

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because We Need to Grapple with How We Talk about Asian Americans

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Just over two months ago, a white male entered three Asian-owned spas in the Atlanta area, and in the ensuing carnage, took the lives of eight individuals, including six Asian women. While America grieved the unnecessary loss of so many lives, many Americans were faced with confronting an uncomfortable truth that Asian Americans knew far too well—that this event was not surprising.

It was not surprising because anti-Asian sentiment is not new. The violence against our Asian-American brothers and sisters has not started as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, but instead, is rooted deep within American understanding of Chinese immigrants [tracing back over 150 years](#). When we talk about how Asians are “robotic” in their workplace rigor, we strip them of their humanity and reduce their complex emotional experiences, dreams, aspirations, and historical interactions into a single moment in time, a psychological concept we call “dehumanization.” Dehumanization can lead to a wide variety of outcomes—from discrimination in policies, to exclusion in social activities, to genocide and ethnic cleansing. When we claim they only reside in certain areas, or only hang out with their own group, we ignore the cultural and historical policy actions that played, assisted, and promoted that self-segregation in the first place.

We segregate and construct borders around interacting with our fellow citizens every moment. This could be from [using racial slurs](#), which can lead to targets of such slurs [fearing for their lives and being scared to freely move around society](#). But it also could be something as simple as considering who gets to be considered an “American”—or part of our group. But group membership isn’t something that is given—it’s a fuzzy category. Are you an American? A world citizen? A brother? A daughter? All of these labels depend on a negotiation—between what you feel about yourself and the context—maybe you’re a student in a classroom, but an employee at your job. But they also depend on if you think others see you as that group. Are you welcomed? Do you feel that others can accept you for who you are? Unfortunately, the more Chinese immigrants believed their fellow citizen would view them as “Chinese,” [the more discrimination they report experiencing](#). Experiencing discrimination removed that person from the group, leading to this self-fulfilling cycle of “Americans” discriminating against immigrants for not being a part of “the group,” and in doing so, both discouraging immigrants from feeling more “American” while continuing to [support an unwelcoming culture](#) at the start.

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The shooter claimed that his violent spree was a result of being addicted to sex. It is not lost on anyone why the target was an Asian-owned spa. The sexualized stereotypes surrounding both “massage parlors” and Asian women more generally are both unfounded and [reduce these women to one-dimensional objects](#), whose existence is solely for the sexual pleasure of others. This “sexual objectification” of women leads to the acceptance of violence against women, a

reduction in how close we feel to the other gender, and has even more dire consequences for women, who show higher levels of mental health risks and increases in self-harm. Sexual objectification continues to perpetuate the systemic inequalities against women, who face increased barriers and hurdles to overcome in society as a result of their gender. But if we can recognize this system of sexualization, we can [resist and organize against it](#) to lead to a more equitable future.

In the wake of this massacre, Congress again began discussing the topic of gun control and hate crime legislation. Those debates too can be understood using social science. We find that conservative-leaning individuals are not too keen on adding additional penalties to crimes that are classified as “hate crimes,” [since they approach the question from the perspective](#) that “murder is murder” and should therefore be punished the same for everyone. So, if we want to debate questions about how long someone should be charged for committing certain crimes, it’s important to think about who we’re talking to when trying to make that case.

How else can we work to change the situation if policy remains stagnant? There are plenty of times when individuals may see or observe a racist behavior but are not sure of how to go about addressing it. This can lead to an unintended consequence—while we all disagree, our complicit silence leads individuals to think that their racist behavior is not only tolerated, but accepted. [One suggestion](#) has been for those who are comfortable to just start calling it out when we see it—condemning racist behavior at the start, in order to ensure others know that this behavior is not supported.

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Why social science? Because it doesn’t give us a simple answer—because these are not simple problems. Discrimination, racism, identity—these are heavy topics, and their roots in our culture go much deeper than a single attack. To truly put an end to extremism, we have to be willing to make the extreme change of [changing the system entirely](#). We need to rethink how we create our groups. We need to rethink how we talk about policies and be willing to change our language based on who we’re talking to. We need to upend the acceptability of sexual objectification and racial discrimination. When a single one of us suffers from the system, we all suffer. We need to recreate a system from the ground up, and social science can lead us there.



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