

Responding to Microaggressions: Social Cost of Bystander Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

This two-part study examined the effects of intervener's race (White vs. Asian) and intervention format (high-threat—emphasizing the act of racism, low-threat—emphasizing the norm of justice, support-based—emphasizing a nonjudgmental attitude) on perceptions of microaggression interventions for White observers and Asian American targets. In separate 2 x 3 experimental designs, Asian Americans participants ($N = 187$) and White American participants ($N = 185$) were recruited through Qualtrics panels and randomly assigned to one of six conditions (three formats of intervention and two intervener groups). Participants read a vignette, imagined themselves as targets of the microaggression (Asian sample) or witnesses of the interaction (White sample), and completed a set of questionnaires assessing positive and negative perceptions of the intervener and aggressor. Asian American targets and White witnesses had more negative perceptions of interveners in the high threat condition. Covariates were relevant in interpreting reactions to intervention.

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Keywords

Asian American, White witnesses, bystander intervention, microaggression, support-based intervention

Significance of the Scholarship to the Public

Given the rapid rise of anti-Asian sentiment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study helps to inform the social costs associated with different strategies for intervening or disrupting the perpetration of microaggressions that specifically target Asian Americans. A support-based, educational approach was viewed most positively, relative to more confrontational strategies.

Racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 271). Microaggressions are associated with heightened emotional distress (Sue et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2011) and elevated somatic symptoms (Ong et al., 2013). Anticipatory stress is common among individuals with marginalized racial identities who have experienced frequent microaggressions (Hicken et al., 2013, 2014), and prolonged stress from racial microaggressions leads to racial battle fatigue (the emotional, psychological, and physical exhaustion individuals with marginalized racial identities may experience as a result of the cumulative effects of microaggressions over time; Smith et al., 2006). For clients with marginalized racial identities, microaggressions in mental health settings may negatively impact their therapeutic relationship with White therapists, their therapy experience, and treatment outcomes (Constantine, 2007; Nadal et al., 2014). Similarly, racial microaggressions in supervision, classrooms, or other training settings may damage the supervisory relationship and take a toll on students or trainees with marginalized racial identities (Constantine & Sue, 2007).

Confronting microaggressions can be psychologically costly for minoritized individuals because they may need to cope with immediate intense emotions, and simultaneously evaluate the social acceptance and interpersonal costs of confrontation (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2011). Bystander intervention often alleviates the burden of confrontation from targets with marginalized racial identities, protecting them from the negative consequences of confrontation or the decision not to

confront (Zou & Dickter, 2013). Sue et al. (2019) proposed the concept of “microinterventions” which are concrete strategies to address microaggressions immediately. The goals of microinterventions include making the invisible visible, reducing the impact of the microaggression, educating the aggressor, or seeking external reinforcement or support. Bystanders can react on the spot, providing more immediate support for targets than delayed interactions (Scully & Rowe, 2009). As third parties, bystanders may be better positioned to confront the aggressor than targets, as the aggressor may perceive confrontation from the target as defensive and dismiss the message conveyed in the confrontation. In addition, confrontation from bystanders is effective in reducing future stereotypic remarks in aggressors compared to nonconfrontation (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Given counseling psychologists’ roles as educators, therapists, and advocates, bystander intervention has become an increasingly important skill to master as it reduces the impact of microaggression on clients, students, trainees, and community members (Miles et al., 2021; Sue et al., 2019).

Confronting an aggressor may come with a social cost for the intervener as they are likely to be perceived negatively by White aggressors and witnesses (Dickter et al., 2012; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). The risk of social costs may be particularly salient among Asians and Asian Americans given cultural values for maintaining relational harmony (Lim, 2009; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010) and social face saving (Kam & Bond, 2008; Oetzel et al., 2001). In this study, we focused on the interpersonal and relational outcomes (i.e., positive and negative perceptions of interveners and aggressors) associated with different forms of bystander intervention, from the perspectives of both Asian targets and White observers. We prioritized the perspectives of Asian participants who took the position of target because our research aim is to inform bystander intervention strategies that will mitigate harm to targets and enhance their sense of support. Alternatively, for White participants, our research aim is to inform strategies that will facilitate multicultural competence and build skills for allyship, thus asking White participants to take the perspective of the observer allows them to react to the different forms of intervention without having to put themselves in the role of the aggressor.

Further, we hypothesize that reactions to bystander intervention are informed by characteristics of the intervention itself (e.g., tone or form of confrontation), characteristics of the intervener (e.g., whether or not the intervener is a member of the target group), and individual differences in personality or history (e.g., history of discrimination or multicultural attitudes). We explore each of these factors below.

