Asian communities' well-being in Aotearoa during Covid-19: The mitigating role of sense of belonging in the relationship between racism and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Anti-Asian racism was a feature of the social response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact on the well-being of Asian communities warrants closer examination. The current study aimed to gauge whether the sense of belonging mitigated the adverse effects of racism on life satisfaction for self-identified Asian New Zealanders.

METHODS: This analysis included 1341 responses to a cross-sectional online survey conducted in 2021. Descriptive analyses outline how components of a sense of belonging were distributed among participants and those who experienced racism during the Covid-19 pandemic. We used linear regression to examine the role of a sense of belonging as a potential pathway variable in the association between experiencing racism and life satisfaction.

FINDINGS: In this survey, four out of 10 participants reported experiencing racism in the first 18 months of the pandemic. Participants' life satisfaction decreased slightly since January 2020 (p<0.001). Experiencing racism was associated with decreased life satisfaction. All the components of sense of belonging reduced the magnitude of this negative association between racism experience and life satisfaction, in particular, expressing one's own ethnic identity and belonging in Aotearoa.

CONCLUSIONS: Given that anti-Asian racism is currently a feature of life and a significant stressor during the pandemic, this study provides empirical evidence of the protective role of a sense of belonging against anti-Asian racism. This study focused on Asian members in Aotearoa New Zealand, but its practical implications have the potential to support other minoritised ethnic communities who also experience racism during the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords: Racism; Sense of belonging; Life satisfaction; Covid-19; Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand; Migrant health and well-being

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The spread of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand has been accompanied by an increase in discrimination, stigma, and racism toward individuals within the aggregated Asian ethnicity grouping (Nielsen, 2021). Chinese and other Asian groups have been blamed for Covid-19 in Aotearoa (Nguyen et al., 2021). The media reported incidents of Asian people being harassed after the spread of Covid-19 in Aotearoa (Te, 2020). The Human Rights Commission recorded historically large

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numbers of complaints in the early months of Covid-19 in 2020. Over 110 complaints and inquiries related to Covid-related discrimination, including experiences of racial harassment and verbal abuse in person and online, were reported to the Commission (Clent, 2020). Recent research on Asians' experiences of racism since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that four out of 10 Asian respondents experienced some form of racism at the individual level in Aotearoa New Zealand since the start of the Covid-19 outbreak (Jaung et al., 2022).

Foundations of anti-Asian racism in Aotearoa

Racism is a structured system of power in which ethnic groups are classified and ranked based on ideologies of superiority and inferiority within specific historical contexts (Garner, 2017). Racism encompasses inequitable treatment against a targeted group at individual, institutional, and societal levels across multiple social domains (Humpage, 2001). Racism in Aotearoa New Zealand is inextricably linked to the history of colonisation and ongoing coloniality, and racism against other racialised groups should be discussed within this context (Reid et al., 2019). Research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand before the Covid-19 pandemic reveals that the highest levels of racism are experienced by the aggregated Asian ethnic groups, along with Māori and Pacific peoples (Harris et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2018). Racism and white supremacy are perpetuated differently against different racialised people in Aotearoa, including various groups within the aggregated Asian ethnic grouping (Simon-Kumar et al., 2022). The construction of the Asian aggregate grouping and the way it homogenises the diverse groups contained within this category are an expression of how racial hierarchies operate in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Racism against Asian peoples in Aotearoa is informed by some ideas which are common to many western societies. The racist concept of *yellow peril* represents white people's belief that Asian immigration poses an existential threat to Western civilisation and its economic systems (Cho, 2021). This attitude is the basis of systemic and cultural anti-Asian racism, including anti-Asian legislation in Aotearoa. The poll tax, for instance, was exclusively applied to Chinese immigrants to Aotearoa New Zealand from 1881 until it was ultimately repealed in 1944, but several other regulations ensured that Aotearoa effectively maintained an anti-Chinese immigration policy throughout most of the 20th century (Ip, 2015).

Explicit preference for immigrants from the United Kingdom and other European countries was abolished in 1987 (Humpage, 2001). Since then, the population identifying with at least one Asian ethnicity group, including those born in Aotearoa New Zealand, increased more than 13 times, from 53,883 to 707,598 between 1986 and 2018 (Statistics New Zealand, 2018a). The aggregated Asian ethnic group is the third largest ethnic group (15.1%) in Aotearoa, after European (70.2 %) and Māori (16.5%), according to the 2018 census (Asia Media Centre, 2020). Nevertheless, the dominant cultural groups tend to regard them as outsiders or *perpetual foreigners* (Te, 2021), a societal position which has been associated with lower levels of social belonging and life satisfaction (Huynh et al., 2011).

