” The female bystander in a hoodie defended the perpetrator. She said, “That’s my father. You’re just taking it that way. How is that racist?” After more arguing, the same bystander told the Target employee, “He (the victim) is not minding his business. He’s out here trying to talk shit.” At this point, it appeared both bystander women personally knew (and were related to) the perpetrator. Not only did the younger bystander identify the perpetrator as her father, the three of them shared physical contact (in a non-threatening way) to pull each other from the altercation. Given the proportion of Hispanic adults (22.9%) in Dale City, CA, it is possible both bystander women identify as white Hispanics. The victim probably experienced psychological harm from the escalating verbal conflict and threat of violence. Also, the victim probably experienced psychological harm when the female bystanders blamed him rather than the
perpetrator by yelling “walk away,” and calling him “an asshole.”

**New York City Subway.** An Asian woman (the victim) captured a 48-second video clip in a relatively empty New York City subway car. The incident involved three people, largely. There was a black man (the perpetrator) carrying a cane. He spoke with an accent (possibly of Caribbean or African descent) and yelled profanities at a white man (an intervener) who protected the Asian woman (the victim). The video began with the perpetrator and intervener in close quarters. Thereafter, the victim said to the intervener, “Thank you for protecting me.” The perpetrator said he was upset the intervener “intervened in his conversation” with the Asian woman. The victim told the perpetrator “Human beings should not have to act like you.” The perpetrator yelled at the intervener as the intervener moved toward the victim, away from the perpetrator. The encounter escalated as the perpetrator charged toward the intervener and victim, and pointed his cane towards them. The perpetrator expressed discontent when the victim pulled out her cell phone to record the interaction, and repeatedly stated, “Don’t take my picture.” The victim responded, “I didn’t take your picture. Please back up. I didn’t bother you. You need to calm down. This is not the time.”

In a caption accompanying the video, the Asian woman (named Emily C. Chen) described in greater detail what happened. She wrote: “Man sits RIGHT IN front of me and tries to get my attention ‘HELLO HELLO, TAKE OFF YOUR HEADPHONES... I say ‘good morning’. He says ‘You’re Chinese, why did you bring Corona to America?’” We saw six people in the video: the perpetrator, the intervener, three bystanders, and the victim (who is filming). No bystanders intervened: two were black men and the other, a white woman. The victim experienced distress based on the tone of her voice and heavy breathing in the video. In addition, she experienced fear. In a Facebook post, she said she was “...angry and disappointed” bystanders did nothing to help. The perpetrator did not physically contact the victim during the video footage. However, the victim seemed afraid when the perpetrator charged toward her and the intervener.

**7-Eleven Convenience Store.** Two asynchronous videos recorded and posted by an Asian man (the victim), Sungmin Kwon (a Korean surname), captured an incident occurring inside a 7-Eleven convenience store. The first was a 6-second clip, the second a 36-second clip. The 7-Eleven is located in Bayside Queens (a New York City neighborhood). In the 6-second clip, the victim was walking down a store aisle when the perpetrator (a white man wearing a black mask) yelled, “Fuck out of here, you gook.” This epithet dates back to the Korean War. In the longer clip, the perpetrator, with his face mask now hanging around his neck yelled, “I got your picture, you stupid. You stupid motherfucker.” One bystander (a man), wearing a mask, stood with his hands by his sides and watched the incident. Standing next to him was a second bystander holding his face mask to his face and watching the incident. The perpetrator then charged toward the victim while grabbing and knocking goods off shelves. The perpetrator made physical contact with the victim, causing the victim to fall to the ground. The camera moved erratically. The victim exclaimed, “Oh!” Then, “OK, OK.” The victim stood up, walked past an exit door and toward the perpetrator. The victim, wearing a face mask, turned the camera toward himself and declared, “He just assaulted me. This man just assaulted me.” In the background, a third bystander (standing nearby) told the victim, “Just relax.” The perpetrator walked away from the victim while mocking him, chanting “Ha cha cha cha.” The victim walked purposefully toward the perpetrator and said, “You pushed me bro. We got evidence. We got evidence.” Immediately thereafter, the perpetrator slammed a bag of chips onto the counter and mocked the victim by repeating “He just assaulted me,” in a demeaning manner. The victim’s camera panned the room. Standing next to the perpetrator now was a fourth bystander who picked up canned drinks, ignoring the commotion. The victim continued recording the perpetrator as
the perpetrator moved around the corner of the aisle and yelled, “You fuckin’ gook...get the fuck away from me.” As the victim followed the perpetrator (while repeating, “You just pushed me bro!”), the perpetrator turned to face the victim. Then, the perpetrator rushed the victim and swatted the camera. The perpetrator made physical contact again while swatting the victim’s cell phone, and yelled repeatedly, “Get the fuck out!” The video ended with the perpetrator pushing the victim’s cell phone away and the victim stating, “What are you fucking doing?” The type of mistreatment was verbal abuse, including use of a racial slur and mocking. In addition, the perpetrator made physical contact through lunging, kicking, and pushing, although the victim claimed in a Facebook comment section he was not harmed physically. The perpetrator yelled, and grabbed and threw goods on the ground to intimidate the victim. The victim likely experienced psychological harm from being insulted. In fact, the victim wrote the following in a caption accompanying the video: “This racism shit is getting fucking tiring.” The victim challenged the perpetrator and later demeaned him in the caption. The victim treated the video recording as a form of self-defense, narrating the event as it occurred. In the caption, the victim summarized the incident as follows: “Racist prick in the video went on a disgusting racist rant against asians saying asians are the cause for the pandemic, were filthy, and don’t belong in this country. I called him out on his bullshit and he approached me.” The victim photographed the perpetrator’s license plate, stating he contacted the police about the incident.

