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## Racism within the Canadian university: Indigenous students' experiences

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### ABSTRACT

This article extends the investigation and understanding of the impact that everyday racism/microaggressions can have on the academic experience of Indigenous students by examining the racial climate of a major Canadian university to learn about the nature of anti-Indigenous racism. The data from seventeen interviews with students at McMaster University provide a deeper understanding of how Indigenous students perceive and experience racism within the university environment – including levels, impacts and coping mechanisms – and highlight the potential for racism to have a continuing impact on equality and access to education for Indigenous peoples. Subtle, modern racism is playing an active role in the daily lives of Indigenous university students, affecting both their academic and personal success. Despite increasing levels of successful degree completion and the creation of strong support systems, Indigenous students are consistently faced with barriers, including interpersonal discrimination, frustration with the university system and feelings of isolation.

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### Introduction

Research on Indigenous students' contemporary educational experiences in Canada typically focuses on achievement levels and how they compare to the general population. Statistical analyses reveal startling disparities, with less than 10% of Indigenous peoples attaining post-secondary degrees, compared to 26.5% of non-Indigenous Canadians (Preston 2008; Clark et al. 2014).<sup>1</sup> Since 'the attainment of higher levels of education is related to an improved standard of living ... greater employment satisfaction, higher incomes, improved health and longevity of life', many researchers have concluded that it is 'essential' to better support Indigenous peoples in post-secondary programme completion (Preston 2008, 1, 8; White and Beavon 2009).

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A common perception is that universities are open and inclusive institutions of learning. This may be an overly optimistic view. Although mainly focused on the racial climate for university/college campuses in the USA, the existing literature reveals that ethnic and racial discrimination is ubiquitous, with ongoing concerns regarding exclusion, isolation and marginality (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2003; Harper and Hurtado 2007). The other frequently recurring theme is that of 'institutional rhetoric rather than action' (Harper and Hurtado 2007, 21). This is supported by Law (2003, 519) who states that thus far there is insufficient evidence 'of systematic attempts concerned with addressing racism' within post-secondary institutions. Henry and Tator (1994, 2009) argue that, in the Canadian context, universities have denied the role of racism in Canadian society and have therefore been resistant to implementing changes to counteract its effects, which hinders inclusion and equity for Indigenous students and scholars. Existing literature also demonstrates that researchers have often neglected the experiences of Indigenous students in their research, despite concerns regarding educational parity and equitable treatment being shared by Indigenous peoples internationally (May and Aikman 2003; Harper and Hurtado 2007). This study contributes to the literature in this area by examining the racial climate, for Indigenous students, of a major Canadian university – documenting the experiences of those who participate in it to learn about the nature of anti-Indigenous racism within the university and how the effects on their lives are understood.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the lack of previous research in this area, many questions remain unanswered, such as to what extent does racism against Indigenous peoples still exist within post-secondary institutions and how does it impact the students? Given this context, I investigate self-reported experiences of everyday racism by Indigenous university students. The data show that despite increasing levels of successful degree completion and the creation of strong support systems, Indigenous students are consistently faced with barriers, including interpersonal discrimination, frustration with the university system and feelings of isolation. There is a considerable lack of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, combined with a lack of awareness regarding issues that Indigenous students face. In order to further both our understanding of inequality within the Canadian university system, and the creation of inclusive/supportive environments for Indigenous students, scholars and policymakers must take these findings into consideration.

### **Theoretical and empirical context**

Throughout history, Canadians have often denied any responsibility for the welfare and lower socio-economic status of Indigenous communities,

placing blame on the shoulders of the Indigenous peoples themselves (Satzewich 2011). Examples of this can be seen in theoretical approaches that identify Indigenous culture as the root of the problem, such as the 'welfare Indian' stereotype (perception of a cultural deficit) (Flanagan 2000; Satzewich 2011). The current study offers a different approach, focusing on the role that racism is playing within university settings, while building on work in other related areas of research, such as racial microaggressions impacting minority groups in the USA and critiques of Eurocentric curricula.

