

Empathic, Powerful Responses To COVID-19 Inequities

With Roxy Manning, PhD

COVID-19 has been devastating for people across the United States. As I read news story after story, with each conversation I had with clients, students, friends, I realized our world would never be the same. And, even more despairingly, I saw some groups bear a greater burden in this pandemic than others. I witnessed with a breaking heart the treatment of my Asian American brethren. I watched my own fear rise as the data piled up documenting the devastating impact of the pandemic in the Black community. I saw discourse that ignored the unequal impact of the disease, or blamed groups impacted by generations of systemic inequities for the ways their bodies and their lives were crushed with this additional burden. I realized, as a practitioner of NVC who advocates using this great consciousness to create systems that attend to the needs of all beings in our world, not just the ones like us or in our local community, this was a moment to rise up, to open my eyes to what was happening and to take steps, however small, to address it.

The Differential Impact of COVID-19

Illness and Death. In jurisdiction after jurisdiction, ethnic differences exist in who contracts COVID-19 and who dies of it. Ethnic minority people are more likely to have jobs considered essential that place them at heightened risk of contracting the coronavirus. For instance, Latinx workers represent 53% of agricultural workers while 30% of licensed practical or vocational nurses are Black (CDC), both jobs that do not permit social distancing and could expose them to others who are already ill. In New York, the Latinx community is 29% of the population while the Black community is 24%. However, 34% of those who died are Latinx and 28% of those who died are Black (Dywer, 2020). In Chicago, 70% of those who have died are Black even though they are just 30% of the population (Wingfield, 2020). In Arizona, 6% of the population are Native Americans, but they represent 16% of those who died (Nagle, 2020). Los Angeles County in California reports that Pacific Islanders are four times as likely to get COVID and six times as likely to die after getting it as the general population (Koran, 2020). Numerous pundits, including the Surgeon General of the United States, have suggested that Black Americans and other ethnic minority group members are contracting the disease because they are in poor health as the result of engaging in unhealthy behaviors. However, those involved in the Environmental Justice field provide a needed systemic lens to understand these outcomes. A study conducted by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health concluded, “After analyzing over 3,000 U.S. counties, the researchers concluded that even a small increase in exposure to fine particulate matter — tiny particles in the air — leads to a significant increase in the COVID-19 death rate

(Villarosa, 2020).” Combined with evidence that shows that “Because of decades of housing discrimination — including redliningpeople of color are much more likely than white people to live in polluted neighborhoods....They are more likely to have asthma and other health problems caused or aggravated by dirty air”(Astor, 2020) we can see that systemic inequities negatively impact the health of people of color, helping to explain their increased fatality of COVID-19 in those groups.

Economic Impact. Just like housing policies have placed ethnic minority people in environments where they are more likely to be exposed to conditions that impact their health and leave them susceptible to COVID-19, economic policies have also left ethnic minority groups ill-prepared to deal with the financial impact. Since numerous studies already document racial and ethnic gaps in financial well-being before the advent of COVID-19, we won't explore this here. Interested readers are invited to explore the articles listed in Appendix A. A recent Pew Research Center analysis documents a myriad of ways in which COVID-19 is exacerbating these pre-existing differences. Latinx and Black people are experiencing job and wage loss at a higher rate than white adults while they have fewer financial reserves to cover expenses during this emergency (Lopez, Rainie and Budiman, 2020). Research shows that they are more likely to hold the types of jobs most vulnerable to layoffs and less likely to telework (Maxwell and Solomon, 2020). In addition, the government's decision to provide stimulus payments only to households where all tax-paying adults have Social Security numbers excludes residents who pay taxes but do not have a Social Security number as well as their partners with Social Security numbers and their children from receiving the financial support that is desperately needed to help weather this financial storm. A disproportionate number of these residents are ethnic minority immigrants.