**Thematic Coding**

Analyzing the videos collectively, three themes emerged: (1) salience of the yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, (2) flattened ethnicity, and (3) bystander inaction. The yellow peril stereotype appeared relevant when we watched the Target Superstore and New York City subway videos. In the former, a cough in close quarters started the altercation. In the latter, the perpetrator explicitly asked “...why did you bring Corona to America?” The connection to disease seems undeniable. We noticed evidence indicating the perpetual foreigner stereotype in every video, but the racial epithet and mocking in the 7-Eleven convenience store video best exemplified it. Further, we noticed perpetrators erected symbolic boundaries by deploying language including “our country.” Flattened ethnicity occurred across all five videos. For example, victims in the 7-Eleven convenience store, Super 8 motel, and Los Angeles subway videos did not identify as Chinese. To sharpen the point, the victim in the Los Angeles subway video reported thinking the perpetrator must be talking to someone else on the subway because she identifies as Thai American. We assert racism trumps important ethnic distinctions some Asian scholars emphasize via deracialization practices. Finally, COVID-19-induced interpersonal discrimination analyzed here tended to happen around multiple bystanders, excepting the Super 8 motel video. Most bystanders ignored what was happening. Paull et al. (2012) referred to such individuals as *abdicating* or *avoiding bystanders* because of their inaction. Overall, bystanders may feel afraid to confront the perpetrator and/or support the victim in service of self-preservation (Paull et al. 2012). However, in the Los Angeles subway video, a man bystander said, “Leave her alone.” And, in the New York City subway video, we witnessed a man bystander intervening physically and verbally. In her accompanying Facebook post, the victim in the New York City subway video expressed anger and disappointment other bystanders did not intervene. We recognize both times a man bystander became an intervener, the victim was an Asian woman. This suggests the victim’s gender might influence whether men bystanders intervene.

**Discussion**

We aimed to generate novel insights about racial discrimination and anti-Asian sentiment (see Chen et al. 2020; Gee et al. 2009; Hong 2020; Kim 1999; Mallapragada 2021; McMurtry et al. 2019; Roberto et al. 2020). To
that end, this study addressed the following research question: With visual data, what can scholars learn about interpersonal discrimination, generally, and the interpersonal discrimination Asians face because of COVID-19, specifically? We invoked Bonilla-Silva’s (2004:933) Latin Americanization framework hypothesizing some white and honorary white Asians moved provisionally to the collective black stratum because of COVID-19. We deployed tenets from visual sociology (Ball and Gilligan 2010; Becker 1974; Harper 1988, 2012; Martiniello 2017; Pauwels 2010, 2015, 2019) to analyze five publicly posted videos (see Table 1) wherein Asians experienced COVID-19-induced interpersonal discrimination. We considered this mistreatment distinct from pre-COVID-19 anti-Asian discrimination because of its attribution. We argued some Asians experienced the kind of demoralizing interpersonal discrimination blacks face daily because of anti-blackness. But we doubt Asians will continue to face it as COVID-19 vaccination rates increase and “normal” returns. More important, Asians will be largely spared the heinous acts of brutality reserved exclusively for phenotypically black bodies.