Although Canada has built an international reputation for multiculturalism and inclusion, it also has a long history of colonialism and exclusion (Henry and Tator 2010). The current environment in Canada for Indigenous peoples is distinguished from that of other racialized groups, who are often immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, because of ongoing struggles for sovereignty and decolonization (Clark et al. 2014). Contemporary Canadian society is 'beset with subtle racial tensions' and this has serious implications for Indigenous university students as policy for higher education in Canada often still presumes assimilation (Sydell and Nelson 2000, 627; Clark et al. 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Research has documented a shift in the predominant forms of racism. Traditional racism (openly expressed prejudice and discrimination) has been largely replaced by 'modern racism', which is more subtle, indirect and difficult to detect (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Sydell and Nelson 2000; Quillian 2006; Clair and Denis 2015). There have been numerous approaches developed to analyse contemporary racism, such as modern racism, aversive racism and the new racism (Barker 1981; McConahay, Hardee, and Batts 1981; Dovidio and Gaertner 1986). Within the theory of modern racism there is a particular focus on how only traditional racism is viewed as racism by most and therefore in its new and more subtle forms modern racism often goes undetected (McConahay, Hardee, and Batts 1981). It is this aspect that makes the theory of modern racism particularly relevant within contemporary Canadian society and, for the purposes of this study, the university environment specifically. Recent sociological theory has been developed following examination of the ways that modern racism operates within various social institutions. Researchers have identified ways in which ideological frameworks are used to negate the importance of race and racism, how 'dominant racial belief systems' are enforced to protect collective group privileges and the persistence of ideologies that dismiss structural inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Byrd 2011). This shift to a more covert/subtle expression of racism must be taken into account when investigating Indigenous student experiences.

Examination of interpersonal/micro-interactions can be used as a starting point for investigating how ideologies of racism are revealed (Essed 1991; Banks 1994). Essed's (1991) theory of 'everyday racism' outlines how racism

can be investigated at the intersection of macrosociological structures and microsociological processes – namely, general daily interactions (Essed 1991; Collins 1992; Banks 1994). Essed (1991) proposed that in order to study everyday racism, one must seek the perspective of those who are experiencing it as they have acquired knowledge that allows them to report on it with authority (Collins 1990, 1992; Banks 1994). This approach has been used as a starting point for analysis within the current study of the racial climate of Canadian universities.

A study completed by Clark et al. (2014) utilizes the concept of microaggressions to look at the racial climate of a Canadian research-based university. Microaggressions can be defined as ‘brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities ... hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights’ (Sue et al. 2007, 271). Although different types of discrimination may have different direct effects, enduring these microaggressions on a daily basis has been shown to create a ‘cumulative burden’ that contributes to general feelings of self-doubt and segregation/isolation, assails personal integrity and creates mental exhaustion (Solozano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Sue et al. 2008; Sue et al. 2009). The study of microaggressions can be seen as compatible with Essed’s theory of everyday racism – both look at interpersonal micro-interactions manifested from structural/ideological constructs.

Sharing Essed’s approach of rooting the investigation in the perspectives of those experiencing racism, Clark et al. (2014) spoke with six undergraduate Indigenous university students to determine how daily microaggressions effect their educational experience and how those experiences/understandings compared to similar academic literature focused on racialized communities in the USA (Clark et al. 2014). Prior to Clark et al.’s (2014) study, the main focus of research on microaggressions in North America investigated the experiences of black, Latina/o and Asian Americans (Yosso et al. 2009). There is still a large gap in research regarding the effects of everyday racism/microaggressions on Indigenous peoples within Canada and abroad. The current study supports the research done by Clark et al. (2014) but also extends it in both scope of investigation and understanding of the impact that everyday racism/microaggressions can have on the academic experience of Indigenous students.

## Methodology

The goal of this project was to gain a deeper understanding of how Indigenous students perceive and experience racism within the university environment – including levels, impacts and coping mechanisms. One-to-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventeen students at McMaster University, enabling participants to share their stories and

provide rich insights into how they experience and perceive their surroundings (Tavallaei and Abu Talib 2010).

In academic year 2012/13, eleven Indigenous students and six non-Indigenous students were interviewed. The students varied in age, area of study and level of programme. The interviews were guided by a short list of key questions about the participants' experiences and challenges at university and additional questions were posed to clarify statements or further develop lines of discussion. This interview style was chosen to allow the interviewees to select the elements of their lives that they thought relevant and to recount them in terms of their own perceptions.

