# IMAGINING CANADA, NEGOTIATING BELONGING

## Understanding the Experiences of Racism of Second Generation Canadians of Colour

**ABSTRACT**

Drawing on information gathered from focus groups with second generation Canadians of colour, this paper explores their experiences and perceptions of racism, as well as their feelings of belonging in Canada. It additionally addresses the ways in which the second generation compares their experiences with those of their parents.

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### A colour portrait of Canada

Second generation Canadians of colour represent a segment of society faced with unique challenges. Drawing from a bourgeoning collection of work on the topic, as well as my own fieldwork, I outline the perceptions and experiences of racism of second generation Canadians of colour and how they influence their feelings of belonging in the national community. I additionally address how second generation individuals compare their experiences of racial discrimination to those of their parents.

The prevalence and effects of racism have not escaped the lens of critical and politically active citizens, officials and researchers. Determined to uncover the countless forms of inequity facing people of colour in Canada, a significant collection of work has centred on the meaning and utility of national identity and its exclusionary tendencies. Statistics and research evincing startling rates of racial discrimination have, over the last three decades, prompted considerable studies in equity, citizenship and belonging. Recent research by Reitz and Banerjee (2007) examining the relationship between racial inequality, discrimination and the social integration of racial minorities in Canada reveals that racial inequality is a significant issue and that the extent of discrimination varies not only among racial groups but across generations. In fact, their findings show that second generation individuals are less likely to report feeling like they belong in Canada than both their parents and their White counterparts.

The ethnocultural makeup of Canadian society has been transformed over the last several decades by different waves of immigration, with the result being that the country is fast becoming one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world. This ethnocultural shift has been paralleled with efforts by both the Canadian government and citizens alike to deal with novel immigration issues. Perhaps the most significant of these efforts is the Canadian government's policy of multiculturalism (1971), which is credited with not only instituting the idea of cultural pluralism into Canadian government but also incorporating it into the Canadian identity (Wood and Gilbert 2005). There is much debate as to whether multiculturalism is a discourse that legitimizes difference or serves as a tool of integration that produces or reinforces racism in Canada (Henry and Tator 2006). While there are numerous supporters of the potential for multiculturalism to positively impact the lives of racialized minorities in Canada, there are also critics who claim that the policy is ill-equipped to deal with the inequity in contemporary Canadian society (Kobayashi 1993).

Regardless of the formation of government branches and divisions dedicated to reducing racism in Canada and the implementation of policies to counter the phenomenon, racism persists as perhaps one of the greatest barriers to the realization of full social citizenship for racialized minorities. As the *Ethnic Diversity Survey* (Canada 2003) shows, experiences of racial discrimination are an unfortunate fact of life for one in five people of colour living in Canada. Although second generation racialized Canadians currently represent just less than two percent of the total population, projected statistics for visible minority populations in Canada suggest that they will represent an increasingly significant segment of the country's total population.[1] As such, the issues facing this group of Canadians will increasingly become those facing Canadians as a whole and will demand the action and resources capable of addressing them.

### Visible minority or invisible majority?

Focus group accounts of second generation Canadians of colour reveal that there is variation in the degree to which this group of Canadians is racialized into the Canadian cultural landscape. Racialization refers to the practice of defining otherness through the attribution of connotative meanings to particular objects, features and processes and entails the construction of categories of population that serve to differentiate, render inferior and exclude various groups (Anthias 1998:574). For the second generation, somatic characteristics including skin colour are used to mark their body as different from the mainstream "White" body, thus rendering them "visible." Interestingly, research with this group shows that there are degrees of visibility associated with their identity, or put another way, a range of awareness of the one's position of difference within the dominant society, a position that is dynamic through time and across social situations. This visibility is most commonly associated with, but not limited to, negative stereotypes that are governed by historical context, the socio-political climate and current events. As the two accounts below highlight, not only does there appear to be a "range of difference" within which racialized Canadians are placed, but also some ethnocultural groups are consequently rendered more visible than others.

