MULTICULTURALISM AT A CROSSROADS: TOWARD PANDEMIC ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION IN POST-COVID-19 CANADA

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The year 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of the official multiculturalism policy in Canada. Often held up internationally as a successful model, Canada's practice and policy of multiculturalism have enjoyed international recognition as being pioneering and effectual. Yet, this apparent successful record has not gone unchallenged during COVID-19, as racial and ethnic conflicts and divisions resurface. Since the outbreak of the global pandemic, there has been a surge in racism and xenophobia across the country towards Asian Canadians. When celebrating its 50th anniversary, it is necessary to revisit multiculturalism at the crossroads of anti-Asian racism during COVID-19. It seems there is an urgent need for immediate action in combatting and eliminating racism by adopting a framework of pandemic anti-racism education in post-COVID-19 Canada.

MULTICULTURALISM TURNS 50

In 1971 Canada was the first country in the world to formulate an official multiculturalism policy with an objective to assist cultural groups to over-

come barriers to integrate into Canadian society while maintaining their heritage, language and culture (Guo & Wong, 2015). During the past five decades, multiculturalism has been the subject of much debate both in Canada and elsewhere. Some scholars claim that multiculturalism is a response to the pressures that Canada exerts on immigrants to integrate into common institutions (Kymlicka, 1998). It provides a framework for debating and developing fairer terms of integration, as integration is usually a long, difficult, and often painful process. However, others disagree. Wong (2008) summarizes the fragmentation critique of multiculturalism in the sociological literature over the past four decades primarily focusing on social divisiveness, clash of cultures, and ethnic marginalization and stratification. Others argue that the multiculturalism policy impedes understanding of structural power differences, such as racism and sexism, and their exclusionary effects (Bannerji 2000).

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Reflecting on the historical development of multiculturalism, Kymlicka (2015) identifies three stages in the saga of Canadian multiculturalism with three distinct dimensions of diversity at work – ethnicity, race, and religion. In its incarnation stage, multiculturalism policy encouraged the self-organization, representation and participation of ethnic groups defined on the basis of their country of origin. This logic of ethnicity was supplemented in the second stage by programs intended to deal with processes of racialization and racial discrimination. More recently, Canada started to witness the emergence of religion as a basis for multicultural claims, and as a result multiculturalism is now under pressure to add religion as a third track. Kymlicka argues that the contingencies by which the logics of ethnicity, race and religion have evolved and interacted over time in Canada have created a framework that retains powerful potential to help build more inclusive models of democratic citizenship in Canada.

Despite the claim that Canada continues to remain one of the last strongholds for multiculturalism in the world, the latter’s meaning has been redefined over the past five decades since its implementation (Winter 2015). Originally conceptualized as a modest remedy to nationalist marginalization in cultural and socioeconomic terms, it was about majority-minority relations, equitable participation, a shared Canadian identity, and inclusive citizenship (Winter 2015). It can be described as a conditionally inclusive form of socio-ethnic leveraging leading to pluralist group formation of a multicultural national identity. By the 1990s, Winter argues, multiculturalism became increasingly individualized and neoliberalized and the equitable participation dimension diminished. The second change in meaning occurred in the first decade of the 21st century when multiculturalism was no longer about majority-minority relations but rather managing minority-minority relations. The dominant group is now marked by its allegedly inherent capacity to be the guarantor of peaceful intraminority and interminority relations. As Winter notes, its meaning has changed from being ‘about us’ to

being 'about them'. In agreement with Winter, it seems clear that multiculturalism in Canada has lost much of its original meaning which serves as a wake-up call for all. If Canada intends to reclaim its original goal of helping immigrants with their full participation in Canadian society, it needs to go beyond the superficial rhetoric of difference and diversity by adopting a framework that addresses its racial and ethnic tension and conflict.