Impact of Format of Intervention on Perceptions of Interveners and Aggressors

Two formats of bystander interventions have been described in the literature—low-threat (i.e., emphasizing the norm of justice) and high-threat (i.e., emphasizing the act of racism) interventions (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Czopp et al., 2006; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Specifically, a low-threat intervention might ask an aggressor to consider whether a stereotyped assumption they have made is an accurate or fair interpretation of a situation, while a high threat intervention would explicitly “call out” the behavior as racist and inappropriate. Compared with low-threat interventions that appeals to the norm of fairness and equality, high-threat interventions that accuses the aggressor of racism elicit more anger, irritation, and discomfort and are perceived less favorably by the aggressor (Czopp et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, both low-threat (i.e., emphasizing the norm of justice) and high-threat (i.e., emphasizing the act of racism) interventions may elicit apathetic or actively resistant reactions known as “White defensiveness” (Jackson, 1999). The literature on overcoming White defensiveness suggests that validating White peoples’ efforts and competency (Knowles et al., 2014) and approaching the microaggression nonjudgmentally (Buckley & Foldy, 2010; Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Watt, 2007) increases White peoples’ willingness to learn and engage in racial conversations. Based on the literature on White defensiveness, we hypothesized that a support-based intervention may help to decrease White participants’ distress about the racially charged interaction and improve positive perceptions of the intervention. A support-based intervention acknowledges that the microaggression is likely unintentional, assumes that the microaggressor is motivated to improve interracial relations, and provides nurturing guidance for changing behavior. No study to date has examined social outcomes of a support-based intervention, and in particular, White witnesses’ social perception of the intervener and the aggressor.

White defensiveness is conceptually linked to the construct of racial colorblindness. White people with high colorblindness avoid acknowledging racial privilege by denying the existence of different experiences based on race (N. Tran & Paterson, 2015). When White identity is salient, White Americans are likely to rely even more on colorblind maneuvers as defensive strategies to avoid White fragility (i.e., inability to cope with the distress associated with the confrontation of racism), preserve positive self-image, and maintain White privilege (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017). Moreover, when targets with marginalized racial identities confront covert racist remarks, White witnesses with higher colorblindness are likely to perceive the target more negatively and the bystander intervention less appropriate (Zou & Dickter, 2013). Similarly, we hypothesized that compared to those with

low colorblindness, White witnesses with high colorblindness may perceive interveners more negatively and give more leniency to White aggressors.

Impact of Race of Bystander on Perceptions of Interveners and Aggressors

Target group members who act as interveners are likely to receive similar negative consequences as the target, being perceived as complainers and less convincing and influential for aggressor's future behaviors than nontarget group members (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker et al., 2013; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). On the other hand, White interveners receive fewer negative consequences and may be viewed as more effective in intervening (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). White witnesses perceive White confronters as more credible and persuasive because they have nothing to gain by confronting a racist comment (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). In fact, target group confronters may elicit a degree of backlash from witnesses, such that witnesses may perceive confronters to be ruder and aggressors less biased when confronters are target group members. The backlash is likely intensified when racist comments take a more subtle and indirect form, like microaggressions (Zou & Dickter, 2013). These prior studies examined differences in witnesses' reactions to Black and White interveners who confront anti-Black racist comments or microaggressions. No published studies assessed perceptions of Asian American interveners, but we hypothesize that they might also put themselves at risk for being perceived as complaining, rude, and not credible.

Asian American Targets' Cultural Context and Discrimination History

Most research on bystander intervention has been conducted with White and Black American participants (Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker et al., 2013; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Little research has been conducted with Asians and Asian Americans, who face unique microaggressive themes. For example, Asian Americans are frequently perceived as foreigners or foreign-born (alien in own land; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). Common microaggressions include questions or comments like "where are you from?" or "you speak good English," equating "White" to "American" and sending the message that Asian Americans cannot be Americans or fluent in English. When the microaggression is more racially loaded (i.e., "you speak good English for an Asian"), Asian American targets tend to perceive the White aggressors more negatively, feel less accepted by the aggressor, view themselves as less similar to the aggressor, and favor the interaction less (A. Tran & Lee, 2014).

Past experiences of discrimination are likely to increase targets' emotional distress with inter-racial interactions (Smith et al., 2006). Although insults may be silently tolerated in Asian culture to preserve relational harmony (Aslani et al., 2013), the cumulative effect of microaggressions may take a toll on Asian American targets and make them more frustrated and less willing to tolerate the microaggressive comment again. Therefore, Asian targets with more past microaggression experiences may feel more positively about interveners who directly confront the aggressor.

Similarly, individuals with marginalized racial identities who have higher levels of racial identity and racial centrality tend to be more sensitive to race-related cues in ambiguous social situations (Operario & Fiske, 2001) and perceive more racial discrimination (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Sellers et al., 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Ethnic identity has been identified as both a mediator and a moderator in the association between microaggression experiences and psychosocial health. Forrest-Bank & Cuellar (2018), with a diverse sample of minoritized college students, observed a positive effect of microaggressions on psychosocial health when ethnic identity was included in the model, indicating that ethnic identity *reversed* the direction of the relationship between microaggression experiences and psychosocial health. Similarly, Choi et al. (2017) found that ethnic identity buffered the negative effects of discrimination experiences on depressive symptoms in a sample of Asian American college students. Ethnic identity has not been examined as a factor in the interpretation of bystander interventions (Czopp et al., 2006; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker et al., 2013; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013). However, its relevance in shaping perceptions of and reactions to microaggressions more generally suggests that ethnic identity is likely to inform targets' experiences of bystander intervention. Stronger ethnic identity may link to Asian targets' ability to recognize discrimination, intensifying their frustration and leading them to prefer a more confrontational bystander intervention, as well as to more negative perceptions of the aggressor.