Although less explicit than historical examples, institutional racism continues to harm Asian and other minoritised ethnic communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Immigration policies continue to seek a specific type of *social cohesion*—favouring migrants with English proficiency but not other national languages: te reo Māori and New Zealand sign language (Kukutai & Rata, 2017), and the currently dominant neoliberal ideology driving policy-making favours migrants from high-income countries that share the culture of "mainstream New Zealand society"

(Simon-Kumar, 2015). Migrants are often framed in negative and racialised terms by politicians who present migrants as a threat to "Kiwi traditional values" (Chen, 2017; Ng, 2017; Simon-Kumar, 2015) and as a burden on Aotearoa New Zealand's resources, as in the case of Labour Party politician Phil Twyford's "Chinese sounding names" campaign (Hunt, 2015).

Racial microaggressions, such as persistently enquiring about the country of origin, are frequently used to maintain the stereotype of perceiving Asians as forever foreigners (Sue et al., 2007). The frequently asked question, "Where are you from?", reveals a verbal form of racial microaggression that reflects the exclusivity of *being Asian* and *being a New Zealander*. Although *casual*, *everyday*, *indirect* racism makes up the bulk of personally mediated racism that people of minoritised ethnic backgrounds experience, violent and racist hate crimes are also a feature of life in Aotearoa New Zealand (Human Rights Commission, 2019), including the 2019 Christchurch Mosque Terror Attack.

The impact of Covid-19 related anti-Asian racism

The prevalence of racist incidents in the Covid-19 period is significant because exposure to racism is a well-established social determinant of health and well-being among minoritised ethnic groups, including Asian members (R. Harris et al., 2006, 2012; R. B. Harris et al., 2018; Paine & Stanley, 2020; Talamaivao et al., 2020). In a survey conducted by Jaung and colleagues (2022) in Aotearoa New Zealand, data from 1452 Asian respondents revealed that 24% of individuals had seen a decrease in life satisfaction since the start of the pandemic, going from satisfied to indifferent or unsatisfied. However, Asians who were not subjected to racism during the Covid-19 pandemic had more than double the likelihood of having a higher prevalence of life satisfaction than those subjected to racism (Jaung et al., 2022).

While Covid-19-related, anti-Asian racism is a pervasive social stressor for Asian people living in Aotearoa New Zealand and a barrier to achieving satisfaction in life, it can be moderated by other factors. Studies found that a sense of belonging is a protective factor that buffers against the adverse effects of racism on well-being (Choi et al., 2021; Cobb et al., 2019; Daley et al., 2018; Huang, 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Straiton et al., 2019). Examining the potential pathway role of a sense of belonging during the pandemic is particularly important because the surge of Covid-19-related anti-Asian racism may have posed an existential threat to Asian members in Aotearoa New Zealand and made maintaining a sense of belonging more challenging. Therefore, the analysis presented in this article sought to provide empirical evidence to gauge the extent to which a sense of belonging potentially moderated the association between Covid-19-related racism and life satisfaction in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the focus of this study was the experiences of Asian New Zealanders, we acknowledge that other ethnic groups, including Māori, Pacific peoples and those in the Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African ethnic grouping also experienced racism during the pandemic. Understanding commonalities and differences in our experiences are essential for ensuring that future pandemic responses are equitable and fit for purpose for all communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.
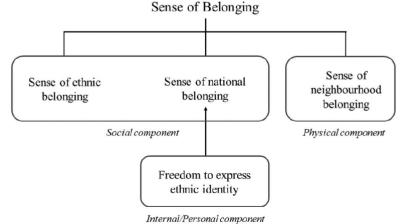
Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging refers to the extent to which individuals feel involved in or that they are an integral part of the community (Hagerty et al., 1992). A community can be understood as *system* encompassing both relationships and organisations, or *environment* including the natural or cultural (Hagerty et al., 1992). Experiencing a sense of belonging thus can occur in different groups and at different levels, such as family,

neighbourhood, region, a company or organisation, religion, an ethnic group, or a country as a whole. This study looks at three important arenas for ethnic minority groups' belonging in society: the local community (sense of neighbourhood belonging), the larger society (sense of national belonging and freedom to express ethnic identity), and one's ethnic group (sense of ethnic belonging). To conceptualize the components of the sense of belonging in this study, refer to Figure 1.

Local community or neighbourhood is a setting that can provide a sense of belonging or exclusion in relation to social interactions with other residents in the area where they settle (Young et al., 2004). According to a study on the sense of community in Aotearoa New Zealand neighbourhoods, the sense of neighbourhood belonging was lower among European New Zealanders and higher among Māori, Pacific, and Asian participants (Sengupta et al., 2013). A study on sense of neighbourhood belonging in Canada showed that discrimination experiences were a main impediment for recent immigrants developing a sense of neighbourhood belonging, along with employment status and English fluency (Salami et al., 2019). Nevertheless, compared to the non-migrant background residents, residents with immigration backgrounds

were likely to place more value in knowing their neighbours on a first-name basis as an indicator of a fulfilling sense of belonging in the neighbourhood (Kitchen et al., 2015).