First, implications for the interpersonal discrimination literature include (1) bystanders can provide crucial information about mistreatment, (2) scholars can review video footage from public spaces and accommodations for evidence of mistreatment (e.g., consider publicly posted videos featuring “Karen-ing”), (3) perpetrators cannot be ignored, and their actions and intentions triangulate what victims of interpersonal discrimination perceive, (4) asking in a survey whether or not one has experienced mistreatment can obscure significant sociological details of discriminatory incidents, and (5) experiences of interpersonal discrimination can vary dramatically in terms of civility or hostility. Altogether, videos we analyzed validate how interpersonal discrimination occurs.

Second, the videos showed mistreatment fueled by implicit, explicit, and historically specific anti-Asian sentiment. Asians’ mistreatment because of COVID-19 evoked yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes (Hong 2020; Lim and Fortson 2020; Mallapragada 2021; Takaki 1998; Wu 2003). For example, perpetrators alluded to Asians’ supposed poor hygiene and cultural habits. Perpetrators used epithets (“gook”) and outsider distinctions (“our country”). The videos allowed us to witness Asian victims experiencing harm, fear, and “othering.” Overall, we found evidence of blatant racist animus, despite the popularity of colorblind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Consistent with our hypothesis, we found some white or honorary white Asians experienced provisional collective black status because of COVID-19.

Third, we noticed common features across the videos: (1) many bystanders chose not to intervene; (2) perpetrators, who were men from various racial backgrounds, felt empowered to discriminate; (3) most victims hesitated to respond to perpetrators (see Bromley 2020); (4) incidents happened in public spaces and accommodations (see Feagin 1991; LaPiere 1934); and (5) though most victims were not Chinese, perpetrators viewed them as Chinese and therefore guilty of spreading COVID-19. Regarding the last feature, we conclude the racial uniform Asians wear flattens their ethnic heterogeneity (Chen et al. 2020:1624; Ho 2021:2–3; Mallapragada 2021). Exposure to interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19 should remind scholars Asians become monolithic when targeted.

This study investigated interpersonal not institutional discrimination (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Feagin and Eckberg 1980; Gee et al. 2009; Jones 2000; Reskin 2012), with the latter showing pernicious consequence for American Indians, blacks, and Hispanics. Legacies of racism make these communities uniquely vulnerable. Hence, we expect racism scholars will debate the significance of COVID-19-induced interpersonal discrimination Asians face because it pales in comparison with difficulties underrepresented minorities face (Lim and Fortson 2020). For example, American Indians, blacks, and Hispanics experience extraordinarily higher COVID-19 hospitalization and mortality rates than whites and Asians (AMP Research Lab Staff
COVID-19 is literally and still killing underrepresented minorities. In fact, if left unchecked the virus will eliminate entire tribes of American Indians (Silverman et al. 2020). Further, the COVID-19-induced economic downturn hurt American Indian, black, and Hispanic workers. Recall American Indians experience the highest poverty rate (25.4%) of any racial group (Muhammad et al. 2019), followed by blacks (20.8%) and Hispanics (17.6%). When situating Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination against this backdrop, their high average socioeconomic status, connection to whiteness, and social and political capital protects them (see Bonilla-Silva’s 2004; Bromley 2020; Delaney 2020; Lim and Fortson 2020).

Our findings beg the question whether exposure to interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19 will cause Asians to analyze their ambiguous positionality in the U.S. racial hierarchy. We doubt it. White supremacy depends upon a divide-and-conquer strategy among non-white racial groups, variously and differentially oppressed. The white privilege Asians accrue incentivizes them to embrace deracialization practices and their ambiguous positionality. Hence, some Asians may choose to participate in their own and other groups’ oppression.