> For me I've never been identified as a visible minority unless I tell people that I'm Spanish – then they look down [on me]. Typically no one really sees me as a racial minority or a visible minority. I've never had that. (FG1-04)

> The week or two after September 11th you're kind of like, nobody ever said anything directly, but you can sort of tell that people are doing a double take. You are a lot more visible than you had been a few hours before. (FG3-02)

Contrary to the label ascribed by mainstream culture and the Government of Canada, most second generation Canadians of colour do not incorporate the identity of "visible minority"[2] into their self-image. On the contrary, what emerges in discussions is a desire to resist this classification that distinguishes them from a pan-Canadian identity and further reinforces their racial exclusion. Instead, they view themselves as representatives of an "invisible majority" whose membership, while often denied or restricted by society, is nonetheless as equally valid and Canadian. Ironically, it is the Canadian government's racial classification that excludes second generation Canadians of colour and is not, in most cases, a self-imposed distinction. This paradox does not escape the second generation racialized Canadian.

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### Racism and the generation gap

While there are many similarities between the experiences of immigrants of colour and their Canadian-born children, there remain several key differences that significantly influence sense of belonging. The most important of these include awareness of the changing nature of racial exclusions and balancing of multiple cultural identities. Second generation racialized Canadians are keenly aware of the changing nature and forms of racism in Canada, and this knowledge has been gained through stories told by their parents about their experiences of immigration. Although there is a general consensus among the group that racial discrimination is prevalent in today's society, many believe that they face less racism than their parents. Discussions of the forms of racism reveal sensitivity to a shift from overt acts of discrimination to increasingly subtler forms.[3]

Crafting and supporting a link between the culture and beliefs of their parents and a "Canadian way of life" is a vital yet challenging element of belonging for second generation Canadians and plays a significant role in processes of identification. Although engaging in this bridging process shapes new possibilities for self-definition, it reportedly increases feelings of exclusion from either or both cultures. As a result, second generation Canadians of colour report difficulties negotiating the terms of their cultural memberships, a struggle that they feel is different from any experienced by their immigrant parents.

> Things changed a lot from Jamaica, but they still have their Jamaican community. Whereas for myself, I had people in those circles of friends growing up, but then you have to make your own friends…and you don't have that Jamaican-Caribbean anymore…I think that's the huge difference – having to form your own community, renegotiate boundaries, identities that they haven't had to go through. So actually for I'd say sometimes it's hard for them to relate. (FG5-02)

> I kind of feel caught in the middle, I guess….If I experienced any sort of racism from other people it would kind of just make me think twice about how I treat other people. Whereas I don't think that my parents would do that. It's different between the generations. (FG3-04)

These two first-hand accounts of growing up as a Canadian of colour point to the difficulties that second generation individuals encounter with respect to relating their experiences of racism to those of their parents. While these quotes effectively point to a generation gap, they

additionally, and perhaps more importantly, reveal the presence of processes of reconciliation that allow for several forms of belonging that do not detract from feelings of Canadianness. This is especially the case as it relates to intergenerational differences in responses to experiences of racism where, in fact, many second generation individuals report having stronger emotional ties to Canada than their parents despite the incongruity of experiencing marginalization in their homeland.

### Unconventional Canadians: The second generation and belonging

The processes through which racial exclusions are understood by second generation Canadians of colour are multiple and complex. One widespread challenge is coping with claims of perpetual immigrant status. Despite being born in Canada, second generation Canadians are often tasked with not only overcoming racial barriers within societal structures and institutions, but also *proving* their Canadian identity. This is a task that many feel is impossible considering the mindset of the mainstream population. Some second generation citizens report that the continuous questioning of their heritage is primary among the reasons for feeling excluded from society and that although they have a strong personal sense of belonging in Canada, it is taxing to maintain in the face of unremitting doubt.

> I find for me, too, there's an obsession to know exactly where you're from. I can't count the number of times…."Well, where are you from?"…because they can't exactly pinpoint it. People like to know exactly where everyone's from. I don't know if that's a form of racism, but I find that I especially deal with that. (FG3-01)

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For some second generation Canadians of colour, a sense of belonging in Canada is partial, ambiguous and, at times, even critical. In the face of exclusion, some second generation individuals have found it beneficial, if not necessary, to complement their Canadian sense of belonging with additional types of attachment. While these connections to local, provincial and regional communities are not unlike those held by other Canadians, for the second generation it is one way in which they handle the partiality of their *acceptance* into society.