Summary and Research Questions

Although some studies have examined the effectiveness of high-threat and low-threat intervention formats by the bystander, both formats are "threats" to the aggressor, which may evoke White defensiveness that hinders the aggressor's ability to acknowledge the microaggression and motivation to engage in future interracial interactions. The current study examined the effects of intervener race (White vs. Asian) and intervention format (high-threat, low-threat, support-based) on the perceptions of microaggression interventions for White witnesses and Asian American targets in order to provide empirically supported guidance for bystanders. Specific research questions (RQ) and hypotheses include:

- 1) How do intervener's race (White vs. Asian) and intervention format (high-threat, low-threat, supportive) influence:
 - (a) Asian American targets' perception of the intervener?
 - (b) Asian American targets' perception of the aggressor?
 - (c) Are the effects in 1a and 1b informed by Asian participants' self-reported history of microaggressions and levels of ethnic identity?

Conflicting hypotheses emerged for 1a and 1b. Asian Americans asked to take the perspective of the target might feel more validated by a high threat intervention, but might find a support-based intervention to be less interpersonally stressful. It is unclear whether intervention by an Asian or White bystander would be perceived more positively. For research question 1c, we hypothesized that stronger ethnic identity and more microaggression experiences would link to more positive perceptions of intervention.

- 2) How do intervener's race (White vs. Asian) and intervention format (high-threat, low-threat, supportive) influence:
 - (a) White observers' perception of the intervener?
 - (b) White observers' perception of the aggressor?
 - (c) Are the effects in 2a and 2b informed by White observer's self-reported levels of colorblindness?

Based on the literature, we hypothesized that support-based interventions made by White bystanders would be perceived more positively, but we expected that high levels of racial colorblindness would link to more negative perceptions of bystander intervention generally.

Method

Participants

A sample of 187 participants who self-identified as Asian Americans and a sample of 185 participants who self-identified as White American were recruited and compensated through Qualtrics panels. An a priori power analysis conducted through G*Power indicated a required sample size ranging from 146 to 178 with $\alpha = .05$, medium effect size ($f = .25$), and power = .85 for the various effects of a 2 x 3 Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) with either one or two covariates (microaggression history and ethnic identity for Asian American participants, or colorblindness for White participants). The average age of Asian American participants was 37.27 years old ($SD = 14.22$). Regarding gender, 78 (41.7%) Asian American participants self-identified as men, 106 (56.7%) as women, one as neither woman or man (0.5%), one as "gender fluid" (0.5%), and one as "all" (0.5%). The average age of White

participants was 43.17 years old ($SD = 16.15$). Ninety-one (49.2%) White participants self-identified as men, 92 (49.7%) as women, one (0.5%) as neither man nor woman and one (0.5%) as both. Of Asian and Asian American participants, 82 (43.9%) reported their ethnic origin was East Asia, 60 (32.1%) reported Southeast Asia, 38 (20.3%) reported South Asia, and 7 (3.7%) reported other areas in Asia. Of White participants, 114 (61.6%) reported European ancestry and 71 (38.4%) reported other White heritage. Eighty-eight percent of White participants and 89% of Asian American participants identified as heterosexual. Participants in both samples represented a broad range of religious backgrounds, although a larger portion of White participants affiliated with a Christian denomination. White participants (97.3%) were more likely to be U.S. born than Asian American participants (59.4%).

Measures

Perception of the Intervener. This measure was adopted from the questionnaire evaluating witnesses' perceptions of a bystander intervener in a vignette by Zou and Dickter (2013). The scale consists of seven negative descriptors (e.g., rude, complaining, hypersensitive) and eight positive descriptors (e.g., likable, honest, respectable), rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Zou and Dickter found that participants rated bystander interveners more negatively and less positively if the racial microaggression they confronted was ambiguous rather than obvious, and colorblind racial attitudes predicted more negative evaluations of the intervener. The target in the vignettes used by Zou and Dickter were Black; the positive and negative perception scales have not been used in published studies with Asian American targets. The two subscales showed high internal consistency previously ($\alpha = .94-.95$; Zou & Dickter, 2013), and good to excellent internal consistency in the current sample (negative $\alpha = .88$ and positive $\alpha = .94$ for Asian participants; negative $\alpha = .92$ and positive $\alpha = .93$ for White participants). Items were summed to create total scores for positive and negative perceptions.

Perception of the Aggressor. This scale consists of the positive descriptors from the original Zou & Dickter (2013) questionnaire and modified negative descriptors. The descriptors used by Zou and Dickter were only used to assess perceptions of the intervener. We modified the negative descriptors to capture participants' race-related perceptions of the aggressor's behavior specifically. The original scales of positive and negative descriptors yielded strong indicators of internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$ and $.95$ respectively). The modified negative perception subscale includes four original items from Zou and Dickter (abrasive, rude, irritating, argumentative) and three new items developed for this study (biased, prejudiced, racist). The negative and positive

subscales showed strong internal consistency in the current sample ($\alpha = .90$ and $.94$ for Asian participants; $\alpha = .93$ and $.94$ for White participants). Items were summed to create total scores for positive and negative perceptions.

Microaggression History. Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (R28REMS) is a shortened version of the original 45-item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (Forrest-Bank et al., 2015; Nadal, 2011). The shorter 28-item version of the scale replicated the factor structure of the longer measure, which has consistently been linked to poorer psychosocial outcomes in Asian and Asian American samples (e.g., Thai et al., 2017). Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranged from 0 (*I did not experience this event*) to 5 (*I experienced this event five or more times*), based on individual's experience in the past six months. Sample items include "I was ignored at school or at work because of my race" or "Someone assumed that I spoke a language other than English." The total score is calculated by summing the items. R28REMS demonstrated good internal consistency for the total scale among Asian young adults in a multi-racial norm sample ($\alpha = .87$), and demonstrated good internal consistency for the total scale in the current Asian and Asian American sample ($\alpha = .91$).

