

A Community of Acceptance: Respect for Thunder Bay's Diversity

Participant: Most of the time they just keep quiet [about racism]... I guess they've been taught to accept it.

Interviewer: I was just thinking this project's called "A Community of Acceptance" That's a whole different take on the word "acceptance."

Participant: That could be they accept that they're gonna be abused; that's the way they have to treat life.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities face racism in Thunder Bay, according to a new study issued by Diversity Thunder Bay. Racism has a significant impact on social cohesion in Thunder Bay, hindering cooperation, quality of life, and participation by various population sectors. Most of the racializing takes the form of subtle and marginalizing social practices although blatant racism does exist. Retail establishments, police services, employment sector, schools and post-secondary institutions were the most prominent sites of racializing. Social practices operated differently in these different locations.

The study consisted of 392 community surveys and interviews with 45 people over a three-month period between October and December 2001. Diversity Thunder Bay is a coalition, including representatives from many organizations spanning business, education, government, multi-cultural, First Nations, and other sectors. The project was funded through the Multiculturalism Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

BACKGROUND

"Race" is an arbitrary way that people use to classify others. Racism is more than the obvious and overt negative use of physical characteristics to judge or mistreat people. Racism consists of those factors - sometimes historical, sometimes assumed or even unconscious - that give people of certain races advantages over others.

The process of using "race" is called **racialization**. Besides occurring in *individual* attitudes and actions, *systemic racism* involves institutional practices and societal structures that disadvantage or give privileges to certain peoples and not to others. Limiting racism to overt actions and attitudes obscures how racialization affects people's lives.

Canada is a country with a population that encompasses a wide diversity of cultures and ethnic groups. It is a country often described as having *two* founding nations. Yet Aboriginal peoples predated the French and English immigrants and view themselves as sovereign nations. They are a vibrant element in Canadian society. Numerous ethnic groups have also become part of what is often termed "the Canadian mosaic."

Over the years numerous groups have tried to address ethnic and racial prejudice in

"What is it like to be Native in Thunder Bay? Well, it is all right as long as no one knows! (Laughs) It is like riding a Honda when you should be riding a Harley Davidson. It is OK as long as no one sees you."
(interview participant)

Thunder Bay. However, no comprehensive research on the community has been done until now. *Community of Acceptance* shows the state of relations between individuals of different racial groups in Thunder Bay.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Racism is an issue.

- 54% of survey respondents have observed discrimination based on race *in the past year*. 76% of Aboriginal respondents have observed such incidents occur.
- 56% of Aboriginal respondents have experienced discrimination based on race.

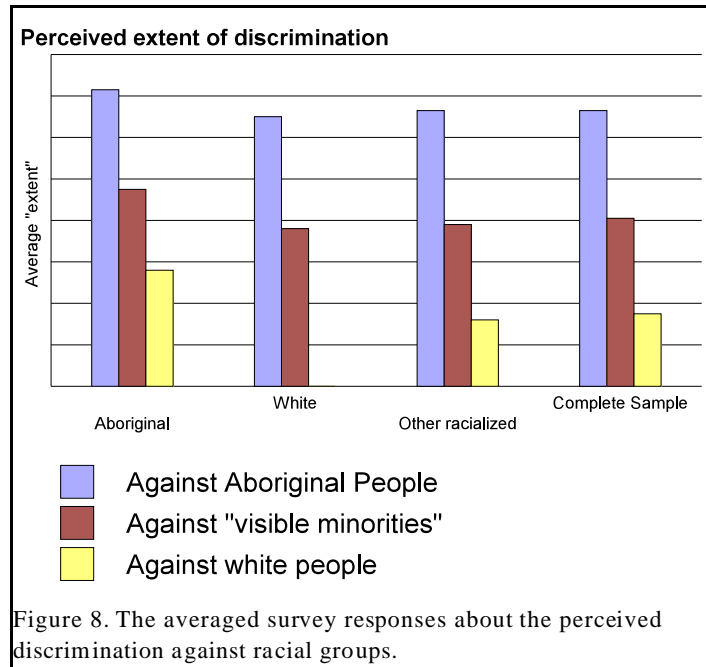
Racism is a community issue.

- Respondents strongly endorsed the idea that racism was not just about individuals. 79% said it is a community problem, not a personal one.
- 81% felt diversity makes Thunder Bay a better place to live.
- There was some feeling that race-related problems makes Thunder Bay a more difficult place to make decisions, or reduces its desirability as a place to live. Half of the survey respondents agreed with this statement. Aboriginal people agreed at an even higher rate.

These figures indicate action by community leaders and community institutions is required.

Who encounters racism.

- Respondents felt that discrimination was strongest against Aboriginal people - with a level nearly midway between “some” and “widespread” discrimination.
- Visible minorities were also felt to experience discrimination in Thunder Bay.
- Aboriginal people strongly perceive discrimination against themselves. 73% of Aboriginal respondents “*strongly agreed*” with the statement that “People of my race have been discriminated against.”
- Discrimination against visible minorities appears to be affected considerably by income, occupation, and education, ability to speak English well, or immigration status.



Where racialization occurs.

