THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA

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INTRODUCTION

The Black Experience Project aims to study the experiences of the Black community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), including the challenges, opportunities, and factors leading to success in this community. Extensive literature shows that racism and systemic inequalities are ongoing issues for Black people in North America, and in the GTA more specifically.

Over 400,000 individuals in the GTA self-identify as "Black." Canada's largest and most diverse city, the GTA holds almost half of Canada's total Black population. Despite this, economic, social and political inequality continues to affect racialized communities in the city, and anti-Black racism persists in overt and systemic forms. Toronto also holds the title of the city with the worst income inequality in Canada, a phenomenon that disproportionately affects racialized populations (Dinca-Panaitescu et al., 2017; Lightman & Gingrich, 2018). In 2016, over 20% of racialized people in Canada were low-income, compared to 12% of non-racialized people (OCASI, 2019). In 2011, the median employment income for Black individuals in the Toronto CMA was $43,090, compared to an average of $56,543 among non-racialized individuals and $50,787 among the total population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In the same year, 25% of Black individuals in Toronto were low-income, compared to 11% of non-racialized individuals and 15% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2011). While similar statistics have been presented year after year, accounts of individual experiences in light of this context are missing from the literature.

On the other hand, this project seeks to bring long-overdue recognition of persistent activism and numerous contributions by the Black community in the face of the nation's history of racism, segregation and exploitation.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed Critical Race Theory, which asserts that, while overt racism is problematized, much of the causes of oppression are normalized in society (Gillborn, 2015). Moreover, it identifies race as a social construct that perpetuates bias and marginalization of certain groups, compounded by various facets of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, class, or religion (Ontario, 2016). The study sought to answer the question, "What does it mean to be Black in the GTA?"

The first stage of the research involved extensive outreach to the Black community and discussions with individuals and community leaders across the GTA to define the issues of most importance to them. The data collection phase consisted of in-depth interviews with 1504 individuals 16 and older who self-identify as "Black" and live in the GTA. Participants varied in terms of location of residence (within the GTA), age, gender, income, ethnic background, and other characteristics.

FINDINGS

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Identity, in its diverse forms, was identified as an important part of participants' the lived experience. Participants described their identities in multi-faceted and overlapping categories, identifying to various degrees with ethnicity, country of origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, profession and residential neighborhood. 53% used the term "Black" to identify their racial identity, 14% preferred the term "African," while the remainder used specific regional/national identities, hyphenated Canadian identities, or multiple identities. A strong sense of Black identity and solidarity with the community was shared among participants. 97% of participants agreed that being Black is an important part of their identity; 75% strongly agreed. 96% agreed that it is important for black people to support other black people to be successful; 78% strongly agreed.

Participants were more active in their communities than the broader Canadian population, through membership in community groups, volunteering and voting. 48% of participants belonged to groups that address the interests of the Black community. Those who belonged to these groups were also more likely to be involved politically than those who were not. 76% of Black community group members followed politics very or somewhat closely, and 67% voted in the last provincial election and the last municipal election. Among non-members of Black community groups, only 57% followed politics very or somewhat closely, and 55% and 51% voted in the last provincial and municipal elections, respectively.

For some participants, political and social engagement, including through educating others and through the arts, was linked to experiences with racism, used as a way to advocate and overcome challenges. Participants highlighted the strengths they saw within the Black community, with half saying that perseverance, resilience and success was among its greatest strengths. 49% also agreed that community values was a core strength, and 67% said the community's most important contributions to the GTA were its cultural and social influence, and its leadership. In discussing their hopes for the Black community, 61% said they hoped to build a stronger community through unity and support, 35% wanted more political advocacy and social consciousness within the community and 30% wanted a stronger education system.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Racism was identified as a prevalent issue in this community, with 20% of men and 16% of women saying they frequently experienced unfair treatment due to race. Forty-six% and 51%, respectively, said they occasionally faced unfair treatment. In schools, half of participants felt that being Black presented challenges not faced by other students, but Black students benefitted from the presence of Black peers and teachers. For BEP participants who went to a high school in Canada where most or some teachers were Black, 84% felt they received a good education, 83% enjoyed school, and only 21% faced challenges due to their race. Only 58% received a good education and 59% enjoyed school when there were few Black teachers. 63% received a good education and 56% enjoyed school when none of the teachers were Black. Gender was a factor as well. Male students across age groups generally said they were well-supported by teachers, but age mattered for women, with older women feeling less supported at school than younger women.

In the workplace, 74% of participants reported being happy and feeling respected in their workplace, but only 63% were satisfied with career progress. One in three participants noted that overt racism and discriminatory workplace culture was a challenge at work. 68% of participants said that Black people in the GTA are frequently treated unfairly when seeking employment. In fact, 19% cited discrimination as the biggest challenge to finding meaningful employment. Finding job opportunities and having the right qualifications were the biggest challenges for 31% and 26%, respectively.

When comparing the situation in Canada to the United States, just over half of participants thought Blacks were

better off in Canada. Only 33% said racism is less obvious in Canada than in the US, 20% said there are more interracial relationships, and a mere 14% said there are more opportunities for success. Only 30% said there was less violence and better police relations in Canada. This low number corresponds with participants' reported negative interactions with law enforcement, with over half saying they had been stopped by police. Among men aged 25 to 44, 79% had been stopped and 60% had been harassed by police. Among men in this age group, 31% had been arrested, compared to 15% of all participants. 71% reported being treated unfairly within the criminal justice system because they were Black.

Participants were affected by racism to varying degrees, with intersectional identities influencing their experiences. While 28% of participants said that discrimination in their day-to-day lives bothered them a lot, 52% of self-identified LGBTQ2S+ individuals were considerably bothered by discrimination. Anti-black racism was also felt more strongly by those with lower or self-reported "inadequate incomes," of which 34% said they were frequently treated rudely or disrespectfully, compared to only 7% of those with enough income to save. Youth were also more greatly affected, with participants between the ages of 16 and 24 being more likely to view racism and stereotypes as persistent challenges, with half saying that racism was the biggest challenge for the Black community, compared to 20% of those aged 55 and older. The majority of participants also felt that those outside the Black community were likely to assign negative attributes to Black people, such as crime or lack of ambition, sentiments which were particularly felt by youth.

CONCLUSION

The Black Experience Project identified persistent inequalities faced by Black people in Canada, while also highlighting the strength and contributions of the Black community in the GTA. The goal was to give the community an opportunity to tell their own stories, to transcend the binaries of political rhetoric and popular media, and instead portray them as unique individuals with a common connection. Due to the extent and complexity of the study, this paper is far from a comprehensive analysis of the information gained from the 1504 participants. However, it demonstrates that this unique research design has immense potential for informing further research, both on Black communities and on other populations. It can offer a guidepost on how to support communities through research and knowledge-sharing, providing individuals within diverse communities with the space to make their own voices heard.

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