

THE AMERICAN CULTURE OF FACE MASKS

Jonathan Nguyen
New York University

ABSTRACT

Because of a global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus COVID-19, people across the United States of America are sequestering themselves in their homes in compliance with their state's quarantine mandate. Many have found innovative ways to cope with the consequences COVID-19 and related public health guidelines have had on their lives. Amidst this crisis, hundreds of thousands of Americans are protesting in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, the highest numbers yet to take to the streets for the issue of ongoing police brutality (particularly the murder of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer, Derek Chauvin). Social distancing guidelines are quite difficult to follow at these densely populated protests. Thus, in this time of uncertainty and risk, one piece of material culture has become especially relevant and contentious: the face mask. My ethnography on Los Angeles County residents and their experiences with face masks during both quarantine and the Black Lives Matter protests helps illuminate some of the social context surrounding this controversial garment in American society. I conclude that people's relationships to face masks reveal a culture of individualism, paternalism, and fearmongering at the heart of American society.

KEYWORDS

Ethnography, collectivism, guilt society.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent state-level quarantine have restricted our agency to do everyday tasks such as buying

groceries, picking up medication, or for anthropologists like myself, conducting ethnography. The novel coronavirus has created a new way of living, something the majority of the population has never experienced. Although the government perhaps should have been more prepared, the rest of us are having to learn as we go. The pandemic and the later protests have forced us to create and perform rituals to survive and accomplish our daily necessities. Face masks have become the facilitator of all activities done outside the home. Although many types of face coverings have been proven to reduce the release of infectious particles into the air from COVID-19 positive people (both symptomatic and asymptomatic), this article of material culture has become associated with different social values around the world. In East Asian countries such as China, where COVID-19 is believed to have originated (Bashir et al 2020), wearing a face mask is a selfless act for the community and the family, an act of collectivism and care for others (Wee 1999). Although very uncommon in America before the pandemic (unlike in East Asia where pollution and fear of infection led many to add such garments into their daily routines), face masks have become a newly integral part of our lives. My paper seeks to address the following question: What is the American culture of face masks?

Because traditional anthropological methods are not possible at this time I employed a dual approach, combining both in-person and virtual ethnography (the latter conducted through FaceTime) for my fieldwork. I conducted my in-person ethnography at an Albertsons Supermarket in the San Gabriel Valley and my virtual ethnography at a CVS Pharmacy in South Central LA by following a peer's experience in the store. I also conducted an in-person ethnography at a protest in Downtown LA. From my participant observation at these sites, I have concluded that in the US, the reasoning behind wearing a face mask seems to be more individualistic and paternalistic:

individuals solely seek to protect themselves (and not others) from the virus. I hypothesize that this perspective is due to fear and misunderstandings about the coronavirus and its rate of infection. While it is necessary to wear a face mask, I question whether most people understand that face masks do not guarantee immunity. Face masks can reduce the spread of infection, but they are not enough without additional social distancing, hand washing, and staying home when ill.

MASKED FEARS

An Albertsons Supermarket, a typical corporate American grocery store, is down the street from my house in the San Gabriel Valley (a community which has not partaken in protests the way people have in neighboring Long Beach). The supermarket operates under strict social distancing rules and requires face masks be worn inside in accordance with California state mandates—regulations which are enforced by the police. The LA County Department of Public Health recommends using a bandanna, neck gaiter, scarf, or any tightly woven fabric such as cotton t-shirts or towels (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health). From my observations, LA residents have mainly bought and worn surgical face masks or N95 respirators, popularly known as N95 face masks. However, one informant reported seeing a crocheted face mask, a full hazmat suit, a motorcycle helmet, and frightening gas masks at our local Albertsons.

COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through respiratory droplets; so, if face masks are best used for covering one's nose and mouth, does a person need to wear such outrageous and fear-inducing masks? The answer, frankly, is no. Perhaps a person's rationale in wearing a large M04 Tactical Full Face Mask is to purposefully invoke fear so that others stay away from them and they therefore have no risk of infection—a very individualistic way of acting. My informant reports having “some fear” when going to the supermarket, “but not so much because we live in a primarily Asian neighborhood.” She says “when [she] sees people with those crazy masks [she's] shocked for a moment and has increased fear,” not so much for infection but rather for her safety. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, and coupled with President Trump's renaming

of COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,” there have been reports of over a hundred anti-Asian hate incidents in LA County alone (Ormseth 2020), adding to many people's (including my informants') anxieties.