Related, we suspect the interpersonal discrimination Asians face because of COVID-19 will not cause them to form political alliances with underrepresented minorities (but see Ho 2021; Kurashige 2007; Lee 2015; Lim and Fortson 2020; Tang 2011). To wit, a recent study by Nicholson et al. (2020) found group consciousness and linked fate increased Asians’ odds of perceiving political commonality with blacks. However, exposure to interpersonal discrimination did not. Moreover, despite his racist and xenophobic posture, one exit poll estimated 27% of Asians voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Wang 2017). By comparison, 8% of blacks voted for Donald Trump. As another example, large numbers of Asians do not routinely attend Black Lives Matters (BLM) events, pro-immigration events, anti-poverty events, etc. (but see Chang 2003; Lee 2015; Zia 2000; Takaki 1998 for historical evidence of black-Asian alliances), in part, because they may not consider themselves racial allies (Delaney 2020; Kim 2020; Lee 2015; Lim and Fortson 2020; Nicholson et al. 2020; Wu 2003). For instance, Asian students initiated anti-affirmative action lawsuits against Harvard University under the guidance of conservative legal strategist Edward Blum. For many underrepresented minorities, affirmative action provides their communities a limited but essential way to resist legacies of racism. Interestingly, recent survey data shows 65% of Asians support the policy, but their support is declining (Ramakrishnan and Wong 2018).

As Kim (1999) describes, Asians are triangulated racially within the black-white discourse, positioned between “relative valorization and civic ostracism” (Ng et al. 2007:96). This triangulation manifests the model minority stereotype (Ng et al. 2007) characterizing Asians as the “modern day success story” of assimilation into white society. Specifically, Asians are portrayed as hard-working, wealthy, educated, self-sufficient, and docile (Kim 1999; Takaki 1998; Wu 2003). The model minority stereotype does symbolic violence though, damaging not only Asians but also American Indians, blacks, and Hispanics. For instance, the model minority stereotype requires oppression amnesia: forgetting historical traumas and social exclusion in exchange for “Americanness” (Anderson and Lee 2005; Hong 2020; Lowe 1996). As such, the model minority stereotype obscures commonalities between Asians and underrepresented minorities. In addition, many Asians encode the model minority stereotype as progressive. Recall presidential candidate Andrew Yang wore a “Math” lapel pin during the 2020 Democratic primaries. We assert many Asians desire to enjoy white privilege. Consequently, they experience cognitive dissonance when mistreated like blacks because acknowledging they are victims of racial discrimination undermines their (honorary) whiteness. It is a double-bind: Asians cannot be white or honorary white, and simultaneous victims of white supremacy.
Limitations and Future Directions

This study speaks to scholars interested in interpersonal discrimination, Asians, visual sociology, and white supremacy. For instance, it is the first study to analyze visual data capturing Asians’ experiences of interpersonal discrimination because of COVID-19. Replicating our approach, scholars could examine Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Vine videos showing racism-related content. Scholars could attend correspondingly to bystanders, interveners, and perpetrators, who remain neglected in the interpersonal discrimination literature. Finally, though our video data originate in the United States, anti-Asian sentiment and mistreatment driven by COVID-19 emerged internationally and affected anyone perceived to be Asian (Ho 2021; Mallapragada 2021; Roberto et al. 2020:370–1).

These important contributions should be understood within the context of several limitations. First, future research should investigate videos’ comment sections. Commenters may deny or condemn interpersonal discrimination Asians experience because of COVID-19, increasing felt stress or social support, respectively. Second, we did not code nonverbal communication (i.e., body language). Third, we did not speak directly with individuals shown in the videos, but instead interpreted what we saw. In two cases, victims added captions and comments sections to their videos. Those helped us interpret the visual data. Fourth, we described individuals’ gender and race when clothing or face masks did not make it impossible to discern. In addition, we could not determine whether victims were foreign-born. Fifth, we recommend scholars show these videos to individuals and assess what they see happening. Who would conclude interpersonal discrimination happened and who would not? Would individuals from certain Asian ethnic groups be more or less likely to see mistreatment? Scholars could create a typology of individuals more and less capable of seeing interpersonal discrimination. Related, we could imagine using these videos to train bystanders how to intervene (e.g., What should you do if you see this incident happening?).

