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Experience of Discrimination by Visible Minorities in Small Communities*

DANIEL W. L. LAI AND NEDRA HUFFEY
University of Calgary

Racism and discrimination continue to exist in everyday life (Cannon 1995, Foster 1996). Canada is a culturally diverse country with an official policy of multiculturalism, but many research findings continue to point out that discrimination against visible minorities¹ is still occurring (Kunz, Milan and Schetagne 2000, Pruegger and Kiely 2002). Many visible minorities are convinced that they have become the victims of subtle forms of racism (Canadian Race Relations Foundation 2001).

Visible minority ethnocultural groups often face systemic discrimination, stereotyping and racism (Calgary Cultural and Racial Diversity Task Force 2001). Discrimination and prejudicial attitudes can exist in the areas of education (Watt and Roessingh 1994), employment (Gunderson, Musznski and Keck 1990, Jeffs 1996, Wickens 1996), health care (Beiser et al. 1988, Health Canada 1999), and access to social services (Calgary Catholic Immigration Society 1994). In Canada, 20% of visible minorities reported that they had experienced discrimination sometimes or often in the past five years (Statistics Canada 2003). Another study found that 26% of Southeast Asian refugees settling in Canada reported at least one racist experience (Beiser et al. 2001).

Little research examines racism in smaller communities, leaving the general population unaware of this issue. With research focusing only on visible minority groups in Canadian cities, there is an erroneous assumption that racism does not exist in smaller communities. In order to determine the nature and extent of racism and discrimination in small Canadian towns, it is important to capture the lived experience of individuals in these communities. As a result, the research question for this study was: "What are the lived experiences of racial minorities in small town settings?"

Literature review

Visible minorities in Canadian cities experience discrimination and prejudicial attitudes (Lalonde, Taylor and Moghaddam 1992, Kunz, Milan and Schetagne 2000, Pruegger and Kiely 2002). Previous research shows that discrimination affects many areas of life, including visible minorities' physical and mental health (Moghaddam et al. 2002, Williams and Hunt 1997, Beiser 1999). For example, visible minority women in Fredericton have difficulties with public services, transportation, work and other aspects of everyday living (Miedema and Nason-Clark 1989). Research also shows that Chinese immigrants face employment discrimination despite their education and have to make greater efforts than European immigrants to be accepted (Li 1982).

Very little research has been conducted on visible minorities' experiences in rural areas in

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¹ The *Employment Equity Act* defines visible minorities as "persons other than the Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race and non-white in color" (Statistics Canada 2003).

Canada, the United States and England. Refugee retention rates in the smallest Canadian towns was found to be very low, with refugees citing insufficient employment and educational opportunities as the main reasons for leaving these communities (Abu-Laban et al. 1999). It is, therefore, very important to examine the nature and extent of discrimination experienced by visible minorities in small Canadian towns so that anti-racist policy and practice can be developed as needed.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the perceptions and experiences of 19 visible minority individuals living in a few small towns in the province of Alberta. Eligible participants were recruited through networking with key community informants, snowball sampling, and collaboration with the Committee on Race Relations and Cross Cultural Understanding (CRRCCU) in Calgary, which has strong community ties in Alberta. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. The interview guide focused on the lived experiences, meanings, and perceptions of the participants and created an opportunity for discussions about racism and other forms of oppression.

The participants gave in-depth interviews at locations of their choice. All interviews were conducted face-to-face except for one, which was done by phone. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for later analysis, though three participants did not give permission for their interviews to be recorded and the interviewers took notes instead.

The inductive data analysis approach was used in this study. This is a qualitative research method for making sense of interviews in which themes and categories of analysis emerge from the data (Creswell 1998, Morrow and Smith 1998). Based on an analysis of the transcribed interviews, an initial coding framework was established by the research team. Once the research assistants had coded the transcripts independently, the codes were compared to ensure inter-code reliability. Themes were subsequently developed.

Results

The participants

Nineteen visible minority individuals living or working in different small communities in central and southern Alberta participated in the study.

To protect their identity, the locations of the communities are not provided. The participants were visible minority men and women from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Twelve were female and seven were male, ranging from 20 to 60 years of age. Two were Canadian-born while 17 had immigrated to Canada between one year and more than 40 years ago. The majority had completed post-secondary education and worked as professionals in their country of origin before coming to Canada. When analyzing the data, four dominant themes were identified: 1) language differences as a struggle; 2) lack of recognition; 3) differential treatment; and 4) differences between generations. For the participants, being a visible minority is about “being different.”