Participants were recruited using 'snowball sampling', beginning with a convenience sample and then expanding to recruit further interviewees (Heckathorn 2011). My contact information was given to two on-campus organizations – the McMaster First Nations Student Association (MFNSA) and McMaster Indigenous Graduate Students (MIGS) – and an email was sent to a listserv for Indigenous students at McMaster. Independent contacts were initiated for non-Indigenous students. After each interview was completed, the interviewees were asked to pass my contact information to potential interviewees. This method recruited more Indigenous than non-Indigenous students. At an on-campus conference regarding Indigenous learning at the university level, two further non-Indigenous students in attendance were selected at random and approached, both of whom agreed to an interview, and another snowball sample was initiated through an unconnected referral.

The interviews varied in length from twenty to seventy-five minutes. All interviewees were at the second year level of university or higher (including graduate levels). There were twelve women and five men, aged between nineteen and fifty-six, with varied academic focus areas. It was far more difficult to recruit men than women. There is a potentially smaller pool of male students, as women make up the majority of those enrolled (Turcott 2011). Demographic information, such as the precise number of Indigenous students on campus, was unavailable when this study was conducted due to issues with the university's data-gathering systems. However, research has shown that, statistically, Indigenous students are severely under-represented within Canada's post-secondary institutions (Clark et al. 2014).

The data analysis process involved transcribing the interviews and uploading them into the computer program ATLAS.ti, coding them based on overlapping concepts/ideas, and then grouping them into broader themes. The analytic approach was both inductive and deductive, consistent with grounded theory. Categories and themes emerged from the analysis and, at the same time, existing theories of racism and prejudice (such as Essed's everyday racism and Bonilla-Silva's colour-blind racism) were used to generate comparisons and build a more comprehensive picture of present-day

experiences (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Essed 1991; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Rich 2012). Within grounded theory, the collection and analysis of data are interconnected (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Consistent with this idea, 'working hypotheses' were generated as the research progressed and the interview questions were modified to better address the themes that arose (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Small 2009; Wilson and Chaddha 2009; Rich 2012).

## Findings

The findings have been grouped within themes that emerged as the research and analysis progressed. In Clark et al.'s (2014) study, salient themes included unconstrained voyeurism, jealous accusations, cultural elimination/misrepresentation, expectations of primitiveness and isolation. Participants in the current study provided support for these themes while also emphasizing the following: interaction levels; perceptions of the university environment and the forms of racism therein; audience effects; in-class and social experiences; the university 'system'; and the persistence of racism. These are not mutually exclusive (some analytic categories may overlap) but have been grouped as such to demonstrate the trends brought forth by the interviewees.

### *Interaction levels*

Both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students agreed that interaction levels are very low. Adrienne, a young Indigenous woman (who happens to have fair skin and blue eyes), stated: 'I've had people say to me that they've always wanted to talk to a Native person, but they don't know how to approach them ... or I'm less scary than other Native people.'

Adrienne mentioned these remarks while describing racism that she has experienced, but it also speaks more widely to a lack of overall contact. John, a male Indigenous student, expressed that just his presence can cause people to avoid interaction: 'I'll get different looks ... how do I say it ... it's a look of being scared.' These experiences, of strangers constantly being curious about their background and appearance, also align with Clark et al.'s (2014) theme of unconstrained voyeurism (strangers enquiring/prying into their identity). Julia, an Indigenous student, stated her belief that the low interaction levels are due to a general personality characteristic of being reserved that many Indigenous peoples share.

As this theme emerged, an additional question was posed to determine the composition of 'friend groups'. Whitney, a female Indigenous student, declared 'I kinda just stuck with my own' – nonchalantly expressed as simply a habitual behaviour. John describes a similar personal situation regarding his friend groups: 'From the first day I came here I was sitting in ISP [Indigenous Studies programme], so the majority of my friends are

Native.’ But he further stated that he was not afraid to make friends outside of ISP. Whitney’s apparent disinterest and John’s declared openness to non-Indigenous friends (and yet not having many) may indicate that larger racial barriers are having an impact on social interaction. The non-Indigenous students interviewed shared similar observations regarding their friend groups and the low levels of social interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

### ***Perceptions of the university environment and the forms of racism***

Each non-Indigenous interviewee was asked how much of the student body they believed was comprised of Indigenous peoples. The responses from those interviewees who answered using percentages ranged from 3% to 10% of the student body. Two interviewees responded with more precise numbers—one response of 200–300 people, and one response of 100 people (out of over 30,000 students) (Office of Institutional Research and Analysis 2015). The variety of answers demonstrates inconsistency in how the Indigenous ‘presence’ is perceived.