Ethnic Identity. The 6-item Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R) is a shortened version of the original Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure developed by Phinney (1991; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Phinney and Ong demonstrated a comparable factor structure to the original 12-item and Brown et al. (2014) demonstrated measurement invariance across ethnic groups, including an Asian American sample. A sample item includes "I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better," rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The total score is calculated by summing all items (range from 6 to 30). In a study that examined the psychometrics of MEIM-R across specific ethnic groups within Asian Americans, the total scale demonstrated consistent acceptable to good internal consistency ($\alpha = .79-.86$; Brown et al., 2014). The total scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the current Asian and Asian American sample ($\alpha = .88$).

Colorblindness. Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) is a 20-item self-report measure assessing degree of color-blindness (Neville et al., 2000). Respondents rate each item on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*; e.g., "Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich"). Ten reverse scored items are phrased in ways that acknowledge inequity and discrimination (e.g., "Race is very important in determining who is successful and who is not"). Neville et al. observed that higher levels of color-blind racial attitudes were

related to greater levels of racial prejudice and a belief that society is just and fair. Internal consistency ranged from good to excellent across three norm samples ($\alpha = .84 - .91$; Neville et al., 2000). The total scale showed excellent internal consistency in the current White American sample ($\alpha = .92$).

Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the Utah State University Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited and compensated through a Qualtrics participant panel (Qualtrics, 2022). Qualtrics collaborates with many participant panels, increasing access to a broad pool of potential participants. Eligibility criteria (i.e., over 18 years of age, able to complete the survey in English, and self-identifying as either Asian American or White American, respectively) were provided to the Qualtrics panel representative and data collection took place on the Qualtrics secure system. Qualtrics panel participants have pre-existing contracts with their panel providers. Participants were notified of an opportunity to participate in a survey via a standardized email that explained the topic, time commitment, and compensation. Compensation comes directly from Qualtrics and is typically in the form of gift cards, airline miles, or cash. Researchers never interact directly with participants in any way and data was delivered in anonymous form. Clicking a link in the email invitation took participants to the informed consent document embedded in the Qualtrics survey. The survey took approximately 15 to 20 min to complete. Data was collected between December 2018 and February 2019. After participants completed the screening items (e.g., age, gender, racial identity), participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions (three formats of intervention and two intervener groups) by the Qualtrics survey system. Participants were asked to read a step-by-step interactive vignette and imagine themselves in the situation depicted by the vignette. Participants were asked to actively respond at multiple points in the vignette, in order to encourage engagement in the process. Participant responses would not change the course of the vignette, but served to maintain engagement and attention.

Two vignettes were developed about the same interaction for the two samples. The vignettes were developed with the support of a panel of five microaggression research experts and were initially evaluated in two pilot studies with 20 Asian American and 20 White participants, respectively, to assess whether the vignettes were representative of daily experiences, believability of the interventions, and appropriateness for assessing microaggressions and bystander intervention. Pilot participants generally found the vignettes to be believable, and provided few suggestions for change. Some indicated that it was difficult to keep the characters in the vignette clear as participants moved through the scenarios, so we simplified the presentation of

the vignette scenario and helped readers follow and remember the names of the characters while they were rating the interaction. For both samples, the scene was the beginning of a book club meeting. During premeeting small talk, a White book club attendee commits the following microaggression:

Florence turns and asks, "Where are you from?" You answer, "I just moved here from a small town in Vermont." "Right," Florence said, emphasizing her wording, "But where are you REALLY from?"

For Asian American participants, the reader took the perspective of the target and for the White participants, the reader took the perspective of a White witness who observed the interaction (thus, the dialogue was written in third person, rather than second person).

In both vignettes, a third character engages in the bystander intervention immediately following the microaggression. The intervener's race was stated in the vignette and indicated by the intervener's last name. The White intervener was named Lisa Smith, and the Asian intervener was named Lisa Zhou. The intervention statement varied across three intervention conditions: (a) the high-threat intervention condition, "Wow, what you just said is kinda racist, making the assumption that someone is not American just because they are not White"; (b) the low-threat intervention condition, "Wow, what you just said is unfair. Asians are just as likely to be American as White people"; (c) the support-based intervention condition, "That is sweet of you wanting to learn more about X. I think you meant to ask about X's cultural heritage rather than suggest that X is not from America."

After the scenarios, participants completed ratings of the White aggressor (Florence) and the bystander (Lisa). Finally, participants completed measures for covariates (ethnic identity and microaggression history for Asian American targets; racial colorblindness for White witnesses), along with demographic items.

Results

Because Qualtrics panels guarantee complete responses, there were no missing data for any items for either White or Asian American participants. All variables were normally distributed, with the exception of the R28REMS, which was positively skewed. Log₁₀ transformation dramatically reduced the skewness, but the pattern of results when analyses were conducted with the original variable and the transformed variable was identical. Thus, results presented here used the original R28REMS variable. Means and standard deviations for all variables in the Asian American and White samples are presented for each condition (Intervention Format x Race of Intervener) in [Table 1](#). Bivariate correlations for Asian American and White participants

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables in the Asian American Sample

Conditions	Asian American Targets' Perception of Intervener			Asian American Targets' Perception of Aggressor			Asian American Targets' Covariates			White Witnesses' Perception of Intervener			White Witnesses' Perception of Aggressor			White Witnesses' Covariate		
	M (SD)			M (SD)			M (SD)			M (SD)			M (SD)			M (SD)		
	Pos	Neg		Pos	Neg		R28REMS	HEIMR		Pos	Neg		Pos	Neg		Pos	Neg	CoBRAS
High threat	Asian intervener (n = 32; 31)			29.10 (1.81)			65.78 (23.57)			35.58 (8.73)			29.10 (1.34)			63.48 (20.16)		
	White intervener (n = 30; 32)			25.90 (9.57)			68.63 (23.12)			39.44 (10.55)			31.31 (11.73)			62.25 (20.14)		
Low threat	Asian intervener (n = 31; 31)			30.00 (9.41)			56.77 (16.58)			39.26 (9.62)			28.71 (11.44)			61.97 (20.43)		
	White intervener (n = 31; 31)			28.13 (7.63)			65.29 (21.32)			34.06 (11.92)			23.61 (10.36)			65.77 (24.15)		
Support	Asian intervener (n = 31; 30)			33.87 (4.67)			63.94 (28.64)			38.90 (11.37)			30.90 (9.35)			63.00 (22.45)		
	White intervener (n = 32; 30)			32.75 (12.69)			60.03 (19.68)			42.07 (9.89)			30.63 (11.97)			64.57 (16.29)		

Note. R28REMS = Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale; HEIMR = Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised; Pos = Positive perception, total score ranges from 8 to 56; Neg = negative perception, total score ranges from 7 to 49; n = sample size for Asian American sample, followed by sample size for White American sample.

were conducted to examine the associations among dependent variables (i.e., perceptions of intervention, perception of aggressor) and covariates (Table 2). In the White American sample, racial colorblindness was associated with more negative perceptions of the intervener and more positive perceptions of the aggressor. For Asian and Asian American participants, more microaggression experiences and stronger ethnic identity were associated with more positive perceptions of the intervener.

Asian American Targets (RQ1)

A series of 3 (Intervention Format) \times 2 (Intervener's Race) ANCOVAs were conducted to examine the main effects and interaction of the intervener's race (White vs. Asian) and the intervention formats (high-threat, low-threat, supportive) on Asian American targets' perceptions of the intervener and aggressor after controlling for covariates (i.e., ethnic identity and past microaggression experiences).

Asian Targets' Perceptions of the Intervener (RQ 1a). Table 3 presents the results of ANCOVAs assessing perceptions of the intervener. There was a significant main effect of intervention format on both positive and negative perceptions of intervener for Asian American targets. Tukey's post hoc tests showed that Asian American participants held significantly less positive perceptions of intervener in the high threat condition versus the low threat ($p = .03$, $d = 0.28$)

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations among Dependent Variables and Covariates in the Asian American and White Samples

	Variables	Perception of intervener		Perception of aggressor		R28REMS	MEIMR
		Pos	Neg	Pos	Neg		
Perception of intervener	Pos	—	-.26**	.22**	.33**	.17*	.18*
	Neg	-.35**	—	.28**	.20**	-.02	-.04
Perception of aggressor	Pos	.24**	.30**	—	-.30**	.02	.08
	Neg	.31**	.07	-.41**	—	.12	.09
	R28REMS	—	—	—	—	—	.10
	MEIMR	—	—	—	—	—	—
	CoBRAS	-.28**	.20**	.25*	-.37**	—	—

Note. Asian American participants were above, White participants were below; Pos = Positive affect; Neg = negative affect; R28REMS = Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale; MEIMR = Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised; CoBRAS = Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. ANCOVAs Examining Perception of Intervener and Aggressor in the Asian American and White Samples

Recipients	Variables	Effect	Asian American Targets				White Witnesses			
			F	df	p	Partial η^2	F	df	p	Partial η^2
Intervener	Positive perception	Race of intervener	1.06	1,179	.31	.01	0.30	1,178	.58	.00
		Intervention	3.43	2,179	.04	.04	2.50	2,178	.09	.03
		Race x Intervention	0.64	2,179	.53	.00	3.46	2,178	.03	.04
		MEIMR	6.13	1,179	.01	.03	—	—	—	—
		R2BREMS	5.57	1,179	.02	.03	—	—	—	—
	Negative perception	CoBRAS	—	—	—	—	15.90	1,178	<.01	.08
		Race of intervener	0.17	1,179	.68	.00	0.02	1,178	.88	.00
		Intervention	3.63	2,179	.03	.04	6.31	2,178	.002	.07
		Race x Intervention	1.34	2,179	.27	.02	1.21	2,178	.30	.01
		MEIMR	0.18	1,179	.67	.00	—	—	—	—
Aggressor	Positive perception	R2BREMS	0.09	1,179	.77	.00	—	—	—	—
		CoBRAS	—	—	—	—	8.02	1,178	.01	.04
		Race of intervener	0.23	1,179	.63	.00	0.13	1,178	.72	.00
		Intervention	2.82	2,179	.06	.03	2.09	2,178	.13	.02
		Race x Intervention	0.22	2,179	.81	.00	1.23	2,178	.30	.01
	Negative perception	MEIMR	0.98	1,179	.32	.01	—	—	—	—
		R2BREMS	0.10	1,179	.76	.00	—	—	—	—
		CoBRAS	—	—	—	—	13.17	1,178	<.01	.07
		Race of intervener	0.41	1,179	.53	.00	1.25	1,178	.27	.01
		Intervention	7.21	2,179	.001	.08	3.14	2,178	.04	.03
	Race x Intervention	0.26	2,179	.77	.00	0.64	2,178	.53	.00	
	MEIMR	1.75	1,179	.19	.01	—	—	—	—	
	R2BREMS	2.31	1,179	.13	.01	—	—	—	—	
	CoBRAS	—	—	—	—	29.97	1,178	<.01	.14	