The respondents who indicated they had observed discrimination based on race were asked where this had occurred. They were given several options and could add their own. These are presented below.

- Retail establishments are the sites of more racial incidents than any other social location.
- Schools are another place in which racial incidents often occur. Study participants report that often schools do not address incidents. While blatant incidents occur, most are more subtle, yet still leave a person marginalised.
- Workplaces are also listed highly as locations in which racializing occurs. Besides impacting who gets hired, workplace racialization impacts retention - who wants to work in a negative environment?

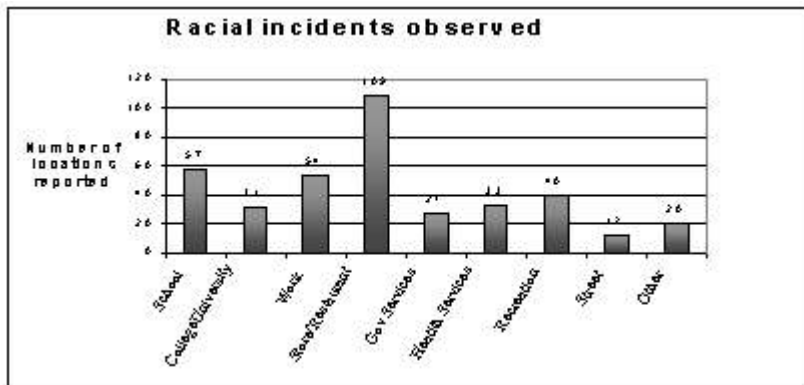


Figure 10. Social locations of discrimination based on race as reported by survey participants.

Interview participants reinforced these conclusions about the frequency of racial incidents in these social locations. They also forcefully added one.

- Police were referred to often. Aboriginal and Black study participants reported frequent “hassling.” Cultural misunderstandings were also highlighted.

Questions were asked about perceptions of fair treatment for the respondent personally and for “all people.” These parallel questions were asked for stores employees, health care workers, police, school staff and social workers.

- Aboriginal people felt personally treated less fairly than did people from any other racial group on each of the five questions.
- Frequency of discrimination was reported between “sometimes and “occasional” in the past year. It is a regular and negative part of racialized people’s lives - a factor that adds extra burden to social interactions or self-esteem.

How does racialization occur?

Social practices matter, according to interview participants. Social practices have a major impact on feeling racialized. Racialized people encounter forms of treatment that are *blatant racism*, *subtle racializing*, *marginalizing interactions*, and *systemic racism*. Many of the Aboriginal and visible

Box 1. Forms of social interaction that are interpreted as racializing by Aboriginal and visible minorities.

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- Blatant Racism*
 - Slurs*
 - Safety concerns/violence*
 - Subtle Racializing*
 - Being Ignored*
 - Being Watched*
 - Treated as a Stereotype*
 - Accusations made*
 - Don’t belong*
 - Marginalizing Behaviour*
 - Stereotypic comments*
 - Differential Treatment*
 - Systematic Discrimination*
 - Societal Structures*
 - Systemic racism*
 - Historical Factors*
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minority interview participants felt that the white population was unaware of their actions, and unaware of how uncomfortable it is to be racialized and how often it occurs.

“White people, they don't understand – like they don't understand that people will stop you or question you just because of the way you look.” (Interview participant)

- Understanding social practices and acknowledging their impact on racialized people is key to understanding social interaction, including the descriptions of race relations in the various locations.
- Box 1 shows some of the ways people felt racialized. The report describes these in detail, using quotes from the interview participants.

“I don't know if you can really say, for sure that it's all racism. But you know it just seems uncanny that these things are happening.” (Interview participant)

An example of one social location.

Data on particular social locations are presented in the full report and are too complex to summarize here. A brief discussion of the most commonly referred to location of racialized treatment - retail establishments - is presented as an example. This also has the advantage of not singling any particular institution. Forms of treatment from Box 1 are *italicized*. This is only a summary.

My experience within the business community – I am surprised how businesses react to non-white people. I'm actually amazed because it shouldn't matter where the dollar's coming from if you're still making money.... I thought all business people would just want to make money and who cares who's buying it. Um, and that might speak to the level of customer service in Thunder Bay as opposed to racism, I don't know. (Interview participant)

- Aboriginal people and other racialized people referred frequently to *differential treatment* in the form of poor service or waiting longer for service.

“Sometimes it's just blatant where we can't get service. Sometimes, because, if I were to go in myself [I'd get better service]. And sometimes my husband [who is Filipino] will say, “Can you phone this place?” or “Can you go into this place? Because I've tried and they're not very nice.” (Interview participant)

- Some study participants reported that they were even asked to leave or completely *ignored*.
- Aboriginal people and other racialized people stated they were often followed around the store by store employees. *Being watched* like this implies an unstated *accusation* that they were likely to steal.