Perceptions of the university environment differed depending on whether the participant was Indigenous or non-Indigenous. When asked if he would recommend McMaster to a prospective Indigenous student, Ben (non-Indigenous) said: ‘When I came it was very welcoming both as a high school student taking a tour and when I actually got here as a student.’ Greg (non-Indigenous) also thought that McMaster was very welcoming and a ‘very open university to anybody’. However, David (Indigenous) stated: ‘There’s not a ton of Native students around ... I don’t know if McMaster’s a tremendously welcoming environment for Indigenous students ... If you look at the university, there’s not much that says to Native students that this is their place as well.’

Sandra (Indigenous) had a different view. She saw the social environment as relatively open-minded and welcoming, despite stating that her non-Indigenous friends sometimes make inappropriate jokes about Indigenous peoples. Sandra differs from the other interviewees in that the majority of her university friends are non-Indigenous and she perceives the social environment generally as a friendly one.

The above statements suggest that McMaster University is not perceived as warm and inviting by all students. Despite his view of the university as potentially unwelcoming, David did go on to say that he would still recommend McMaster to prospective Indigenous students due to the ‘vibrant Native community’ and the rewards therein.

The majority of interviewees shared a common perception regarding how racism is expressed. When asked if they had experienced any situations involving racism or discrimination, most first felt the need to clarify that it was not



overt. However, personal definitions of what was considered overt varied. Caitlin (Indigenous) said: 'I've never had anyone be outwardly racist.' Yet, she proceeded to recount a situation where she had been openly mocked by her non-Indigenous room-mates in residence for preparing a special poultice for an injury. This resulted in Caitlin moving to a new residence, yet she still defined it as a 'subtle' form of racism. When speaking with John (Indigenous) about the different types of racism that exist, his very frank response was: 'You keep saying "outright" and people don't say things to me like that ... I mean people get carried away by saying "oh you're Native" and then it's just like ... you want me to say "oh ... you're white". The theory of modern racism outlines how contemporary racism often goes undetected in its subtle form and is therefore often not confronted (McConahay, Hardee, and Batts 1981).

Melissa (non-Indigenous) provided an example of how subtle racism can occur. While commenting on her personal observation that the McMaster entrance application had a lot of questions about 'it' (Indigenous background), she went on to say: 'If they were just born into it and their parents don't live on reserve then they might not necessarily identify with it, but they would use that as like an easier way of getting into school.'

Melissa's comments support the finding of Clark et al. (2014) regarding Indigenous students facing jealous accusations (often based on misinformation). Whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, all of the participants perceived the racism they had experienced (or witnessed) to be of a subtle nature, rather than overt.

### **Audience**

Another common thread throughout the interviews was an acknowledgment that an individual's behaviour would change depending on who they were around – the composition of the audience. This took two main forms. The first was from the perspective of Indigenous students – altering their behaviour by choosing when to reveal their background. Although not all Indigenous students have a choice about 'revealing' their ancestry, as it might be inferred due to physical appearance, several interviewees have chosen to carefully 'navigate' this space. Adrienne described how mentioning her Indigenous background can elicit reactions that result in her feeling awkward and uncomfortable, so she chooses carefully as to when, and with whom, she shares that information.

The second form that this behaviour took was regarding individuals choosing when to say socially inappropriate things. Tracy (non-Indigenous) described attending a seminar where she felt that the discussion had become racist. When questioned as to whether she knew if any of the other students happened to be Indigenous, she said: 'No, in fact someone

asked – and of course by asking and no one saying yes apparently that gave them permission.’ William (Indigenous) shared details about an event where a student was making offensive/racist statements until he saw William and realized his background – at which point the other student ran away. William’s chosen strategy is not to respond when such events arise. These examples demonstrate a focus on ‘who’ your audience is and ‘clearing the way’ before making provocative or racist comments.

