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IMPLICIT RACISM AND HOW IT AFFECTS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN OUR CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM IN CANADA

Abstract

In this research article I discuss how racial minorities, specifically Indigenous people, are still experiencing discrimination in universities with a focus on Thompson Rivers University (TRU) in British Columbia, Canada. Even with policies in place to prevent discrimination, there is evidence that staff and administration at TRU still show bias against Indigenous faculty and students and choose to ignore problems until they become too big to ignore. The article argues that discrimination is so deeply ingrained in institutions that it becomes a natural response people are unaware of, which continues to perpetuate this behaviour. It's important for fair and sufficient funding to be made available to teach about Indigenous peoples' history and culture as this can allow the healing process to begin and ensure actual equality. Those in positions of power have a responsibility to make changes to the way they address racism, and the institutions need to start addressing the underlying implicit racism.

Keywords: Secwépemc people, Indigenous, white people, racism, discrimination, Thompson Rivers University, harassment, education, Person of Colour (POC), implicit racism,

decolonization, EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion).

Introduction

Our environments will affect us. This can be both positive and negative depending on the situation. Within this article I discuss the way that existing as a racialized person in an academic space can and does result in unfair bias, discrimination, and explicit racism. For Indigenous people, these experiences are lifelong and do not end once a person enters academia or the workforce. So, what happens to an Indigenous person growing up in a continuously hostile environment? Almost all of them struggle—some fight and some give up. In this article, I enlighten you to the realities of being an Indigenous person in this environment, the struggles we face, and how we can start to solve these problems to reduce or, possibly in the future, obliterate the barriers we face. I insert my own personal reflections based on my experiences alongside research. I do this to show that our voices and stories mean just as much and that they are just as legitimate as formal research.

“7. We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”
- (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)

The Past Repeats Itself Yet Again

I care about implicit racism and how it affects Indigenous people because I have experienced its negative effects throughout my education journey, from my first day of school to the present. I decided to work toward preventing this issue from harming any other Indigenous people's confidence and stop perpetuating the false notion that Indigenous peoples are uneducated. A history of Residential Schools shows that "some thought it was a risky matter to give the students too much education...In the case of the Indian 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). I believe that with the proper evidence collected showing how Indigenous people's education is mishandled, there will be a way forward where Indigenous people can take the matter into their own hands and be in charge of their own education.

See What I See

If you wanted to be noticed by teachers as an Indigenous kid and not easily overlooked, you had to work harder than anyone else did. I learnt this all throughout my younger years in school and when I graduated from it, I believed things could be different when I moved.

Holding high hopes for a university that claimed to respect and hold its Indigenous students in high regard. I could not see myself in better hands. I was proven very wrong through poor guidance and no directions for how to navigate the university and its barriers. To me it was a disappointment to see more white people not following through with their words and commitments, and so I decided I would do it by myself once again. Through the injustice and unfairness, I have experienced in my education journey I have learnt that the only way it will change is if we make them prove it through actions and so I will challenge this university and perhaps others to start following through with their promises to us Indigenous people.

Rating Our "Privilege"

Ignorance is bliss, but only to people who never have to face the consequences. Racism is not only ingrained in our institutions but

normalised within them as well. It becomes much more common for people who are white-passing to not notice or to feign ignorance when it is happening. Martín (2021) states that "it is not just that people do not recognize that there is a problem—and therefore do nothing to change it—but they refuse to recognize that there is a problem, and therefore implicitly refuse to do anything about it" (p. 870).