A sense of belonging can occur through identification with broader society at a national level and within one's ethnic group (Zdrenka et al., 2015). Sense of national belonging refers to the feeling of being connected to society at large. By contrast, sense of ethnic belonging refers to the extent to which one relates to one's own ethnic group. Though social identity theory suggests that individuals tend to favourably differentiate their social groups from other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), a sense of ethnic belonging does not necessarily require negative association with a sense of national belonging (Brewer, 1999).

Research has shown that feeling supported in identifying with one's ethnic group contributes to a greater sense of national belonging for immigrants (Moradi et al., 2019). Social identity theory explains the factors that influence one's identity expression. People express their identities by considering the salience of identity in a given social context and judging its appropriateness to express their identities (Reicher et al., 1995). This means that, in some situations, people may conceal an identity associated with a stigmatised group or understate an identity they believe the audience will not accept (Mok, 2019; Tajfel, 1981). In this sense, not expressing one's ethnic identity may protect one from rejection by others, but it comes at the expense of not having their identity recognised, respected, and accepted by members of the larger society. Thus, the ease with which one can express one's ethnic identity may increase one's sense of acceptance by the larger society and national belonging.

Social identity theory posits that group membership is an integral part of positive self-concept and identifying with national or ethnic groups increases one's subjective well-being (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Other studies using

Figure 1: Sense of Belonging Components

data from a representative worldwide poll show that having a sense of national belonging positively predicts one's life satisfaction (Morrison et al., 2011). Similarly, a sense of ethnic belonging has been consistently linked to positive outcomes such as psychological and subjective well-being (Diaz & Bui, 2017). In an Aotearoa New Zealand context, maintaining both senses of national and ethnic belonging was linked to better well-being outcomes, including life satisfaction (Ward, 2009).

Sense of belonging and discrimination

Previous research on the relationship between discrimination and sense of belonging has been based on two primary models: the rejection–identification mode and the rejection–disidentification model. The former contends that racialised group members increase their identification within their ethnic group to protect their self-esteem and sense of well-being in the face of discrimination (Branscombe et al., 1999). Although perceived discrimination harms well-being, an increased sense of ethnic belonging plays a positive mediating role in this relationship according to this model. On the other hand, the latter suggests that perceived discrimination increases hostile attitudes towards the privileged larger-society members and hampers identification with the larger society (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). These two models contribute to an understanding of discrimination by framing discrimination as potentially strengthening ethnic belonging while weakening national belonging. However, expressing one's ethnic identity may not always benefit the members of minoritised ethnic groups, as suggested by the rejection–identification model, particularly for some Asian groups, in mediating or moderating the effects of discrimination (Lee, 2003).

Research aim

Given the established protective role of a sense of belonging against the adverse effects of racism on individual well-being (Choi et al., 2021; Cobb et al., 2019; Daley et al., 2018; Huang, 2020; Lewis et al., 2021; Straiton et al., 2019), it is imperative to investigate whether this protective effect extends to Covid-19-related racism within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand. The primary objective of this study, therefore, is to examine the potential pathway effect of a sense of belonging on the association between Covid-19-related racism and life satisfaction in Aotearoa New Zealand with the aim of providing empirical evidence on the extent to which a sense of belonging can act as a buffer against the negative impact of racism on individual well-being during the pandemic. In this paper, we first examine the distribution of responses for the components of sense of belonging by the experience of racism in order to identify its association. Subsequently, we closely investigate the association between each component of sense of belonging and life satisfaction since the onset of Covid-19. Finally, we explore the potential moderating role of the components of sense of belonging in the association between racism and life satisfaction.

Methods

This research used a cross-sectional self-report online survey design to understand the patterns of racism, sense of belonging, and life satisfaction experienced by Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand in the Covid-19 context, while identifying the potential pathway roles of sense of belonging in the association between racism experiences and life satisfaction.

Positionality

This research was designed and implemented by a multidisciplinary research team (Health, Social Work, Asian Studies, Sociology) based at the University of Auckland and Goethe University Frankfurt. As a research team, we recognise our position and responsibilities as tangata Tiriti in relation to Māori, who are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa

New Zealand. Our study intersects with our responsibilities outlined in te Tiriti o Waitangi in the goal of ōritetanga (Article 3), as racism is a barrier to equity for both Māori and Asian communities, and anti-racist actions contribute to equity for all racialised peoples. Our work is informed by the work of Māori scholars on racism in Aotearoa New Zealand, including the Whakatika survey (Smith et al., 2021) and the body of works exploring how racism operates as a determinant of health (summarised in part by Talamaivao et al., 2020). We aim to bring an explicitly anti-racist position to this study but understand that racism materialises in diverse ways and intersects with other forms of discrimination. We also acknowledge that although we are a part of diverse Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, racism is experienced in specific and contextualised ways, and there are inequities in our capacity to mitigate the harms of racism (Simon-Kumar et al., 2022). We do not claim to represent them entirely, nor do we aim to describe a universal *Asian experience*.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference no. 22517). The participant criteria included being 16 years or older and self-identifying as an Asian living in Aotearoa New Zealand at the time of survey. Before launching the online survey using Qualtrics software, the research team adapted the survey based on the feedback from 10 pilot study participants. To expand the reach of the survey to the Asian population who do not have English as their first language, the research team made the decision to translate the survey into Asian languages. However, in order to ensure the survey was distributed in a timely manner, the team decided to limit the translation to Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese only. Professional translators translated the revised survey into the three languages. Afterward, nine bilingual reviewers rated the functional equivalence of the translation, and

three versions of the translated survey were adapted accordingly.