Discrimination and Attacks. Members of the Asian American community are experiencing a marked increase in assaults, from verbal slurs to physical attacks, directly related to their race. The New York City Commission on Human Rights reported receiving 12 times as many complaints of anti-Asian discrimination and harassment this spring as in the same time period last year (Thorbecke, 2020). ABC news reported the FBI issued a warning about an increase in crimes due to anti-Asian bias. In that warning, they describe the stabbing attack of three members of an Asian American family, including the two-year-old and six-year-old children, by someone who believed the family was Chinese and was infecting people with coronavirus (Margolin, 2020). A scan of the news produces story after story of fellow residents of the United States, all ages and genders, being attacked because of their presumed Asian identity. This is an impact related to COVID-19 that is unique and specific to Asian Americans.

There are many other ways in which COVID-19 has magnified the differences that exist in our US society along group identity. Class differences, often intersecting with race and ethnicity, lead to significant disparities in which school districts and students have been able to continue their education and which students are falling further and further behind. Those who are incarcerated and those who are un-housed are at risk of greater exposure to COVID-19 because of the conditions in which they live; they also have less access to resources and healthcare when they become ill. We must use the consciousness and skills NVC provides us to stand up for the disenfranchised in our communities.

How NVC Can Help

There are several ways in which the NVC community can contribute during this pandemic. While I don't have data to support this assertion, I am guessing that a small percentage of the certified trainers, trainer candidates or even dedicated NVC practitioners in the United States identify as members of some of the disenfranchised groups discussed above. These communities have their own reservoirs of empathy and emotional support, empathic action and intervention strategies. When we show up to stand in solidarity with them, we want to do so from a place of humble service. We can show up and ask how can we serve, rather than step in as saviors offering NVC as the ultimate solution. When we show up with curiosity and a willingness to be directed to where the need is, we can trust that what we offer is truly wanted, and is more likely to be received as a "power-with" offering that honors the dignity and capacity of those whom we want to serve. There are several ways we might be called to offer support in which NVC can be especially powerful.

Empathic Connection. Everyone needs empathy, and in these chaotic, unpredictable, scary times, more than ever before. Ask around in your neighborhood or call local churches or service organizations. Are there people who are quarantined and living alone? Adults who are single or far away from family members? People who have lost their jobs and are feeling hopeless and depressed? You can volunteer to hold phone or Zoom empathy sessions with anyone who simply needs to be heard for the myriad of feelings they are holding. As you listen, track whether your world view or assumptions are impacting the quality of the empathy you offer.

One complaint I've frequently heard from NVC students from socially marginalized groups is that when they attempt to talk about biased treatment they've experienced, they are often met with demands that they share the observation, or offered education about how much less stimulated they would be if they owned whatever "isms" they are naming as an interpretation that is not real. Refrain. This is a moment to really dive deep in your empathy skills. If someone rails against the racist person who accosted their child playing outside their home and told their child they don't belong in America, you can translate racist in your head and meet them with empathy. Hold their fear and deep need for safety for their child. Catch their unfathomable disorientation as previously trusted neighbors speak words of anger and hate and reflect their longing for acceptance and trust from people they interact with every day. Don't seek to educate them that calling someone racist is a judgment that perpetuates the kind of violence and otherizing that their child experienced, even if it's true! When you're entering empathic space with someone whose life experiences are so very different from yours, it becomes even more important to maintain a stance of open-hearted welcome and curiosity about their needs, rather than focus on the language or manner in which they are expressing those needs.

Bystander Intervention. During this period, you may witness some of the verbal or even physical harassment and attacks that Asian Americans and other people of color are experiencing. Maybe on some public online forums, you've noticed an increase in people calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus" or arguing that China deliberately spread the virus to weaken the US. Perhaps you'll witness someone arguing online that resources shouldn't go to treat African-Americans who get severely ill since their underlying health condition is their fault and they are more likely to die anyway. As a bystander, there are ways you can utilize your NVC skills to stand in solidarity with those who are impacted.