### *In-class experiences and reactions*

The theme shared most widely across the interviews was in-class incidents of racism, with fifteen (of seventeen) interviewees mentioning personal experiences of this nature. Although there was consensus that such incidents occurred, the viewpoints varied. Adrienne (Indigenous) recounted multiple instances within the classroom environment. One example occurred in a history class where the professor was talking about the Six-Nations<sup>4</sup> and began telling jokes:

He was like “didn’t they realize that didn’t make any sense? You can’t have six nations inside of a nation that is Canada?” ... And a lot of people kind of laughed about it in the class and were like ha-ha that’s funny and then he kept going ... and was like “oh, there’s so many names ... I don’t understand ... what are they calling themselves now? Do they call themselves Iroquois? Or do they call themselves something else?” And then I put up my hand and I was like “they call themselves Haudenosaunee ... that’s how Six Nations refer to themselves” ... And he kind of moved on ...

Although her reaction did not address the nature of the professor’s comments, it did seem to alter the direction of the lecture. This is also an example of the theme identified by Clark et al. (2014) of cultural elimination or misrepresentation regarding the history or culture of Indigenous peoples. Several Indigenous interviewees referenced serious inaccuracies in curricular content.

Caitlin (Indigenous) shared an event from her introductory class for contemporary Indigenous Studies:

We had to do ... kind of like a mock trial type of thing and we were joking around because you had to dress, like act, what you were pretending to be, and um, this guy ... he was just like “oh, I’m just gonna look into Google and type in the definition of a savage and dress like that”.

The reference by Caitlin’s classmate to the concept of ‘savage’ also supports Clark et al.’s (2014, 117) finding of ‘expectations of primitiveness’ (the idea of Indigenous culture being stuck in the past and ‘spontaneous mockery’).

Sandra (Indigenous) shared an in-class experience that caused her a great deal of distress:

I walked into class one day and he [the professor] is doing the slide show ... talking about different survey questions ... and his example question of what a scale question is was "on a scale of one to a hundred how much do you like Aboriginal people?" ... Like how weird is that? ... I put my hand up and said "is there a reason that you used that question?" ... like you could put "on a scale of one to a hundred how much do you like giraffes?" ... It doesn't have to be a race of people ... and this is like a classroom of three-hundred kids that are just writing this down. Like zombies.

This event was so upsetting for Sandra that she took a picture of the slide and spoke to people outside of the class. She also expressed that this experience led to her losing motivation to work hard in that course and that she was fearful of failing.

Greg (non-Indigenous) provided an example where the instructor happened to be Indigenous. Greg explained how the non-Indigenous students were uncertain about dealing with the professor: 'Some students were hesitant about going up to him to ask questions because they were intimidated because he was Aboriginal.' This observation supports the research done by Henry and Tator (2012) indicating that racialized faculty are also faced with both systemic and interpersonal barriers within the Canadian university environment.

### ***Social experiences***

Both positive and negative experiences were recounted from the social scene. John described a situation where he experienced racism, but uniquely (in comparison to other interviewees) it was during an interaction with another Indigenous student when he was in the Indigenous Studies department office:

This other Native lady came in and as I walked through she was like "oh I remember you from last year and you're still here ... congratulations". Because Aboriginal people have a tendency to drop out or not finish I don't know ... but that just made me want to like hit her.

John was obviously very irritated by this event, but with defiant bravado he said: 'I laughed at her. I was like she doesn't know me.' This interaction provides an example of how racist beliefs may become internalized by members of the group being targeted.

Sandra recounted how she believes that her non-Indigenous friends at McMaster consider her to be a novelty and introduce her as their 'Native friend':

It's like a cool thing cause I'm Native. But like, I don't introduce people as my Black friend, or my White friend, or my Italian friend ... In residence especially it was like, "oh that's the Native girl" ... "oh my god - you're like Pocahontas right".

When asked how she would respond, Sandra said: 'Most of the time I'm fairly gracious about it cause it's really just ignorance.' This is another example of

the belief that ignorance leads to these types of circumstances. The reference to Pocahontas further supports Clark et al.'s (2014) finding of expectations of primitiveness.

Several positive experiences were mentioned regarding the MFNSA. Each year, the MFNSA hosts a powwow on campus and Adrienne has found the experience of sharing the event and interacting with/teaching non-Indigenous students about the ceremony to be very gratifying. Caitlin also speaks about the positivity that surrounds the MFNSA, but for her this is rooted in bringing the Indigenous students together. All but one of the Indigenous students interviewed referred to the MFNSA and/or the Indigenous Studies office as a place where they had positive social experiences and connected with other Indigenous students. This aligns with the research done by Solozano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) regarding impacts of microaggressions on African American students in the USA. They found that 'academic counterspaces' were often used to facilitate learning, more supportive environments and personal/cultural validation (Solozano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 70).