Between August and September of 2021, when the delta variant of the Coronavirus was dominant worldwide, participant recruitment was conducted for six weeks. In order to recruit the targeted population, we employed non-probabilistic purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Goodman, 2011; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). In addition, we used both community networks and online channels to advertise the survey. The survey was disseminated among Asian groups through various social networks (e.g., health workforce, universities, Asian community-related groups, Asian ethnic media and local media). To reach a wider targeted population across Aotearoa New Zealand, we also used social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) to advertise the survey. A participant information sheet was presented at the beginning stage of survey participation to inform participants of the aims and design of this research. Participants were able to select their preferred survey language.

Measures

The research team measured racism experiences by modifying the General Social Survey (Statistics New Zealand, 2018b). Participants were asked whether they had experienced direct or indirect discrimination due to their ethnicity in Aotearoa New Zealand since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e., from January 2020 until now), with three response options, "yes," "no," and "prefer not to answer." We measured the impact of experiences of racism on the respondents' lives before and since Covid-19 on a five-point scale (1 = a lot, 2 = quite a lot, 3 = moderately, 4 = a little bit, 5 = not at all).

Next, by modifying the Human Rights Commission's questionnaire (Nielsen, 2021) and Social Report (Ministry of Social Development, 2016), the sense of belonging was measured in the following components on a five-point scale
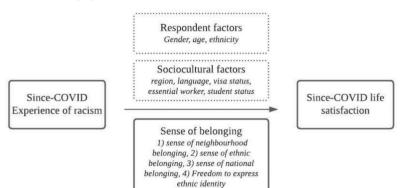
(1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree); 1) Sense of neighbourhood belonging: "I feel a sense of belonging to my local area or neighbourhood"; 2) Sense of ethnic belonging: "I feel a sense of belonging to my ethnic community"; 3) Sense of national belonging: "I feel a sense of belonging to New Zealand"; and 4) Freedom to express ethnic identity: "I feel that I can fully express my ethnicity in New Zealand."

Levels of life satisfaction were measured by modifying a question from the Covid-19 Health and Well-being Survey (Ministry of Health, 2021). Participants were asked to rate how satisfied they were/are with their life in New Zealand before and since Covid on a five-point scale: (1 = very dissatisfied; 2 = dissatisfied; 3 = neutral; 4 = satisfied; 5 = very satisfied). Lastly, socio-demographic information was collected from the questions about gender, age group, ethnicity, first language, visa status, educational status, essential worker status, and residential area.

Data analysis

Figure 2 depicts the conceptual model used in this study. The exposure variable was since-Covid experience of racism, the outcome variable was since-Covid life satisfaction and the components of sense of belonging were treated as potential pathway variables. Responses with missing racism experience (did not answer or answered "Prefer not to respond" to racism question), sense of belonging component (did not answer), and outcome variables (did not answer life satisfaction questions) were excluded from the analysis.

Data analysis was performed using Stata/IC (version 16, StataCorp, College Station, TX). Descriptive summaries and prevalence of experiences of racism were analysed by: gender (female, male, another gender), age group (16-29, 30-59, ≥60), total response ethnicity for prioritised ethnic group (Chinese, Indian, Korean, Southeast Asian,

Figure 2: Proposed Association Between Since-Covid Experiences of Racism and Life Satisfaction in Aotearoa New Zealand with the Potential Modifying Role of Sense of Belonging

Other Asian), English as first language, visa status (temporary/permanent), student status, essential worker status, and region (Auckland/other, urban area[i]/other). Continuous data were described using mean and standard deviation and tested for associations using two sample t-tests or ANOVA. Categorical data were described using count and proportion, and group difference was analysed using chi-square tests.

The role of the components of sense of belonging, potential pathway variables and confounding variables in the relationship between any experiences of racism (binary) and since-Covid life satisfaction (5-point scale) was then examined by building consecutive linear regression models where covariates were added sequentially:

1. Baseline model (M0)
2. Add confounding respondent characteristics (gender, age group, ethnicity) to M0 (M1)
3. Add sociocultural factors (language, residency status, student status, essential worker status, region) to M1 (M2)
4. Add sense of belonging components, separately, to M2 (M3a-d)
   – Sense of neighbourhood belonging (M3a)
   – Sense of ethnic belonging (M3b)
   – Sense of national belonging (M3c)
   – Freedom to express ethnic identity (M3d)

Results

Of the 2204 initial responses, we removed cases in which only the socio-demographic questions were answered (742 responses). Next, 10 cases which did not meet the recruitment criteria were deleted. From the remaining 1452 responses, 111 cases had incomplete data, including 34 cases who responded "prefer not to answer" to the racism question. A total of 1341 participants were included in the final analysis. The socio-demographic profile of the 1341 included and 111 excluded cases are outlined in Table 1. The overall proportion of participants who experienced racism in the study was 39.9%. A total of 535 participants responded that they had experienced direct or indirect racial racism since the Covid-19 pandemic. The experiences of racism by sub-group is in a previous publication (Jaung et al., 2022).