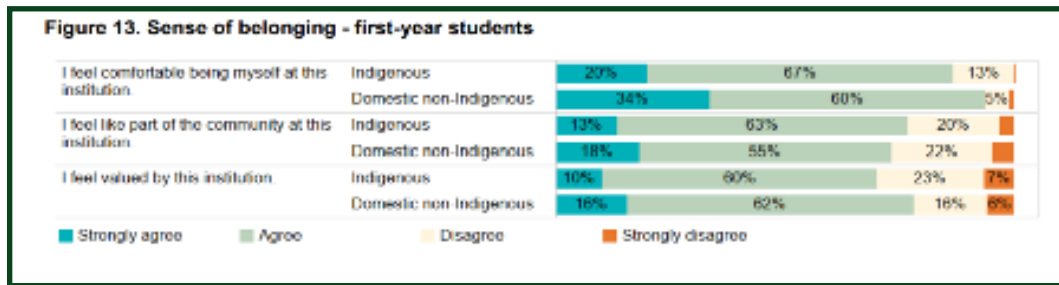
In Thompson Rivers University (TRU), the lack of evidence of white students negatively rating staff just shows that TRU faculty rarely, if ever, encounter prejudged biases surrounding their racial identity. To illustrate the breakdown of professors by gender and race, I randomly selected one faculty among the multiple available resources. The website called Rate My Professor (n.d.) is an online platform where students can determine how they view professors. There are 949 professors listed on this website who have either worked at or are currently employed by TRU. For illustration purposes, I will use the Psychology department as an example.

Table 1.

Total Men	Total women	POC Men	POC Women
12	15	2	3

In the Psychology department, there is a total of 32 professors listed on the Rate My Professor website, with only 5 of them being Persons of Colour (POC). Out of 3 POC women, only one of them is rated higher than the rest. 9 out of 12 non-POC women are rated above 3 (out of 5), and both POC men have ratings below 3.1, while 6 of the non-POC men have ratings above 3.1 (Rate My Professor, n.d.). On average, not only are the non-POC professors rated higher but there are far more hired. When you take a glance at most people of colour or women on the site they will have a very low rating, and the complaints are not always accurate. Why are women, especially the POC faculty, rated so low no matter what? Mistry & Latoo (2009) show that "bias against racialized minorities may persist because discrimination is so deeply entrenched within institutions (institutionalised) that it becomes an automatic response even without conscious awareness or explicit intent" (p. 20).

Picture 1.



Source: TRU: TRU Indigenous Student Engagement (2020 Survey of First and Fourth-Year Baccalaureate Students).

The demographic breakdown of faculty represented by the Rate My Professor analysis is also reflected in the data for TRU students. In 2018, TRU's Integrated Planning and Effectiveness (IPE) Committee reported that the Indigenous student population was 2,963 and that there was a 57% retention rate after the first year as of 2019 (Thompson Rivers University, 2018). That means about 1,275 Indigenous students did not continue into their second year (Thompson Rivers University, 2018). Within first year students' experiences alone, the following graphs determined that only 20% of Indigenous students felt comfortable being themselves at TRU, and a negligible 10% of Indigenous students felt valued by this institution (Thompson Rivers University, 2020).

These two snapshots focusing on the experiences of two small student and faculty populations reflect the larger culture of racism within TRU. This environment can be seen publicly in recent news articles discussing bullying, racism, and harassment of staff by two senior faculty (Chrumka & Lindsay, 2021; Kondrashov, 2021). Overall, the data show that TRU can be a challenging environment for Indigenous faculty and students.

Promise is another word for liar

The screenshot included here shows values listed on TRU's website (Thompson Rivers University, retrieved from TRU website, 2020). The values include the ethical standards this institution claims to follow. In a university that is built on the unceded lands of the Secwépemc people, it is meant to be an institution that raises up and protects Indigenous people. However, the evidence of bias among faculty despite the policies in place speaks volumes to how little

the TRU staff and upper-level management truly care about Indigenous faculty and students. They often speak about doing great things, but the evidence shows that they ignore or do not take policy violations seriously until they are reported 55 times (Chrumka & Lindsay, 2021) when it should have been dealt with immediately the first time it was brought forward.


In August 2021, Thompson Rivers University start an investigation under two executive members in TRU after several former and current staff and faculty member report of their anti-Indigenous racism and bullying behaviour in the

Picture 2.

Our values

Respectful relations define our behaviour. We respect each other (Xyemstwécw), the land, knowledge, the peoples of our region and beyond.

