

CSA

Outcome Report: Let's Talk Systemic Racism

Canadian Sociological Association

Student Concerns Subcommittee

December 2020

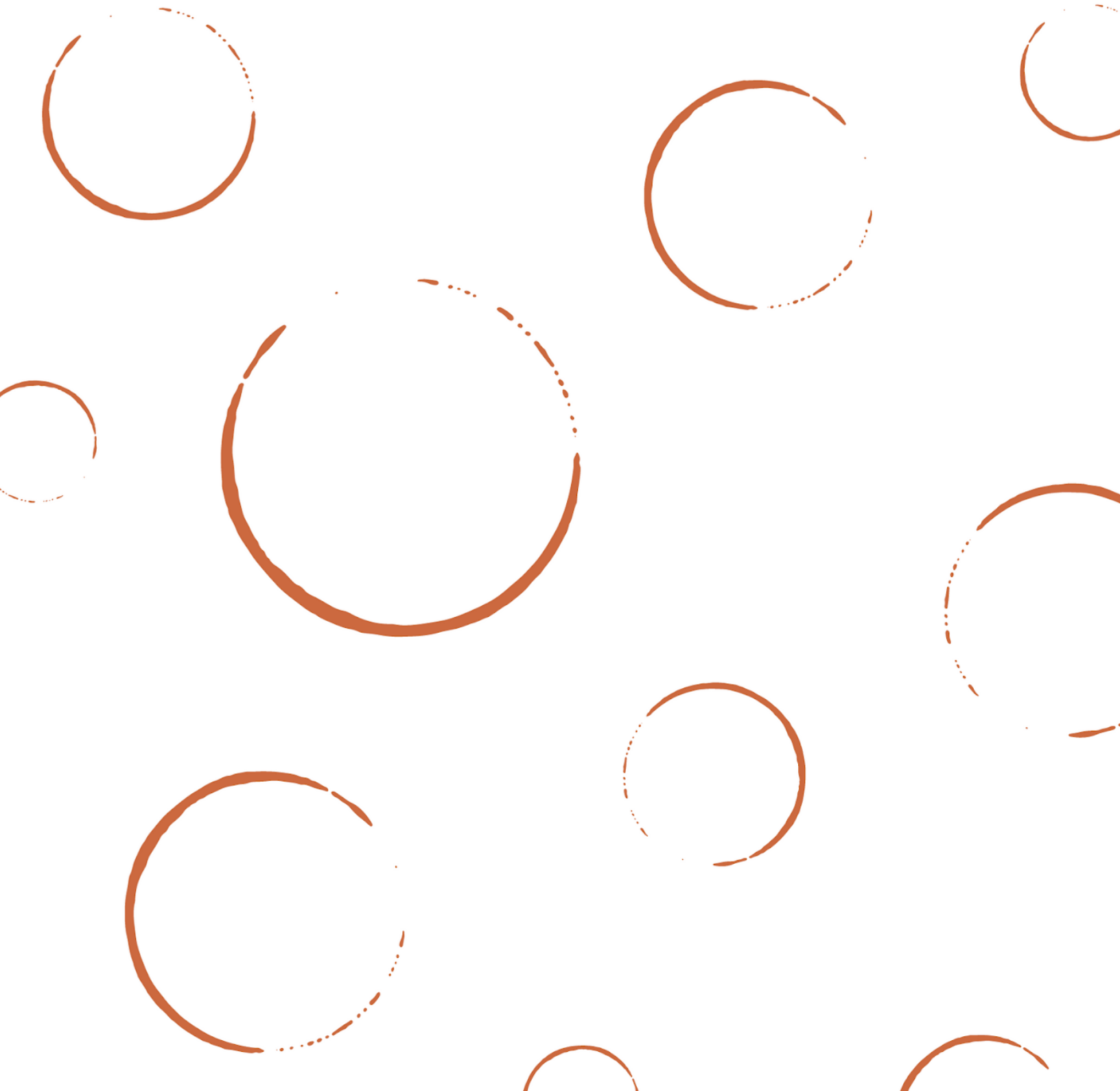


Table of Contents

About the Initiative	4
What We Heard	6
Feedback Survey	8
Next Steps	9

Land Acknowledgement

The Canadian Sociological Association Student Concerns Subcommittee (CSA-SCS) wishes to situate its presence as an uninvited guest on the traditional territories of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, across so-called Canada. This acknowledgement is to recognize the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous nations and their territories that the CSA and its constituents work and live on.