### ***The university 'system'***

Several Indigenous students raised concerns about barriers they have faced within the university, such as limited programme opportunities in the Indigenous Studies programme, an administration resistant to change, and the persistent minimization of concerns raised by Indigenous students. Barb spoke to the level of racism that is 'built in' to the university system, stating that the racism takes its toll both emotionally and academically:

One of the foundational issues in trying to access education that is grounded in an Indigenous pedagogy is having faculty who are Indigenous themselves. And we don't have a lot of faculty here and in fact graduate students are called upon to fill the gaps. So there's two impacts there. One, you do feel an obligation to support the program and see it succeed. And you know that there's undergraduate students that need that Indigenous faculty. So you try to do your best to help ... and then that impedes your own progress.

Barb provided several examples of what she regards as systemic racism and discrimination.

Claire shared how both her academic and personal lives were affected by a lack of support from the university system. Three days before her PhD dissertation defence date she received a report from an external evaluator that said that the Indigenous methodology she used was 'an obstacle to the pursuit of truth'. The report stated that she was missing a lot of literature (particularly non-Indigenous scholars) and that she needed to change the entire thesis. Despite its eventual resolution, this situation delayed her graduation, cost her further tuition money, and left her feeling extremely angry and frustrated.

David provided another example of systemic barriers. He stated that within his graduate programme, Indigenous peoples and issues undergo 'exclusionary marginalization'. This was exemplified through a description of the comprehensive exam reading lists. He also stated that because Indigenous peoples and topics are excluded from his exam reading lists and his research focus is on Indigenous issues, he has had to do twice the work of other graduate students in order to reach his own research goals. David's experiences support the view shared by other interviewees that there are both academic and personal impacts of racism/discrimination within the university system.

Adrienne does not feel that large enough steps are being taken to assist Indigenous students: 'I think it would just kind of be better to see a more institutional kind of push – of acceptance.' She also stated her belief that a more positive approach to Indigenous students has been 'institutionalized' at some other universities. It is telling that most of the Indigenous students interviewed chose to attend McMaster for reasons other than what the university could offer (e.g. location or personal convenience/family considerations). However, as a result of great efforts (by Indigenous students, faculty and allies), Adrienne, Claire and Barb all believe that they have seen improvements in the institution's approach toward Indigenous students over the past few years.

### **Isolation**

Throughout the interviews, the theme of isolation emerged in both the academic and social environments. Speaking to academic isolation, Barb stated:

You are in a program where there's not maybe any other Indigenous learners and you know you're isolated in your work ... maybe there's other students that are not interested in what the Indigenous perspective is or maybe the prof has not really given you a welcoming sense of opportunity to talk about the Indigenous perspective.

For Sandra, isolation is experienced both socially and academically. She described her feeling of being singled out socially, mocked and placed in a separate category within the university and in Canadian society generally. Sandra also expressed her experience of feeling as though she has to turn different parts of herself on and off when she attends the university:

As a Native person ... going to university and like going along with the White man and Canadian society has a very negative connotation ... I don't know if it's jealousy or that kind of thing, but I get major flack for going to school ... When I'm at school I tend to turn off the "res" of myself ... well right now I'm using bigger words and talking to you in a way that I'm hopefully giving you good answers to use in your research cause I know how research works ... But when I'm with my family and friends I do not talk like this.

Sandra is experiencing isolation due to her Indigenous background in three environments – the community where she lives, the university social

environment and the university academic environment – and feels that she must control different parts of herself in each case. This is a difficult and draining task.

William expressed a particular sense of isolation in the academic environment. When not in Indigenous Studies courses, he says ‘nobody will talk to me because everybody sitting around me is White’. In support of this statement, William describes a particular in-class experience:

I had them talk right over me. There was a White person on my left and a White person on my right and they turned and looked at each other and started talking right over me and pretending as though I wasn't there.