Sense of belonging

The distribution of responses for the components of sense of belonging is outlined in Table 2. Most participants had neutral or positive responses for all of the components. More than 40% of respondents agreed that they feel a sense of neighbourhood and ethnic belonging, while almost 60% agreed that they have a sense of national belonging and the freedom to express their ethnic identity.

Racism and sense of belonging

Table 3 displays the distribution of the component of sense of belonging by experience of racism. Not experiencing racism was associated with higher mean responses to all four components of sense of belonging. The strongest association was found in the sense of national belonging and freedom to express one's ethnic identity.

Sense of belonging and life satisfaction

Overall, respondents' life satisfaction dropped from $m = 3.88$ ($sd = 0.80$, 95% CI 3.84-3.91) before-Covid to $m = 3.62$ ($sd = 1.05$, 95% CI 3.56-3.68) since-Covid (p<0.001). A similar decrease was observed across all the demographic and social categories in this study. Table 4 displays the association between each component of sense of belonging and since-Covid life satisfaction. Although there was a statistically significant association between positive responses to each component and higher life satisfaction, the strength of association was greatest for expressing one's ethnic identity and sense of national belonging.

Sense of belonging as a potential pathway factor

Table 5 summarises the findings from the sequential linear regression models used to explore the association between racism and since-Covid life satisfaction (M0) and whether it is impacted by potential pathway variables: demographic factors (M1), sociocultural factors (M2) and the sense of belonging components (M3a-d).

At baseline (M0), experiencing racism was associated with a 0.49 unit decrease in since-Covid life satisfaction. This association was attenuated after adjusting for demographic (-0.48) and sociocultural (-0.45) (M1 and M2). All the components of sense of belonging reduced the magnitude of the associated further, in particular, expressing one's own ethnic identity (-0.30) and a sense of national belonging (-0.25).

The components of sense of belonging were all associated with increased since-Covid life satisfaction. Sense of national belonging had the largest magnitude of effect with a 0.40 unit increase in since-Covid life satisfaction. Sense of ethnic belonging had the smallest effect on since-Covid life satisfaction (0.18) and on the association between racism and life satisfaction (-0.40).

Discussion

This study provides local insights into the surge of anti-Asian racism during the first

Table 1. Sociodemographic Profiles of Included and Excluded Eligible Participants

Socio-demographic profile	Eligible participants		Significance of difference
	Included(%) (*n* = 1,341)	Excluded for incomplete responses (%) (*n* = 111)	Chi-square (*df*)
Gender			
Female (974)	907 (67.6)	67 (60.4)	
Male (459)	417 (31.0)	42 (37.8)	ns
Another Gender (19)	17 (1.3)	2 (1.8)	
Age groups			
Youth/young adults (468)	440 (32.2)	28 (25.2)	
Adult (887)	809 (60.3)	78 (70.3)	ns
Older Adult (97)	92 (6.7)	5 (4.5)	
Prioritised ethnicity			
Chinese (406)	375 (28.0)	31 (27.9)	
Indian (149)	133 (9.9)	16 (14.4)	
Korean (506)	474 (35.4)	32 (28.8)	ns
Southeast Asian (247)	229 (17.1)	18 (16.2)	
Other Asian (144)	130 (9.7)	14 (12.6)	
First language			
English (401)	370 (27.6)	31 (27.9)	ns
Other (1051)	971 (72.4)	80 (72.1)	
Visa status			
Permanent (1,170)	1090 (81.3)	80 (72.1)	5.6 (1)*
Temporary (282)	251 (18.7)	31 (27.9)	
Student status			
High School (40)	35 (2.6)	5 (4.5)	
Tertiary/ other (329)	310 (23.1)	19 (17.1)	ns
Not a student (1,083)	996 (74.6)	87 (78.4)	
Essential worker			
Essential (504)	465 (34.7)	39 (35.1)	ns
Non-Essential (948)	876 (65.3)	72 (64.9)	
Regional group 1			
Auckland (1,094)	1010 (75.3)	84 (75.7)	ns
Other (358)	331 (24.7)	27 (24.3)	
Regional group 2			
Urban (1,348)	1240 (92.5)	108 (97.3)	ns
Rural (104)	103 (7.5)	3 (2.7)	

Note: n = 1,452; * *p* < .05; ns = not significant.