First, make sure you feel safe, or that you're intentionally aware of and choosing any risk connected to your intervening. It's helpful to explore this question before an incident occurs. As you read about the ways our community members are being treated, ask yourself, "How do I

want to respond and what need would that meet for me?" As you connect with the needs that would be met by a particular response, also ask yourself, "What needs would not be met if I respond in this way?" Are you willing to risk those needs going unmet? What support or resources would you need if attacks were now directed at you? Exploring these questions makes it more likely that in the moment, you can act from a place that is holding all of your needs.

Once you decide to respond, focus on safety for the targeted person before anything else. If your need is to create conditions for safety, you'll realize that educating the actor might be the last thing you wish to do. If you're in person, distracting the actor - calling attention to yourself in some way - can create the opportunity for the targeted person to leave. As they leave, you can choose to accompany them or keep an eye on them to ensure they are truly safe.

There are also times when your intervention might involve letting the actor know that you're not in agreement with their action. Your NVC consciousness is especially helpful here. Instead of calling out the actor as a bad, evil person, focus on the needs. Call out the action, not the actor. Why is their action not working for you? What need of yours is not being met? Take ownership, and speak up because you have unmet needs, and not because you believe the targeted person has unmet needs. If you speak up and say, "I think this person isn't feeling safe" or "What you just said would be hard for an Asian-American to hear," you convey the subtext that the unwanted treatment is the problem of the targeted group, not a problem that anyone can have. Instead, you could speak up and say, "I'm feeling scared about where this is going." or "It's really hard for me to hear you say that because I want me and every member of our community to be treated with respect." This conveys the message that this is also your problem, with your unmet needs. It helps to deflect attention from the targeted person while also stands in solidarity grounded in the belief that safety, care, dignity and inclusion are human needs we all seek, not just the problem of that "other" group.

After you've deflected the situation and helped reestablish safety for the targeted person, you have another opportunity to leverage your empathic NVC skills. See if the targeted person needs support. Do they need empathy for their experience? A silent warm presence while they self-regulate? Is there some other need you could meet? Tuning in empathically, and even guessing what might serve them is very useful here.

Similarly, if you have the bandwidth, you can empathize with the actor. What led them to do or say the things that they did? What needs are their actions speaking to? Perhaps they need empathy for the fear, uncertainty, confusion, losses that they are experiencing that are magnified in these times. Away from a public setting that could stimulate shame, let them know how you were impacted by their actions and work with them to find strategies that hold everyone's humanity as they attempt to get their needs met.

There's a lot more that bystanders can do. This is a brief introduction to some ways NVC can inform how you show up as a bystander. If you want to learn more about NVC informed ways to bystander intervention, contact [Ceri Buckmaster and Leonie Smith](#) who have developed an NVC training program. And if you want to gain more awareness and skill in recognizing and interrupting violence towards Asian Americans, sign up for a [free training through Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#).

Empathic Action. In this time when so many people have lost jobs and are struggling with securing food, access to health care and attending to other basic needs, the role of empathic action must be mentioned. Empathic action enables us to move from the inner, interpersonal domain to one where we can make material changes in people's lives. An example of empathic

action might be offering to go to the grocery for an elderly neighbor after they have spoken about their fear of exposure to the virus. You've moved from empathizing with their fear to identifying and offering concrete actions you can take to meet needs that are connected to their fear - in this case the needs for both safety and sustenance. Empathic action in support of disenfranchised communities can take place on two levels - individual and systemic.

Individual. As noted above, individual empathic action involves understanding the needs that are not met for someone, identifying a strategy that could meet that need, and checking in with the person to see if they would like that course of action. Sometimes, we simply act, when the strategy is small and has little risk of not wanted. There are two important considerations when undertaking empathic action. First, check with the person to see if they would actually like the strategy you are contemplating. Just like we are not attached to an empathic guess resonating for the receiver, we also want to remain open to the empathic action not being welcomed. Next, it's important to recognize that some people from marginalized groups report difficulty speaking up and asking for what they need, especially to members of non-marginalized groups. After a lifetime of receiving message after message that their needs do not matter, they may become hopeless about even asking. If you have a sense a strategy may be useful, take the risk and ask. Don't assume that because the person did not ask for your help, they will not welcome it. The essential approach is to ask - either make an open-ended invitation for the person to name what they would like, or offer specific strategies you can provide for them to choose from. And when you ask, welcome any response you get.