Sixth, future research should assess ethical issues of using publicly posted videos where not all persons visible consented to the recording or posting. We treat the videos like published newspaper stories, which are not governed by Human Subjects regulations. We also acknowledge some individuals are adept at producing fake videos. In response, we provide links to mainstream news coverage (see Table 1) because networks conduct fact-checking. Seventh, not all instances of interpersonal discrimination toward Asians because of COVID-19 are videotaped and/or posted. In fact, one cannot estimate the population size of such videos. Scholars should therefore upload videos of discriminatory incidents to a central repository. They should also assume most instances of interpersonal discrimination go unseen, even when recorded. Related, by the time cell phone cameras are recording, many discriminatory incidents have begun already and some have ended. Finally, scholars should examine how underrepresented minorities explain COVID-19-induced interpersonal discrimination Asians face. On the one hand, they may view such incidents as insignificant in the larger scheme of things because of Asians’ high average socioeconomic status, connection to whiteness, and social and political capital. On the other hand, they may believe the COVID-19 pandemic will activate Asians’ interest in coalescing with underrepresented minorities to fight white supremacy.

Appendix

Subjectivity Statements

TNB grew up in southeast Washington, DC in a socially disadvantaged inner-city, all black neighborhood. Because his mother feared for his safety and believed education guaranteed upward mobility, he attended Catholic elementary, junior high, and high schools, all of which were predominantly black or all black. Lessons he learned in these institutions regarded the importance of social justice and
supporting the less fortunate and scrutinizing one’s own privilege. He attended and graduated from a HBCU and then earned a master’s degree and PhD from a PWI. He always felt a Du Boisian two-ness and still feels it today. His research exposes the sociological and social psychological impact of racism. He has never written exclusively about Asian Americans. He feels many Asian Americans decline opportunities to work for social justice alongside American Indians, blacks, and Hispanics.

CLB grew up in southern California in a culturally diverse working class neighborhood. She attended a majority racial minority high school with roughly 25% Asian American, 35% Mexican American, 15% African American, and 25% European American students from primarily working and middle class families. While growing up in this environment, her mother stressed the importance of learning about and appreciating different cultures. However, because African Americans were the numerical minority and often spread out throughout the city, she learned very little about her own racial group. As a college undergraduate, she began to question her own racial identity when she realized that growing up in a diverse environment was not typical across the United States. She also began to realize that what seemed like racial harmony from the outside was actually fraught with racism and discrimination. For example, most of her teachers provided more opportunities and support for Asian American students, who they believed were smarter than students from other racial backgrounds. As an undergraduate, she began taking classes in ethnic studies and social psychology to learn more about racial identity development and the historical meaning of race in the United States. She eventually joined a research lab that focused on the relationship between racial identity development and race socialization among African American adolescents. She has continued with this line of research throughout her academic career, focusing primarily on race socialization as a predictor of racial identity development, academic performance, and mental health. She currently teaches a multicultural psychology course where a significant portion of the material addresses racial identity development, the role of family, and stereotypes such as the “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” among Asian Americans. Her belief is that Asian Americans are a diverse group with varying economic, social, academic, and historic backgrounds.

RD grew up in a predominately African American, unincorporated community of Shelby County, Tennessee, located on the outskirts of Memphis. RD attended multiple elementary, middle, and high schools that varied in racial and ethnic compositions (all black, predominately black, predominately white, etc.). She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Memphis. Post-graduation, RD taught 6th grade Mathematics and Social Studies in one of Philadelphia’s most impoverished and drug-ridden neighborhoods. Observing the inequalities, food insecurities, and unstable living arrangements faced by her students, RD enrolled at the Bush School of Government and Public Service in their Master of Public Service and Administration program to study public and nonprofit management. Combining her interests in helping children like her former students with her experience interning at the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County, RD is continuing her education as a Sociology Ph.D. student at Rice University. RD did not grow up around many Asian Americans and did not have daily interactions with Asian Americans until she entered college. RD has neither examined nor written about the experiences of Asian Americans. However, as a Political Science major in undergraduate, RD took classes that explore racial inequality and injustice. She acknowledges that all ethnic groups are heterogeneous and their experiences deserve scholarly attention.

MC grew up in Beavercreek, OH, a predominantly white suburb of the Dayton area. He and his family comprised a portion of the 2% of 46,000 Beavercreek residents that were African American; 6% of the population was Asian. As a child, he was forced to be conscious of his race and identity before beginning
grade school and throughout the progression of his adolescent years. Although he did not regularly interact with his Asian peers, he was aware of how they were able to navigate assimilation and the model minority status/stereotype in ways he could not as a black male. MC completed his undergraduate education at a southern, private, PWI in which the demographics racially mirrored those of Beavercreek, OH. Never has he done scholarly work focused on Asians, but as a scholar interested in identity and race, he understands that nuances exist in how individuals negotiate their group identities.

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