For William, Sandra, Barb and others, the mental/emotional strain caused by severe isolation (experienced in the university environment) may be inhibiting their academic performance. Each of these accounts of isolation aligns with Clark et al.'s (2014) findings. Although Clark et al. (2014) focused on the environment (systemic/institutional causes) creating the isolation, it is evident that there are social (interpersonal) causes at work that go beyond the institutional structure – such as the prevalence of everyday racism/micro-aggressions spawned from racist societal ideologies.

### ***Why does racism persist within the university?***

Interviewees were asked why they thought racism persists in the university environment. There was a strong theme running throughout the answers regarding a ‘lack of awareness and knowledge’. Caitlin expressed (while laughing):

I had a friend before say “we learned about you in social studies, but it was kind of like we learned about you back then ... and then there's missing like a whole time” ... so it's almost like she didn't know we still existed.

On a more serious note, Whitney said:

I just really like when they bring up the whole history of Aboriginal people in Canada and the genocide and what had happened [in class] ... I think these students and the people need to know cause some of them have no idea.

It is clear from the interview data that the students are cognizant of a severe lack of awareness among non-Indigenous students on campus regarding Indigenous students and organizations, as well as the possible effects of this deficit. Both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students interviewed appear to share the belief that the answer to ‘why’ racism still occurs largely revolves around a general lack of knowledge and understanding.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The data indicate that racism is creating ongoing barriers for Indigenous students within post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, it reinforces the belief

that modern racism is prevalent and that its subtle, and often unrecognized, nature does not mitigate its impacts. Although it may be more subtle, the potential damage that can be caused by modern racism is not diminished (Krieger et al. 2001; Reitz, Breton, and Dion 2009). Employing Essed's (1991) theory of everyday racism (acknowledging the authority of those experiencing racism to speak to its effects), this research has highlighted the potential for racism to have a continuing impact on equality and access to education for Indigenous peoples – concerns that are shared internationally.

The study by Clark et al. (2014) provided an initial base for important research regarding experiences of Indigenous university students in Canada. By increasing the number of students interviewed, including graduate students and speaking with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, the current study has identified further themes not discussed by Clark et al. (2014) and expanded the understanding of everyday racism/microaggressions and their effects on educational success and personal satisfaction within the university environment. The themes identified by Clark et al. (2014) were all supported by the current study. However, further themes were also highlighted: interaction levels, perceptions of the university environment and the forms of racism therein, audience effects, in-class and social experiences, the university 'system' and the persistence of racism.

For those interviewed, the level of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is, on average, extremely low. This almost complete lack of interaction speaks to an ongoing divide that contributes to continued ignorance regarding Indigenous students. The largest trend that appeared within the dialogue regarding social experiences was the positive focus on the MFNSA and the Indigenous Studies department office by Indigenous students. They were referred to as a place to meet socially, for studying and a way to create a 'family' on campus. Institutional support for the Indigenous Studies department and on-campus Indigenous student groups is a positive step forward, allowing Indigenous students places to turn to when they are seeking support. Although the experiences recounted were positive, they were all within situations generated by Indigenous students and for the most part did not involve contact with non-Indigenous students.

There is an inconsistent view of the Indigenous student presence on campus among non-Indigenous students. This could be a reflection of several things. Is education for Indigenous peoples prior to university of a low quality? Is there enough institutional promotion of Indigenous organizations? Are Indigenous students keeping a lower profile by choosing to associate only with other Indigenous students? These are important questions for future research.

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees spoke to how they may adjust their behaviour depending on who they are speaking 'in front of'. For

Indigenous students, it was to limit the disclosure of their Indigenous 'identity' to avoid feeling judged or on display. For non-Indigenous students, the choice to alter their behaviour was to avoid saying something about Indigenous peoples in a situation where their behaviour would be considered socially 'inappropriate'. This choice implies the acknowledgement that certain beliefs or statements are not socially acceptable when members of the population being discussed are present. However, it also suggests a general understanding that it is okay, or 'less unacceptable', to say these types of things when no members of the population are present. This supports Denis's (2015) argument for the existence of a 'political avoidance norm' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Fort Frances, Ontario – being careful to avoid certain topics in particular settings or in front of a certain audience.

