MIGRATION, IDENTITY, AND OPPRESSION

AN INTERPROVINCIAL COMMUNITY INITIATIVE EXPLORING AND ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF OPPRESSION AND RELATED HEALTH, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The ACRN's mandate is to provide services, information and referrals, and to undertake research to promote programs and policies that support capacity development and the full participation of peoples of African descent in Canadian society. Working in close collaboration with its member organizations, specifically the Saskatchewan African Canadian Heritage Museum (SACHM), Daughters of Africa (DoA) and Prairie Somali Community, ACRN approached the Canadian government in 2016 for funding to address the internal and external experiences of discrimination and oppression that contribute to the sustained marginalization of the communities. The project focused on the three human rights UN-prohibited grounds of discrimination, "race," gender and religious difference, and the impact of this discrimination on health, social and economic wellbeing.

This project was implemented in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia through the collaborative efforts of the lead author and Dr. Michael Baffoe (co-principal researcher), Professor of Social Work, University of Manitoba; Dr. Oleksandr (Sasha) Kondrashov (co-researcher), Assistant Professor of Social Work, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC; African Community Organization of Manitoba Inc. (ACOMI) and the African Descent Society of British Columbia. The Saskatchewan project team (ACRN Staff and volunteers) worked in close collaboration with the Human Rights Commission of Saskatchewan and the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical social theorists such as Ignatieff (2007) and Mullaly and West (2018) have argued that while contemporary anti-discrimination human rights work carried out within a liberal democratic framework has contributed positively to public policy, it has had limited success with respect to human and

social development. Critical race theory helps us to understand that "race" as a human identity is a problematic social construct (UNESCO, 1978). Research on the meaning and role of "race" within human rights work has substantiated this (Lwanga, 2004). Furthermore, history has shown that differences such as "race," gender, and religious differences have been consistently used to dehumanize and exploit the "other" by those in positions of power (Bishop, 2015; Mullaly & West, 2018). Critical theory and postmodern thinking draw our attention to the relationship between the UN-prohibited grounds of discrimination and oppression, and how they intersect at multiple levels (internalized, interpersonal, structural, cultural/religious and systemic) and in multiple forms (exploitation, violence etc.). They also expose some of the key concepts related to discrimination, oppression/ un-earned privilege and sustained inequality, such as human differences, identity by self and others, and abuse of power (Mullaly & West, 2018).

Critical and holistic social work theory and practice have also informed this project, specifically Lee, Ng, Leung and Chan's (2009) work on body-mind-spirit and healing in clinical social work. Related research among professional social workers has shown that the processes of healing and growth from internalized and external oppression entails the development of personal values that are consistent with human rights values, and are based on deeper knowledge gained through lived experience beyond values that had been gained through intellectual knowledge (Lwanga, 2016). More recent publications in this area include Hick and Stokes (2018). Lastly, this project draws on Elias and Paradies's (2016) public health research in Australia. They estimated the mental health cost associated with racial discrimination (depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD)) to the Australian economy to be $37.9 billion/year between 2001 and 2011.

METHODOLOGY

In this project we defined discrimination as a single event of unfair and unjust treatment based on perceived "race," gender and religious differences and, oppression as the state of being subjected to sustained unfair and unjust treatment and control. Oppression involves the persistent misuse of power and abuse in human relationships.

There were two levels of FGDs: a) those who self-identified as community leaders (i.e., sought to use human relationships to empower others or practiced positive influence) and b) individual participants who wanted guidance on how to overcome discrimination and/or oppression.

Designed as a participatory action research (PAR) project, FGDs were full-day workshops that included the following educational steps and critical self-reflection activities: (See Figures 1–4 for visual representations of workshop key concepts and activities.)

a. completion of research consent and confidentiality forms;

b. a presentation on human rights and UN-prohibited grounds of discrimination focusing on the three, their intersectionality, and different levels and form of oppression (see Figs. 1–3);

c. two individual exercises in critical anti-oppressive practice. The first one reflecting on a lived experience of oppression, second one, the participants were the source of oppression as a way to foster critical self-reflection, reflexivity and on-going mindfulness practice (see Fig. 4);

d. a presentation of guidelines in telling an anonymized story, and the importance of confidentiality in personal and community development work;

e. FGDs of 6–8 participants facilitated by research assistants and notes takers;

f. a plenary session discussion on the health, social and economic costs of oppression and effective strategies in overcoming oppression.

