Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion
Centre canadien pour la diversité et l'inclusion

Navigating race in Canadian workplaces

A brief history of race relations in Canada

August 2020

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Why does history still matter?

Many Canadians struggle with making the link between history and contemporary workplaces as related to racism and discrimination. Understanding Canadian history allows us to recognize why systemic barriers persist and remain particularly stark for some racialized groups.

In this section we provide a brief overview of a few key historical periods that have shaped race relations in Canada.

Pre-contact (prior to 1497)

Indigenous peoples lived in North America for thousands of years before European explorers arrived in the 11th century. Some Europeans eventually settled in Newfoundland, drastically changing the lives of Indigenous inhabitants.[1] Pre-contact is important to recognize, because it speaks to the rich and long history that existed before a narrative centred on a European legacy dominated our understanding of Canada as a country.

Colonization (1534 in Canada)

Colonization refers to the settlement and control over inhabited lands. Colonizing countries (namely Western European countries) set up colonies around the world for their benefit. This process of political, economic and social domination of other territories and peoples (namely in the Americas, Australia and parts of Africa and Asia) is referred to as colonization. In this framework, local people and land are exploited for the benefit of the colonizing country.

In Canada, a French explorer named Jacques Cartier undertook three voyages from France, lasting from 1534-1542. These voyages served as the symbolic start of colonization in Canada.[2]

Slavery (1689 – 1833)

While Canada commonly associates itself with the proud history of the Underground Railroad, Canadians often forget that the colonies that became Canada were home to slavery for over 200 years, up until 1834. European colonizers largely saw slavery in racial terms. When Britain took over New France, seven per cent of the colony was enslaved, two-thirds of which were Indigenous, and the other one-third, African.

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[1] Government of Canada (2017, May 2). Part 2 – History of First Nations – Newcomer Relations. In First Nations in Canada. Retrieved from https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1307460755710/1307460872523
[2] McCullough, J.J. (2017). Early History of Canada. In *The Canadian Guide.* Retrieved from http://www.thecanadaguide.com/history/early-history/

Following the 1776 American Revolution, there was another influx of slaves. When loyalists moved to Canada, they brought with them 2000 enslaved people to the provinces of Nova Scotia, Ontario and Quebec.[3] The legacies of slavery are still seen and felt today in the form of anti-Black racism.

Immigration Act (1869)

After Confederation, the Canadian Government made immigration policy a priority, with the idea that attracting newcomers would result in growth and economic gains.

In 1869, the Canadian Government passed the Immigration Act. As it appeared, the Act had few restrictions. However, the policy was highly discriminatory in practice. There were specific channels by which immigrants could come to Canada.

The Canadian Government opened immigration offices in Britain, Europe and the United States. Through this practice, they attracted farmers and laborers of British, European and American nationality and turned away workers, artisans and tradesmen from other countries.[4] And, immigrants who were considered ill or a threat to public safety were made to pay a levy.

The Indian Residential School System (1884)

The Indian Residential School System remains one of the darkest marks on Canadian history and a reminder of the deep impacts of colonialism and colonization in Canada.

In 1884, amendments to the Indian Act led to the creation of Indian residential schools. The Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and United churches funded and operated the schools, with the goal of assimilating Indigenous children into the system created by the settlers. It was estimated that over 150 000 Indian, Inuit and Métis children between the ages of four and sixteen attended the schools, in all Canadian provinces and territories except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland.

Indigenous children experienced significant trauma at these schools, trauma which has impacted generations of Indigenous families across Canada. In addition to being forcibly separated from their families, there were reports of physical, sexual and emotional abuse at these schools. Children were made to abandon their language, cultural beliefs and ways of life, and forced to adopt English and French, learn European-based school subjects, new habits and foreign religious practices. Any expression of Indigenous identity was harshly punished. The last

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[3] Ostroff, J. (2017, June 17). Colonial Canada Had Slavery For More Than 200 Years. And Yes, It Still Matters Today. *HuffPost Canada*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/06/17/slavery-canada-history_n_16806804.html

[4] Makarenko, J. (2010, August 10). History of Canadian Immigration Policy. In *Immigration Policy in Canada: History, Administration and Debates*. Retrieved from https://www.mapleleafweb.com/features/immigration-policy-canada-history-administration-and-debates.html

residential school closed in 1996[5] in Saskatchewan, but the negative legacy of these schools is still felt today.

The Chinese Head Tax (1885)

Canada enacted the Chinese Immigration Act in 1885, which included a head tax on Chinese immigrants coming to Canada. Almost all Chinese immigrants were made to pay a head tax of $50, later raised to $100 and then $500. This put a huge financial burden on Chinese immigrants and it was the first official legislation in Canada to exclude immigration based on ethnic origin. When the tax was removed from the Chinese Immigration Act in 1923, the discrimination continued with the ban of Chinese immigration until 1947.[6] The Canadian Government profited from this practice, collecting $23 million in various head taxes over 38 years.[7]

Komagata Maru (1914)

On May 1914, the *Komagata Maru* steamship sailed into Vancouver carrying hundreds of South Asian immigrants. Canada denied entry to almost all the 376 passengers, keeping the ship in the harbor for nearly two months. The ship was eventually forced to return to India, where there was a riot. British soldiers killed twenty passengers and jailed others.