18 months of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also provides a snapshot of life satisfaction and four components of sense of belonging during the tumultuous time. As with other analyses of the association between racism and well-being, we found that experiencing racism was associated with reduced life satisfaction among our participants. Our analysis also highlighted the positive association between a sense of belonging and life satisfaction. Furthermore, we explored the potential role of the components of sense of belonging in mitigating the association between racism and life

satisfaction, particularly the sense of national belonging and freedom to express ethnic identity. Overall, our analyses indicate that participants' life satisfaction decreased since the start of the pandemic and alongside experiencing racism, and their sense of belonging is significantly associated with their life satisfaction. Below, we will highlight each of the significant findings in the context of the current literature and then discuss the implications of this study.

This study provides evidence that racism is prevalent in Aotearoa New Zealand. Since

Table 2. Overall Distribution of Sense of Belonging

Components of sense of belonging	Number of participants (%)	Mean value (SD)
Sense of neighbourhood belonging		
Strongly disagree	74 (5.5)	
Disagree	223 (16.6)	
Neither agree nor disagree	497 (37.1)	3.3 (1.1)
Agree	460 (34.3)	
Strongly agree	87 (6.5)	
Sense of ethnic belonging		
Strongly disagree	89 (6.6)	
Disagree	205 (15.3)	
Neither agree nor disagree	424 (31.6)	3.2 (1.0)
Agree	478 (35.7)	
Strongly agree	145 (10.8)	
Sense of national belonging		
Strongly disagree	68 (5.1)	
Disagree	144 (10.7)	
Neither agree nor disagree	344 (25.7)	3.5 (1.0)
Agree	595 (44.4)	
Strongly agree	190 (14.2)	
Freedom to express ethnic identity		
Strongly disagree	45 (3.4)	
Disagree	196 (14.6)	
Neither agree nor disagree	323 (24.1)	3.5 (1.0)
Agree	540 (40.3)	
Strongly agree	237 (17.7)	

Note: *n* = 1341

Table 3. Distribution of Sense of Belonging by Racism Experience

	Racism experience (%)		Significance of difference		
	Yes (*n* = 535, 39.9%)	**No** (*n* = 806, 60.1%)	**Chi-square**	**T test**	
				Significance	**Effect Size (95% CI)**
Sense of neighbourhood belonging					
Strongly disagree	52 (58.4)	37 (41.6)			
Disagree	93 (45.4)	112 (54.6)			
Neither agree nor disagree	170 (40.1)	254 (59.9)	***	***	0.5 (0.4 - 0.6)
Agree	168 (35.2)	310 (64.9)			
Strongly agree	52 (35.9)	93 (64.9)			
Mean value (SD)	3.1 (1.1)	3.4 (1.0)			
Sense of ethnic belonging					
Strongly disagree	49 (66.2)	25 (33.8)			
Disagree	112 (50.2)	111 (49.8)			
Neither agree nor disagree	187 (37.6)	310 (62.4)	***	***	0.2 (0.1-0.4)
Agree	162 (35.2)	298 (64.8)			
Strongly agree	25 (28.7)	62 (71.3)			
Mean value (SD)	3.0 (1.0)	3.3 (0.9)			
Sense of national belonging					
Strongly disagree	51 (75.0)	17 (25.0)			
Disagree	88 (61.1)	56 (38.9)			
Neither agree nor disagree	149 (43.3)	195 (56.7)	***	***	0.3 (0.2-0.4)
Agree	198 (33.3)	397 (66.7)			
Strongly agree	49 (25.8)	141 (74.2)			
Mean value (SD)	3.2 (1.1)	3.7 (0.9)			
Freedom to express ethnic identity					
Strongly disagree	35 (77.8)	10 (22.2)			
Disagree	112 (57.1)	84 (42.9)			
Neither agree nor disagree	143 (44.3)	180 (55.7)	***	***	0.5 (0.4-0.6)
Agree	187 (34.6)	353 (65.4)			
Strongly agree	58 (24.5)	179 (75.5)			
Mean value (SD)	3.2 (1.1)	3.8 (1.0)			

Note: n = 1341; *** p < .001; ns = not significant.

