

## Special Article

## Socio-Cultural Discrimination and the Role of Media in the Case of the Coronavirus: Anthropological and Psychological Notes through a Case Study

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Recently, the outbreak of the coronavirus has raised worldwide concern for the global health. The media shows the high number of cases and at the same time, the spread of information is huge that almost everyone is aware of the existence of this type of virus.

**Aim:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the social discrimination of Chinese associated with the coronavirus outbreak.

**Methods:** The method, which was followed, was a case study with one participant who lives and works in the city of Wuhan where the virus was initially appeared.

**Results:** The results of this case study highlight the social, medical, psychological and political needs that have to be met.

**Conclusions:** The data collected in this study could apply to other contexts or settings, so it could be characterized as transferable. This epidemic was soon transformed to the worst pandemic of the last century and affected the globe creating social distancing and exclusion.

**Key words:** coronavirus, social exclusion, social discrimination, public health.

### Introduction

Every year in the beginning of the winter, flu outbreaks, develop and becomes epidemic. The number of deaths caused by the flu are highlighted on the news, but it is rarely mentioned why those people died or how many survived the viral infection. Influenza is mutated every year, and vaccines are constantly modified to provide protection to citizens (Hollingsworth, 2020). Several studies have focused on coronavirus contagion and its possible effects to the human species (Ji, 2020) however, there is lack of research on this virus and its dangerous effects since the coronavirus epidemic is very recent. The virus can infect several mammals, such as primates, pigs, bats, rabbits and goats, as confirmed by recent research. Therefore, it appears that the virus was transmitted by bat bait to the mammals and from there to humans.

Moreover, recent studies have shown that human-to-human contagion of the virus is possible through droplets by coughing or sneezing (Ji, 2020). The new coronavirus, 2019n-CoV, found early this year in the Chinese city of Wuhan, causes respiratory infection with various severity. Symptoms usually occur 5 to 14 days after exposure to the virus with escalating: headache, colic, cough, fever, shortness of breath. It is transmitted through the air by an infected person (coughing or sneezing) or contaminated surfaces (which are easily touched and then people put their hands in mouth or nose, inserting the virus into their body). However, the American Center for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) clarifies that there is no evidence to support the coronavirus contagion scenario through imported products or parcels due to the

limited survival time of coronaviruses on surfaces (a few hours) (Gamero et al, 2020).

At the same time, while it is a dangerous virus that has affected the lives of millions of people, there is a significant lack of research into the sociocultural effects of this situation and the social exclusion of the Chinese because the outbreak of the virus occurred in China (Xiang et al, 2020). The mechanism of the cultural construction of the different other is common in most cases and in this particular epidemic the Chinese have been stigmatized by the mechanism mentioned by Argyriadis (2017) regarding medicalization and pathologizing. In similar epidemics, there is evidence that one of the most serious consequences is the social exclusion of patients due to the fear of infectivity (Xiang et al, 2020). This state of affairs brings about psychological problems such as increased anxiety and depression, and among others. Due to the incomplete research for this scientific point of view, it is imperative to further investigate this state of social discrimination in periods of epidemics. Even though this is a real and crucial epidemic (Sanche et al, 2020), this study focuses mainly on the feelings of people who have great concern of their health (Xiang et al, 2020).

## Methodology

### Aim

The purpose of this study was the research of social exclusion that the Chinese people experience due to the coronavirus epidemic and the fear that people from other countries express to them. In particular, through this case study we attempt to analyze the socio-cultural impacts of the coronavirus epidemic and how the current situation is influenced by the institutions and the media.

### Method

The qualitative approach of case study was used for this research as it was considered more appropriate for this specific issue of discussion. As Noor (2008) points out, using this methodological approach, researchers are able to focus on one case and highlight the experience of one case, from a multi-faceted aspect. Considering the above the researchers decided to use this approach as their intention was mainly anthropological. The term 'case study' is used to refer to either the individual case or to a small number of subjects or phenomena or aspects of a

topic / problem. It is generally classified as qualitative research methods, as it does not seek to engage multiple subjects, collect data from large or representative samples, and does not seek generalization of its results. The approach has much in common with ethnographic studies. As they are time consuming, the main value lies in the abundance of data that has been collected and can only be collected as a result of long and painful observation and recording by subsequent analysis. While it usually does not start with a hypothesis, after analyzing the data one or two hypotheses may arise that will require further investigation with other research techniques (Robson, 2010).

### Data collection

The data collection tool that was used in the current study was interview, which was sufficient for the study of this case as confirmed by (Robson, 2010) who states that interview can be used as the sole or dominant tool in a case study. In the case of this study, semi-structured interview was used, with predefined questions that could provide flexibility to the interviewers.