Note. R2BREMS = Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale; MEIMS = Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised; CoBRAS = Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale.

and support conditions ($p = .02$, $d = 0.34$). Negative perceptions of intervener were lower in the support condition versus the high threat ($p = .02$, $d = 0.41$) and low threat conditions ($p = .02$, $d = 0.44$).

Asian Targets' Perceptions of the Aggressor (RQ 1b). Table 3 summarizes ANCOVA results related to participants' perceptions of the aggressor in the two samples. The main effect of intervention format on negative perception of aggressor was significant. Tukey's post hoc tests showed that Asian American targets perceived the aggressor less negatively in the support condition relative to the high threat ($p = .004$, $d = 0.53$) and low threat conditions ($p < .001$, $d = 0.64$). Both demonstrated moderate effect sizes.

Influence of Covariates (RQ 1c). Ethnic identity and microaggression experiences demonstrated the expected positive associations with perceptions of the intervener. No significant association was observed between the perception of the aggressor and ethnic identity or microaggression experience.

White Witnesses (RQ 2)

Similarly, a series of 3 (Intervention Format) \times 2 (Intervener's Race) ANCOVAs were conducted to examine the main effects and interaction of the intervener's race (White vs. Asian) and the intervention formats (high-threat, low-threat, supportive) on White Witnesses' perceptions of the intervener and aggressor after controlling for colorblindness.

White Witnesses' Perceptions of the Intervener (RQ 2a). The main effect of intervention format was significant for White witnesses' negative perceptions of the intervener (Table 3). Tukey's post hoc tests showed that White participants held significantly more negative perceptions of intervener in the high threat condition relative to the support condition ($p = .001$, $d = 0.61$), with a moderate effect size. In addition, the interaction between race of intervener and intervention format was significant for positive perceptions of the intervener. As shown in Figure 1, the Asian intervener in the high-threat condition and the White intervener in the low-threat condition were rated the least positively of all conditions.

White Witnesses' Perceptions of the Aggressor (RQ 2b). Table 3 demonstrates that White witnesses' negative perceptions of aggressor were lower in the support condition than the low threat condition with a moderate effect size ($p = .013$, $d = 0.43$). No significant difference was observed with White witnesses' positive perception of aggressor across conditions.

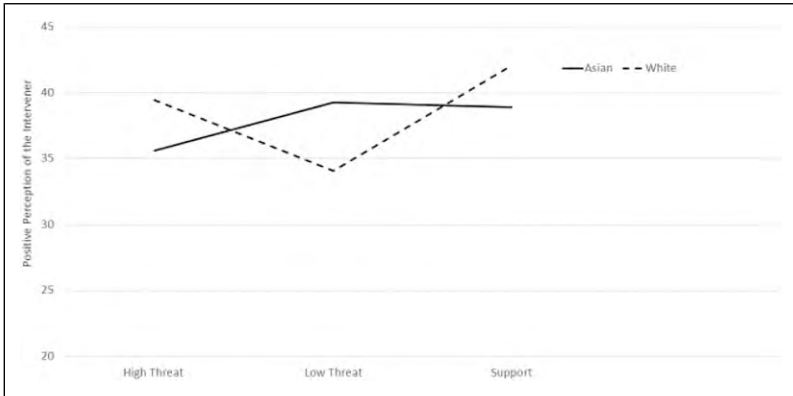


Figure 1. The Interactions Between Race of Intervener and Intervention Format on White Witnesses' Perceptions of the Intervener.

Influence of Covariate (RQ 2c). Largest effect sizes were observed for CoBRAS, such that those who were higher in racial colorblindness viewed the interveners the least positively. Additionally, colorblindness was associated with more positive perception and less negative perception of the aggressor among White witnesses.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the interpersonal outcomes of different bystander interventions for microaggressions perpetrated by White aggressors toward Asian American targets, with the goal of providing empirically supported guidance for bystanders and bystander educators. The effects of intervener race (White vs. Asian) and intervention format (i.e., high-threat, low-threat, support-based) were investigated for Asian American targets and White witnesses. Overall, the support-based format seems to be the most socially accepted and appreciated bystander intervention strategy to intervene in a microaggression targeted at Asian Americans. Both the high-threat and low-threat formats are likely to damage interveners' social image, nuanced by the intervener's race and who the rater is. Strong endorsement of ethnic identity and higher reports of past microaggression experience seems to predict favorable perceptions of interveners among Asian targets. Colorblind racial attitudes were the sole predictor of White witnesses' more positive perception of the White aggressor.