There were many in-class experiences of everyday racism/microaggressions recounted by Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students (as witnesses). The large majority of these cases were instigated by peers, although several interviewees mentioned a professor's involvement. From the viewpoint of the Indigenous students, when these issues arose, the professors did not handle them appropriately. Non-Indigenous students were divided on this topic. Some saw the professors as not taking the necessary action and others thought they acted in a respectful manner. None of the non-Indigenous students shared an example where they thought the professor had been at fault for making racist comments. Sue et al. (2009) state that these difficult situations can be instigated by racial microaggressions and, if not handled properly, can potentially impugn the sense of self-worth of Indigenous students, while simultaneously validating and fortifying the negative racial ideologies of non-Indigenous students. It may be important for future researchers and policymakers to examine how professors at the university level are 'trained' in terms of sensitivity to/awareness of Indigenous issues and the proper manner for responding to controversial situations. Perhaps the current training/support systems for faculty are lacking.

Several Indigenous students spoke at length regarding the ways in which they believe the university system is limiting and marginalizing Indigenous students and issues. Despite increased support for on-campus student groups and the Indigenous Studies department, from their perspective the university has not taken sufficient steps to address Indigenous students' needs or promote institutional change, and the students are negatively impacted as a result. According to others, positive changes are happening, but the improvement has been very gradual.

Despite the existence of groups such as the MFNSA, several Indigenous students expressed how they often feel isolated. How this is experienced varies, stemming either from social experiences or from academic barriers. The experiences that these students shared echo findings of the Urban Aboriginal



People's Study (an extensive survey seeking feedback from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples across Canada) (EnviroNics Institute 2010, 126). This is a serious matter that requires more specific research to determine the precise circumstances that are fostering the sense of isolation and to learn how Indigenous students believe this aspect of their university experience could be eliminated.

All the interviewees agreed that a lack of awareness and understanding (regarding Indigenous peoples and the related issues) was at the root of ongoing racism toward Indigenous peoples at McMaster University. This lack of awareness was framed in different ways, but centred on a belief in a generalized lack of knowledge regarding Indigenous peoples in Canada – and more specifically a lack of awareness of the Indigenous presence on campus. It is possible that non-Indigenous students may be open to further learning opportunities in this area if they were presented by the university. However, the research completed by Jackman and Muha (1984) and Wodtke (2012) indicates that further education alone may not be sufficient to overcome racist beliefs – perhaps the entire university system also requires adjustment. This is another important area for continued research.

It is clear from the research data that subtle, modern racism is playing an active role in the daily lives of Indigenous university students, impacting both their academic and personal success. This study has drawn attention to a significant gap in the literature and acts as a starting point for further research as this area is both under-researched and important in achieving a university system that provides a positive and supportive environment for the Indigenous students who choose to attend. It would be beneficial to increase the number of male university students interviewed to more evenly represent the different genders, and perhaps to investigate comparisons of gender, age, status versus non-status, First Nation versus Métis versus Inuit, students living on versus off reserve, and students who choose to take Indigenous Studies courses versus those who do not.

The information shared by interviewees demonstrates that Indigenous students are still facing racism in the classroom, socially and systemically. The question was posed as to whether or not the university has made serious attempts to address its own decolonization. Although requiring further investigation, it appears that some steps have been taken, but the changes have not been implemented at every level or to the necessary extent. Within Canada, some universities (such as Trent University in Ontario and the University of Victoria in British Columbia) have introduced innovative strategies for creating positive and successful environments for Indigenous students. Perhaps one of the next steps for research in this area is to compare the experiences of Indigenous students at different universities to gauge whether the varied policies and practices that have been put in place concerning Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous faculty and students are having the

desired effects. It is extremely important that research continues regarding the environment that exists for Indigenous students at Canadian universities in order to gain a better understanding of the present circumstance and what actions may be taken to decrease both the social and institutional elements of racism.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. Within this study, the term 'Indigenous' has been chosen for referring to Canada's First Peoples, as it is the least politically contentious. However, each of the interviewees selects their own term for self-identification and these have been left unchanged within the data.
2. For the purposes of this study, 'racial climate' is defined as 'the overall racial environment of the college campus' (Solozano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 62).
3. See Henry and Tator (2010) and Satzewich (2011) for further context on racism and Indigenous peoples in Canada.
4. Six Nations of the Grand River is a Haudenosaunee community located approximately 25 km south west of the city of Hamilton, Ontario. Six Nations of the Grand River has the largest population of all First Nations in Canada (<http://www.sixnations.ca/CommunityProfile.htm>).

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