

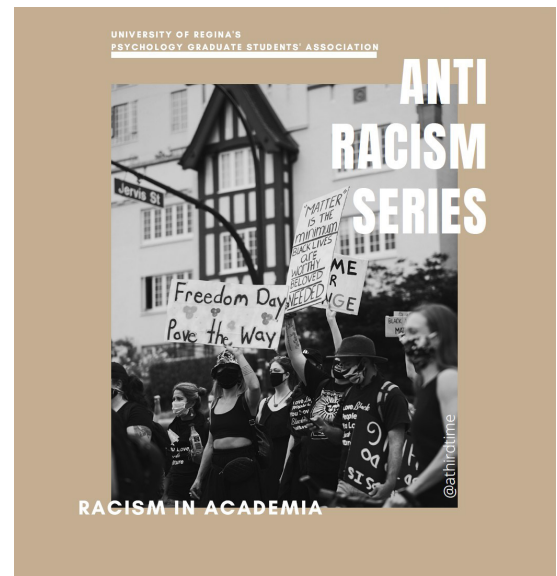
How to be an Anti-Racist Researcher

Notes from the “Anti-Racism in Research and Academia” event



Written by Emily Winters, MSc (Regina)

Over the past year, students from the University of Regina Psychology Graduate Students’ Association (PGSA) have facilitated several virtual events aimed at amplifying Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour’s voices, as well as name and contextualize systemic racism across several fields. Moreover, these events are intended to outline actionable items that attendees can walk away with and put to use. In December of 2020, the PGSA organized an event titled: “Anti-Racism in Research and Academia”, which showcased the knowledge and perspectives of three Indigenous researchers located in Saskatchewan: Dr. Verna St. Denis, a Professor in Educational Foundations at the University of Regina; Dr. Carrie Bourassa, the Scientific Director of the (CIHR) Institute of Indigenous Peoples’ Health (IIPH) and a Professor of Community Health and Epidemiology at the University of Saskatchewan; and Anthony Elsom, the research coordinator for the Depression, Cognition, and Culture Lab (DCC) at the University of Regina. I had the pleasure of meeting with two of the speakers from this event to further discuss how racism presents in academia from both the student and faculty point of view. From these talks, four recurring themes emerged on how health researchers can work to be more anti-racist in both their professional and personal lives.



PGSA's Anti-Racism Series Event Poster

1. Check your biases

One of the most meaningful things health researchers can do to be better allies to their Indigenous colleagues is to be conscious of their biases. Dr. Bourassa emphasized that we all have biases, but it is important to take the time to work with people and not be afraid to ask questions. Being honest with ourselves to critically examine the biases we hold is paramount in working to be an anti-racist researcher. For example, when recruiting graduate students, faculty are often told to consider how well the prospective student “fits” into their lab. However, we have to ask ourselves, what does “good fit” really mean? It is possible that emphasizing “fit” subconsciously translates into recruiting students who look like you and have had similar life experiences to you. Prioritizing whether potential students have diverse perspectives and experiences over “fit” is one way to promote a more anti-racist space in your lab.

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2. Create meaningful relationships and avoid “tokenizing”

Another way to incorporate anti-racism into your research program is to avoid tokenizing. Tokenizing is the practice of symbolically including a member of a marginalized group in an effort to appear inclusive. In academia, this may look like a researcher including one member of a First Nations community on their panel to say they “included Indigenous perspectives.” It has become common practice to use the overarching term “Indigenous” to collectively describe First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples across the land we now call Canada. Although many Indigenous peoples in Canada have shared experiences of historical and ongoing colonization, and it may often be appropriate to reference Indigenous peoples as a collective group, it is very important to be mindful that there is tremendous diversity within and across Indigenous communities. Anthony Elsom emphasized how he hopes audience members left his talk with an understanding of how “everyone has different experiences.” Ultimately, it is crucial for researchers to be aware of the unique experiences of those who identify as “Indigenous.” This means that researchers cannot just include a seat at the table and expect one person to represent the “Indigenous perspective” on any issue — anti-racism means going well beyond “checking a box.”