My second informant, Laura, carried me with her on FaceTime during her visit to a CVS Pharmacy in South Central LA in late May. Through her phone's camera, I observed how empty the pharmacy was as most people were trying to stay in their homes. Before she left her car, Laura put on her face mask, made of an anti-dust cloth, a breathing valve, and filter. While walking inside, Laura sneezed twice. When I asked her if she was afraid to sneeze, she answered that she had “some fear when sneezing” and she only did so “because there is no one on the street right now.” She added that because she is afraid of the social consequences of sneezing in public during the COVID-19 pandemic she usually holds in any sneeze or cough even though she understands that the purpose of the face mask is to stop any particles that might be released. She worries people will think she is infected, or that people will look at and treat her differently. She worries for her safety. Laura, a Black woman, is keenly aware of the increased racial tensions in her community after the tragic murder of George Floyd and is concerned about the high infection and death rate amongst African Americans. The Internet is littered with reports that describe how “COVID-19 [is] killing African Americans at shocking rates” (Hlavinka 2020) without expanding on the racism rampant in health care or the health disparities caused by socioeconomic marginalization which disproportionately affect people of color.

As Laura waited in line to pay for her items, a man walked into the pharmacy without wearing a face mask. The security guard immediately stopped him and ordered him to put on a face mask. The man tried to interject but was interrupted by the guard who now held out his hand and yelled back the same order. After the security guard's paternalistic gesture, the man swiftly left. A table a few feet away with boxes of face masks remained untouched. We cannot know why the man entered the pharmacy or if he was contagious, but by enforcing the mask rule (without offering the

man a mask), the security guard may have stopped him from accessing medication while also saving those in the store from a possible coronavirus infection. Social distancing and the face mask are supposed to mitigate fears over (and confusions about) viral transmission, yet the fear remains (with face masks—or the lack thereof—as a visual trigger). This leads to Americans performing scare tactics to ward off infection and fight for safety, even if it means denying an essential service (like medication) to another person. American society is still rooted in individualism and paternalism.

PROTESTING: DIVIDED WE FALL

In response to such paternalism, many Americans took up mass collectivism at the Black Lives Matter protests across the country. For the first time, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has gained thousands of new supporters who are willing to put themselves at risk and protest racism and police brutality during a pandemic. Even though BLM protests have occurred across major US cities from Los Angeles to New York City, where people show up by the thousands every day, there is no significant correlation between the increase in positive COVID-19 cases and the nationwide protests (Dhaval et al 2020). From what I observed at a protest at LA City Hall, all protesters had on a face mask and whenever possible were social distancing, though perhaps not exactly six feet apart. Around the outskirts of the large gathering were tables set up by volunteers and fellow protesters, providing snacks like granola bars, water bottles, and hand sanitizer for free. Some tables had a limited supply of free surgical face masks to be distributed as well. My informant Laura protested numerous times throughout LA. Each time she protested, she saw two to three protesters who brought extra surgical face masks to hand out to other protesters who forgot or lost their own. Even at these protests where tensions and emotions are heightened, the genuine care for others is palpable and transparent within the community of protesters. The protesters demonstrate that by helping one another (through the simple exchange of a face mask) they can reach their goals while safely avoiding viral transmission—a truly collectivist way of acting.

Positive collectivism, though, cannot be seen in the subpopulation of face mask deniers—those who have protested against the face mask rule. The deniers seem to be motivated by individualism. Rather than protecting their communities by wearing a face mask, face mask deniers simply protest wearing one themselves when they go out in public. Their reasoning seems to be based on medical misinformation and

and negative media portrayals of face mask use. The media has focused their attention on President Trump and his once-daily White House coronavirus briefings to the American public, even though the President has repeatedly denied wearing a face mask due to his personal belief that wearing one will hinder his chances at reelection (Lemire and Weissert 2020). This is a very individualistic act for the leader of a nation. Four months into quarantine, President Trump was seen wearing a face mask for the first time. Not only does our national leader resist wearing a face mask, many local police officers also do not wear them. Laura and I observed that numerous police officers were not wearing masks at protests across Downtown LA; the Los Angeles Police Department reported a 21% positive infection rate amongst the 1,900 officers tested after (most of) the protests subsided (Rector 2020). In contrast to these high-powered and prominent dissenters, many state government and public health officials do follow mask orders. Therefore, it is not hard to guess why Americans would be confused as to what to do regarding the face mask. People most often take the advice of authority figures because it is assumed that their advice is informed and sound. But the constant spread of contradicting information about face masks has created great uncertainty and politicized the face mask. For many, the civil unrest and global health crisis have been incredibly unique and difficult to navigate. People's lives have been uprooted by a seemingly unending quarantine and near daily protests and they do not know what to do. Americans are left utterly confused and afraid, without government aid, and thus act accordingly—with or without a face mask.

