

Confronting Afrophobia: A Phenomenological Inquiry on the Marginalization of African-Canadian Youth in Canadian Institutions



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“...self-aware and self-reflexive [youth service professionals]... can amplify the voices of marginalized advocates and highlight experiences that are denied, or hidden, by systemic powers through institutional policies” (p. 21).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research examines systemic Afrophobia and anti-Black racism within Canadian institutions, particularly in education, social services, and youth work, and how these structures marginalize African-Canadian youth. The article also looks at the role youth workers play in either challenging or reinforcing these inequities, exploring their lived experiences, and highlighting their work with youth and how their insights reveal the persistence of Afrophobia and anti-Black racism in their professional environments.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in Ontario.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The study focuses on more than 500 youth sector professionals actively engaged in the Virtual Café by YouthREX (Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange), an online discussion platform designed for Ontario’s youth sector stakeholders to connect, network, share, and find resources, with more than 1,790 registered members. The participants engaging in this online community of practice represent a diverse range of intersecting social identities and levels of professional experience.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This study employed a **qualitative phenomenological approach** – a research method used to understand people’s lived experiences and how they make sense of those experiences – to examine how racial bias (Afrophobia) contributes to the marginalization of African-Canadian youth within youth-serving organizations.

Researchers analyzed **qualitative data** (describing qualities, characteristics, processes, or experiences) from posts made in online discussions on the Virtual Café, which comprises six Communities of Practice. For this study, researchers focused on a discussion thread from the Centering Black Youth Wellbeing Community of Practice that posed a question: “Why is anti-Black racism still a problem in Ontario?” Over 500 youth workers responded by posting to this discussion between January 27, 2021, and February 7, 2021.

Researchers conducted **in vivo coding**, creating descriptive codes based on the exact words or phrases used by participants. These codes were used to tag and categorize related quotes; researchers then grouped the coded quotes under their corresponding themes, allowing the authors to see how similar ideas were clustered. They wrote memos summarizing the key points of each theme and included notable examples from the data.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Participants in the study highlighted ways in which Afrophobia is implicated in their work experience and in interactions with some of their coworkers and leadership. Three distinctive themes emerged:

i) Challenging racist systems.

Youth workers challenge racist systems by being **proactive, reflective, and committed to self-education**. This involves unlearning and relearning, recognizing and questioning their own biases to develop strategies to push back against the “status quo.” They also encourage others – family, friends, peers, and coworkers – to have difficult conversations about racial discrimination and address Afrophobia.

Barriers to challenging Afrophobia include **a lack of interest and discomfort** around discussions of racism, especially among non-racialized communities (i.e. European-Canadians) where race is often ignored or avoided. This **avoidance** helps maintain the status quo and prevents meaningful conversations about the consequences of racism and anti-Black racism in particular.

ii) Recognizing Afrophobia within their institutions.

Afrophobia/anti-Black racism is a systemic issue and remains **deeply embedded** in Canadian institutions. Participants identified that the widespread **lack of education** on race, racism, and the notion of white supremacy is a critical barrier to positive transformation. Black Canadian contributions and perseverance through adversity is often **silenced** behind a benevolent multicultural narrative, which **ignores** instances of colonization, human enslavement, internment, and systemic disenfranchisement in Canada's history. These omissions lead many to believe that racism is not a major issue in Canada. Participants noted that anti-Black racism persists because many people are raised to think **it's not their problem to solve** or that it rarely occurs, even though everyday racism is active in schools, workplaces, and social settings.

Without a thorough understanding of the root causes and consequences of racial injustice, youth workers and institutional leaders are at risk of operating under the misconception that anti-Black racism is non-existent or insignificant, which can lead to policies and practices that continue to marginalize racialized communities.

iii) Challenging complicity.

Youth workers recognize that while they may actively challenge systemic racism, individual youth workers and agency leaders can still be complicit in maintaining racial inequities unintentionally. This complicity stems from inaction, misdirected actions, and **performative allyship**, through which superficial gestures of support replace meaningful efforts for change. To effectively combat anti-Black racism, **intentional and coordinated efforts are needed** on the individual, organizational, and systemic levels to promote transformation and demand accountability. In many cases, anti-racism efforts are driven by the desire to avoid *appearing* racist rather than genuinely acknowledging and addressing the systemic impact.

Anti-Black racism continues in Canada because people are unaware of its colonial roots and oppressive systems. Participants call for changes within the education system, advocating for a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges the historic and contemporary experiences of Black Canadians. Educators must be conscious of the reality of anti-Black racism and authentically engage with Black parents and youth to address these intrapersonal and system-level challenges.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research is crucial for youth work because it highlights how systemic Afrophobia/anti-Black racism affects African-Canadian youth and critical approaches to youth work. The researchers emphasize that anyone can support youth experiencing marginalization, demonstrating that equity benefits *everyone* and not just those who are experiencing oppression.

They also highlight the importance of understanding other systems of oppression and **intersectionality** – the idea that a person's different identities shape their experiences of discrimination or privilege – in promoting social justice. When challenges faced by African-Canadian youth are viewed as individual issues rather than systemic issues, individuals become pathologized instead of addressing the structural forces that create and maintain social inequities. Rather than being indifferent, the youth sector needs strong, social justice-oriented policies that educate and enable youth workers to effectively support systemically marginalized communities and combat anti-Black racism.

Youth workers' direct engagement with Black youth allows them to challenge stereotypes and advocate for more equitable treatment. By challenging biases and assumptions and examining issues from the perspective of those directly affected, youth workers can centre the lived experiences of racialized youth to strengthen their interventions and programming.

While dismantling systemic Afrophobia/anti-Black racism is a large project, youth workers' commitment to self-awareness and equity-oriented practice makes them key agents of change. Their ability to challenge personal and institutional biases and promote culturally responsive interventions creates opportunities for systemic transformation, making their role in challenging oppression both necessary and impactful.

- Q Garang, K. ë, Nembhard, J., Simmonds, C. C., & Anucha, U. (2025). [Confronting Afrophobia: A phenomenological inquiry on the marginalization of African-Canadian youth in Canadian institutions](#). *Child & Youth Services*, 1–30.