

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



The Contours of Anti-Black Racism:

Engaging Anti-Oppression

from Embodied Spaces

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Anti-Black Racism, Oppression,
Anti-Oppressive Practice,
Youth Violence, Storytelling

POPULATION GROUP

Racialized Youth

STEPPING UP THEME

Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

SOURCE

Academic

“...no matter how intense the suffering, human agency cannot be stopped from imagining and performing new possibilities of healing and liberation. For us, then, the aim of anti-oppression and indeed anti Black-racism is engaging in an ongoing process of liberation...to uncover the source of our suffering, stop tearing each other down and start lifting each other up” (p. 28).

1. What is the research about?

This research is about how anti-Black racism is experienced by Black people in Canada. It focuses on the different layers of anti-Black racism experienced, and how even those invested in fighting anti-Black racism are sometimes implicated in how it operates.

2. Where did the research take place?

The observations and reflections on which this article is based took place at one site (Kitchener-Waterloo) of a multi-site research project; the sites chosen were three major immigrant-receiving cities in English-speaking Canada: Toronto, Vancouver, and Kitchener-Waterloo. The research project took place in the context of an alleged increase in youth violence in large cities, which was said to disproportionately impact racialized youth. The project explored the healing practices that youth used in the face of violence.

3. Who is this research about?

This article is about the experiences of the authors, four Black people in an Ontario university: two professors and two PhD students. All of the authors are from the African continent and settled in Canada as refugees or immigrants with their families. They have all been involved in the fight against anti-Black racism, and all worked together on the above-mentioned research project in various roles.

4. How was the research done?

While working on the research project described above (which aimed to explore the healing practices of racialized youth in Canada), the authors of this article were “stunned” (p. 22) that the violence they were studying was not just relevant to the youth in the project, but also to the authors’ own embodied experiences. In this article, the authors critically reflect on their individual and shared experiences of different types of anti-Black racism and how they engage in Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) to counter racism.

5. What are the key findings?

Within the context of their own AOP, the authors identify three understandings of the term **anti-Black racism** and reflect on their embodied experiences of these understandings.

A) Anti-Black Racism (A-BR)

- This describes the type of racism directed against Black people.
- Not all Black people experience anti-Black racism in the same ways. Jamaicans were often stereotyped as criminals, but as globalization and the free market economy bring African youth to work in precarious positions in Canada, Black Africans – and specifically Somalis – have more recently become the targets of this stereotype; as such, their lives are devalued by mainstream actors.

- This includes the specific **Anti-Black-African Racism** that:
 - i. devalues Black people from the African continent; while ‘old fashioned’ explicit biological racism is now socially unacceptable, images and conceptions of Africa as ‘backwards,’ ‘savage,’ and ‘uncivilized’ continue in subtle ways, which have been naturalized and embedded over time, impacting the daily experiences of racism for Black people from the African continent.
 - ii. homogenizes Black Africans, imagining that they are all from one small village, ignoring the incredible diversity of the continent and people’s experiences. When Black Africans do not fit in these narrow popular stereotypes, the mainstream is unsettled and unsure of how to react.
 - iii. creates barriers in health care, employment, and social settings, and within academic institutions.
- Storytelling and talking about experiences of anti-Black racism can be seen as ways of engaging in AOP that can help to heal and prompt social justice action.

B) Anti-Black Racism (AB-R)

- This describes a stance against the type of racism Black people perpetuate against each other.
- Fanon (1967) can be helpful in understanding what the authors call **internalized racism**, in which, after being repeatedly subjected to discrimination and oppression, Black people come to believe and perpetuate racist ideas and behaviours that have been used against them. For Black Africans, this may also relate to the history of colonization, and how colonial violence may be internalized by some, distorting self-image and consciousness.
- Despite the pain of internalized Black-racism, the authors insist that people can still imagine and enact new possibilities to overcome it, and to put into action ways of healing and becoming free. As such, they state that the aim of their AOP is to support Black people to see the roots of suffering, to stop hurting one another, and to build each other up.

C) Anti-Black-Racism (A-B-R)

- This describes a stance that combines the fight against anti-Black racism and the fight against racism perpetuated by Black people; it is impossible to look at either in isolation, as they reinforce each other. Moreover, race should not be looked at in isolation either; rather, the ways race intersects with other aspects of identity need to be examined.

- A-B-R cannot be understood on a local level without taking into account the broader, global processes that create and maintain inequity, injustice, and marginalization; it is especially critical to understand how pitting marginalized groups against each other maintains the global economy.
- AOP needs to find ways to honour racialized people’s diverse experiences, rather than homogenizing them, and, at the same time, create a sense of collectivity, while honouring difference. The authors recognize the challenges that this presents, and they struggle with many questions about how this should play out in practice; for example, they ask, “How do we engage racism in relation to all other forms of oppression without watering down the intensity of race?” (p. 31)
- Rather than seeing clear divides between “oppressor – oppressed” and “colonizer – colonized,” the authors argue that we are all implicated in maintaining systems that create oppression, and they advocate for people to work together and to see themselves as invested in the fight against the suffering of others.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The authors use storytelling throughout the article to illustrate the different layers of anti-Black racism from their own experiences. While the storytelling serves a practical purpose, it is also a strategy of AOP, used to spur readers to social action. The authors state that AOP is unique to each practitioner, and that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach. Rather, they hope that readers will recognize that there are many ways to engage in AOP that contribute to transforming communities.

For youth workers, this article may serve as a reminder that **self-reflexivity** and **self-awareness** are good starting places when engaging in AOP. The narratives presented can also help youth workers understand **the multiple and layered ways in which Black youth may experience racism**. Moreover, **storytelling is a method that can be explored as a tool of healing** when working with racialized youth.

FIND IT ONLINE

<https://exchange.youthrex.com/academic-literature/contours-anti-black-racism-engaging-anti-oppression-embodied-spaces>



Kumsa, M.K., Mfofo-M’Carthy, M., Oba, F., & Gaasim, S. (2014). The contours of anti-Black racism: Engaging anti-oppression from embodied spaces. *Journal of Critical Anti-Oppressive Social Inquiry*, 1(1), 21-38.