Table 4. Distribution of Sense of Belonging by Since-Covid Life Satisfaction

Component of sense of belonging	Since-COVID life satisfaction (Number of respondents, %)					Significance of difference	Cronbach's α (1 item)
	Very dissatisfied	Dis-satisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied	Chi-square (df)	
Sense of neighbourhood belonging							
Strongly disagree	13 (17.6)	14 (18.9)	22 (29.7)	21 (28.4)	4 (5.4)	190.6 (16) ***	0.3
Disagree	20 (9.0)	44 (19.7)	60 (26.9)	79 (35.4)	20 (9.0)		
Neither agree nor disagree	11 (2.2)	46 (9.3)	132 (26.6)	226 (45.5)	82 (16.5)		
Agree	6 (1.3)	42 (9.1)	87 (18.9)	206 (44.8)	119 (25.9)		
Strongly agree	5 (5.8)	5 (5.8)	9 (10.3)	22 (25.3)	46 (52.9)		
Sense of ethnic belonging							
Strongly disagree	11 (12.4)	12 (13.5)	29 (32.6)	20 (22.5)	17 (19.1)	117.4 (16) ***	0.5
Disagree	17 (8.3)	30 (14.6)	39 (19.0)	91 (44.4)	28 (13.7)		
Neither agree nor disagree	12 (2.8)	58 (13.7)	117 (27.6)	183 (43.2)	54 (12.7)		
Agree	8 (1.7)	39 (8.2)	109 (22.8)	208 (43.5)	114 (23.9)		
Strongly agree	7 (4.8)	12 (8.3)	16 (11.0)	52 (35.9)	58 (40.0)		
Sense of national belonging							
Strongly disagree	19 (27.9)	20 (29.4)	14 (20.6)	10 (14.7)	5 (7.4)	411.8 (16) ***	0.6
Disagree	15 (10.4)	36 (25.0)	43 (29.9)	45 (31.3)	5 (3.5)		
Neither agree nor disagree	10 (2.9)	38 (11.1)	122 (35.5)	149 (43.3)	25 (7.3)		
Agree	8 (1.3)	49 (8.2)	113 (19.0)	290 (48.7)	135 (22.7)		
Strongly agree	3 (1.6)	8 (4.2)	18 (9.5)	60 (31.6)	101 (53.2)		
Freedom to express ethnic identity							
Strongly disagree	11 (24.4)	11 (24.4)	10 (22.2)	8 (17.8)	5 (11.1)	233.9 (16) ***	0.5
Disagree	11 (5.6)	41 (20.9)	60 (30.6)	63 (32.1)	21 (10.7)		
Neither agree nor disagree	15 (4.6)	41 (12.7)	102 (31.6)	128 (39.6)	37 (11.5)		
Agree	9 (1.7)	42 (7.8)	117 (21.7)	268 (49.6)	104 (19.3)		
Strongly agree	9 (3.8)	16 (6.8)	21 (8.9)	87 (36.7)	104 (43.9)		

Note: n = 1341 ; *** *p* < .001; ns = not significant.

the beginning of the pandemic, 39.9% of respondents have experienced direct or indirect discrimination due to their ethnicity. In line with previous literature (e.g., Talamaivao et al., 2020), this study confirms once again that racism negatively affects well-being, specifically life satisfaction. Overall, the current study indicates that experiencing racism in the midst of pandemic had a detrimental effect on the psychological well-being among Asian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although the findings are limited to the Asian communities, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence regarding the harm that racism causes for all minoritised ethnic communities. Furthermore, it emphasises the significance of identifying protective factors that mitigate the detrimental effects of racism on well-being, alongside the ongoing need for anti-racist actions.

This study has also uncovered important insights into the relationships between experiencing racism and a diminished sense of belonging across multiple components. Although levels of all four components of sense of belonging were generally high, experiencing racism significantly decreased all four components. The greatest decrease occurred in expressing ethnic identity and having a sense of national belonging. The most prevalent reasons for restraining ethnic identity expression are worries about acceptance and what others would think when ethnicity is expressed (Reicher et al., 1995). One of the possible explanations for the greatest decline in ethnic identity expression is that Asian respondents may choose not to express their ethnicity as a means of avoiding or protecting themselves from racism. These findings are consistent with the rejection–disidentification model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009), which posits that experiencing racism leads to national disidentification, or a diminished sense of national belonging, among the minority population. However, contrary to the rejection–identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999), which posits increasing

identification with their ethnic group or a growing sense of ethnic belonging in the face of discrimination based on their ethnicity, this study indicated that experiencing racism also decreased their sense of ethnic belonging. Those who did not experience racism were statistically significantly more likely to experience a higher sense of belonging in all four components.

This study identified a significant correlation between a sense of belonging and life satisfaction among Asian members in Aotearoa New Zealand. Statistically significant associations were found between positive responses to each component of belonging and greater life satisfaction. This finding is also consistent with previous research, which discovered a positive relationship between sense of belonging and life satisfaction (Diaz & Bui, 2017; Morrison et al., 2011). Having a sense of national belonging and expressing one's ethnic identity were found to have the strongest association with life satisfaction, although all components of sense of belonging were associated with life satisfaction to a significant degree. One possible explanation is that feeling like a part of a nation and freely expressing one's ethnic identity are significant indicators of acceptance for Asian members, who are frequently marginalised and racialised in Aotearoa New Zealand (Harris et al., 2018). Indeed, acceptance contributes to the satisfaction of basic social needs such as belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which have been linked to an individual's subjective well-being (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A major strength of this study is the examination of the potential moderating role of a sense of belonging against the negative effects of racism on life satisfaction. We discovered that each of the four components of sense of belonging were not only associated with life satisfaction, but also interacted with

Table 5. Linear Regression: Association Between Experiences of Racism and Since-Covid Life Satisfaction and the Role of Sense of Belonging