Language differences as a struggle

One of the most prominent issues the participants discussed was their perceived lack of English proficiency and the employment-related and social discrimination that came with it. For some, English was not an easy language to learn. One said, “English is a really crazy language, difficult and crazy.” The language barrier impacted employment and promotion opportunities. One participant said, “When you can’t speak the language, there are barriers, instantaneously...a lot of employers are not going to be able to communicate with you.” They felt employers were unfair in not hiring educated visible minorities who did not speak English fluently for positions in their profession. However, language barriers did not always hinder employment or promotion, as one participant described her father’s experience, explaining, “They put him through training, Dad went through it for two years almost and now he’s shop supervisor.” Thus, it is possible for employers to play an important role in addressing discrimination by ensuring that visible minorities have equal access to job opportunities.

Lack of language ability also created difficulties for visible minorities in their daily life. One participant described how some visible minorities dealt with the challenges of developing social networks: “Some basically live in their own world...you don’t have to interact with people.” Others refused to let the language barrier hinder their social life. One participant explained, “I couldn’t understand people, and they couldn’t understand me either. I didn’t take any English classes but I learned on my own, watching TV and at work, I picked it up.”

Although the majority of participants came to live in smaller communities due to job offers, many were not able to gain employment in their chosen professions [and there was] a strong sentiment about how society often discredits their professional credentials or looks at their country of origin, ethnicity or skin colour.

Lack of recognition

Another theme that arose was the lack of recognition, by employers, educational institutions and the government, of visible minorities' education, professional credentials and employment experiences gained in their country of origin. Although the majority of participants came to live in smaller communities due to job offers, many were not able to gain employment in their chosen professions. Underlying the participants' comments was a strong sentiment about how society often discredits their professional credentials or looks at their country of origin, ethnicity or skin colour, rather than giving equal value to the qualifications they brought to Canada. Another immigrant said, "If only they would accept people for their abilities and education, not because he's pink, yellow, white, black or blue."

In order to gain professional recognition or to upgrade, these immigrants would have to return to university or college, as experienced by one participant: "I have to go back to school, because most of them ask for a Canadian certificate, so if I don't have that I won't have a good job." Even when visible minorities are willing to upgrade by going back to school, the lengthy process was considered difficult for many because of the cost and their age. One participant commented, "I had to start all over again. It's hard. Plus it's difficult because I'm not too young now." Some felt that it was financially unrealistic to pay the fees necessary to obtain Canadian credentials and that the government was responsible for these problems. One immigrant said, "It's very expensive, we need to make it easier and more accessible." Participants strongly emphasized the problems of foreign credential recognition in Canada, and the impact it had on their employment opportunities.

Differential treatment

As visible minorities, some felt welcomed and accepted, and found that people in smaller communities were friendly, warm and helpful. Unfortunately, many participants had experienced discrimination in one form or another. One

example was shared by a participant who believed that she and her friends were treated rudely, "because we speak in our language in front of them." When a Canadian-born participant was asked how it felt to be a visible minority growing up in a small community, she recounted, "It has always hit me ever since I was young...like I would be the only person that wasn't invited for their sleep-over. I guess being a minority, you're always struggling to fit in so that you don't want to expose your culture, or any other differences that are a part of you."

With regards to work situations, one Chinese participant felt that people in her small town were critical and possibly jealous of her success in business because she was a visible minority. Another participant observed that even though the company he worked for had hundreds of employees, he did not think there was a single "foreigner" at the management level. A Chinese immigrant summarized several participants' perceptions that being a visible minority is a disadvantage in getting a job, "because visible minority tends to be considered a little secondary."

When asked to compare their experiences or views on racism, discrimination and different treatment in small communities with those that are encountered in big cities, responses from the visible minority participants contrasted. Some felt that big cities are more multicultural and so the issue is not as severe. An immigrant from Sierra Leone remarked, "Racism is there, but it's not too rampant because it's too multicultural. Small towns, of course you're going to have it because people are not used to seeing minorities." The treatment that people experienced as a visible minority in a small town had definite ranges. Some participants felt the opposite was true. One visible minority person, for example, felt that a small community was ideal for raising children, while an immigrant from Sri Lanka felt that the problem of discrimination was worse in bigger cities, saying "There's lots of resentment towards minorities. It's different if you live in a big city, the stereotypes are really amplified."