There is a well-established pattern of Indigenous peoples being “researched to death” while the Indigenous peoples themselves have not benefited from the research projects centered around their own communities. In an effort to avoid perpetuating this harmful practice of extractive research, many researchers may be weary of conducting research with Indigenous communities. When asked if there is a way for non-Indigenous researchers to conduct research with Indigenous communities in a good way, Dr. Bourassa was very clear: “We have to work together, and the elders have really brought that [idea] home, that we are all here on Turtle Island, we all come from all Four Directions. [...] There is space for non-Indigenous allies. What I think is really important, is that we are talking about cultural safety.” Cultural safety goes beyond recognizing cultural differences (awareness), that these differences impact Indigenous peoples’ health and wellbeing (sensitivity), and adapting services/practices to better serve Indigenous peoples (competence). Practicing cultural safety means that **researchers take the time to establish lasting and meaningful relationships that promote the self-determination of Indigenous communities.** Research conducted with Indigenous communities must be driven by that community and serve their interests. They should not just be consulted at the end of the project, but embedded throughout the entire research process.



Mr. Anthony Elsom, B.A. (Hons),
Research Coordinator for the
Depression, Cognition, and
Culture Lab (DCC)

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3. Create a space that promotes justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion

Academia has a long-standing history of being an exclusionary and unwelcoming environment for many marginalized groups. There are several things that health researchers can do to promote justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in academia. As researchers, it is important that we take steps to make sure people from historically excluded populations feel that they belong in academia. A simple way to do this is making sure advertisements, promotional materials, and lab websites feature diverse individuals — if people see themselves represented in these contexts, it makes it a more welcoming environment for them. Furthermore, while promoting diversity and inclusion of marginalized populations in academia is important, it is even more important to ensure that academia is a safe for them to work, free from discrimination and harassment. One way to do this is to believe and advocate for marginalized people if/when they report an injustice. When asked how white/settler faculty can be better allies to their Indigenous colleagues, Dr. Bourassa said: “If you see something, do something. There is still a lot of straight-up racism [...] There is a lot of fear that if you say something, people might come after you, but we have to speak up if you see someone being slandered [...] The racism is still so blatantly rampant.” If a student or colleague discloses that they have been subjected to racism or discrimination, you can validate their experience and ask them what is the best way that you can help (e.g., reporting the incident to a Human Resources department on their behalf). If you see or hear a student or colleague say or do something racist, hold space to have a conversation with them about how that is harmful. White/settler faculty have the power to use their privilege to advocate for BIPOC faculty and make it a safer space for all.



Dr. Carrie Bourassa, Scientific Director of CIHR Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health (IIPH) and Professor at the University of Saskatchewan

4. Take initiative

Anthony indicated that he sees many “great strides being made, but there is still a lot of work to do” to make academia a more anti-racist field. The work of many anti-racist academics has resulted in widespread emphasis on highlighting the perspectives of Indigenous people. This emphasis often results in the limited number of Indigenous academics in Canada being asked to be on several boards, panels, or speak on anti-racism quite often, despite the fact that anti-racism may not directly pertain to their primary program of research. It seems the responsibility is often placed on Indigenous academics to do anti-racist work. Dr. Bourassa indicated that this burden of anti-racist work

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“cannot fall only on Indigenous people.” Non-Indigenous allies have an important role to play in creating and implementing ways to decolonize academic spaces. When I queried how non-Indigenous academics can navigate the balance of uplifting and listening to Indigenous peoples whilst not burdening Indigenous academics, Dr. Bourassa indicated that this is a difficult situation. She believes that “just because you’re Indigenous, that doesn’t mean that you have to be a part of decolonization. While we need Indigenous people to do this work, there needs to be a balance of both [allies and Indigenous people].” Dr. Bourassa emphasized that working together is the only way forward: “we have to come together. Not only in terms of Indigenous peoples and allies, but in terms of marginalized populations, BIPOC, we have a thread running through that. I feel like we are still in these silos, and we cannot address anything when we’re in silos.”

Academics can take initiative to be anti-racist researchers by implementing the suggestions included in this article, but this is by no means an exhaustive list. There is no substitute for taking the time to do your own reading, reflection, and having difficult conversations with those around you. Although our ignorance may make us uncomfortable, we must be aware that our discomfort is not more important than making academia a space where everyone can thrive. Everyone is at a different place in their anti-racist journey, and you can honour where you are today, while committing to continuing to learn.

It is important to take the time to work with people and not be afraid to ask questions. Being honest with ourselves to critically examine the biases we hold is paramount.

Dr. Carrie Bourassa



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