FIGURE 1: INTERSECTIONALITY OF OPPRESSION (ADAPTED FROM MULLALY & WEST, 2018)

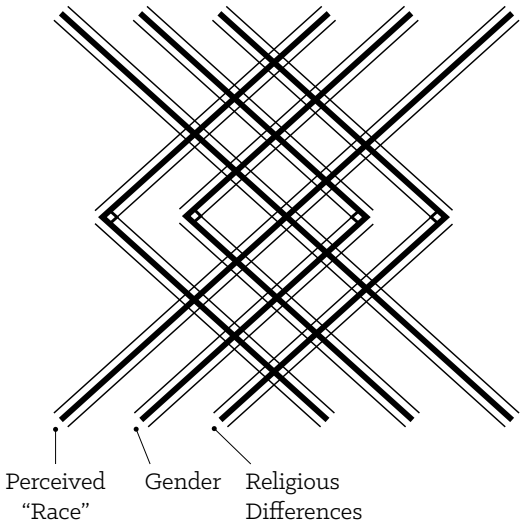


FIGURE 2: INTERSECTING LEVELS OF OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE (ADAPTED FROM MULLALY & WEST, 2018)

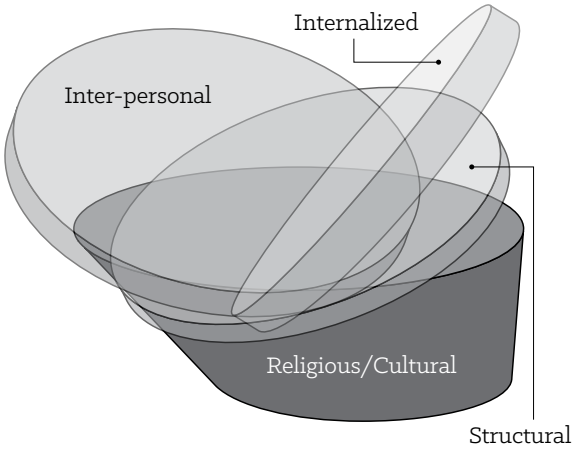


FIGURE 3: DIVERSE AND DYNAMIC FORMS OF OPPRESSION (MULLALY & WEST, 2018)

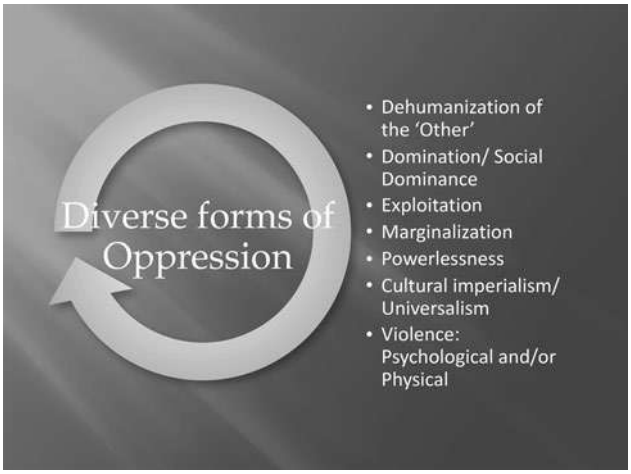
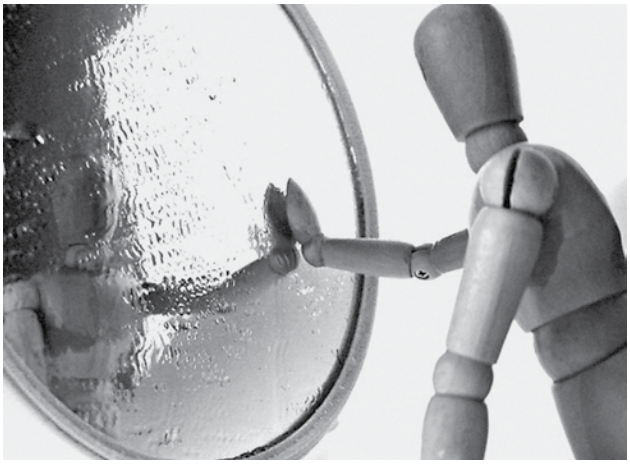


FIGURE 4: PERSONAL CRITICAL REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY ACTIVITIES



Participants shared one example of a lived experience of oppression in detail. The main research question with supporting questions:

What are examples of oppression based on "race," gender and/or religious differences within your family/community and/or in the wider Canadian society that you have been involved in?

- What are the human, social and economic costs of oppression to the individual, family and wider society?
- What strategies did you use to support overcoming oppression?
- How did the status of the person(s) involved (immigrant, refugee, naturalized Canadian, first or multi-generation Canadian) play into the experience of oppression?

TABLE 1: COMMUNITY LEADER AND INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT OF FGDS

City/Province	# of community leaders	# of FGDs	# of FGDs	# of individual participants	# of RAs & note takers	# of FGDs
Regina, SK	20	6	3	28	8	4
Saskatoon, SK	7	3	2	6	2	1
Prince Albert, SK	–	–	–	16	2	3
Vancouver, BC	9	3	2	–	–	–
Winnipeg, MB	18	4	3	–	–	–
Total	**54**	**16**	**10**	**50**	**12**	**8**

FINDINGS

There were no clear differences in lived experiences of oppression between participants who identified themselves as recent immigrants and those who had lived in Canada for generations. Sharing lived experiences of oppression revealed:

- distinctions between positive and negative self-identity and; self-identity and how others and Canadian government policy and institutions identify people of African descent;
- a relationship between migration, adopting new identity and discrimination/oppression;
- that self-identity and how others identify the individual can negatively impact self-image, that person's health, social and economic wellbeing plus how this process can get entrenched over time; and
- both functional and dysfunctional processes of overcoming oppression.

