MICROASSAULTS: A PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION OF RACISM AS EXPERIENCED BY REFUGEE YOUTH LIVING IN ST. JOHN'S AND HAMILTON

Dr. James Baker is currently a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at McMaster University. His work has appeared in *Sociological Inquiry, National Identities*, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *Refuge,* and the *Journal of Youth Studies*. James has taught courses in sociology and political science and, for nearly 15 years, worked with the Association for New Canadians, an immigrant settlement agency located in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This short article examines microassaults as identified by 16 refugee youth living in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador and Hamilton, Ontario. Given that the respondents reported sadness, hurt, and anger following their experience of racism, these findings reinforce the need to ensure supports are available to assist refugee youth as they integrate into Canadian society.

Ce court article porte sur les micro-assauts identifiés par 16 jeunes réfugiés vivant à St. John's (Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador) et à Hamilton (Ontario). Comme les répondants ont rapporté de la tristesse, de la douleur et de la colère à la suite de leur expérience du racisme, ces constatations renforcent le besoin de s'assurer que du soutien soit disponible pour aider les jeunes réfugiés à s'intégrer dans la société canadienne.

While immigration scholarship strongly suggests that both immigrants and refugees experience racism, discrimination, and prejudice, for refugees such experiences have additional physical and mental health implications. Most forms of contemporary racism experienced by refugees are subtle and experienced in everyday life (Baker 2013; Phan, 2003). Yet, this remains largely under-researched and under-examined, especially within the Canadian context. For this reason, this short article examines the racial microaggressions faced by 16 young refugees aged 14-25 who have resettled in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador and Hamilton, Ontario.

BACKGROUND

Empirical research in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States has documented that refugees and visible minorities are often marginalized, treated poorly due to their race, or experience racially motivated violence. Hadley and Patil (2009) suggest that resettled refugees "are at a particularly high risk of discrimination because they show many outward signs of their minority status, including dress, skin color, language, neighbour of residence, religion, and socioeconomic status" (p. 505-6). In fact, refugee youth are an especially vulnerable group given that they often enter countries of resettlement with high levels of trauma exposure and significant mental health needs including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Moreover, Ellis et al. (2008) argue that ongoing stressors, such as those brought on by experiencing racism, discrimination, and prejudice, can further increase refugee youths' risk to healthy development and potentially function as traumatic reminders. This is especially relevant for youth who have fled their country due to persecution associated with their ethnic or religious identity.

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSION THEORY

First coined in 1970, racial microaggressions can be understood as brief, daily, verbal or non-verbal exchanges that communicate negative views, ideas, or beliefs to people of colour because they belong to a racial minority group. While Sue and his colleagues (2007) have developed a racial microaggression taxonomy that comprises three types, this article will focus specifically on the first type - *microassaults* - which are verbal or non-verbal acts designed to defame an individual through name calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Despite the growing trend towards research on racial microaggression theory using psychology, few studies have been conducted using a sociological lens and little research has been done in Canada.

EXPERIENCES OF MICROASSAULTS

The most commonly experienced form of microassults faced by refugee youth in St. John's and Hamilton come in the form of name calling or avoidant behaviour. As reproduced below, one participant stated that she had been called the n-word by "Canadian girls" while another young black male indicated that a white woman crossed the street following his approach. When interviewed, they said:

> P1. …In my class some people swear, they say "oh n—ger." Canadian girls say to Somali girls "n—ger."[1]
>
> I: How does that make you feel?
>
> P1: It made me angry
>
> P2: The only racism I experienced is when I'm walking at night time and if I pass a white lady and she walks to the other side, it makes me feel uncomfortable because I think I'm not gonna hurt nobody, I'm just walking on the street. They're probably not racist but it's how their mind is put on, they probably put all black people in same category.
>
> P3: Yes. Someone hates you but they don't wanna say it … they like to keep it to hurt more, so it's inside, a lot of people show you love but a lot of hate. To be honest a lot of people hate me too here. Sometimes people treat you different because you're Muslim, they say "Oh you're Muslim."

In each case, the participants had equally reasonable responses to their experiences as the actions of the white majority reinforces negative stereotypes regarding minorities. In fact, such responses underpin the notion that some white people "engage in racialized performances to show people of color that they are *trespassers* into white space" (Picca and Feagin 2007, p. 80; emphasis in original). The second participant quoted above poignantly notes the unintended and subtle outcomes of their actions. While he senses that the person may not be racist, their actions nonetheless belie a different feeling. Similarly, the third participant quoted above notes that while she feels she is disliked or hated due to her religion, her peers do not actively demonstrate it. It is clear that these examples have the effect of reinforcing the view that while Canada purports itself to be multicultural nation, it nonetheless belies a lack of tolerance for diversity. As a result, it appears that some Canadians simultaneously hold egalitarian values while exhibiting racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours.

WHAT MICROASSAULTS OF REFUGEE YOUTH SHOW

In many of the interviews conducted for this research, refugee youth reported feelings of sadness, hurt, and anger resulting from the actions of white Canadians while others felt ashamed of their identity. This was especially prevalent among the Muslim youth, who felt that they were being unfairly targeted due to their religion. Perhaps one of the most troubling outcomes of this research is the supposed "normalizing" of racism insomuch that some youth were advised by friends and family members to expect it or to ignore it — a point made in my previous research on refugee youth (Baker 2013). Indeed, such approaches are problematic as it may lead to higher degrees of isolation, alienation, segregation, depression, and concomitant stress among minority youth. It is clear that there is a need to respond to and address their experiences in order to ensure these youth are able to fully integrate into and experience the fruits of Canada's 'multicultural' society.

1 Following the example of Essed (1997), this article does not spell out racial slurs unless it is necessary for comprehension.

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