Afrophobia in Canadian Institutions: Youth Marginality, System Professionals and Systemic Barriers

"Informed by anti-[B]lack racism/Afrophobia, therefore, Canadian society and institutional professionals primarily relate to African-Canadian youth through stigmas, stereotypes, and historical assumptions" (p. 16).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about widespread anti-Black racism in Canada and the impacts on Black youth.

Anti-Black racism includes beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes directed at Black people through policies, laws, and regulations, with the goal of marginalization and oppression. The authors use the terms anti-Black racism and Afrophobia – "racism that targets people of African descent or the manifestation of racism towards Black people" (p. 3) – interchangeably to help highlight the complexity of anti-Black racism that African Canadians face across institutions.

Reflecting on their experiences in youth mentorship programs, the authors highlight how anti-Black racism/ Afrophobia are experienced – and ways system professionals – including teachers, school administrators, police officers, social workers, and youth workers – can mitigate institutional anti-Black racism/Afrophobia and better understand youth's experiences of the resulting marginalization and stigmatization.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in Ontario, Canada.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about impacts on Black and racialized youth and the system professionals who are tasked with the provision of programming, services, and support to these youth.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the three authors – African-Canadians with experiences working with youth experiencing marginalization – met over Zoom to reflect on systemic issues facing African-Canadian youth and barriers to those youth receiving services and supports. They interrogated the importance of racial identity in delivering community-based mentorship programming, providing services, and experiences of socioeconomic marginality. This research approach is **autoethnography**, which describes and analyzes individual personal/professional experiences to understand cultural experiences.

The authors relied on **critical race theory** – which centres the experiences of racialized people and critiques racism in institutions – to make sense of African-Canadian youth's systemic marginalization and stigmatization. Critical race theory points out that racism looks 'ordinary' or 'natural' to people in the dominant culture because it is ingrained due to white supremacy; as such, those experiencing marginalization are often the ones to challenge systems.

The discussions were **recorded** and **transcribed** (written out word for word). The authors then **analyzed** the transcriptions and listened back to the recordings to confirm their interpretation of patterns and to strengthen emerging themes.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

The analysis revealed **three key themes** describing the ways that Afrophobia play out in youth program contexts:

i) Grassroots leadership is often made invisible.

The grassroots work of Black and racialized system professionals and youth to challenge anti-Black racism is often overlooked or appropriated by researchers and policymakers. This dismissal highlights the ways that the work of influential grassroots leaders within communities experiencing marginalization can be made invisible. While these leaders have a better understanding of the challenges facing African-Canadian youth, they are still overlooked in social service leadership and policy. These invisibilized leaders

who have worked with African-Canadian youth through effective grassroots programs should guide policymakers on how to support and effect change for marginalized youth.

ii) Funding and resources are made scarce.

The lack of funding and resources for African-Canadian communities is one obstacle to establishing programs that can mitigate the impacts of Afrophobia and limits what youth workers and community organizers can do to initiate and run programs for youth. Limited funding for communities experiencing marginalization can lead to systemic neglect of young people – which, in turn, leads to stigmatization and stereotyping by system professionals. The authors also note that when career advancement becomes the primary focus of system professionals, they show no commitment to supporting African-Canadian youth.

iii) Structural constraints are strengthened and enforced by stereotypes and stigmas.

Assumptions branding African-Canadian youth as non-academic or as potential criminals is discourse-based – based in prevailing stereotypical narratives, or on others' generalized reflections and experiences. Consequently, these youth may not receive nurturing guidance, respect, or supportive mentorship. Black youth may experience a double consciousness – the sense of being one person with two identities: the one they feel inside, and the one they experience as being perceived by the world. This double consciousness can be "a survival strategy" (p. 13) used by Black youth to protect themselves from a judgemental system, and even to self-empower within institutions that are historically and continually disempowering.

Youth workers who rely on previous case notes when working with Black youth may also come to conclusions or make assumptions about specific Black youth in their practice. Effective youth workers will prioritize understanding Black youth through first-hand experience, in real time, prioritizing an anti-oppressive approach, trusting and including those youth in decision-making, and ensuring that young people's perspectives and opinions are also included in case notes. One of the authors shares the example of a probation officer advising them to 'stay away'

from a 16-year-old boy that one newspaper had described as a "monster"; when the author met this "monster," they saw a boy who needed guidance and a second chance at life. Meeting Black youth where they're at, and on their own terms, supports young people towards responsible adulthood and citizenship.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Due to the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism, youth workers may – consciously or unconsciously – perpetuate anti-Black racism, informing how Black and racialized youth enter systems and how they are received and provided services. Black youth regularly experience race-based trauma in schools, social service organizations, law enforcement institutions, and health care agencies, whose practice may be informed by unconscious beliefs and biases. Youth workers must strive to understand Black youth on an individual, one-on-one basis.

African-Canadian youth are often silenced when they name historical and ongoing experiences of Afrophobia, but they need to be affirmed, understood, and supported. System professionals must acknowledge that "what we see, depends heavily on what our cultures have trained us to look for" (p. 4). Youth workers who have not personally experienced the trauma of institutional racism must learn about anti-Black racism – and the ways in which Afrophobia upholds racism through policies, regulations, and laws to organize racialized youth – and how to challenge it in their work environments and day-to-day practice.

🔍 Garang, K., Leslie, G., & Black, W. (2023). Afrophobia in Canadian institutions: Youth marginality, system professionals and systemic barriers. *Child & Youth Services*, 1-24.