As a committee and organization, we strive to understand our role within Canada's ongoing settler-colonial project that subjects Indigenous peoples to dispossession and genocide. We recognize our participation and complacency in colonial modalities and knowledge systems and are committed to decolonial praxis that centres and affirms the contributions of Indigenous elders and scholars to the field of sociology.

About the Initiative

Purpose/Background:

Renewed attention and urgency around the Black Lives Matter movement this summer came through an outpouring of public protest against anti-Blackness, racism, and institutionalized forms of violence. Mounting evidence of police brutality and the murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement increased public awareness of the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism across institutions. Growing attention to this reality also evoked responses from academic institutions and sociology departments, who went to varying lengths to express solidarity.

Despite the deluge of commitments to change and accountability, many had yet to materialize. Furthermore, COVID-19 public health measures limited access to potential sources of support for racialized students during this tumultuous time. Access to networks of peers and colleagues were particularly constrained, and students struggled to find a space to organize and share their experiences with others.

One of these students, Karine Coen-Sanchez, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at University of Ottawa, approached the Student Concerns Subcommittee to address this issue. Karine proposed the creation of a virtual meeting space for racialized students to allow for discussions about the day-to-day and long-term impacts of structural racism within academia. With Karine leading the vision for this event, the SCS and Executive Director, Sherry Fox, provided planning and logistical support to create an online panel and discussion/forum.

Objectives:

The panel was intended to meet the following objectives:

- 1) Create a safe and comfortable forum for racialized students to come together and talk about their experiences.
- 2) Hear student perspectives on what their institutions are and/or could be doing to address systemic racism.
- 3) Understand what role the CSA can take to act on the concerns raised, beyond this forum.

LET'S TALK SYSTEMIC RACISM

The CSA SCS is committed to creating a safe space for open conversations. This online panel and discussion will be open only to racialized students.

August 17th at 3pm (EDT)
Participants are welcome to speak in English and French.

Discussion Topics

1. Graduate students' experiences with white supremacy and institutional racism.
2. The racist structures embedded in educational institutions, including at the departmental level.
3. The effects of racist structures on racialized students' wellbeing and academic progression.

PANELISTS

Karine Coen-Sanchez (she/her)
Organizer

Pedrom Nasiri (they/them)

Kayonne Christy (she/her)

Roodabeh Dehghani (she/her)

CSA SCS

QUESTIONS? STUDENTS@CSA-SCS.CA

Execution:

The event was held on Monday, August 17th over Zoom. To provide a “safe space” for racialized students, the event was only open to racialized students, with the exception of CSA Student Communications Volunteer, Kieran Maingot, as a notetaker for the event, and Sherry Fox, who operated the technical logistics behind the scenes. The event was moderated by Dina Idriss-Wheeler (PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Ottawa) and featured four panelists: Karine Coen-Sanchez (PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Ottawa), Pedrom Nasiri (PhD Student, Department of Sociology, University of Calgary), Kayonne Christy (MA Student, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia), and Roodabeh Dehghani (PhD Student, Department of Sociology, University of Ottawa). In addition to the moderator and panelists, over 50 students participated in the event.

After introductions were made, each panelist took a turn to speak about their own experiences. Following each panelist’s talk, attendees engaged in dialogue with the panelists, relating to and building on what was shared. A summary of the discussion is provided in the next section.

Following the panel, a survey was sent to all attendees to provide an additional anonymous medium that would allow students to share their experiences and feedback (see Feedback Survey). Based on the ideas and concerns shared by students, the SCS proposed several potential initiatives to participants for feedback through a Google Form. The suggestions attendees favoured are provided in the final section of this document.

As a committee, we would like to acknowledge several limitations of the event. First, our aim to create an intentional space for discussion among racialized students was not achieved in full. By overlooking the shortcomings of a ‘safe space’ approach, we neglected to recognize that no space can be inherently safe or apolitical if our objective is to engage in critical discussion. Moving forward, we are working to adopt a framework that prioritizes safety and well-being and fosters anti-oppressive accountability among all participants.

What We Heard

The students in attendance at this event spoke about the ways that institutional racism shaped their academic experiences. Among the stories they shared, students' narratives emphasized several major areas of concern including a lack of racial diversity in academic settings, the erasure and denigration of racialized scholars from sociological curricula, shortcomings in resources affirming and tailored to racialized experiences, and the struggle between tokenism and marginalization. It is our hope that by illustrating some of these concerns, we can amplify students' voices urging sociologists to "move beyond statements" and actively hold ourselves and the spaces we inhabit to account. We must commit to actions that address the enduring structures of white supremacy in which sociology is entrenched.

