AFRICAN CANADIANS: EMPLOYMENT AND RACISM IN THE WORKPLACE

David Este, Ph.D., is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary.

Wanda Thomas Bernard, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University.

Carl E. James, Ph.D., is Director of the York Centre for Education and Community (YCEC) in the Faculty of Education at York University.

Akua Benjamin, Ph.D., is Professor in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University.

Bethan Lloyd, Ph.D., is Research Coordinator for the Racism, Violence, and Health (RVH) Project in Halifax.

Tana Turner is Human Resource Consultant in Toronto.

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the experiences of African Canadians in Toronto, Calgary and Halifax with racism they have encountered in workplace environments. Attention is paid to how these manifestations of racism impact the well-being of people of African descent. A series of strategies based on Canada's Employment Equity act are provided to ensure that workplaces are free from racism.

BACKGROUND

The "Racism, Violence and Health" (RVH) project was a five year action research project that addressed the impact of racism and violence on the health and well-being of African Canadians in three Canadian cities. The RVH research study determined perceptions of both global and race-related stress in the indigenous African Canadian community, the Caribbean Canadian community and the African immigrant community in three Canadian cities, Halifax, Toronto and Calgary. We documented the first voice accounts of Black men, their families and communities about their experiences of violence (including the violence of racism), and analyzed how those experiences differed across gender and age as well as how they are related to individual, family, and community health status. The research program integrally involved community members at all stages of the research process, thereby increasing their capacity to take action on their own behalf.

The specific objectives of the research were as follows:

- To investigate perceptions of both global and race-related stress in indigenous, Caribbean, and immigrant African communities in Halifax, Toronto, and Calgary
- To document the first voice accounts of Black men, their families and communities about their experiences of violence (including the violence of racism)
- To analyze how those experiences differ across origin, gender, age, education, and income
- To analyze how these experiences are related to individual, family, and community health and well-being
- To develop culturally relevant health education materials that address issues of racism, violence, gender, and health across the lifespan of African Canadians

The research program included a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The active involvement of community members through annual community forums and community-based reference groups was integral to the success of the research.

In this paper we explore the experiences of African Canadians with workplace racism as well as how this form of institutional racism impacts the well-being of members of this community. For the purposes of this paper, institutional racism exists when the established policies and practices of a particular organization reflect and produce differential treatment towards and outcomes for various groups. In the process, institutional racism serves to maintain social control and uphold the status quo in favour of the dominant group (Skillings & Dobbins, 1991). Finally, we also provide some strategies designed to

deal with the racism and discrimination encountered by African Canadians in the workplace.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This was a mixed methods research study that included a survey (900 participants—300 in each site), qualitative interviews (120 participants—40 in each site), two-year micro-ethnographies (six young Black men—two in each site), and annual Black community forums and smaller community meetings in each site. In addition, there was ongoing involvement of diverse community-based reference group members in each site that helped us to bridge the community/academic divide.

Quantitative data

After a year of community consultation in each site, a 90-minute face-to-face questionnaire was administered to community members by trained members of diverse Black communities. The questionnaire included a significant number of demographic questions, standardized instruments that addressed perceptions of general health status (the SF-12 General Health Survey; Ware, Kosinski & Keller, 1996), global stress (the Perceived Stress Scale; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) and racism-related stress (Harrell, 2000, 1997), as well as project-developed scales focusing on responses to racism, violence, and immigration (adapted from the New Canadian Children and Youth Study (Beiser, et. al. 2005)).

Qualitative data—interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 120 participants, which included 40 participants at each site (a total of 63 women and 57 men). A semi-structured interview guide was used that provided an opportunity for interactive discussion that explored experiences from the perspective of the participants using their meanings and interpretations. A purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the in-depth interviews. Participants included community members and key informants from various sectors, such as advocacy and service, health care, and criminal justice. The interviews were transcribed and the data coded and analyzed using qualitative software (Atlas Ti), from which descriptive feedback reports were developed.