Any experience of racism	Regression coefficient	Standard error	t	P-value	95% CI	Cronbach's α
Model 0 (Baseline)						
Racism coefficient	-0.49	0.06	-8.65	***	-0.61 ~ -0.38	0.3
Model 1 (demographic factors)						
Racism coefficient	-0.48	0.06	-8.25	***	-0.59 ~ -0.36	0.2
Model 2 (sociocultural factors)						
Racism coefficient	-0.45	0.06	-7.84	***	-0.56 ~ -0.34	0.3
Model 3a (sense of ethnic belonging)						
Racism coefficient	-0.40	0.06	-7.21	***	-0.51 ~ -0.30	0.4
Belonging coefficient	0.18	0.03	6.88	***	0.13 ~ 0.23	
Model 3b (sense of neighbourhood belonging)						
Racism coefficient	-0.37	0.06	-6.69	***	-0.48 ~ -0.26	0.4
Belonging coefficient	0.27	0.03	9.65	***	0.21 ~ 0.32	
Model 3c (sense of national belonging)						
Racism coefficient	-0.25	0.05	-4.58	***	-0.36 ~ -0.14	0.4
Belonging coefficient	0.40	0.03	15.14	***	0.35 ~ 0.46	
Model 3d (freedom to express ethnic identity)						
Racism coefficient	-0.30	0.06	-5.42	***	-0.42 ~ -0.19	0.4
Belonging coefficient	0.28	0.03	10.78	***	0.23 ~ 0.33	

Note: The dependent variable of this analysis is life satisfaction since-Covid.
*** $p < .001$; ns = not significant.

the association between racism and life satisfaction. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Choi et al., 2021), our study reaffirms that sense of belonging is a strong protective factor that buffers against the negative association between racism and life satisfaction. Moreover, all four components of sense of belonging serve as mitigating factors. Given that anti-Asian racism is currently a feature of life in Aotearoa New Zealand and a significant social stressor to achieving life satisfaction during the challenging Covid-19 pandemic period, this study provides empirical evidence of the protective role of a sense of belonging against anti-Asian racism.

Future directions

Research that aims to describe the harm of racism run the risk of simplifying the complex and contextual impact of racism and restating rather than proposing solutions

to the problems of racism and white supremacy. Furthermore, the scope of racism described and anti-racism actions proposed are often limited to reactive, one-off interventions with a focus on interpersonal racism and individual education. However, the multi-faceted manifestations of racism during the Covid-19 pandemic and increased awareness of racism following the *anti-racism summer* of 2020 which was ignited by the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020 (Chavez, 2020), have led to a widespread understanding that transformative change is required. Many leading health institutions subsequently named racism as a public health emergency (Evans et al., 2020; Karan & Katz, 2020).

Highlighting the interplay between how racism is felt by Asian communities and the sociocultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, this research suggests that national-level policies and sustained cultural shifts that help foster a sense of national belonging and a social environment where people feel free to express their own ethnic identity will improve quality of life for racialised groups. Early research into what these approaches may look like in a pandemic context includes: using organisational change management processes to embed anti-racism within institutions (Watt et al., 2021); using government policy as a tool to monitor the socioeconomic impacts of racism and directly address economic inequities related to racism (Siddiqi et al., 2021); a shift from multiculturalism to anti-racism (Lei & Guo, 2022); and understanding the interrelated nature of racism and nationalism to counter the hateful narratives that drive these systems and beliefs (Elias et al., 2021; Lee & Johnstone, 2021).

Specifically, within the field of social work there has been a call for a stronger conceptual framework for understanding anti-Asian racism within one's society and the role that social workers can play

in improving social justice (Zhao et al., 2022), taking an intersectional approach to supporting specific Asian communities (Wang et al., 2021) and committing to an explicitly anti-racist social work praxis (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2022; Hudson et al., 2022). Examining how these solutions are best implemented and the difference they make for communities harmed by racism should be the focus of research, health and social sector praxis, and policy-making if we hope to address racism in our and similar societies.

Limitations

The findings of this study must be understood alongside some limitations. First, a cross-sectional research design does not allow us to draw causal conclusions. Future research would benefit from using longitudinal or experimental research designs that generate observations with a temporal component. Next, this study sample was not representative of the Asian population in Aotearoa New Zealand because of the use of non-probabilistic purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Compared with New Zealand Census data, there were relatively low representations of the first three largest Asian ethnic groups (Chinese, Indian, and Filipino) and an over-representation of the Korean ethnic group. These characteristics of our study population may limit the generalisabililty of the research to a wider Asian population. Finally, due to the use of a self-report survey design, there is a potential that participants might respond in a socially desirable way to a questionnaire (van de Mortel, 2008). However, this self-report survey design might not pose a serious threat to the validity of the findings because a large number of survey responses would certify the robustness of the data. In addition, considering that participants voluntarily responded to this anonymised online survey, they are less likely to feel pressured to report their experience in a socially desirable direction.

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Endnotes

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