Representation in Academic Settings

First and foremost, students pointed to the enduring gap in the representation of racialized colleagues in academic settings. Not only were there few racialized professors present in their departments, but when racialized professors did hold academic appointments, they were more likely to be employed in precarious positions (part-time or contract teaching rather than tenure-track positions). Participants urged departments to reflect on why there is such little racial diversity among their full-time professors. Some of the key questions emerging from this discussion involved holding ourselves accountable to: Who is on the hiring committee? Who makes decisions? How do you recruit? Do you make a conscious effort to reach out to networks that include racialized members when advertising positions?

Beyond hiring practices, students attributed racial disparities to the harm embedded within these spaces and the processes which afford people access to them. Students' ability to navigate dominant departmental cultures and gain access to academic networks were determined by their proximity to whiteness. When speaking to issues of access, students highlighted how institutional biases framed racialized students and their work as subpar, thus limiting their chances to thrive in academia. As a result, students constantly needed to achieve more (i.e., grants, publications) to be considered serious scholars or demonstrate their "fit" in these spaces.

Curriculum and Scholarship

Concerns around curricula were grounded not only in matters of representation but also in the denigration of theoretical perspectives from racialized scholarship. The erasure of the (theoretical and empirical) contributions of Black sociologists was commonplace, and efforts to address this inequality typically involved surface-level engagement with their scholarship. And while Western interpretations of the social world (i.e., political economy) were presented with much adulation, perspectives from the Global South as well as internationalist worldviews were either absent from the curriculum or regarded to be substandard when they did receive consideration. The inability to adopt a critical lens when engaging with Western knowledges coupled with the antagonism towards alternative ways of knowing and thinking furthered the

inaccessibility of racialized scholarship from students' sociological imagination. Moreover, course syllabi and classroom discussions rarely moved beyond a Canadian or American context. Ultimately, students were struck by the lack of sociological reflexivity evinced through these pedagogical approaches.

Support and Resources

Departments that adhered to hegemonic Western ideologies and were predominantly populated by white colleagues created isolating and unwelcoming environments for racialized students and their research. As a result of departmental deficits, students often had to invest their own time to seek out knowledge and access to the resources needed to support their work. Because of the numbers, securing racialized supervisors was a challenge, and some students had to settle for white professors who were often viewed as "generous" for supervising them, despite their actual knowledge of the subject matter or the level of support provided. In some cases, white supervisors preferred that racialized groups be studied from a lens of disempowerment, further marginalizing students' engagement with racialized scholarship. In other situations, professors infantilized students either because of their racist assumptions about students' capacities or because of their own fears of being called racist through which they forgo anti-racist accountability.

Such experiences prompted students to question whether they were receiving the "proper" graduate school experience. Students posed questions such as: Why did they need to engage in free and additional labour to produce the same quality of work as their peers? Why was it acceptable for departments to have such significant shortcomings in their understanding of one of the major axes of inequality examined by sociologists? And how could this oversight continue to go unaddressed for so long?

Programmatic responses that attempt to address such concerns, such as the mentorship programs, perpetuated similarly isolating dynamics. Application process and programming often force racialized students to engage with gatekeepers who are predominately white and often fail to apply theoretical EDI training they may have received (if any) in practice. Requiring racialized students to interact with these gatekeepers minimizes the efficacy of such interventions. Likewise, mental health supports rarely provided culturally competent care, reducing the likelihood that racialized students would even attempt to access these services.

Visibility

On an individual level, these issues created an environment in which racialized students were simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. As students lamented about their experiences, a common site of struggle was identified at the juxtaposition of the commodification of their presence for diversity and inclusion initiatives and the institutional desire for non-disruptive solutions. When given a platform, the implications of sharing their honest perspectives depended on how their voices were actually being received. In many institutions, students were expected to simply appreciate the opportunity to "have a seat at the table," and expressed deep

concern about the potential for further marginalization if they spoke about their negative experiences. Racialized students' voices were more likely to be valued when they spoke from the standpoint of the "good racialized student." For example, faculty in administrative roles (e.g., graduate and program chairs) desired conformity, limiting change to solutions that would fail to destabilize harmful structures not be disruptive or require significant effort on their behalf. And because of this pressure to affirm the status quo, students were often left to self-advocate in these hostile environments. If students did not let instances of racism or mistreatment go, they became the problem.