Asian Targets' and White Witnesses' Perception of Intervener (RQ 1a & 2a)

There was similarity between Asian targets and White witnesses' perceptions of the intervener based on the intervention format. Compared to the support condition, both Asian targets and White witnesses had more negative perceptions of the intervener in the high threat condition, which is consistent with prior research (Czopp et al., 2006) and our hypothesis that as the interventions became more threatening, Asian targets and White witnesses would perceive them more negatively. Asians and Asian Americans may resonate more with less overtly conflictual approaches (Ma, 2007), in alignment with the collectivistic value of maintaining relational harmony (Lim, 2009; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010) and the Asian value of social face saving (Kam & Bond, 2008; Oetzel et al., 2001). Both high-threat and low-threat interventions, particularly the former, presented a conflict-intense situation that may threaten relational harmony and mutual-face (i.e., both parties' social image) for Asian American targets and the aggressor. Interveners who utilize high-threat format, regardless of their racial identity, may risk damages to their social image in the eyes of the Asian targets and White witnesses.

On the other hand, the support-based intervention is the least direct and confrontational, which best preserves harmony and mutual-face among the three intervention formats. This explanation is further supported by the result that Asian American targets had much higher positive perception of the intervener who utilized the support-based format than high-threat format. The support-based bystander intervention seems most socially appreciated by the Asian targets. Of course, an interpretation based on the literature on Asian cultural values is speculative because we did not actually assess endorsement of Asian cultural values in our sample. Noticeably, contrary to prior research that showed a socially favorable outcome of the low-threat format (Czopp et al., 2006), interveners who utilized the low-threat format were also viewed by Asian targets more negatively than those who used the support format. It may be that the low-threat format neither validated the target's racial reality by calling out the racism nor aligned with the Asian values because of its confrontational nature. For Asian interveners who want to support in-group targets, low-threat bystander intervention appears to be just as socially costly as high-threat intervention.

As we hypothesized, White witnesses experienced the least negative perceptions of the intervener in the support condition, relative to the high-threat condition. However, the significant interaction effect for positive perceptions suggests that the perceptions of White witnesses are conditioned by the race of the intervener. White interveners using the low threat format were actually perceived the least positively by White observers. The low-threat condition may convey an indirect and ambiguous message about race,

which could be interpreted by White witnesses as neither taking a strong stance on the issue of racism nor being empathetic and understanding of the White aggressor. Prior research demonstrated that White interveners are perceived as more persuasive and less rude (Gulker et al., 2013; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010; Zou & Dickter, 2013) and their message is perceived as more serious and just (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Compared to Asian American interveners, White interveners may receive more leniency from White witnesses when directly confronting aggressors (i.e., using a high threat approach).

Covariates also related to Asian American targets' and White witnesses' perceptions of the intervener (RQ 1c & 2c). Consistent with prior research that those with higher ethnic identity experience more racial sensitivity and greater awareness of racial discrimination (Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers et al., 2003), higher ethnic identity predicted more positive perceptions of intervener among Asian American targets, suggesting that targets with higher ethnic identity may be more appreciative of the intervention and the intervener than those with lower ethnic identity. Similarly, more past microaggression experience was related to more positive perception of interveners among Asian American targets. Among White witnesses, higher racial colorblindness predicted more negative perceptions of the intervener, which is consistent with previous studies (Zou & Dicker, 2013), and highlights the relevance of general attitudes about race relations for intervention.

Asian Targets' and White Witnesses' Perception of Aggressor (RQ 1b & 2b)

White witnesses' positive and negative perceptions of the aggressors were solely predicted by their degree of racial colorblindness (RQ 2c), consistent with the literature that high colorblindness is closely associated with low racial sensitivity and high defensiveness (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017; Mueller, 2017; N. Tran & Paterson, 2015). White Americans tend to utilize colorblindness as a strategy to deny the existence of White privilege and to experience themselves as unprejudiced when race is salient (Norton et al., 2006; N. Tran & Paterson, 2015). White witnesses with high colorblindness may be more likely to minimize the microaggression, feel defensive to the intervention, and empathize with the aggressor than those with low colorblindness.

Additionally, there was a similar pattern of intervention format predicting negative perceptions of the aggressor for Asian American targets and White witnesses, such that the negative perception of aggressor was lower in the support condition than the threat conditions. We had hypothesized that the support condition would decrease the tension in the interaction and thus, decrease the negative perception of aggressor for both targets and witnesses. In particular, the finding for Asian American targets demonstrated that the

support condition is most likely to preserve the social image of the aggressor, perhaps supporting speculation that the support condition is most congruent with Asian values of harmony and mutual face-saving (Kam & Bond, 2008; Lim, 2009; Ma, 2007; Oetzel et al., 2001; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010).

Limitations

One limitation of the set of studies was the possible age difference between the Asian American and White participants. The average age of White participants was 43.17 ($SD = 16.15$) and that of Asian American participants was 37.27 ($SD = 14.22$), which suggested that there might be a modest generational gap between the two samples. Another limitation was that all the characters in the vignettes were women. All women characters might have elicited stereotypes of both Asian and White American women among participants, which might have influenced the results of the studies. For Asian and Asian American women, “speaking up” is frequently negatively perceived socially (Li, 2014). Bystander intervention is an assertive action that contradicts the warm, gentle, and submissive stereotypes of Asian and Asian American women, and might evoke backlash from participants (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). On the other hand, the quiet targets in the vignettes might fit and even perpetuate such stereotypes.