The participants also commented on their beliefs about the reasons for mainstream Canadians' discriminatory behavior and attitude towards visible minorities. The most commonly cited reasons were narrow-mindedness, ignorance, lack of understanding and lack of knowledge about other cultures. A participant who was born and raised in Canada felt it was this "hidden sort of racism" that bothered her the most.

In response to the different treatment they experienced, some visible minority participants took an active role in trying to change people's impressions about them. For example, one participant from China believed that it was her responsibility to make a good impression on Canadians and she worked very hard to be successful so that they would think highly of Chinese immigrants. Another individual responded to the differential treatment with a positive attitude, by choosing not to pay attention to the negativity.

Experiencing differences between generations

Another common challenge facing visible minority families was the intergenerational issues within families. Many first generation visible minority immigrants felt that it was harder for them to adapt to Canadian culture, while it was more natural for their children. An immigrant stated, "My problem is that I grew up in another culture and I came to a new culture, so I find it very difficult to accept things over here." Visible minority parents felt that it was easy for the children to learn about the new culture and to mingle with other Canadians, but worried that they might forget about their own culture and language. One remarked that it was his wish to preserve "our culture and language at least."

These struggles were not only experienced by the parents, as Canadian-born children find themselves facing a dilemma as well. One visible minority person born in Canada said, "It's a struggle for someone in the second generation, you don't want to lose any of your culture. I am living with two cultures."

Discussion and policy implications

The experiences of visible minorities living in small communities were both positive and negative. There seemed to be a willingness to minimize the experiences of discrimination, or to accept these as unalterable facts of life.

These responses are not unique and have been documented in previous research (Matthews 2006, Moghaddam et al. 2002, Ruggiero and Taylor 1997, Taylor, Wright and Ruggiero 2000).

The participants' minimization of racism and discrimination in small communities may be related to their success in achieving satisfactory employment or comparative conditions to those in their countries of origin, as supported in previous research findings (Matthews 2006, Ruggiero and Taylor 1997). One possible reason for this minimization may be that it is more beneficial for visible minorities to deny any discrimination they might experience, than to acknowledge the problems openly (Taylor, Wright and Ruggiero 2000, Ruggiero and Taylor 1997).

Participants offered recommendations for addressing discrimination in small towns. Several themes emerged in their responses. It was suggested that providing community education about different ethnic groups and cultures through public institutions and events, immigrant-focused support services, and employment opportunities for visible minorities would help them feel more welcome in small towns. The top priorities for support services and resources were English classes, employment opportunities and affordable housing.

The recommendations presented by the participants provide important guidance for policy-makers and service providers in immigration and settlement services, affordable housing, education, and employment areas. Collaboration among organizations addressing these policy and service needs will be critical in order to increase access to services and support while avoiding competition, cultural insensitivity, and inadequate coordination (Stewart et al. 2008).

About the authors

DANIEL W. L. LAI is Professor and Associate Dean (Research and Partnerships) of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. He has a strong research interest in cultural diversity issues. His research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in various focus areas including examinations of the experience of visible minorities in Canada.

NEDRA HUFFEY holds a M.S.W. focusing on community, organizational management, and policy. Her practice experiences include working in the immigrant sectors as well as with people with HIV/AIDS. She is also specialized in program evaluation and community-based research. Currently, she works as a researcher at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary.

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Foreign Credential Recognition

Special issue of *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens*

This issue of *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* (spring 2007) provides insightful information and viewpoints on the growing debate regarding foreign credential recognition. The 35 articles published in this issue give an informed overview of the challenges involved in the recognition of foreign credentials and suggest a wide range of approaches to dealing with these challenges.

Topics covered by the authors include criteria set by regulatory organizations, the "legitimacy" of the credential recognition process, the prevalence of prejudices and professional protectionism, strategies adopted in Canada and abroad for credential recognition, ways to facilitate professional assessments of immigrants, retraining and transition programs, and the economic, social and cultural contributions of immigrants to Canada.

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Guest Editor: Lesleyanne Hawthorne (University of Melbourne)

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