

## The Myth of Happiness: A Commentary on Racism and Mental Health in Canada

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**Abstract:** Unlike the pervasive belief that there is little racism in Canada, this commentary argues racism has detrimental effects on the mental health of racially minoritized people. Not only through individual racist incidents, our mental health is adversely affected also by racist structure and culture, which discourages us from expressing negative emotions and speaking up to resist it. We often feel pressured to look happy to avoid a risk to become victims of the racial stereotype such as “villain.” In the white normalized society, dismantling the racist structure should be the fundamental remedy to improve mental health of the racialized. As a Mennonite, I seek subversive peace, as Jesus, Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace, took initiatives to challenge oppressive system for the marginalized. Thus, I call for living out the liberating way to eradicate racial violence in today’s Canadian context.

**Keywords:** racism, structural violence, mental health, Mennonite, peace, disability

A recent report on an investigation into anti-black racism of the Peel District School Board (PDSB) in Mississauga, Ontario was released on May 15, 2020. The report notes that the Board has been “dysfunctional” as it grappled with anti-Black racism despite the claims of Black communities, colleagues, and students for decades.<sup>1</sup> In relation to the report, a Toronto Star article on October 6, 2020 highlights how racism impacts the mental health of Black educators.<sup>2</sup> A Black male interviewee shared the pressure to be happy to avoid a risk to be seen as “the villain.” “Being a Black male ... especially in this board, you have to walk on eggshells,” one said. “You essentially have to be fake: you have to be a happy guy, you can’t have conflicts, it’s hard to advocate for yourself or anybody quite frankly because you are always made to be the

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Carter, “Peel School Board ‘Dysfunctional’ in Face of Racism, Can’t Govern Properly, Report Finds,” CBC News, June 8, 2020 (website), accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/peel-school-board-racism-report-1.5603109>; Arleen Huggins “Investigation of the Peel District School Board, 5/15/2020” (website), accessed October 28, 2020, <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/new/PDSB-investigation-final-report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Callan, “‘You Have to Walk on Eggshells’: Racism Taking Its Toll on the Mental Health of Black Educators at PDSB,” thestar.com, October 6, 2020 (website), accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/10/06/you-have-to-walk-on-eggshells-racism-taking-its-toll-on-the-mental-health-of-black-educators-at-pdsb.html>.

villain. I have had weight issues, blood pressure issues, extreme anxiety, stress. I've been to see specialists and doctors."<sup>3</sup>

As this case indicates, Black and other racially minoritized people are often impacted mentally not only by individual racist incidents but also by the racist structure and culture. In this environment, their voices are unheard. Canadian laws are meant to protect people from the harm of racism, but racially minoritized people know that when they speak out, it comes at great personal cost. They may be socially isolated, being branded as troublemakers who shake the stability of the system structured by the white norm. In this climate, racially minoritized people feel pressure to suppress their emotions exacerbated by everyday racism in order to survive in the system. This pressure to chronically suppress emotions affects their mental health. The system that neglects and even fosters racial violence threatens people's mental health, but the responsibility of coping with these threats is left to the individuals.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who works at the intersections of feminist, queer, and race theories, argues that people, especially the marginalized, are forced to be happy within certain social norms and to be silent about what is sacrificed. When a person speaks out about an unjust experience, the person becomes an "affect alien" who mars others' happiness and kills joy by reminding them of uncomfortable history and matters.<sup>4</sup> However, the affect alien becomes an unhappy subject due to very false happiness.<sup>5</sup> False happiness is often demanded of Black men in order that they will not become victims of racial stereotypes historically shaped by white-centered norms. Individual counseling and medical assistance are ways to get mental support. Yet, as the Black educator of the Peel District School Board in the interview above notes, without eradicating the racist structure and culture that is the very root cause of the deterioration of mental health, they continue to be exposed to harmful factors. Racist microaggressions and incidents in their daily lives continue to violate their dignity. Moreover, the racist structure that neglects and consequently fosters such violence maintains pressure to suppress their negative emotions by continuously reminding them of the risk of speaking out. Dealing with mental health issues caused by racism requires a structural approach in addition to an individual one.

As an Asian migrant in Canada, I've had to pay a great personal cost after speaking out about an unjust system. The key for racial justice is not about hearing voices of those who experienced racism, but more importantly about whether people in the system are willing to pay the actual cost to change the racist structure after listening to these experiences.. Without the awareness that change is needed and willingness to be changed, the gesture "We listen to you" is a hollow claim and even an irresponsible act of handing back the burden to those who have been victimized and traumatized by the violent system. In a racially biased society, sharing about racially discriminatory experiences requires courage to be vulnerable. For there to be genuine solidarity with racially minoritized peoples, and dismantling of racist structures, white people must educate themselves, becoming ready to listen and take on the cost to change. We

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 69.

must take responsibility before asking their racially minoritized colleagues to speak about the experiences and expecting them to educate their white colleagues. Different from genuine solidarity, “performative allyship” ultimately benefits the ones claiming the allyship by relieving their guilty feelings without actual engagement in the work and the cost together.<sup>6</sup> It takes courage for people to share vulnerable stories with hope for change. When there is little genuine solidarity and actual change, this kind of allyship, as a result, emotionally alienates them much more deeply.