A third limitation is the use of pan-Asian category in the research. Asian Americans are a culturally and ethnically diverse group with considerable in-group variability in acculturation levels, immigration status, and socioeconomic status (Kibria, 1998). The pan-Asian recruitment in the current study precluded the examination of intercultural differences. There are also intercultural differences among Asian cultures in terms of collectivism-individualism and conflict style preference (Croucher et al., 2012; Lim, 2009; Nguyen & Yang, 2012; Oyserman et al., 2002). Given the potential relevance of Asian cultural values, particularly the value of relational harmony, on participants’ preference for intervention strategies (Lee et al., 2012; Ma, 2007; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010), future research is needed to include Asian cultural values as a covariate and examine the association of Asian participants’ endorsement of Asian values with their perception of bystander interventions.

A fourth limitation is that the current study relied on vignettes to elicit responses from participants. One primary concern of utilizing the vignette technique in research is that the responses from the participants are influenced by how well they track and interpret the vignette (Finch 1987; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). The current vignettes were relevantly short and simple, but having three characters involved in the vignette might have added complexity to the situation. Additionally, we did not control for or collect data about which character (e.g., White aggressor vs. White bystander) White

participants might have identified with more reading the vignette, which led to ambiguity in the interpretation of the results.

Implications for Practice, Advocacy, Education, Training, and Research

Anti-Asian sentiment has rapidly risen across the United States since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, which has resulted in a surge in racialized violence, discrimination, and microaggressions against the Asian and Asian American community (Asian Pacific Policy, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Ruiz et al., 2020). Bystander interventions are proactive strategies to disarm and challenge microaggressions, provide support for targets, and reduce future microaggressions from aggressors (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Sue et al., 2019; Zou & Dickter, 2013). Bystander intervention trainings provide White allies and bystanders with tools to take antiracist actions and intervene in microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019). Although our data was collected prior to the pandemic and did not address specific COVID-19 related microaggressions, the findings from the current research extended prior literature and have several important implications for bystander intervention trainings and practice against anti-Asian microaggressions.

First, the support-based bystander intervention is likely to decrease tension in the interaction and has more social benefits for all the parties involved in the situation (i.e., targets, aggressor, and intervener) than low- or high-threat interventions. Interveners who utilize a support-based format are likely to be perceived less negatively and more positively socially than those who use the other two formats. The support-based format is also more likely to preserve the social image of aggressors, possibly reducing White defensiveness. The support-based format may be an important addition to bystander intervention trainings against anti-Asian microaggressions, especially for situations where the targets have a collectivistic cultural background that values relational harmony (Kam & Bond, 2008; Lim, 2009; Ma, 2007; Oetzel et al., 2001; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010). Additionally, the support-based format might be particularly useful when practitioners and educators need to intervene in anti-Asian microaggressions within group settings with clients, trainees, or students (e.g., group therapy, group supervision, classroom) who are Asian or White while trying to preserve therapeutic, supervisory, or teacher–student relationships with the Asian targets and White witnesses.

Second, interveners who utilize the low-threat or high-threat formats are at risk of damaging their social image. Asian targets seem to show least favor of interveners who use high-threat intervention, but strong disfavor of those who use either the high or low-threat intervention. The low-threat format neither

validates the target's racial reality nor aligns with the Asian values of relational harmony and face saving. Contrarily, White witnesses are least likely to favor those using low-threat intervention when the intervener is White, and are most likely to disfavor interveners who use high-threat intervention regardless of intervener's race, consistent with prior research (Czopp et al., 2006). It might be important to inform trainees of the potential social costs with these two formats when providing bystander intervention trainings for Asian American and White interveners. Similarly, caution must be taken for educators and practitioners to use the high- and low-threats formats in training and clinical settings as it might hurt their relationships with Asian targets and White witnesses.

Third, racial colorblindness is profoundly linked to White Americans' perceptions of bystander interventions. Compared to those with low racial colorblindness, White witnesses with high colorblindness are more likely to empathize with aggressors. Consistent with prior literature (Mueller, 2017; Tettegah, 2016), the finding further highlights the importance of addressing racial colorblindness in not only bystander intervention trainings, but also multicultural education curriculum for White students or trainees.

Fourth, given the rapid rise of anti-Asian sentiment due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Asian Pacific Policy, 2020), our study contributed to a much-needed research area on bystander interventions that specifically address anti-Asian racism. As Asian cultures have a unique set of values (e.g., relational harmony, face saving), prior research that focused on bystander interventions against anti-Black microaggression might not be directly translatable to situations that involve Asian and Asian American targets. On the other hand, Asian American targets may not prioritize relational harmony in the face of a direct insult of overt racism (Aslani et al., 2013) and thus, they may experience the support-based bystander intervention as less validating against overt racism relative to microaggressions. More research should examine the social costs of high-threat, low-threat, and support-based bystander interventions on blatant anti-Asian racism.


Lastly, the study results might be somewhat generalizable to other collectivist cultures that have a similar emphasis on relationship. For instance, Latinx cultural values include *respeto* (respect), *simpatia* (sympathy), and *personalismo* (personalism; Gabrielidis et al., 1997), which are conceptually similar to Asians' value of relational harmony. Both Asian and Latinx Americans are more likely to utilize avoiding and third-party conflict styles than African Americans (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). It is possible that Latinx interveners may face similar social costs when they use high- and low-threat bystander interventions for microaggression, compared to support-based interventions.

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