The following three case examples were selected to represent data collected from the three provinces. They expose conflicted relationships within families, communities and public spaces coupled with faltering resilience.

MIRIAM

Miriam immigrated with her husband and three children. When her youngest started school, with more time by herself she recalled her childhood dream to become a teacher. Her husband Moses was loving but also protective and controlling. He worked in another province for 2–3 weeks at a time. Miriam believed that any discussion about her attending university would be interpreted as disrespectful based on their religion/culture. She discussed with a close relative-Kate, who child minded while she attended classes. Overtime, another family friend babysat. One evening Miriam was told that a teenager visiting had raped her daughter. She was shocked and upset… When Moses heard about it all, he was devastated and refused to forgive Miriam. He left the province, remarried, and started a new family. At the time of the FGD, Miriam had stopped attending school—overwhelmed with grief and responsibility.

YVONE

Yvone, a 1st-generation Canadian, had worked in a newcomer settlement agency but quit that job. She recounted: "I noticed workers always mistreat immigrants from Africa. I found myself standing up for the women and children… It got to the extent that the workers started calling me an advocate. I did not take that as an offence… I was always stressed during and after work… even though not directly experiencing the mistreatment. This… also affected my family life. The social worker… seemed unable to address the oppressive behavior of the staff… I could not take it any longer."

DESMOND

Desmond immigrated as a skilled worker and immediately started working in a public service agency. He worked alongside other equity group members but was frustrated because of what he referred to as a lack of communication and team spirit. He did not feel supported to succeed by his manager or his colleagues. He relented, "I am looking for opportunities to improve my skills outside my work place."

CONCLUSION

These preliminary findings confirm the urgent need for public policy and programs in recognition of the vulnerability of individuals, families and African-descent communities in the three participating provinces and across Canada (see Nestel 2012, among others). At the time of the FGDs, none of the cities that participated had fully functional organizations or gave an impression of being a flourishing community hub despite settlements of thriving families as early as 1859 (Philip and Josephine Sullivan's family as an example) in Vancouver. Participants referred to systemic oppression, "racial battle fatigue," and lack of a sense of belonging. The project exposed the underlying root causes, the legacy of and persisting oppression, alongside with the related multiple, layered and complex problems. The International Decade of People of African Descent should bring these issues at the forefront and support open dialogue linked to the development of concrete strategies to reverse this human and social tragedy.

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TABLE 2: HEALTH, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF OPPRESSION, AS REPORTED BY PARTICIPANTS

Health Costs	Social Costs	Economic Costs
PHYSICAL HEALTH • Episodic and chronic stress in families, communities and employment • Chronic stress from the accumulation of stress **EMOTIONAL HEALTH** • Humiliation because of persistent violation of human rights and dignity • Emotional instability from marginalization and dehumanization **MENTAL HEALTH** • Loss of self-esteem coupled with self-doubt and confused/negative self-identity • Self-hatred • Internalization of oppression • Anxiety and depression • Inter-generational trauma • Hospitalizations of community members with PTSD	**DEHUMANIZING RELATIONSHIP** • Poor relationships in contexts where discrimination and oppression are experienced • Lack of sense of belonging among recent immigrants and even among multi-generational African-descent Canadians **SUSTAINED DYSFUNCTIONAL CONNECTIONS** • Challenges in maintaining relationship with spouse, children, community, and supervisors • No place for meaningful reprieve or a chance for healing **ISOLATION** • Avoidance of interactions to prevent episodic reminders or recurrent exposure to discrimination/oppression • Inability to communicate freely and comfortably at work, school within the communities and even at home **LACK OF PHYSICAL COMMUNITY PRESENCE AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS** • Poor social coping skills • Inability to access public resources and programs • No effective support system	**FAMILY LEVEL** • Working two jobs and long hours at minimum wage that do not reflect their level of education • Families in low-income status because of loss of jobs or quitting jobs **COMMUNITY LEVEL** • Communities are poorly funded and lack governance and administrative structures that support progress and address systemic barriers • Limited resources and lack of training in democratic processes contribute to conflicted and dysfunctional relationships **ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL** • Feeling less obliged to perform optimally at the workplace **SOCIETAL LEVEL** • Large numbers of highly skilled immigrants of African descent function below optimal level within society; • Others fail to integrate and eventually re-immigrate to other countries.

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