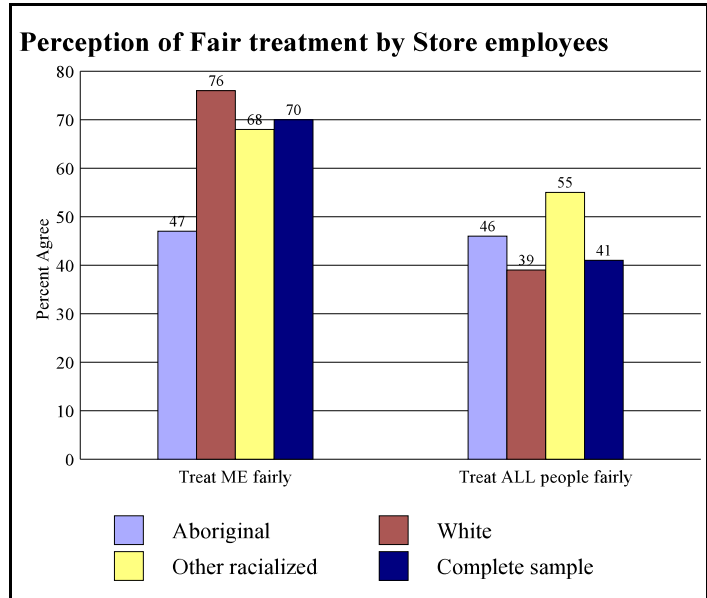
“As soon as we walked into the store, staff immediately started following us. In order to get them off our backs we flashed them our money. We should not have had to do that.” (Survey respondent)

- *Systematic discrimination* occurs when Aboriginal people exercise their rights as accorded

through treaties with the Canadian government. Cashiers or store policies made it needlessly difficult, or sometimes outright denied, these rights.

“There was this sign that said you must present the status card before someone has punched through the order. What is funny about it is that you needed to total their order and then hit subtotal and then hit the tax exempt. So you actually couldn't even process their tax exempt until after the order was put through.” (Interview participant)

- The graph in the box shows that Aboriginal people perceive fair treatment by store employees at a much lower rate than do other people.



Racialization has an impact on Thunder Bay.

The impact of racialization on the individual who is being racialized is obvious. It has been mentioned above. The impact on the community is less obvious. This was not the direct focus of this study but some conclusions can be drawn. As racialized people described how they reacted or coped, a number of strategies became clear. In part, the strategies depended on the level of racialization and the other resources people had available. In addition, visible minorities have different options than do Aboriginal people. Strategies include:

- Maintaining cultural ties and walking in two worlds.
- Responding to racialization.
- Withdrawing personally.
- Operating around racialization.

Racialization weakens ties in the community and can remove the person and his or her talents and resources. For example, some Aboriginal people have chosen to operate around racialization by working to create alternate but parallel societal structures.

Community development includes both quality of life and economic prosperity. Systematic exclusion of some members has a negative effect on their quality of life. Social cohesion has been shown to have direct and positive results on economic prosperity. In fact, social cohesion (the investment of *social* capital that results in cooperation, shared values and networks of relationships) has a direct relationship to economic development and sustained prosperity.

The strategies noted above show a trend for racialized people to not invest social capital, or invest it in alternatives to mainstream community structures. Yet there is evidence of a willingness to invest trust, shared values and relational energy to create in-group cohesion. For Aboriginal people, this strategy is happening after decades of exclusion. Racialization has

fractured social cohesion. Racialization has a detrimental effect on the community of Thunder Bay as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Treating people on the basis of race happens in Thunder Bay and has adverse effects. Blatant racism and systematic discrimination occur. But other forms of treatment are less obvious. The final report emphasizes these social practices, as they were the basis by which racialized people reported their interactions with institutions in Thunder Bay and in everyday life.

Thunder Bay has a stake in addressing problems associated with racialization. Survey respondents strongly asserted that it should be addressed by the community, not as a personal problem alone. Solutions to racialization will be multifaceted. There is no quick fix to longstanding problems. Attention to social practices means the population at large becomes more aware.

The report also emphasizes how racialization reduces social cohesion. The concept of social cohesion is both theoretical and practical. Racialization is not just a negative effect on individuals. It impacts the community as a whole and reduces our social and economic responsiveness. This points to the necessary leadership of municipal government and the business community, e.g., Chamber of Commerce.

Certain institutions are also pointedly mentioned by racialized people - police services and both school boards, in particular. Institutions need to go beyond race relations policies and consider social practices and institutional culture. Such an approach recognizes that we are not always conscious of how our environment or position affects our own thoughts and actions. It also calls for organizational change.

Successful communities are those that can improve the lot of all its citizens, including those who face structural barriers that limit participation and success. Thunder Bay can be that sort of community. To do so will have positive consequences for all residents and citizens of Thunder Bay.

I think that this process we're participating in right now is a result of something that's occurred in our community over the last couple of years which I think is absolutely wonderful. My only fear to this process is that this process will end... The momentum that's starting, I hope that we're able to continue it. (Interview participant)

The full 130-page report is available at all Thunder Bay libraries, by download from <http://diversitythunderbay.tripod.com>, or can be purchased as a CD-Rom from Diversity Thunder Bay for \$7.

A Community of Acceptance was conducted by a research team coordinated by Randolph Haluza-DeLay of CSoP Research & Consulting.

"Building social capital and a compassionate sense of place"

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