



Executive Summary

Background

As part of the podcast series, Through the Looking Glass: Race in Canada, four online focus groups were conducted in September 2020. Respondents were enlisted through a third-party research recruitment firm and agreed to take part in a videoconference focus group that would be used in this series about race in Canada.

Participants were screened to include people from urban and rural communities and from different regions across Canada. The four groups included men and women 18+ who identified as Black, white, people of colour, and Indigenous.

Findings

1. Impressions of Canada were positive - initially

Most respondents, we heard in Episode 1, describe Canada as a relatively open, very diverse country that presents economic opportunity. But that top line impression started to break down very quickly with the recognition of foreign academic credentials. Failure to recognize foreign credentials was seen as unfair, discriminatory and designed as a barrier to entry. Most participants had real trouble identifying unifying Canadian values, and many thought it varied - urban to rural, or by region. One thing all agreed: there is a veneer of politeness to Canada that does not signify true acceptance of others. Respondents told of covert racism revealed socially through "jokes" drawing on negative stereotypes.

2. Awareness of anti-Black racism was universal

There is so much more awareness of discrimination against Black people than discrimination against Indigenous peoples. While it's conceded that Indigenous peoples face the most discrimination in Canada, no participant in Episode 2 knew who the Chief of The Assembly of First Nations was, nor was there any consensus about what to call Indigenous peoples. We heard Native, Native American, Aboriginal and Indigenous.

3. Discrimination cuts deep

The pain and sadness of Indigenous peoples is just one millimetre below the face they put on in our focus groups. We learned that their own family histories were disappearing because it was too painful to talk about. In Episode 3, our participants, who were two generations removed from Residential Schools, were overcome by emotion describing the consequences for their families. Indigenous participants said their family histories had disappeared and they felt disconnected from their heritage. Black participants felt that their history in Canada was generally unrecognized and undocumented.

Black and Brown Canadians feel their environment is not just biased against them – but hostile and even threatening to them. Not many of our visible minority participants were surprised to see evidence of excessive police force against an Indigenous leader. They consider it a regular part of life.

4. Black and Indigenous peoples see themselves as allies

Indigenous peoples in our focus groups did not resent the attention Black Lives Matter gets. On the contrary, they see it as their best hope for fair treatment. Their hope is that a rising tide of fairness will lift all boats.

Indigenous peoples attend BLM rallies and fight for it on Facebook. Black Canadians include Indigenous peoples among the people they are fighting for.

5. Symbols matter

Most people knew who Viola Desmond was, and they knew that because The Bank of Canada put her on the 10-dollar bill. As a result, people knew her story. It made all participants feel proud, and they felt it said something positive about Canada's willingness to confront its past. It lends credence to the idea that an Indigenous Governor General could be an important symbol.

6. There is broad goodwill toward Indigenous peoples

Caucasians as well as other minorities, recognize the depth of the discrimination Indigenous peoples have and do face. Everybody was aware of the Residential Schools and had no trouble understanding the legacy those schools are still leaving today. This is a big improvement from years past. Not long ago, people would have tried to justify the schools or minimize their impact. Not now. However, change requires a catalyst, and the political leadership of the Indigenous community is not breaking through. As mentioned earlier, there was no consensus about what to call Indigenous peoples. We heard Native, Native American, Aboriginal and Indigenous.

7. Diversity is our strength: we're certainly not there now, but it's a shared wish

The idea of a society of true diversity and acceptance for all was seen as the essence of the country. You could hear it in their descriptions of Canada off the top of Episode 1. That is what people want it to be.

But there is a strong divergence in starting points. Our white participants thought Canada was a good country getting better. Our participants of colour thought Canada was an okay country that needed a lot of change.

8. Exposure drives attitudes and behaviour

George Floyd was a real spark to help people understand how messed up the relationship between the police and Black people is. The video of Chief Adam's arrest graphically illustrated to our participants how differently from whites Indigenous peoples are treated by police. Group participants in Episode 2 who might never care about NFL football know Colin Kaepernick's name.

There is a complacency among white Canadians about the amount of discrimination embedded in our society, including the police, but when people are confronted with the reality of discrimination, they recoil from the injustice of it. *It is not Canadian.*

Reflections from the Moderator, David Herle*

American political scientist Samuel Huntington said that in America revolutions are sparked by people's desire to share fully in the aspiration of the country, not by people who reject the aspirations of the country.

That thought kept running through my mind as I reflected on focus groups I moderated about race in Canada (acknowledging as a White man I carry real blinders). I am neither an expert in

racism nor am I a role model. I am just a public opinion researcher who listened to my fellow citizens talk about their lives and experiences. As I listened, I could only ask myself "Why are we tolerating this discrepancy between the ideal of our country and the reality of our country when it comes to inclusion of Indigenous peoples and people of colour?" Because those group participants I heard calling out for equality in Canada are not trying to upset the basic precepts of our country. They are appealing to those basic precepts.

Listening to the group participants at the beginning of Episode 1 of my video-podcast series, you can hear the idea of Canada. Opportunity. Diversity. Good people. Those were people's - white or not - top of mind impressions of Canada. Years ago, I surveyed Canadians on what they considered essential to the Canadian identity. Equality of opportunity and compassion were in the very top tier of desired Canadian attributes.

So how does that square with the racism and discrimination that is tiered and woven throughout Canadian society? Perhaps it gets put in the same mental place we had put the conditions in Long Term Care homes prior to the pandemic - too uncomfortable, too likely to provoke cognitive dissonance, too systemic to really think about addressing. When bad things hide in those places, exposure is the key to eradication.

The video of George Floyd's murder horrified and galvanized people all over the world. Few Canadians watching Through The Looking Glass could fail to be moved and angered as their fellow Canadians describe: regular and random police stops, sometimes accompanied by violence or intimidation; obvious discrimination, systemic and personal, in career opportunities; negative stereotypes that follow one around from school to work to the grocery store; and the erasure of people's history and narrative.

So, the first conclusion from this research is that the higher the profile examples of overt racism have, the more accepting we are that it is real and systemic. The first step to change is to remove the gauzy denial that envelops racism in Canada and confront it openly and directly. That is a role for media and political leadership.

Also, school curriculums need to teach the whole story of Canada and all its peoples, including the bad parts. I should not have graduated from school knowing more about the fur trade than residential schools. I am sure curriculums have progressed but from what I heard, not enough.

And people of good will have to act. When I asked participants what it said about me if I wore a "diversity is our strength" T shirt, one asked me "what are you going to do? Are you going to push the police officer off George Floyd?" If I am true to the ideal of Canada, I will be that person.

Black Lives Matter and Indigenous protests are seen by participants in these focus groups as necessary movements to have Canada live up to its professed ideals. The Canada that proudly called itself a mosaic, compared to the American melting pot.

We can make progress. We acknowledge the residential schools now and their lingering impact. We acknowledge Viola Desmond and the Black community in Canada. We used to proudly talk about tolerance (like it was a good thing!) but now we talk about diversity. We need to take the next step to inclusion. A diverse population does not make Canada remarkable. A diverse, cohesive, and inclusive population – that would make us remarkable and that is the aspiration of Canada.

**These reflections first appeared in [The Toronto Star](#) on Thursday, February 25, 2021.*

Thank you for reading and thank you for watching. We would like to thank our [Presenting Sponsor TELUS](#) for their kind contribution to this project. Most of all we would like to thank the 24 people from all parts of Canada, and all walks of life, for participating so candidly and thoughtfully.