- Inclusion and Diversity.** Access is open: we welcome students, faculty, staff and communities from our region and around the world to learn from and with one another. We embrace diversity of thought and people. We commit to equity. We continually see the world and its inhabitants in new ways by re-examining our practices and their impacts.
- Community-Mindedness.** We come together to help one another (Pelkwaic-kt es knucwentwécw-kt). Mutual benefit guides us to connect meaningfully with people in the communities we serve, contributing to an interconnected world where we all share a common future and humanity.
- Curiosity.** We seek out new ideas and embrace change, understanding they may involve risks. We break paths with creative, critical, yet thoughtful purpose. We push boundaries as a university and encourage students, faculty, staff, and the community to do the same.
- Sustainability.** The natural world inspires us with wonder and reverence. We recognize how the health of our societies, cultures and ecosystems rests upon wellness of people, biodiversity, and wise stewardship of precious and finite resources. As a world leader in sustainability we know that the well-being of generations to come is shaped by what we do today.



workplace (Thompson Rivers University, 2023, Chrumka et al, 2021). The investigation process is about one year long, 22 allegations made against Matt Milovick who is a VP Finance & Administration, and in total of 55 allegation against his subordinate Larry Phillips, the assistant vice-president of people and culture, who was also found to be guilty of sexual harassment (Thompson Rivers University, 2023, Chrumka et al, 2021). The full investigation report was released to the public on March 25, 2024, one year after the anonymous complaints were made against Philipps and Milovick. In the investigation report 10 of the 55 allegations substantiated against Phillipps has been confirmed, while Phillipps left the university shortly after the investigation began (Reeve, 2023). On the other hand, the investigation has fully exonerated Milovick and absolved his misconduct complaints under the whistle-blower policy, He was still working at TRU throughout the entire investigation and up until now when I wrote this article (March 2024) (Schulze, 2024; Klassen, 2023). Milovick is suing eight individuals who filed the complaints with alleging malicious defamation in February 2023 based on the TRU's investigation (Petruk ,2023). Milovick declared that he has no issue with the complaint itself or the investigation into the allegations, but he also claims that that the accusers and their supporters chose to publicize the allegations which, in the document, he and his lawyer describe this event as:

“The defamatory expression complained of in this notice of civil claim is calculated to expose the plaintiff to hatred, ridicule and/or contempt, and/or to lower him in the estimation of right-thinking people generally, and/or to cause him to be shunned or avoided, all of which has occurred (Petruk, 2023, para 13)”

However, none of the allegations in the claim have been proven in court (Petruk, 2023).

TRU claims to highly value the confidentiality of its students, professors, and administration, yet its whistle-blower policy does not protect those who use it. This leaves anyone who uses the policy vulnerable to

potential trouble and retaliation. TRU takes quick action on a public relations level to try to cover this scandal, yet relationships within the university have been forever altered and there is a lack of trust that permeates. Additionally, the university has not compensated or taken any action to protect the eight individuals who filed complaints, at least as far as public knowledge goes. Meanwhile, the man accused of anti-Indigenous and bullying actions continues to work at TRU. There have been few actions taken to prevent workplace harassment among employees, all of which are quite vague, such as posting some workplace safety articles on TRU Connect and workplace surveys. There have been no policy-level actions taken to protect students and employees regarding incidents like those mentioned above. How are any victims of racism at TRU supposed to feel safe reporting incidents to the school when they have no support from the institution when speaking up? TRU's promises and propaganda don't align with the statistics that support the existence of both implicit and explicit racism. This is exactly the reason why I want to write this article, to make the university face what happened and honour the promises that they made to the entire community.

In my own experience as a student in this Institution, I came to know that students with white skin were favoured above students who are POC. The expectations for Indigenous students are reflective of a larger social narrative that paints them as becoming addicts, having kids, and using the government because we are not seen as capable people. The expectations for Indigenous female presenting students were even lower. This drove me to prove I was not just another statistic and it led me down a harder road, one of working to overcome the obstacles set down by white people, and then ignored by them because they choose to not face their own implicit racism. They always act so surprised when we tell them it is not as easy as they think, and they choose to repeatedly invalidate us. There are almost no studies on the belief of non-Indigenous people as to the reality of racism against Indigenous peoples in Canada. Currently

