

Correspondence

Countering social stigma and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic through solidarity

ABSTRACT

A recent article highlighted the difference between the attitude and mental health of domestic and overseas Chinese college students. It suggests that this difference is due to the social stigma and discrimination inflicted on overseas Chinese students. In this correspondence, the author proposes solidarity, analogous to the Chinese notion of *ren* 仁, as a means of countering social stigma and discrimination.

Keywords COVID-19, discrimination, *ren*, social stigma, solidarity

Researches have suggested that fear of the COVID-19 has fueled social discrimination and hate crimes toward the Chinese people and those of Asian descent.¹ Many who suffer from social stigma and discrimination are reported to have experienced mental distress, which has affected their actions and behaviors.² In fact, a recent article shows that domestic Chinese college students exhibit positive attitudes and less anxiety toward the COVID-19 compared with Chinese college students studying overseas.³ This notable difference is due mainly to the social injustice and inhumane actions inflicted toward overseas Chinese students by the country's natives. Because of this, the pressing need to counter social stigma and discrimination should be addressed by the community in order to safeguard the mental well-being of the people and to promote positive attitude and behavior during the pandemic.

This unprecedented event in human history that gave rise to social injustices toward the Chinese people has also affected healthcare workers and COVID-19 patients. There have been media reports describing how they have been assaulted, discriminated and isolated from their communities.⁴ In addressing this social concern, the author proposes solidarity as a means of countering the effects of social discrimination and stigma. This health crisis calls into action the social responsibilities of every person to commit to the different measures initiated by the community. Instead of acting divisively,

everyone should heed to work together, to help one another and to share a common purpose.

To put into a proper cultural context the idea of solidarity, the author finds a parallel in Chinese tradition. Confucius was highly influential to the Chinese way of living. His concept of *ren* 仁 is understood as an encompassing precept among the virtues.⁵ According to Filipino sinologist Alfredo Co., this moral virtue can be better understood if one knows the etymology of *ren* 仁.⁶ *Ren* 仁 comes from two Chinese characters that have the literal meaning 'man and a second'.⁶ This Chinese word implies 'consciousness-of-human-others'.⁶ *Ren* 仁, then, becomes the moral awakening of an individual to have the responsibility toward other people, so that they will cultivate themselves and their relationships.

Similarly, Pope Francis clearly emphasizes the important role of solidarity as a response to this uncertain time—that to be in solidarity means to respect the humanity of every person.⁷ Practicing solidarity is a shared responsibility of all to destroy the wall that blocks the spirit of communion. The first act of solidarity is to recognize the rights of every human, promoting their well-being and determinately committing oneself to the common good.⁸ This sensitivity toward human rights and respect for human dignity does not only promote the well-being of the person but can also initiate an active involvement in response to the health crisis.⁹ Once the

state establishes a safe and just community, it will eventually motivate people to participate in the efforts of the state to end the pandemic.

Acknowledgement

No funding was received for this paper.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

References

- 1 Timberg C, Chui A. *As the coronavirus spreads, so does online racism targeting Asians, new research shows*. 9 April 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/08/coronavirus-spreads-so-does-online-racism-targeting-asians-new-research-shows/> (10 February 2021, date last accessed).
- 2 Mental Health Foundation. *Coronavirus: The Divergence of Mental Health Experiences during the Pandemic*. 22 October 2020. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/divergence-mental-health-experiences-during-pandemic> (10 February 2021, date last accessed).
- 3 Haojun Y, Zhuohui C, Yishu F *et al*. Knowledge, attitudes and anxiety toward COVID-19 among domestic and overseas Chinese college students. *J Public Health* 2021;fdaa268. doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdaa268.
- 4 Sotgiu G, Dobler C. Social stigma in the time of coronavirus. *Eur Respir J* 2020;2002461. doi: 10.1183/13993003.02461-2020.
- 5 Fung Y. *Ren 仁* as a heavy concept in The Analects. *J Chin Philos* 2014;41(1–2):91–113.
- 6 Co A. *The Blooming of a Hundred Flowers: Philosophy of Ancient China*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2009.
- 7 Francis. *General Audience on Healing the World*. 2 September 2020. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200902_udienza-generale.html (10 February 2021, date last accessed).
- 8 Paul J II. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Vatican City, 1987. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (10 February 2021, date last accessed).
- 9 Human Rights Watch. *Human Rights Dimension of Covid-19 Response*. 19 March 2020. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response#_Toc35446578 (9 February 2021, date last accessed).

Ariel C. Balingue

Center for Christian Formation and Praxis Angeles University
Foundation Angeles City, 2009

Address correspondence to Ariel C. Balingue,

E-mail: balingue.ariel@auf.edu.ph.

doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab052