UNDERSTANDING RACISM

Prepared by Charlotte Reading, PhD

Since the time of first contact with Europeans, Indigenous [1] peoples in Canada have experienced several forms of racism, which have negatively affected all aspects of their lives and well-being.

Racism is a general term used to describe:

· "a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human races determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to rule others;
· a policy, system of government, etc., based upon or fostering such a doctrine; discrimination;
· hatred or intolerance of another race or other races" (Dictionary.com, n.d.-a).

© Credit: Library and Archives Canada, ID PA-182251, "Portrait of Native students at St. Paul's Indian Industrial School."

This fact sheet is the first of three that will focus on anti-Indigenous racism in Canada,[2] beginning with an exploration of the concept of race, its history and contexts, and continuing with a discussion of the various forms of racism within societies. In order to address racism in Canadian society, we must first understand what racism is, how it became a way to identify people, and the forms it takes.

The historical construction of race

Race is a relatively recent concept within western societies. In Europe, until the latter part of the 1600s, identity was primarily defined by one's religion and language (Hannaford, 1996). The concept of race as a category of identity did not emerge until

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[1] The terms 'Indigenous' and 'Indigenous peoples' are used throughout this fact sheet to refer to First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples inclusively; however, the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal peoples' will be used as substitutes when reflected in the literature under discussion. Whenever possible, culturally specific names are used.
[2] The second fact sheet in this series will examine how racism is experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada and how it affects their lives and well-being. The third and final fact sheet will explore how policies, programs and strategies can address racism at personal and institutional levels.

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Europeans began to colonize other continents. In 1684, François Bernier published the first classification of humans into distinct races (Todorov, 1993), followed by a 1735 publication by Carolus Linnaeus which further classified people based on continental differences. Within this categorization, Linnaeus also suggested that Europaeus (Europeans), Asiaticus (Asians), Americanus (Americans) and Africanus (Africans) differed in general mood. He arbitrarily classified Europaeus as cheerful, Asiaticus as melancholy, Americanus as aggressive, and Africanus as sluggish (Brace, 2005). In 1779, Johann

Blumenbach further proposed five major racial divisions including: Caucasoid (White), Mongoloid (Asian), Ethiopian (later Negroid), American Indian, and Malayan (South American).

During this time, scientists became increasingly interested in looking for differences between groups who were now being defined as separate races. These investigations produced an official ideology (or worldview) of race. According to this ideology, racial categories are exclusive; they arise from nature, and they are enduring (Smedley, 1999). Subsequent authors such as Georges Buffon, Petrus Camper,

Christoph Meiners and Thomas Jefferson promoted a more oppressive ideology in which Caucasians were generally viewed as superior to other races, and particularly to people who had been classified as Negroid or American Indian (Graves, 2001). It is interesting to note that 18th century naturalists, who were formulating the characteristics of various 'races', relied primarily on colonists' subjective descriptions of Indigenous peoples who were often referred to as inferior savages who lived a primitive life (Smedley, 1999).

By the 1800s, the term 'race' had become commonplace and for the first time in human history, racial classifications were used to create and maintain discriminatory social hierarchies (Allen, 1994; Smedley, 2012). Unfortunately, these racialized classifications and hierarchies have persisted into the 21st century in 'race-based' societies that share a number of similarities including a belief that:

· racial differences originate in biology and that physical characteristics (e.g., skin colour, hair texture, eye shape), as well as behaviours, are accurate indicators of race;
· each race has a distinct culture (e.g., language, dress, music, dance) that is also linked to biology;
· racial differences are meaningful and unchangeable;

- some races are 'naturally' inferior, and consequently;
- racial categories should be written into political, legal and social systems (e.g., the one-drop rule[3] and the *Indian Act*[4]).

Scientists have confirmed that there is no biological basis for what we refer to as human 'races.' In fact, genetic researchers have discovered that among modern humans, 85% of our genetic variation occurs between individuals, with only 5% between so-called 'racial groups' on the same continent and 10% between people on different continents (Smedley, 1999). As Graves (2001) points out, some animals have more genetic variation than humans: "there is more genetic variation within one tribe of wild chimpanzees than has been observed within all existing humans!"(p. 31).

Erroneous beliefs about racial differences have led to the formation of 'racialized' groups that are, in reality, established as socially rather than biologically distinctive. In fact, Omi (2001) suggests that "the idea of race and its persistence as a social

category is only given meaning in a social order structured by forms of inequality - economic, political, and cultural - that are organized, to a significant degree, by race" (p. 254). Research employing critical race theory has been used to reveal how the social construction of race influences the health and well-being of racialized groups by supporting the inequitable[5] structuring of privilege for some groups and disadvantage for others (Adelson, 2005; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Danzinger & Haveman, 2001).

The ideology of racism

An ideology is a set of beliefs and attitudes that evolve through persuasion or coercion to become deeply rooted in the structures and systems of a particular society (Marshment, 1978). In North America, the ideology of racism involves beliefs about racial inequalities that are based on superficial differences in physical appearance, as well as artificially constructed differences in intellectual capacity and

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[3] The one-drop rule was a social classification used in the United States in which a person having any African ancestry was considered a 'Negro' and during the time of slavery, therefore a slave (Davis, 2001).

[4] Enacted by the Parliament of Canada in 1876, the *Indian Act* grants the federal government authority over First Nations lands, First Nations governance and First Nations identity (*Constitution Acts, 1867*).

[5] The term 'inequity' refers to something that is unjust or unfair (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2012a).

moral character between people racialized as 'White' and people racialized as non-white, including those racialized as Indigenous. The evidence is clear that discussions of race do not occur in a social or material vacuum (Lewis, 2004) and have been used to rationalize unfair treatment and diminished opportunities afforded to certain groups. In general, those people racialized as 'White' are afforded better treatment and more opportunities than people who are categorized as 'Black,' 'people of colour,' or 'Aboriginal, Indigenous, or Indian' (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2012; Summit on Indigenous Peoples, 2003; Statistics Canada, 1993).

Stereotypes are generalized beliefs about the nature, behaviour, morality, work ethic, etc. of individuals who have been designated to a particular group (based on race, ethnicity, social class, religion, age, gender, etc.). Walker (2008) defines stereotypes as 'social distortions' that do not accurately reflect the diversity within populations and can have a negative impact on relationships between individuals and groups defined as meaningfully different. In particular, racial stereotypes can form a mental framework among members of the dominant racialized group (in the case of North America, people defined as white) about how to 'deal

with' the racialized other. On a cultural level, racial stereotyping promotes race-based fears and hostile attitudes that validate and foster social distancing. Equally problematic is that stereotypic, racist misrepresentations form a 'shield of ignorance' which hinders members of the dominant group from understanding their own privilege and, thus, prevents them from confronting the racist ideology that forms their perceptions, attitudes, and actions (Hook, 2005).

Forms of racism

In this section, we will explore several forms of racism that reflect domination of knowledge, aggressive interactions between individuals, and inequitable structures within society.

Epistemic racism

Epistemology refers to the study of knowledge, exploring questions such as how knowledge is acquired and what assumptions are made in the historical development of knowledge. This area of inquiry is critical to understanding racism because the dominance of western [6] knowledge systems produces and promotes beliefs about racialized cultures as inferior to western culture. For Indigenous people, these knowledge systems played a key and relentless role in their

portrayal as primitive or noble savages who were less evolved than Europeans. 'Civilization' was thus legitimated as an obligation of the colonial group (Bastien, Kremer, Kuokkanen, & Vickers, 2003; Yancy, 2008; Solomona, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

The practice, discourse, and culture of western science are based on, and therefore reinforce, racist ideologies and structures (Lester, 2012). Western science has been afforded vast resources and opportunities by a colonial system to observe, measure and record hypothetical racial differences (Sibeud, 2012). Consequently, science has emerged as one of the most dangerous tools of colonial domination, as disciplines of science have created and maintained racial distinctions used to segregate and oppress Indigenous peoples. Examples of this can be found in studies that describe the generalized and diminished social, economic and health status of Indigenous people, yet fail to consider the detrimental historical, social, and political determinants of those disparities. The findings of this flawed research are published and offered as facts through academic and popular media, which creates erroneous, yet widely held, negative stereotypes

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[6] Western civilization, with its roots in European and Mediterranean antiquity, is based on three major traditions including: classical Greek and Roman culture, the Christian religion, and the scientific method (Perry, Chase, Jacob, & Jacob, 2009).

and attitudes about Indigenous peoples. Moreover, research involving Indigenous people continues to be dominated by certain paradigms while Indigenous and other alternative worldviews [7] and approaches are ignored or rejected as 'unscientific' (Walker, 2003). Too often, non-Indigenous researchers with little or no connection to Indigenous communities conduct research about Indigenous peoples that is based on western disciplinary-specific theories. The culturally irrelevant and often racist results of these studies are then disseminated to an often equally disengaged and uninformed academic audience, thus perpetuating the dominance of western research on Indigenous people. In fact, the recent advance of Indigenous paradigms and methodologies [8] by Indigenous scholars, as well as the development of Indigenous-specific research ethics guidelines by the Tri-Council [9] has been initiated to address this form of epistemic racism.

While it is critical to consider the dominance of western knowledge systems and practices as a distinct form of racism, most people are familiar with the more obvious form of relational racism.

Relational racism

The term 'relational' refers to the context of everyday human relationships. Relational racism occurs when a person experiences discriminatory behaviour from people he/she encounters in his/her daily life (e.g., being followed by sales people in stores; being ignored in a line up when their turn comes; being denied promotion by an employer when others are receiving one for doing less well; and having others avoid close personal contact, particularly in isolated locations or at night). Unfortunately, relational racism also manifests as more overtly damaging behaviour, including name-calling, as well as physical and sexual assault, and sometimes murder. Much of this behaviour is based on hostile attitudes informed by negative stereotypes (Levin, 2011; Dylan, Regehr, & Alaggia, 2008; Lamontagne, Canadian Electronic Library, & Canadian Women's Foundation, 2011).

Relational racism is certainly the most obvious form of racism. Therefore, we often perceive racism as being associated with this type of irrational bigotry that is demonstrated

in personal interactions and includes demeaning language, discriminatory behavior, and/or assault. Yet, by confining racism to the realm of the interpersonal, we neglect the more insidious and perhaps destructive impacts of structural racism (Klitgaard, 1972).

Structural racism

The term 'structural' refers to the economic, social and political institutions and processes of society, and the moral and cultural systems that underpin them (McGibbon, Waldren, & Jackson, In press). A structural theory of racism is based on the notion of racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva, 1997), which emerges when a dominant group is established and its power is reinforced through inequitable laws, policies, rules and regulations, as well as access to resources. Structural racism is perpetrated when policy makers and power brokers [re]produce or fail to redress structural inequities between racialized groups. In this way, the ideological concept of race is given material power in the social order, as it becomes linked to political and economic structures and systems (Essed & Goldberg, 2002).

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[7] Indigenous worldviews are based on ancient and sacred knowledge and traditions about human beings' interconnectedness with the natural world, the spirit world, the past and the future, as well as the need for balance and harmony in all relationships (Turtle Island Conservation, 2012).

[8] Methodology refers to the approach taken in research, while methods refer to ways of gathering information.

[9] The Tri-Council consists of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

McGibbon, Etowa, and McPherson (2008) describe how the ideological construction of racial difference is frequently used to generate and reinforce structural inequities through a cycle of oppression. Within these structures, stereotypes about Indigenous people (e.g., they are alcoholics, lazy, and irresponsible) bring about prejudices (to pre-judge based on a stereotype [Merriam-Webster Online, 2012b]; e.g., every Indigenous person I meet is a threat to me and/or a burden to society), which produces discrimination (an action or inaction based on prejudice; Dictionary.com, n.d.-b), which leads to oppression (institutional disregard and/or support of prejudicial and inequitable treatment of a racialized and stereotyped group; Dictionary.com, n.d.-c).

Structural racism is operationalized within the routine practices created and supported by racist ideologies.

Essed and Goldberg (2002) suggest that "these practices both adapt to and themselves contribute to changing social, economic and political conditions in society" (p. 185). Examples of racist structural practice can be seen in political actions that attempt to maintain dominance over Indigenous peoples (Berger, 2009). For instance, the *Indian Act* essentially conveys the status of 'Indian' on individuals through a variety of criteria that have never been sanctioned by Indigenous peoples. Likewise, the size, location and distribution of Indian reserves, which are lands set aside for residence by status Indians, were often not determined by, or in consultation with, Indigenous peoples (Alfred & Alfred, 2009). The residential school program established by the federal government and Christian churches forcibly removed thousands of Indigenous children from their homes in order to 'educate and civilize' them, yet caused physical,

emotional, and sexual harm to the children and produced complex intergenerational effects (Milloy, 1999). More recently (1960s to present), child welfare programs continue to apprehend Indigenous children from their homes at rates much higher than non-Indigenous children, often placing them in non-Indigenous homes away from family, community and cultural supports (Blackstock & Trocmé, 2005).

Structural racism frequently takes the form of exclusion from social society, social goods, social production and social consumption.

Social exclusion

Social exclusion physically and socially isolates racialized groups from equally participating in and benefiting from educational, economic, political, and health systems. These actions disadvantage certain racialized groups to the extent that they create unfair distribution of resources such as housing, health care, and opportunities for education, employment, justice, and social welfare. Wallis, Sunseri and Galabuzi (2010) describe social exclusion in four areas: social society, social goods, social production and social consumption.

Exclusion from *social society* occurs when institutional mechanisms create social, material and/or geographic isolation, which limit

participation in civil society [10] and political decision-making. Indigenous people have been excluded from Canadian society through the *Indian Act*, which defines them as wards of the federal government rather than as valuable citizens of Canada. This has been accomplished through centralization, which physically isolated Indigenous people on remote First Nations reserves and Inuit hamlets, and through policies that limit or curtail Indigenous peoples' ability to make decisions for their own communities (Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 1996).

Exclusion from *social goods* represents a failure to provide for the needs of a particular population or measures to restrict others from doing so. Several examples of the exclusion of Indigenous people from the attainment of social goods can be found in the poor quality of housing provided on First Nations reserves and Inuit communities, the lack of adequate federal investment in critical infrastructure such as water treatment and accessible roads, as well as lack of protection from ecologically unsafe extraction and/or development of natural resources on traditional lands (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

Exclusion from *social production* refers to the denial of opportunities to contribute to, or participate in, social and cultural activities of a society. This begins with an historical record that essentially ignores the harms suffered by Indigenous peoples during colonization of Canada and does not respectfully acknowledge the past or present contributions made by Indigenous peoples to the cultural (music, dance, art, spirituality), environmental (protection, sustainable resource development), and political (democratic government) development of Canadian society (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, (1996).

Exclusion from *social consumption* manifests as inadequate access to the usual forms of employment and participation in the economy and labour-market. For Indigenous people, this is revealed as a lack of educational and employment opportunities resulting from inadequate investment in the education and retention of Indigenous students, as well as inaccessible (physically and/or culturally) training or advanced education for those living in remote communities. Furthermore, as a result of relocation to isolated and/or inadequately resourced locations, there are very few opportunities

for economic development within Indigenous communities. Moreover, government policies have limited the degree to which Indigenous peoples can engage in economic development and the market economy (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

Symbolic racism

Symbolic racism was defined relatively recently to describe explicitly negative public response to forms of relational racism (Henry & Sears, 2002). Symbolic racism persists in some members of the dominant racialized group who might not be labeled as racist because they abhor overt relational racism, yet they often hold similar, albeit less aggressive, attitudes that serve to maintain the inequitable racial status quo (Tarman & Sears, 2005; Trepagnier, 2001). In this case, prejudices are revealed in less direct ways such as opposition to social justice-based racially targeted policies such as affirmative action policies or the Non-Insured Health Benefits program for status First Nations people (Vala, Pereira, & Costa-Lopes, 2009). Those individuals who believe that Indigenous people should not be given 'special' treatment and who make statements about their ancestors coming to Canada with

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[10] Civil society refers to non-governmental, special interest or faith-based organizations (e.g., Friends of the Earth, World Vision) that reflect the interests and goals of the public.

nothing and "climbing their way to the top through hard work and perseverance" are said to be demonstrating symbolic racism (Shuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997).

Embodied racism

Embodied racism is experienced through the reactions of the body to the anxieties of discrimination, alienation and social violence (Hook, 2006). Aside from creating inequities in the material conditions of life, the injustices of racism also exert powerful, physical, and psychological responses within individuals. Likewise, the social isolation and residential segregation of structural racism is experienced in the body as physical and psychological pathogens such as increased rates of chronic disease and mental health challenges (Collins & Williams, 1999; Trocmé, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). An example of this kind of racism can be found in the racially motivated formation of an 'Indigenous welfare state,' which has captured Indigenous people within punitive colonial systems that are directly and indirectly linked to the disproportionate burden of illness, injury, and premature death (van Krieken, 2004).

Colour-blindness

The recent concept of 'colour-blindness' suggests that racial differences are not important

and, on the surface, this is obviously true. This notion of 'racelessness' is regularly promoted in social science discourses that present race as a social construction and focus instead on differences between ethnic groups (Harrison, 1995). However, although the theory of biological race has been refuted, these discourses fail to consider the very real *social experience* of racism (Shanklin, 1998; Bernard, 2011). Consequently, this philosophy actually perpetuates inequities because it does not recognize that people are, in fact, treated differently based on the racialized or ethnic category to which they are socially assigned; racialized people experience discrimination and systemic oppression, whereas people categorized as white are imbued with an unearned privilege as a result of their skin colour. National statistics related to education and employment fully support the reality of this differential treatment (Galabuzi, 2006). Rather than promoting social justice, colour-blindness or racelessness essentially ignores the social realities of racialized inequities experienced within relationships, systems and structures, thereby maintaining the status quo. Civil rights activists claim that this is simply a new form of racism that manifests in more subtle and indirect ways than the more explicit forms of racial segregation and antagonism (Leach, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2006;

Blair, 2008). Some scholars have even suggested that the academy, as an institution of higher learning, is implicated in the maintenance of white privilege through the discourse of colour-blindness (Zamudio & Rios, 2006).

Conclusion

Race is not a biological fact but rather a socially constructed concept that was created and is maintained to establish disparities in the distribution of resources and power (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The roots of inequities within structures, systems and individual behaviours are deeply embedded in erroneous beliefs about innate differences between groups of people. This is particularly evident in relationships between people of European ancestry and Indigenous peoples in North America. Racism exists in several, often intersecting, forms including: negative and stereotypic attitudes about 'racialized' groups, the dominance of western knowledge systems, overt aggression and more subtle discriminatory behaviours, as well as structural inequities and social exclusion. In the next fact sheet, we will explore how a racist ideology and diverse forms of racism create and perpetuate disadvantage and poor health among Indigenous peoples.

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HOW TO USE THIS FACT SHEET

REFLECT

Talk to others in your community, reflect on the content of this fact sheet, and contemplate how you could make a difference in the health and well-being for yourself, your family or your community.

ENGAGE

Find local friendship centers, community organizations or groups where you can volunteer or participate in healthy positive actions. You too can share knowledge and make a difference in the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples' of Canada.

sharing knowledge · making a difference
partager les connaissances · faire une différence
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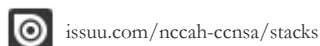
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Citation: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. (2013). *Understanding racism.* Prince George, BC: Author.

ISBN (Print): 978-1-77368-020-0
ISBN (Online): 978-1-77368-021-7

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