> I think the ideas of community and nationality for me are really fluid and very difficult to pin down...I'm always Filipino-Canadian. So my sense of belonging…I do feel like I belong here and I can get by here, but I also feel very comfortable around Filipino groups….I feel like the whole idea of racism is kind of complicated with second generation people. (FG3-04)

There is also an ambiguity associated with belonging in Canada that is experienced by many second generation individuals. Although this results from struggles over striking a balance between Canadian and ancestral cultures, it is also a consequence of the uncertainty surrounding what it actually means to be "Canadian." Complicating this process are wider claims that ethnocultural attachments preclude or lessen one's sense of being Canadian, even though research shows that this is not necessarily the case.

> I would say, of course, it's hard, the point we made earlier, to not feel like you belong and to be constantly questioned and doubting….If people come here because of the ideal of inclusion, it can be like a broken dream or hope that wasn't realized. (FG5-04)

Emerging from some of the second generation racialized Canadians is a reflexive and critical evaluation of not only the importance of national belonging, but also the possibility of actualizing this identity and having it acknowledged and supported by other Canadians. More specifically, for many second generation individuals, the parameters of Canadian identity, although multiple, do not reflect inclusive ideals. As such, the critical belonging that materializes is often mobilized by both a personal determination to resist definition based on criteria of exclusion and a desire to remedy the inequities faced by all Canadians of colour. In the words of a second generation Canadian, "My sense of belonging gives me the right to be critical. If I didn't belong somewhere I wouldn't really even care to criticize." (FG3-02)

### Conclusion

For second generation Canadians, dealing with racism is a fact of life. Although individual experiences of racial discrimination vary, there is a consensus that it is a significant issue in Canada. Processes of identity ascription by mainstream society mark the body of the Canadians of colour as "other," and this not only serves to exclude the second generation, but also reminds them of their perpetual difference. In comparison to the experiences of their parents, the second generation reports experiencing less racism, although they acknowledge important shifts in the nature of contemporary racism toward increasingly subtler forms. Recognition of this intergenerational divergence is

the outcome of different contextual and perceptual frameworks that position second generation Canadians in complex spaces of awareness and tolerance that render them more sensitive to the nuances of difference.

Focus group discussions reveal that experiences of racism have a generally neutral or slightly negative effect on the second generations' sense of belonging in Canada. Although they described their identities as Canadians as being partial, ambiguous and, at times, contradictory, further analysis reveals the presence of multiple imaginings of Canada (in which the terms of belonging differ). It is within these alternative visions that some second generation racialized Canadians critically reflect on the duality of the social landscape in which they are simultaneously included and excluded, and also challenge the racial structures that seek to define them. Their continuous struggle to eliminate racial barriers in Canada and their willingness to contest the homogenous images of national culture promise to reshape the ethnocultural landscape of the future.

**Notes**

[1] By 2017, roughly one in five Canadians will be a member of a visible minority, representing approximately 22% of Canada's population. (Bélanger and Malenfant 2005)

[2] Term coined by Statistics Canada that refers to "persons (other than Aboriginal persons) who are non-Caucasian in race or non-White in colour." Statistics Canada (1999). *1996 Census Dictionary*. Ottawa. Catalogue No. 92-351-UIE.

[3] Some overt acts of discrimination noted by second generation Canadians in the study include name-calling, unfair hiring practices and physical harassment. Examples of subtle forms of racism include excess politeness, racism denial and institutional discrimination.


## *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens*




Metropolis, the Political Participation Research Network and the Integration Branch of Citizenship and Immigration Canada collaborated with the Association for Canadian Studies to produce a special issue of the ACS magazine, *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens*, "Newcomers, Minorities and Political Participation in Canada: Getting a Seat at the Table." Guest edited by John Biles and Erin Tolley (Metropolis Project Team), this issue includes interviews with the leaders of all major federal Canadian political parties (except the Bloc Québécois, which declined an interview), and 22 articles by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners from across the country.

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