ANTI-ASIAN RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA DURING COVID-19

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, racism and ethnic discrimination has resurfaced and proliferated during the global pandemic. Asian Canadians, particularly those of Chinese descent, have been spat on, verbally abused, and physically attacked. They are shamed and blamed for the spread of the virus despite the fact that they have the lowest infection rates in Canada. They are shouted at to "go home" even though some of them are born in Canada and have never visited their ancestral lands. As victims of racial discrimination, Asian Canadians have subsequently experienced high levels of anxiety, trauma, and desperation. Using critical discourse analysis, Guo and Guo (2021) critically analyzed incidents that were reported in the popular press during the pandemic pertaining to anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. Their findings reveal that there has been a significant rise of reported hate crimes perpetrated against Asian Canadians resulting primarily from ignorance, fear, and misinformation related to the global pandemic. Framing their examination using critical race theory, their research focused on anti-Asian racism concerning mask-wearing (before it was made mandatory), name calling, and attacks on Chinatown. Their analysis shows that the framing of Asian Canadians as potential carriers of the virus has depicted them as weak, sickly, diseased, and foreign, and therefore 'undesirable' citizens. Similarly, the misperception that Western culture is superior to Asian cultures also explains the use of hate speech and name calling (e.g., 'Chinese virus', 'bat eating') and justifies the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions that lead to a belief of cultural inferiority.

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To understand how Chinatown became the symbol of disease and the targets of racist attacks during COVID-19, Guo and Guo (2021) situated the discussion in the historical context of the Chinese in Canada. It appears that anti-Asian hostility had been driven by a racialized 'Yellow Peril' hysteria depicting peoples of the East as an existential danger to Western civilization. It seems a parallel can be drawn to how Chinese Canadians were treated in Canada's racist past. Since the Chinese arrived in Canada, the presence of Chinese people was compared to that of the plague and vices such as gambling, opium addiction, disease, and unsanitary conditions. Their analysis demonstrates how deeply rooted racial discrimination is in Canada, a point illustrated by Guo and Wong (2018) in

reflecting on Canada's immigration, racial and ethnic history since its confederation over one hundred and fifty years ago. Despite Canada's claimed nonracist immigration policies and multiculturalism to protect minorities from possible prejudice and discrimination, Asians and other racialized peoples within Canada experience racism and ethnic discrimination socially in their everyday lives. COVID-19 triggered an angry backlash that unleashed some of the historical sentiments against the Chinese and deeply entrenched racial ideologies within the Canadian cultural framework. The anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia reflect and retains "the historical process of discursive racialization by which Asian Canadians have been socially constructed as biologically inferior, culturally backward, and racially undesirable" (Guo & Guo, 2021, p. 204).

TOWARD PANDEMIC ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION IN POST-COVID-19 CANADA

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In light of Canada's growing anti-Asian sentiments since the outbreak of COVID-19, it seems clear that multiculturalism is at a crossroads. In agreement with Kymlicka (2015), more emphasis and resources are needed to fight racism in Canada. On this occasion of celebrating the 50th anniversary of Canada's official multiculturalism policy, it is time to engage in critical deep reflections on the rhetoric of Canadian exceptionalism presenting the country as a culturally diverse and inclusive nation. To condemn and combat anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism and xenophobia related to COVID-19, I propose pandemic anti-racism education that aims to call out any form of racism and xenophobia that is directly related to the global pandemic and eliminate racial oppression for achieving social justice in post-COVID-19 Canada (Guo & Guo, 2021). For this discussion, I draw on Dei's (Dei, 1996; Dei, James-Wilson & Zine, 2001) anti-racism education model that views education as a racially, culturally and politically mediated experience. The model encompasses four learning objectives to integrate multiple centres of knowledge; recognize and respect for difference; affect social and educational change related to equity, access and social justice; and teach community empowerment. It requires that educators acknowledge the existing inequities in social structures and educational environments, understand their role in these structures, and actively advocate for change. More specifically, Guo and Guo (2021) argue, "Educators need to explicitly teach pandemic anti-racism and develop awareness of discursive racialization and xenophobic violence and discrimination in relation to COVID-19 and discuss action plans to eliminate them" (p. 206). To achieve this goal, the role of teachers and instructors extends from the sphere of the classroom into the community and requires engaging with social and political issues. In particular, it requires collaboration among teachers, students, administrators and community activists to work towards a change at a broader level. This is exactly what is needed in combating racism as a contagious virus that

requires collective efforts in achieving social justice in post-COVID-19 Canada.

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