GUILT SOCIETY

Along with mass confusion and hysteria, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a crisis of pure versus impure, and clean versus dirty. The coronavirus itself is deemed an impure condition, while the face mask comes to symbolize purity (even as it reminds us of impurity). Thus, COVID-19 follows the four kinds of social pollution Mary Douglas outlined in her famous take on the classic symbolic dichotomy: “first is danger pressing on external boundaries; the second is danger from transgressing the internal lines of the system; the third is danger in the margins of the lines; the fourth is danger from internal contradictions” (Douglas 1966). The American people have shown that they know how to avoid others with their outlandish face masks and fear-mongering distancing methods. The uncertainty caused by the infection's varying levels of severity—from asymptomatic to lethally symptomatic cases

—means people will do anything to avoid infection. Sometimes, tragically, this extends to violence, as seen in the rise of racist hate crimes across Los Angeles. As Douglas says about the phenomenology of primitive religions, these religions’ followers “were inspired by fear . . . they were inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene” (Douglas 1966). From my observations of LA residents, the same can be said about all of those subjected to a quarantine and face mask rule during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because it is difficult to fully comprehend medical research and the effects of medical racism (especially as these issues are not often part of mainstream national dialogue), there are widespread misunderstandings about COVID-19 which perpetuate fear-based responses. As the most prominent visual marker of the pandemic era, the face mask is a site for negotiating (perpetuating or assuaging) these fears.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict first described America as a guilt society (Benedict 1946). People’s reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and statewide quarantine—such as their aggressive face mask stances—have established America as a truly individualistic and paternalistic guilt society. Many Americans in the current crisis are acting only to protect themselves (as they may also do under normal circumstances), thus reinforcing a system of guilt-inspired action by punishing those who do not comply (in this case, those refusing to wear a mask in public settings). What I have observed of the American culture of face masks is ruthless; Americans weaponize their individualism in order to ward off potential infection or anything deemed impure. While the mask literally covers our faces it has, in a greater sense, exposed the underbelly of American culture. The pandemic and protests have reawakened the beasts of the United States of America: our fearsome desire to protect our individual bodies. Americans fail to realize that they and all of those around them are experiencing the same pandemic and all deserve to win a fight for equality. Solidarity with others and sacrificing some comforts for others’ benefit is not ingrained in American culture. Perhaps we could learn a thing or two from the collectivist mindset harbored by Asian cultures, which favors collective care for others over individualism. As Jean Paul Ricoeur pointed out, *avec la souillure nous entrons au règne de la Terreur*: “With defilement we enter the reign of Terror” (Douglas 1966).

WORKS CITED

Bashir, N., Kazmi, A., Khan, S., Shereen, M., Siddique, R. “COVID-19 Infection: Origin, Transmission and

Characteristics of Human Coronaviruses.” *Journal of Advanced Research* 24 (2020): 91-98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jare.2020.03.005>

Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Houghton Mifflin, 1946.

Dhaval, D., Friedson, A., Matsuzawa, K., Sabia, J., Safford, S. “Black Lives Matter Protests, Social Distancing, and COVID-19.” National Bureau of Economic Research (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3386/w27408>

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Taboo and Pollution*. Routledge, 1966.

Hlavinka, Elizabeth. “COVID-19 Killing African Americans at Shocking Rates.” *MedPageToday*. May 1, 2020. <https://www.medpagetoday.com/infectiousdisease/covid19/86266>

Lemire, J. and Weissert, W. “Face masks make a political statement in era of coronavirus” *The Associated Press*. May 7, 2020. <https://apnews.com/7dce310db6e85b31d735e81d0af6769c>

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. “Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Face Cloth Coverings.” Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. July 17, 2020. <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/protection/GuidancClotFaceCoverings.pdf>

Ormseth, Matthew. “Rise in hate incidents toward Asian Americans during coronavirus crisis officials say.” *Los Angeles Times*. May 14, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-13/hate-crimes-and-incidents-directed-at-asian-americans-rise-during-pandemic-county-commission-says>

Rector, Kevin. “LAPD coronavirus cases spike following protests, adding to debate over role of protests in spread.” *Los Angeles Times*. June 23, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-06-23/lapd-coronavirus-cases-spike-adding-to-debate-over-role-of-protests-in-spread>

Wee, C.J.W.-L. “Asian Values’, Singapore, and the Third Way: Re-Working Individualism and Collectivism.” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 14, no. 2 (1999): 332-58. www.jstor.org/stable/41057000.