Many Canadians believe that there is little racism in Canada. My experience tells a different story. From my four years living in Canada, blatant and implicit racism is part of my daily experience on the street, at my workplace, and at school. I have heard similar stories from my racially marginalized friends and colleagues. News is covered with stories about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s (RCMP) violent reaction to Black people, the recent issue about Indigenous fishery burned by a white-owned company in Nova Scotia, mistreatment towards migrant workers, and so on. There are many articles, books, and online resources detailing how racist social structures have been constructed through colonialism, slavery, and discriminatory immigration histories in Canada and, more broadly, in North America. When I share the same social space with Canadians who claim there is little racism and receive the same “Canadian” news, I ask: “How can they not know about racism? *Do they not know about it, or do they not want to know it?*”

Whether or not one recognizes this, one’s race and white privilege impacts one’s mental health. Persons protected by the racist system face much less chance to be insecure, vulnerable, and to find themselves in abusive situations. They do not need to advocate for their rights. They are able to sustain dignified lives without dealing with racism. The white normalized system continues to protect and privilege them. However, racially minoritized people are often not protected and are oppressed by the same system in various degrees depending on their race, including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian communities etc. They are exposed to negative occurrences whenever their dignity is violated by racial violence. They have to choose to resist the violence or to suppress their emotions. In responding there is a greater possibility that they may become further disempowered and/or more aggressive. They may be alienated by a social group, lose a job, and even risk being murdered, as many recent incidents against Black people have shown. To maintain their lives in a white normalized society, the racially minoritized bear a certain level of racial violence and ensuing trauma in everyday life. But still the media often only highlights angry protesters as violent. Given the long history of systemic violence such as colonialism, slavery, and human rights abuses as well as continuous white privilege at the cost of many lives, don't those who have been harmed by the system deserve to be angry? In a society that rarely allows them to express negative feelings against racial violence, how can they deal with their long-suppressed emotions?

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<sup>6</sup> Adele Halliday, “The Problem with Performative Allyship: When We’re Seeking Salvation, Not Solidarity” from Anti-Racism Panel, *The Christian Left Conference: What is the Christian Left?*, Online, 2020.

People often regard mental health as an individual issue. Some believe that individuals can handle their mental health issues with better coping skills and self-care. This is true to some degree. However, if someone is continually exposed to a high level of violence, it is obvious that the effort for the one to be liberated from the violence should be the fundamental remedy for healing. Jesus, who is the Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace,<sup>7</sup> has served as a model of how to respond to such violence that causes long-lasting oppression. In his inaugural teaching in Luke 4:14–20, Jesus announced that the Spirit of the Lord has sent him to set the oppressed free. Jesus took transformative initiatives to renounce dehumanizing power and affirm human dignity throughout his life. His initiatives challenged those who had maintained oppressive laws and cultures at his time and he positioned himself firmly on the side of the marginalized.

People are often attracted to the idea of peace and the act of seeking peace. As a Mennonite, a historic peace church tradition, I also seek peace, but through the lens and with the accountability of justice that Jesus set as an example. The sense of peace that I learn from Jesus is not seeking tranquil waters; rather, it disturbs the tranquillity of false peace, like false happiness. Seeking the peace that disturbs challenges the religious and sociopolitical systems that function to privilege certain people at the cost of oppressing the rest. Such peace does not neutralize the sociopolitical demands for justice. Rather, it is subversive. It is a liberating peace, particularly for those who have suppressed their painful emotions from injustice. If we expect racialized peoples to improve their mental health and be happy and peaceful without such efforts to eliminate racial violence, the very myth of happiness will be detrimental to their mental health. Only when expressions of anger, anxiety, and stress caused by racial violence are safely heard, without pressure to be happy, and the voice against racism is ensued by actual efforts to change, we will be able to experience true happiness and peace. This is the way that Jesus, Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace, modeled in his ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem. As Jesus took initiative in his context, the followers of Jesus Christ in Canada are called to live out the liberating way in today's context where racial violence has harmed the dignity of racially minoritized people and deteriorated their mental health. When we follow this call, more people can know true happiness and peace.

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 9:6.

**Author's note:** I am a Ph.D. candidate at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto. As a migrant living in Canada, grappling with racism has become part of my life. I grew up in South Korea where I belonged to the normative group in ethnicity and culture. Until I moved to North America and have been situated at the periphery of the societies, I hardly realized that living with discrimination outside of normality would make it difficult to maintain mental health for daily life. Not only from my own experience, I often read news of Black and Indigenous peoples who have been seriously discriminated against by the white normativity constructed through historical violence such as colonialism and slavery. As a migrant who is marginalized but also benefited from the settlement history in Canada, I feel obligated not to be silent on these matters. In this commentary, I wanted to call on Canadian residents for responsible engagements with such violence detrimental to mental health of many in our context.