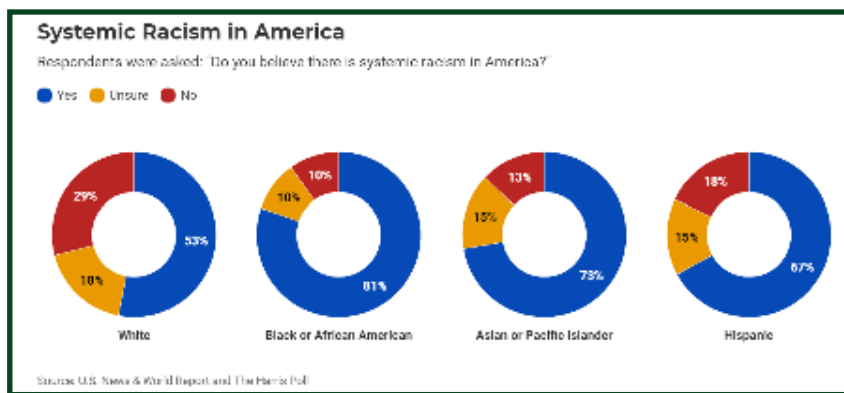
there are a handful of written news articles and think pieces discussing Canadians' belief in racism. Bricker and Chhim (2020), for example show that 40% of people in Canada see racism as an American problem, yet 60% of Canadians acknowledge racism is a serious problem today. An American study provides further context.

As shown in the chart above, we can see that racism has been a serious problem in the United States as well, and most people (53% white, 81% black, 73% Asian, and 67%

(2014) states that "In other words, institutions serve as a site where race and racism are constructed and maintained yet simultaneously obscured and normalised" (p. 146). The foundation of school structures in Canada are based on racism, and it is ignored because of the discomfort it causes the descendants of our colonisers. They ignore the blatant racism because Indigenous people are still not seen as equal to themselves, which perpetuates racism throughout Canada.

As racism is so normalised, it makes it

Picture 3.



Hispanic) believe that racism is prevalent and active (Bricker & Chhim, 2020). However, there is no data on Native American or Indigenous people included. I firmly believe that this issue is not confined to just one nation; rather, it is a problem that affects the entire North American region and the globe. Canada needs to foster greater awareness and understanding of racism against Indigenous peoples and conduct further research that gives a voice to Indigenous people's experiences.

Legalised Assimilation

Residential Schools were institutions created to strip Indigenous people of their language and culture, and though they have now closed, academic institutions such as universities and colleges have taken over this task. Colonial education was born out of Eurocentrism and this way of learning was considered superior over all other types (Dei et al., 2022). It denied, invalidated, and pushed away Indigenous knowledge until the modern day. This Eurocentric education has continued to be considered our formal education in Canada (Dei et al., 2022). Fleras

very difficult for international students as well as all other students to believe Indigenous people when we talk about the horrifying events that happened and how those views still exist today. The current university structure is not created with Indigenous students or faculty in mind and operates to serve colonialism. This structure often leaves Indigenous students out and leads to a higher dropout rate as is shown in TRU's institutional data reflecting 49 to 65% drop outs each year (Integrated Planning and Effectiveness: Fall 2018, 2020.). As Fleras (2014) explains "...treating everyone the same when people's need-based differences must be taken into account may well have the unintended effect of inadvertently excluding those with different experiences, realities, and aspirations" (p.150). The TRC (2015) states that

to close the education and income gaps, there needs to be stable and adequate funding of Aboriginal education that takes into account the challenges of the legacy of residential schools as well as other challenges faced by Aboriginal people. In addition to fair

and adequate funding, there is also a need to maximise Aboriginal control over Aboriginal education, and to facilitate instruction in Aboriginal cultures and languages. These educational measures will offer a realistic prospect of reconciliation on the basis of equality and respect. (p. 153)

The only way that Canadians and institutions, especially Canadian universities like Thompson Rivers University, can begin to make reparations and change the way the world views Indigenous peoples is to acknowledge the barriers, traumas, and funding difficulties they face, and to assist them in their education. They need to keep their eyes and ears open to prevent further harm.