### Sample

The sample of this study was a resident of Wuhan, China, where the coronavirus is believed to have erupted. This particular participant was selected following the researchers' previous acquaintance with him and because he expressed the desire to talk about his personal experience at this critical time for his city. The participant is a 42-year-old man who works as an employee at a sausage company and he at the same time runs an online store. He is married and has 2 children who attend the elementary school. The participant is healthy and financially well-off while living a normal life as he says, like the average of his compatriots. He has a normal social life which matches his educational level at the postgraduate level in marketing. The latest outbreak of the coronavirus has forced all residents of the city to be quarantined for security reasons. The government of China has also set some extra restrictions in order to reduce the risk of a pandemic and safeguard that the fatality rates will remain low.

### Research procedure

The research process followed the instructions of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religions in 2008 on how to make an interview more

effective. So, for the introduction of the interview, the researchers, as recommended, explained the purpose of the interview, assured conservation of personal data and requested that the conversation was going to be recorded. Afterwards, a warm-up was held, where questions were asked to make the interviewee feel comfortable. Then, the main part of the questions was followed. Throughout the process, calmness was maintained, with the aim of eliminating any tension created during the interview, and in the end, the researchers thanked the interviewee for all the information he gave and the time he spent. The duration of the interview was one hour and was carried out through the Skype application due to the distance and the quarantine that had been imposed. During the process, the researchers kept notes and at the same time recorded the interview after obtaining consent from the participant. Throughout the interview, the principles of ethics were preserved; the researchers had the written consent of the participant and informed him that he could interrupt at any time. He was also informed that his anonymity and protection of personal data would also be secured.

### Validity and reliability

In order to safeguard the validity and reliability of the research we checked out if our method was the appropriate for the issues we aimed to study. We also discussed our approach with several academics exchanging opinions. At the same time, it is possible to have the same results if the same individual was interviewed again. In addition, questions have been formulated that correspond to what they were created for and which were based on data from international literature. In order to carry out a valid and reliable study, the researchers took into consideration the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Credibility as an element of validity of qualitative research denotes the extent to which the research approach and findings remain in sync with generally accepted natural laws and phenomenon, standards, and observations.

The data collected for this study followed this criterion. This case also had the ability to generalize, on the extent to which the results of the research could apply to other contexts or settings, so it could be characterized as transferable. The researchers kept in mind the

dependability factor considering that the changes that occur during the course of research, will not affect the research outputs. Finally, the researchers adopted means such as documenting the procedures for rechecking data and unearth negative instances that contradict previous observations, in order to ensure conformability.

### Results

The answers that the research subject gave are placed at the following narration:

*It's true that we are scared. Everyone in the place where I live! What we experience this period of time is really very serious no matter what they say on the media. They sometimes spread on the Internet fake news, too. However, we everyday see that people affected by this particular virus, often end up in the hospital or they are in serious condition and their families are so worried. Too many people I know have been quarantined because they have the virus. This is too frightening and I hope that doctors will soon find therapy for this epidemic.*

*When I first heard that it was a serious epidemic that was going to hit the area and that we all had to isolate I thought it was an exaggeration of the moment. The data I have through watching what is happening to my friends and neighbours make me believe that we experience a very unique condition. The fact that we have been isolated and we live in a ghost city where no one walks on the streets, frightens me. There are only officials who distribute food and medication. They are dressed in such attire that they really look like astronauts. The problem is that we don't go out, we don't work, we don't socialize or travel and our lives have changed completely. It's like being in a state of war.*

*I believe that it takes a great deal of mental strength to be able to get out of this situation physically and mentally, but the worst problem we have lately had was from the rest of the world. Every person who was born in China embraces racism by the rest of the world because he is potentially infectious*

*Chatting with other friends who are currently in Europe they transfer to me messages of racism and social exclusion. They complain that they often visit shops and the other customers either move away from them or leave these shops or stare at them as they were weird.*

*Due to this condition, sales from the e-shops we operate have sharply fallen. And we feel we are in a financial embargo that deprives us of our power and at the same time affects our self-esteem. Our customers receive misinformation, for example people think that it is likely to get the coronavirus just by touching a parcel that will arrive by mail.*

*We want to believe that what we are experiencing at the moment will be temporary and we will be able to return to our daily routine soon to be productive again to regain our financial and psychosocial needs, to find money again so that we can cope with our daily lives, as we did in the past. I feel that when I am at home I have nothing to do, I see myself as a prisoner and watching the news makes me feel depressed. I pray for people and I hope that doctors will soon find medication to treat this catastrophe.*

## Discussion

The data discussion followed the content analysis process with the systematic evaluation of the interview. Specifically, the researchers followed a 5 step process for their most objective approach.

