CHALLENGING RACISM THROUGH ASSET MAPPING AND CASE STUDY APPROACHES: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE AFRICAN DESCENT COMMUNITIES IN VANCOUVER, BC

Rebecca Aiyesa, is a Social Worker (and a former student of Sasha); she served as the research assistant of the project team.

Dr. Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. He is the lead co-researcher for the BC component of the IAP project.

INTRODUCTION

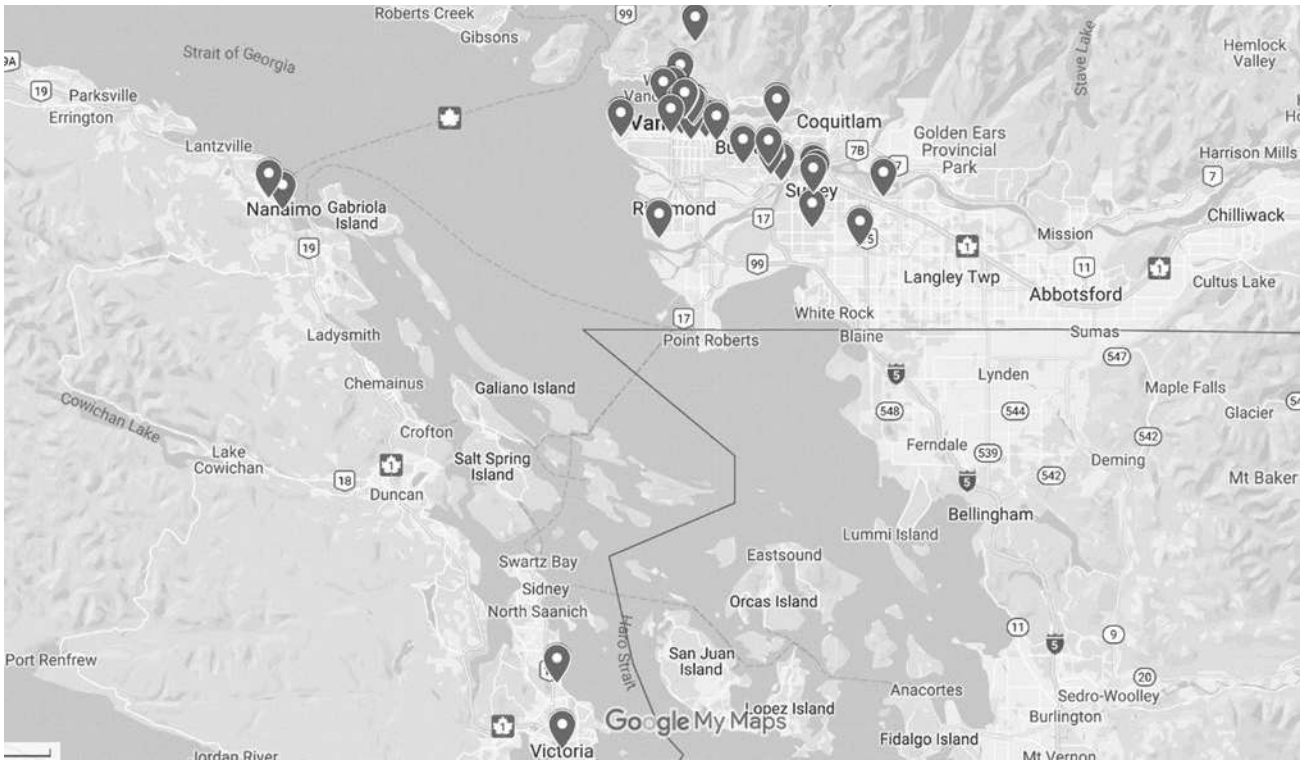
Experiences of "race," gender and accent-based discrimination are prevalent within African Descent Communities (Henry and Ginzberg, 1985; Henry, 1999; Creese and Kambere, 2003; Tettey and Puplampu, 2005; Francis, 2009; Creese, 2010; Creese, 2011; Creese and Wiebe, 2012; Francis and Yan, 2016). In this study, we employed asset mapping, and case study approaches to explore perceived oppressions due to "race" among Canadians of African descent and immigrants of African descent currently residing in Vancouver, BC. The study is part of the interprovincial African Canadian Resource Network Inter-Action Project (ACRN-IAP) focusing on addressing Mental Health, Social and Economic cost of the Intersection of oppression based on "Race", Gender and Religious differences experienced within and by Canadians of African descent. Dr. Christine Lwanga was the Lead Researcher and Social Development Consultant for ACRN and served as a co-principal researcher alongside Dr. Michael Baffoe, a Professor at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba. Christine co-facilitated the work in Vancouver with Yasin Kiraga the Founder and Executive Director of African Descent Society BC, who hosted the focused group discussions (FGDs).

METHODOLOGY

Asset mapping is a tool widely used in community development to promote sustainability and find new ways to connect people. The tool can help communities to identify individuals, associations, institutional, economic, physical, and cultural assets (Kretzmann, & McKnight, 1993; Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2011; Lightfoot, McCleary, & Lum, 2014). We used asset mapping to identify African descent community assets in BC and to invite local leaders to participate in a full day workshop. Through internet search, we identified 39 community organizations within the Greater Vancouver area (see Appendix A). The asset map was developed (see figure 1). Each organization was invited to send 1-2 representatives to the workshop; 10 organizations were represented at a full day workshop conducted in winter 2019, during the African Heritage / 'Black' History Month.