Community forums

Annual community forums provided opportunities for community members to actively participate in the research process. Three were held at each site, in years one, two and four of the project, and mini community meetings were held in year three. The community forums served a capacity building function, as they helped to increase the respective communities' capacity to work with issues of violence, gender, and health. They were open to all interested community members, including policy makers and health and social service providers. Each forum addressed concrete questions and concerns, providing space for people to tell their stories and respond to the stories of others. The forums also offered practical information concerning the intersection of violence, gender and health; an introduction to current policy concepts and planning initiatives; updates on the research program and findings; and the opportunity to evaluate the research annually.

FINDINGS

For African Canadians who enter the labour market, securing employment is often considered to be the most difficult challenge. One young man from Africa described what he confronted when looking for work:

> *A person's colour, his race and the way he looks affects his opportunity of getting a job. You are judged based on your colour. The lighter you are, the closer you will get to these people. The darker you are the further down you get and the lowest job.*

Many African Canadians have the experience of gaining employment and then finding that their experience in the workplace is marred by racism. In the interviews and community forums, African Canadians shared their experiences in the workplace, which included having their efforts minimized, not getting credit for their work or ideas and not being taken seriously. Participants also talked about having to fight against the stereotype that people of African descent lack a work ethic or are "unintelligent, uninventive and not capable of abstract thinking." Several participants recalled times when their ideas were downplayed or ignored, or they were not given credit "for ideas that were stolen by others." At the same time, many face significant pressure to perform beyond that which is expected of their white co-workers. "Because of the colour of your skin," an African man from Calgary stated "you have to perform above the rest of the workforce or pay a higher price when you make mistakes, compared to the rest of the people." Many research participants reported feeling emotionally drained by the pressures of having to work "ten times harder" than white co-workers.

Some participants reported that they found a job and a work team that they were happy with but found that their options within the organization were restricted by policies and practices that limit career and job advancement of African Canadians and other people of colour. Frequently, African Canadians find themselves trapped in entry level or low paying jobs. The resulting economic marginalization

brings with it a wide range of economic and psychosocial problems for individuals, families and the African Canadian community. Many participants reported being passed over for other positions for which they were fully qualified, oftentimes in favour of lesser qualified people. One woman from Halifax remarked that she had become so frustrated with other people getting the job she applied for, that she had stopped applying for promotions. However, instead of thinking that there was a fault in the system, she blamed herself for her lack of advancement. "I used to ask myself what was wrong with me," she said. Blaming herself for the organization's inability to acknowledge her skills and abilities because of the colour of her skin has undermined her confidence in herself and her enthusiasm for her life. Other participants reported that they no longer even bothered applying.

Denied the opportunity to demonstrate their skills, these African Canadian employees felt devalued. All of these everyday experiences, respondents agreed, erode one's confidence: "making you feel you have to measure up to some standard that you cannot see," and you "always feel you're just below that standard." Being in a position where their work is expected to be inferior is particularly difficult for immigrants who feel marginalized because of their perceived substandard credentials and lack of Canadian experience. "When you are forced to work for people whose qualifications and experience and ability are less than yours, that is difficult," said a female participant living in Toronto.

Black men and newcomers to Canada in particular stated that their credentials were overlooked when it came to job competition, and that they were required to jump through a significant number of hoops to secure employment. A female participant at a community forum in Calgary stated, "We do not have opportunities to gain good jobs despite our educational credentials." Time and time again, first generation participants talked about their inability to get jobs despite their qualifications and experience. Holding several degrees and being a professional in their country of origin did not offer a guarantee that they would not end up in low-wage jobs, such as janitors or laundry workers.

Participants pointed to the generally low socio-economic status of many Blacks and noted that they are "well represented in low paying jobs." One Calgarian woman told us of her experience of being underpaid. She said that her boss believed that "me being an African woman, I would be more inclined to settle for something less than what I am worth." Being unable to secure employment comparable to Whites with similar education and experience leaves many African Canadians in the position of having to work two or more jobs in order to support their families.