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Coding in order to describe the content
3. Themes review
4. Definition and naming of themes  
(although in this case study there is only one thematic unit)
5. Report production

The results of this case focus on three main themes, the financial, the psychological and politics.

This year, the coronavirus has been one of the most discussed issue on the media and in peoples' everyday discussions, although this virus is known for years. The problem is that it has been mutated for the 7th time and is actually quite dangerous. This situation has terrified the whole planet while scientists are working feverishly on developing medication and strategies to stop the virus epidemic and "rescue the human species". At the same time, however, it is obvious that Chinese people have been pathologized and as a result they have been excluded from the rest of the world, a situation that reflects the West social discrimination. The authorities of Wuhan in China where the new coronavirus first appeared, decided to suspend the operation of public transport, closing the airport and railway stations for travelers who intended to depart from the city. And here comes in mind theories about the interference of institutions to the symbolic expressions of health and illness (Douglas, 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1986). The social control is exacerbated by the media which announce great shortage of masks and antiseptic distribution among friends and relatives. The worst version of information from the media is when they refer to the fact that coronavirus is more dangerous compared to SARS. The numbers and statistics announced by the media are quite scary for the citizens as well as information about fast transformation of courts into hospitals of 1000 beds capacity. The cultural construction of diversity has begun with the existence of human life on the planet and the discrimination of Chinese people for being dangerous to the others is just an expression of a fear (Walker, 2020). No one can dispute the great need for strict measures to protect peoples' health but as the interviewee states, he has empirical information that every Chinese is suspect for contaminating the virus. By social stratification into so-called higher and lower, stronger and weaker, richer and poorer and a series of other dipoles, stereotypical constructions of the different other are reproduced (Argyriadis, 2017). Illness has always been a feature of social discrimination with the fear of infectivity. Thus, when a person or condition is pathologized, is automatically placed in the spectrum of otherness. So, in the case of coronavirus, the rumor that has been spread is that anyone who gets this virus will surely die and in this way the human species will be wiped out. This situation has resulted in an

international mass panic. But what about the 95% of patients who manage to survive coronavirus? How long will societies keep the Chinese in quarantine? It is true that people have stopped purchasing products from online Chinese shops, they have stopped visiting even conventional Chinese stores mainly in the west and when people meet a Chinese man/woman on the street, the airport or a shopping mall, they walk away. The coronavirus strikes the global economy creating a trade "war" between China and the rest of the world. The problem is deeply political. In our time, many people are convinced that any kind of value can be measured and then translated into economic terms. Simplification and "economics" are the most effective weapons of populism which, while often dismissing the contributions of experts, present the prophecies of some economists and other scientists in their field as "scientifically guaranteed"(Argyriadi & Argyriadis, 2019; Argyriadis, 2017).

And while the world certainly has the ability to read, analyze, and judge the details that anthropologists deny in the thick of generalizations, the rhetoric of numbers offers the eternally enticing vision of prepared truth. People forget, therefore, that economic value is not the only criterion of quality, of "excellence," as fans of this approach like to say (Xiang et al., 2020). Many anthropologists have written about the dangers of the so-called "accounting culture" that is increasingly imposed on our daily lives in the name of "objective" assessment (Gamero et al., 2020).

And here again comes the issue of the numbers-based approach to everyday life. Man gets a valuation, his life falls in percentages and mathematical probabilities while profit or loss from such a situation is the first topic of discussion (Argyriadi & Argyriadis, 2019; Argyriadis, 2017).

**Conclusions:** The global big picture of the coronavirus epidemic in the winter of 2020 is a stereotypical reaction that is repeated every year for each new strain of a flu virus. In the epidemics that have always existed and will continue to exist, people who belong to vulnerable populations (and not the general population) are at risk. The hegemony of the medical model is strengthened and Western rationalization is expanded to address issues such as health, illness and nutrition.

Overall, although scientists say there is no reason to panic, it has been observed by the media that the Chinese people have been excluded, albeit temporarily, from the wider world and have been characterized as the different Others. Every Chinese is suspicious of carrying the deadly disease so their social exclusion is legitimized.

The question that arises and deserves further study is while we are used to racism in minorities, we are seeing this time such a large population being excluded from the rest of the global community. How can this be explained? And for how long will a whole country going to accept social discrimination for a health issues that happened in a specific time-place context? Moreover, what are the psychological effects of this virus to the Chinese people who live under fear and fully depressed by the loss they experience?

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