The workshop comprised a general discussion about research with the intent to support community development; on human rights, its essence and purpose; and the experience of people of African Descent in Canada. This was followed by two FGDs on the experiences of discrimination and oppression with a specific focus on "race" and

FIGURE 1: BC AFRICAN DESCENT COMMUNITIES ASSETS MAP



racism. There was an emphasis on oppression arising from the perception that Canadians and immigrants of African descent comprise a different "race". FGDs provide a safe space for expression, discussion and emphasis when appropriate (Creese, 2011). Workshop participants included those identified as professionals with authority in human rights, various professionals and community leaders; they referred to one human race, clarifying that the other "race(s)" is a social construct with no biological or scientific basis as was historically implied (UNESCO Declaration, 1978).

This paper presents case summaries from one of the FGDs, while the analysis includes the data analysis from all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All participants admitted having experienced "race" based discrimination and oppression due to physical appearances and accent in the Canadian context and contributing to self-doubt, conflicted self-image and identity.

The highlights of the findings from the research include:

- participants who encountered discrimination and oppression due to "race", internalized the experience.
- participants who experienced oppression at work, school or home reported a high level of psychological, emotional and physical stress.

Two cases – a youth male and an adult female are presented to highlight key themes; we use pseudonyms.

MARCUS

Marcus expressed frustration that his supervisor usually sends him on errands during important staff meetings and he was never debriefed on the discussion or outcome. Yet he was reprimanded for not following the current policy. Marcus explained that he felt everyone was against him at work. His co-workers would sit together for lunch chatting and when he joins the table or attempts to join the conversation, everyone would "stylishly leave the table or engage with something else." He indicated that one of the workmates attempted to explain their behaviour by saying, "we do not understand your accent."

Marcus expounded about his despair when he explained that he was unemployed for a while after he resigned from another "bad work situation." Because Marcus could not secure employment right away, he depended on those around him for financial support. Marcus clarified that he struggles with trusting people or sharing his experience, especially with individuals from the same "race" as those who mistreated him.

ASHER

Asher relocated to Canada and immediately prepared for a career in education. "I was a trained counsellor in my former country and volunteered with different organizations here in Vancouver. I got excellent recommendation letters. I also got excellent grades in the pre-entrance courses and got into the program successfully, but when it was time for my practicum, I started experiencing difficulty from my coordinator."

Asher described her coordinator as another immigrant from a different "race," and explained that he doubted her Canadian experience. "He asked me when I arrived in Canada that I have gotten this much experience. I told the coordinator that I have been here for one year. He looked at me and said I am not qualified to attend my practicum. Another board member looked through my credentials and said I am qualified and should be given a chance. During my practicum, the same coordinator notified me that I was suspended from the program. I questioned the authority to know what happened, I also wrote a petition to the board, but I wasn't given any response. Out of frustration, I left the program, got a cleaning job. I felt let down, I would cry while at work. I couldn't understand why I was treated that way. I wanted to know what I did wrong but there was no explanation. When the board called me back, I wasn't prepared to return as I had lost confidence and the experience was still traumatizing. I grieved the process for a while, and then I reapplied to another university got into the program. I re-explained my ordeal during the admission interview process to the panel; they did not understand why I was treated that way."

Participants at Asher's FGD were in tears as Asher narrated her experience, and some other participants had equally traumatizing life experiences. As a result of internalized oppression and high levels of stress, some participants referred to being unable to maintain healthy working relationships with colleagues, supervisors and at home. Their productivity levels were decreased and this affected their finances as well as other challenges in life.

Creese and Kambere's (2003) study shows that women of African descent are marked based on the intonation of their voices, their accent and skin tone. Although Carter (2007) suggests that there is no direct correlation between oppression due to racism and trauma, participants' shared lived experiences of discrimination and oppression established that the experience from racism contributed to psychological distress. This included anxiety disorder, clinical depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD, personality disorder – including incidences of uncontrollable anger, being hospitalized and incarcerated, in addition to experiences that set in motion the process of healing.

Like in Asher's case, some participants adopted various strategies of resistance to assert their self-dignity, worth and respect and that of those around them, and to challenge oppressive systems. Pease (2007) describes the response strategies of resistance as opposition consciousness. This is referring to when oppressed groups acknowledge the injustice done to individuals within their communities and demand a change in policy, economy and society (Pease, 2010, p.5).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three key strategies can be used to address the identified themes.

1. ENGAGE IN CRITICAL RACE THEORY

One way to address internalized oppression is to employ critical race theory and analysis and recognize language as a form of power and the need to transmit historically grounded cultural identity and positive self-identity to contradict misrepresentations in public spaces. Researching and learning about one's culture can be a source of strength, as it gives a more accurate view than what is being communicated by the media or society at large.

2. ADDRESS PERSISTING STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATING AND OPPRESSION

Civic engagement and positive self-identity is critical for those who experience oppression. Individuals, families, organizations, service providers and policymakers need to prioritize, recognize and address oppression and its toll on the health and wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole. Policymakers must engage in critical theory and approaches against discriminatory and oppressive policies, and promote safe environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds can thrive.

3. WORK IN COLLABORATION WITH OTHERS - NOT IN ISOLATION

Structural violence is a systematic way in which social structures place avoidable limitations on groups of people that constrains them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible, as well as deny them the opportunity for emotional and physical, etc. wellbeing. It is critical to developing clear goals, boundaries and guidelines of working together. Individuals, families, organizations and all public institutions should embrace human rights and social justice values through leadership principles that involve active listening, creation of safe spaces for crucial conversation about "race," racism, internalized and other levels and forms of oppression.

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