Canada needed immigrants, but it was difficult for those from outside Britain, Europe and the United States to gain entry. Many were subject to the Continuous Passage Act of 1908, requiring that all immigrants arrive directly from their point of entry, with no stops in between, making it harder for those from non-European countries to come to Canada. The rule was in place until 1947.[8]

MS St. Louis (1939)

MS St. Louis was a ship that left Hamburg, Germany in 1939, carrying 937 passengers, mostly Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi Germany. The passengers had secured Cuban tourist visas. However, only 28 passengers were allowed entry into Cuba, and the ship was forced to leave Cuba shortly after. Despite petitioning for admission, the ship was denied entry to the United States and Canada, with both countries being hostile to the idea of Jewish immigration. The ship eventually made its way back to Europe with 907 passengers still on

[5] Union of Ontario Indians. (2013). An Overview of the Indian Residential School System. Retrieved from http://www.anishinabek.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/An-Overview-of-the-IRS-System-Booklet.pdf

[6] Chan, A. (2016, September 6). Chinese Head Tax in Canada. Retrieved from https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-head-tax-in-canada/

[7] MTCSALC. 2011, March 29). Government collects $23 million. In *Chinese Head Tax.* Retrieved from http://www.roadtojustice.ca/laws/chinese-head-tax

[8] Husser, A. (2016, May 17). Komagata Maru apology: Ship's story represents 'dark chapter' of Canada's past. CBC News. Retrieved from http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/komagata-maru-backgrounder-apology-1.3584372

board. While the U.K, France, Belgium and the Netherlands took in many of the passengers, the Nazi invasion of these countries put these Jewish asylum seekers at risk again. It is estimated that 254 of those who returned to Europe died during the Holocaust. This episode in Canada's history underscores Canada's anti-Semitic past and how that was translated into on immigration policies.[9]

The Japanese Internment (1942)

One of the most tragic events in Canada's history is the Internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. During this time, Japanese Canadian citizens were forcibly removed from their homes on the West Coast to remote areas in eastern British Columbia and elsewhere. The Canadian government not only seized and sold their property, but they also forced them into mass deportation after the war ended.

Japanese migrants have been arriving in Canada since the turn of the 20th century. When anti-Asian sentiment and riots broke out protesting their presence, Prime Minister King gave the order that under the authority of the Order-in-Council, all people of Japanese ancestry would be excluded from a 100-mile radius from the Pacific Coast. In the end, 22 000 Canadian Japanese, of which sixty-five per cent were Canadian-born, were removed from their homes. Wartime restrictions were kept in place until April 1949.[10] The federal government apologized for the internment of Japanese-Canadians in 1988, over 40 years later, and offered compensation. The city of Vancouver apologized in 2013, over 70 years later.

Demolition of Africville (1964)

Black people have lived in Nova Scotia since 1749. A large number arrived in the late 1700s and early 1800s, many of whom were former slaves or black loyalists. The Black residents were subject to systemic racism but formed a tight-knit community, 'Africville', located on the outskirts of Halifax. Even though the residents paid municipal taxes, Africville was denied basic community services such as electricity, clean water or infrastructure. As the community became entrenched in poverty, the City of Halifax began to set up undesirable developments in the community that were a sore sight for its White residents.[11] These developments included the prison, a slaughterhouse and a city dump.

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[9] Schwinghamer, S. (2018). Canada and MS *St. Louis*. Retrieved from https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canada-and-ms-st-louis
[10] Robinson, G. (2017). Internment of Japanese Canadians. Retrieved from http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/internment-of-japanese-canadians/
[11] Rabble. (2018). Africville. Retrieved from http://rabble.ca/toolkit/rabblepedia/africville

In 1964, the Halifax City Council evicted resistant residents of Africville with little to no compensation or consultation.[12] Though there were protests and resistance, businesses and homes were demolished and residents were relocated into housing projects, many of which were also entrenched in poverty and slated to be demolished. These relocation efforts, made in the name of community revitalization, ruptured the Black community in Halifax. Today Africville has been declared a historical site and a formal government apology has been issued to the community's descendants.

Multiculturalism (1971)

In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act affirmed the government policy that every Canadian receive equal treatment, which respects and celebrates diversity. The Act recognized that English and French remain the official languages but that other languages may be used[13].

While the Multiculturalism Act created a national narrative of an equitable and accepting society, this section has demonstrated how Canada has historically treated racialized groups as unequal, as written in law and in practice.

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[12] McRae, M. (2017, February 23). The Story of Africville [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://humanrights.ca/blog/black-history-month-story-africville
[13] Mehta, A. (2013, May 27). Multiculturalism 1971 [Prezi]. Retrieved from https://prezi.com/1yunojzapk9d/multiculturalism-1971/

Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI)

CCDI has a mission to help the organizations we work with be inclusive, free of prejudice and discrimination – and to generate the awareness, dialogue and action for people to recognize diversity as an asset and not an obstacle. Through the research, reports and toolkits we develop and our workshops, events and workplace consultations, we're helping Canadian employers understand their diversity, plan for it and create inclusion.

CCDI's leadership has a proven model that's cultivated trust as an impartial third party. Our expertise is focused on the topics of inclusion that are relevant in Canada now and the regional differences that shape diversity.

A charitable organization that thinks like a business, we have created a niche with our innovative research technology and data analysis that brings a deeper understanding of Canadian diversity demographics and mindsets at any given moment.

CCDI is grateful for the support of our over 170 Employer Partners across Canada.

Contact us

For any questions regarding the benefits of becoming a CCDI Employer Partner, please contact:

Nyla Camille Guerrera
Senior Director, Partner Relations
1-416-968-6520 x 112
nyla.camille@ccdi.ca

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