Recognizing Multiple Racisms

In emphasizing multiple racisms, those in attendance asserted liberation need not be pursued under the guises of multiculturalism or inclusion, as both of these ideologies continue to be framed within the existing and dominating systems that fail to build power among racialized scholars. Students stressed the need to recognize that liberation looks different to everyone. Both generationally and geographically, departments need to take an intersectional approach to these issues as racism occurs along multiple axes of inequality. This need for an intersectional approach was most notably highlighted by Christy and Nasiri's discussions of the intersections of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, transphobia, and racism. However, the dismissal of these contributions created a harmful environment for panelists and attendees as Nasiri spoke about the violence being directed at Queer and Trans BIMPOC folx at the event. Undoubtedly this underscored the urgent need for intersectional anti-racist approaches within the CSA and more broadly.

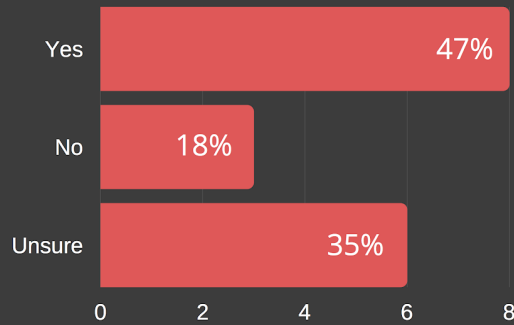
LET'S TALK SYSTEMIC RACISM

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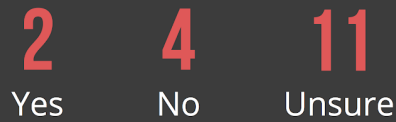
FEEDBACK SURVEY

Respondents: n = 17 racialized students

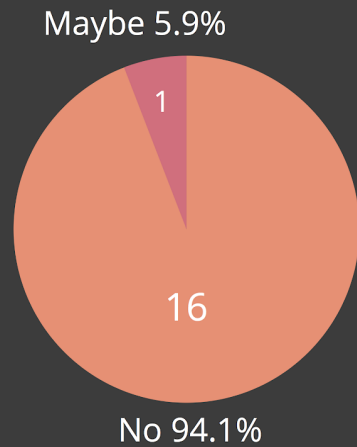
Have you experienced racism during your undergraduate and/or graduate studies?



Does your academic institution have a formal reporting mechanism for incidences or acts of racism?



Have you ever reported an incidence of racism you experienced during your undergraduate and/or graduate studies?



Next Steps

We as sociologists and members of sociology departments need to move beyond operating within racist structures to those which are transformative. The call to action is clear: institutions cannot stop at what is easy or non-threatening. They must acknowledge and support what is necessary to disrupt structural racism.

Drawing on the information shared by event attendees and a feedback survey, the Student Concerns Subcommittee is proposing the following recommendations to the Executive Committee of the Canadian Sociological Association:

Proposal and Brief Description	Concern(s) Addressed
Creating a virtual code of conduct that prioritizes the safety and well-being of racialized participants but also creates space for critical discussions.	Support and Resources
Creating a cross-appointed student position on each of the Equity Subcommittee, Decolonization Subcommittee, and Black Caucus. These positions would focus on identifying and addressing equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization issues pertaining to student members of the CSA.	Representation in Academic Settings Support and Resources Visibility
Creating a resource guide on the CSA website to increase the visibility of racialized scholars' work (similar to the Indigeneity and Sociology Research Guide: www.csa-scs.ca/indigeneity-and-sociology).	Curriculum and Scholarship Support and Resources Recognizing Multiple Racisms
Facilitating a professional development webinar through which racialized professors can share their experiences and knowledge about how to navigate academia.	Representation in Academic Settings Support and Resources Visibility Recognizing Multiple Racisms
Creating a space on the CSA website to increase the visibility of students' work (e.g., op-eds, academic publications, news articles highlighting activism/public sociology), prioritizing submissions from racialized students.	Representation in Academic Settings Curriculum and Scholarship Support and Resources

<p>Creating an annual award that recognizes student engagement with community initiatives aimed at transforming, dismantling, and abolishing structures of oppression.</p>	<p>Representation in Academic Settings Support and Resources</p>
<p>Inviting speakers from the Systemic Racism Panel to contribute to a collective submission about systemic racism in academia for the Committing Sociology section of the <i>Canadian Review of Sociology</i>.</p>	<p>Representation in Academic Settings Visibility Recognizing Multiple Racisms</p>



Canadian Sociological Association
Student Concerns Subcommittee
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