History is alive and resonates with the present because of racist consequences on both Residential School children and their descendants (Fleras, 2014). Even in the current education system, white people continue to dismiss Indigenous peoples' experience and trauma when it comes to Residential Schools. Most are avoiding the discomfort of facing the mistakes their ancestors made and leaving all the healing up to Indigenous people so they can continue to blame the mistakes on their ancestors instead of taking accountability for the way they continue to benefit from this system. As Rene Magritte's artwork that brings George Santayana's (1905) words to life reminds us that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

There was an official apology by the Harper Government in 2008 (Government of Canada, 2010) that recognized the Canadian Government's role in the Residential School system. For white people, this apology was a conclusion to the past harms done. For Indigenous peoples, it is one step in an ongoing healing process. For white people, there is an overwhelming sense in social consciousness that it is time to stop dwelling in the past (Fleras, 2014). The assumption is that these past events have no bearing on the present while complicating any effort to move forward. Such a historical response reflects a Canadian-style polite racism that justifies racial inequality, avoids responsibilities, and defends dominant interests without sounding racist. Reconciliation with Indigenous people

means nothing when our colonisers' descendants only continue to take from us. Land is being stripped of its trees, oil pipelines are being put on our lands by force, and now there are efforts to take our right to protect and place our Indigenous children in homes where they can continue to learn their culture and way of life (McKenzie et al., 2023; Unite for Change, 2022). For Indigenous peoples, however, to borrow a phrase from William Faulkner (1961): the past (history) is not dead, it is not even the past.

Conclusion: How to Clean a Mess

Indigenous people are often expected to do better than everyone else, and their differences and needs are ignored instead of their experience of racism being validated and supported through the university. This occurs due to their less privileged position within the system.

In the Thompson Rivers University (2019–2022) Collective Agreement, between Thompson Rivers University and the Thompson Rivers University Association (pp. 67–68) it is stated that harassment is to be dealt with seriously and that the school would offer educational and training programs to educate and prevent harassment. If the policy were being taken as seriously as TRU claims, then there would be no tolerance for racism. Thompson Rivers University Learning Design and Innovation: Promotion and Tenure Standards (2021) stated that "In this light, candidates are encouraged to highlight throughout their portfolio how they have embraced the principles of diversity, inclusion (EDI), decolonization, and Indigenization" (pp.1-2). I question why it's only important for faculty to highlight things they've done for marginalized people when considering attaining a promotion rather than making it mandatory for faculty to be actively supporting and fighting against racism in these institutions. There should be no space in educational institutions for those who do not fight for Indigenous people and support them fully. If we are going to start changing things in the university, we best start with what we promise and commit to. All faculty should not only be passively supportive but commit to standing with Indigenous people

in the university itself even when it gets uncomfortable.

TRU has officially hired an Equity, Diversity & Inclusion officer as of January 2023 whose main goal is to advise TRU in their ongoing EDI Action Plan (TRU Research & Graduate Studies, 2019). This Action plan consists of a talking circle, an environmental scan, a comparative review process, a diversity and inclusion survey in addition to a gender audit (TRU Research & Graduate Studies, 2019). It is not unreasonable to state that this work should have been done prior to its origin in 2018, and the fact that it has taken so long is concerning. This education and training should have been made mandatory long ago, as there should be absolutely no space for racism to run free on lands and in a school where they claim to be inclusive to all. Since there hasn't been a process in maintaining faculty to this point, this should be the first immediate step taken by the university. If TRU wants to prove that they are real allies, then they would support and ensure Indigenous people are not continuing to be the primary target of racist administration in this university. TRU operates like multiple universities in Canada—there are accessible anti-racism toolkits through EDI available on TRU website, but they are not a mandatory requirement for employment. The only university to have mandated anti-racism education tied to employment is Western Universities training, although there is no focus on anti-Indigenous racism within this program (Western University EDI Action Plan, 2019). TRU could be nationwide leaders by stepping up to be the first institution that mandates a comprehensive anti-racism training model.

The statistics make it appear as if Indigenous people in this university are content with the way things currently are. What this doesn't reflect is the fact that marginalised people do not have the safety or ability to speak out in most circumstances. If we want accurate stats on Indigenous people's thoughts and experiences, then a safety net needs to be built that encourages people to speak up without the threat of repercussions be they large or small—legal or workplace microaggressions.

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