Systemic. The other place where empathic action is desperately needed is at the level of systemic change. Communities are working hard to change the systemic conditions that underlie so many of the disparities discussed earlier. However, getting the attention of those with structural power can be difficult. You can leverage any resources - NVC skills, access, community and social standing, greater likelihood that you'll be listened to, etc - that you possess on behalf of communities you want to support. For instance, community members with unsafe working conditions that increase their risk of transmitting or contracting COVID-19 may be afraid to protest because they are worried about losing their jobs. If you don't work in the same setting or perhaps you are a manager at that location, with the community's agreement you can advocate repeatedly for the needed change. This kind of empathic action, which echoes the concerns of those with less structural power, amplifies their concerns in a way that makes it more likely they will at least be acknowledged, if not attended to.

How will you use your commitment to NVC to create a world that works for all? How will you show up in these uncertain times? What steps can you take to create a more equitable world, where we bear together, equally, the great burden of these times? Together, we can stand up for all peoples.

Works Cited

Astor, Maggie. Environmental Justice Was a Climate Forum Theme. Here's Why. *The New York Times*,

September 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/05/us/politics/environmental-justice-climate-town-hall.html>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Centers for Disease Control. COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups. *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>. 22 April 2020. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Dwyer, Colin. New York City's Latinx Residents Hit Hardest by Coronavirus Deaths. *NPR*. 8 April 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/08/829726964/new-york-citys-latinx-residents-hit-hardest-by-coronavirus-deaths>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Koran, Mario. 'The disease is ripping through': why coronavirus is devastating California's Pacific Islanders. *The Guardian*. 22 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/22/pacific-islanders-california-coronavirus-death-rate>

Lopez, Mark H., Rainie, Lee and Budiman, Abby. Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity. *FactTank News in the Numbers - Pew Research Center*. 05 May 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/2L15rwr>.

Maxwell, Connor and Solomon, Danyelle. The Economic Fallout of the Coronavirus for People of Color. *Center for American Progress*. 14 April 2020. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/04/14/483125/economic-fallout-coronavirus-people-color/>

Nagle, Rebecca. Native Americans being left out of US coronavirus data and labelled as 'other'. *The Guardian*. 24 April 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/24/us-native-americans-left-out-coronavirus-data>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Thorbecke, Catherine. NYC launches \$100,000 effort to combat anti-Asian discrimination in COVID-19 era. *ABC News*. 26 May 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/nyc-launches-100000-effort-combat-anti-asian-discrimination/story?id=70830974>

Villarosa, Linda. 'A Terrible Price': The Deadly Racial Disparities of COVID-19 in America. *The New York Times*, 29 April 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/29/magazine/racial-disparities-covid-19.html>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Black Health Care Workers in the U.S. *Harvard Business Review*, 14 May 2020. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/the-disproportionate-impact-of-covid-19-on-black-health-care-workers-in-the-u-s>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

Appendix A. Economic Justice Articles

Hardy, Bradley, L., Logan, Trevon, D. and Parman, J. The Historical Role of Race and Policy for Regional Inequality. *The Hamilton Project*. 28 September 2018. http://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/the_historical_role_of_race_and_policy_for_regional_inequality?_ga=2.99237402.545340636.1590545631-1479463529.1590545631

Irwin, Neil, Miller, Claire C. and Sanger-Katz, Margot. America's racial divide, charted. *The New York Times*. 19 August 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/20/upshot/americas-racial-divide-charted.html?abt=0002&abg=1&login=smartlock&auth=login-smartlock>.

White, Gillian. Black Americans Are Working More—With Little to Show for It. *The Atlantic*. 29 March 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/03/black-wages-labor/521172/>.