The combination of the stress of trying to make ends meet and the anger and frustration of not being able to work up to one's potential negatively impact African Canadians' self-esteem. "If you are an engineer and end up driving a cab," said a young African woman who had been in Calgary for 15 years, "that's subjugating you to a level where you have lost your self-esteem." Not having their skills and abilities affirmed resulted in huge frustration, which some individuals likened to being beaten up.

Participants also indicated that their treatment in the workplace was compounded when those in power ignored problems of racism, or condoned unfair treatment of employees. Through their deliberate ignorance or condonation of systemic and individual expressions of racism, those in leadership positions sent the message that they supported, or did not care about, how people of colour and other marginalized groups were treated.

Participants also pointed out that they often faced the additional burden of educating their peers about racism, either in response to questions from co-workers, or because they could not leave incidents of racism unchallenged. Participants indicated that even well-intentioned co-workers would make offhand comments or express negative ideas that were impossible to ignore. For some, it became a significant and exhausting part of their job. As a woman from Halifax remarked, "Sometimes I just tell people, I'm off-duty.... I am not doing any more educating today."

A number of participants spoke of not being recognized as professionals, "It is a constant struggle," one man said. Another recalled that in the university at which he worked, he was constantly being mistaken for a student and was continually asked, "What courses are you taking?" Another participant with two PhDs talked about how his employer used his qualifications as bait to bring in large contracts, but the participant was still refused a salary that reflected his skills and qualifications.

A few male and female participants suggested that Black women have some advantage over Black men in the job market because Black men are particularly vulnerable to systemic racism in the workplace. They are, as one African woman stated, "seen as being more of a threat to the White men who own the system."

The economic marginalization of Black men in the labour market contributes, in part, to difficulties and tensions in marriages and family relationships. Many young women become single mothers because of the structural forces that operate to marginalize Black men. Quite often couples do not marry because Black men are unable to find work to support their families. In some cases, males give up earning a living through legitimate means, a decision that the women in their lives may disapprove of. Underemployment, unemployment, and the struggle to make ends meet financially create a great deal of tension,

particularly when there are children to care for, and this forces couples apart.

The everyday facets of life like having a good career, a well-paying job and one's material needs taken care of are tightly connected to a person's ability to function in and contribute to society. "It is terrible," one African man in Calgary commented, "What's annoying is that the racial pressure is not something you can clearly grasp. It's not something that is quantitative. It's very subjective and you don't always know where it's coming from or why people are doing that."

MOVING TOWARDS RACISM FREE WORKPLACES

In 1986, Canada passed the Employment Equity Act. The primary goal of this legislation is to ensure that qualified members of designated groups are represented in the workplace in accordance with their availability in the workforce and have opportunities to realize their full potential in safe, fair and inclusive workplace environments.

Using the Employment Act as our guide, the following represents a series of strategies that will contribute to racism free workplaces.

Strategic and bold initiatives are required to implement employment equity in more proactive ways that will ensure that all racialized employees will not experience racism and will have genuine opportunities for occupational mobility within organizations. Senior managers must assume leadership roles to create more diverse workplaces that place greater emphasis on equity for all employees.

Clear and open communication at all levels in the workplace regarding why employment equity is required, the benefits of these programs, the specific strategies used in the workplace and how they are being implemented is required. Organizations also need to create spaces where employees feel safe to engage in open dialogues on racism and other forms of oppression that systematically and negatively impact racialized persons at various critical milestones throughout their employment tenure (hiring, retention and promotion).

Workplace environments must develop clear anti-harassment policies and ensure that all employees are aware of these policies. The policies need to include specific penalties for infractions as well as a process for implementing the policies when required.

Finally, support for employees who are from equity seeking groups is required. Quite frequently, these individuals are isolated, marginalized, and devalued in their workplace and have little support. Organizations need to create strategies, practices, and policies to ensure that employees are not isolated and have opportunities to fully utilize their knowledge and skills in the workplace.

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