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Shifting Perceptions: Transforming anti-racism praxis into prototypes

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Edmonton Shift Lab[1]

The Edmonton Shift Lab is a unique social innovation lab from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, that is doing ground-breaking antiracism work through a combination of systems thinking, design thinking and Indigenous epistemologies. For the last five years, the Shift Lab has worked with volunteer community members from the human services sector in Edmonton to explore anti-racism approaches that could be impactful and scalable. Fighting racism requires a systemic approach and keen insights into behavioural science. Our findings challenge the established diversity, equity, and inclusion workshop approach and improve upon it through the creation of tangible, actionable prototypes that are being adopted by community partners. These prototypes include a subscription box service, a public safety brochure, a tabletop board game, an app and an educational curriculum for landlords. Each shows promise in making systemic change to the attitudes and actions that contribute to racist behaviours. We have begun collecting and tabulating feedback about what works and what doesn't, and we are eager to share these observations in the context of systemic design.

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[1] https://www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/

Presentation description

Racism's pervasive intractability has become one of the defining social issues across the Western world today. The question of how to combat it defies easy answers; ultimately, activists and policymakers alike must ask themselves, as Antionette Carroll of the Creative Destruction Lab does, "If racism was designed into our communities, can it be un-designed?" (Carroll, 2018) This is obviously easier said than done, as the Canadian experience shows, but the willingness seems to be there. In a post-George Floyd world, broad swathes of public and private sector actors have committed to fighting racism. But how effective are they?

Beginning in 2016, the Edmonton Shift Lab launched a systemic design exploration to understand what works and what doesn't when it comes to reducing racism. This included an understanding of local Indigenous worldviews (i.e., Cree, Anishinaabe, Nakota Sioux etc.), examining behaviour change research from fields like public health (Michie et al., 2014), and working with volunteers from across the human services sector to engage in a design-centric approach to upend traditional thinking about racism and look at how we could enact change. This resulted in the creation of five concepts or "prototypes" that reflect this multivariate initiative.

Legacies of oppression

Oppression in systemic design in Canada manifests itself in many ways, but historically it is deeply and most visibly rooted in the subjugation of its Indigenous populations (Gilmore, 2015). For example, the country has recently been grappling with the discovery of numerous grave sites discovered as part of the Indian Residential School system, which began shortly after the *Indian Act* was passed in 1876 (Parrott, 2020), nine years after the country formally came into being with the *British North America Act of 1867.*

These schools formed a system ostensibly designed to educate the Indigenous population as the country was settled. In reality, this system was not just assimilative; it was abusive. It was intended "to take the Indian out of the child," according to the country's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald (Fine, 2015). Attendance was mandatory, and Indigenous children were taken from their families across the country, sometimes forcibly (Figure 1). Children were forbidden from speaking their own languages, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of priests, nuns and other religious authorities who administered the schools was rife (Fraga, 2021). Entire Indigenous languages and cultures were suffocated by this school system, and the impacts of this trauma have carried on from one generation to the next, creating chasms of mistrust between Indigenous communities and Canadian institutions. This pattern is seen over and over, not just in education but also with inequities in healthcare, housing, criminal justice and other systems. Only belatedly has the country recognised this fact and begun work to change it.

Figure 1. "The Scream" by Cree artist Kent Monkman (2017).

Anti-racism praxis

The response of the Edmonton Shift Lab was to boldly re-imagine what an Indigenous-centric approach to education might be. The incorporation of Indigenous epistemologies with systemic design and design thinking led us to create a triple helix, or braid (Dryburgh et al., 2021), that strives to weave these and other sources of information and knowledge together to create a framework for action in the service of justice and equity (Figure 2). Scholarship on Indigenous knowledge frameworks, such as "relational systems thinking" (Goodchild, 2022) are rapidly proliferating, so we examined and consulted with Indigenous scholarship on the stewardship team, advisors, and community members to better understand how to approach this topic in Edmonton/Treaty 6 Territory. Many of the ways we centred Indigenous knowledge in the Lab can't be captured in steps and linear processes, but the wisdom that emerged

was critical in informing how we would engage with land-based practices, ceremonies, and stories from elders.

With this heightened understanding of Indigenous ontologies, we wondered if non-Indigenous populations could be targeted to better understand their positionality as settlers in Amiskwaciwâskahikan ("Beaver Hills House" in Cree, the original name of Edmonton). This came in the form of our animating question: "How might we reimagine what it means to be a Treaty person?"

The answer came in the form of Exploring Wâhkôhtowin, a historical board game dedicated to telling the Indigenous side of the story (Figure 3). This game replicates the experiences of an Indigenous family attempting to survive and thrive as European settlers and the Canadian state encroach westward in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. With the threat of disease, the imposition of legislation such as the *Homesteader Act* and the extirpation of the buffalo underway, each player is challenged to succeed not by accumulating territory, gold or resources but rather by holding onto ceremonies and keeping their culture alive over successive years. "Wâhkôhtowin" is a Cree word which translates as kinship or community, and players are invited to decolonise their understanding of these concepts with this tabletop game experience.

Figure 2. The Triple Helix Methodology.

Figure 3. The Exploring Wâhkôhtowin game board.

From praxis to prototypes

Exploring Wâhkôhtowin is one of five prototypes that emerged from the Edmonton Shift Lab that attempt to redesign effective approaches to anti-racism. Developing them into prototypes allows us to make them tangible, testable and, most importantly, impactful. Another prototype, the Anti-Racism Box, looks to challenge the limitations of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) workshop model that is favoured in corporate settings. So far, 1,000 users are on their own journey in trying to find this out, while Reflection Pool is a prototype meant to replace the DEI workshop through a customised digital journey into antiracism praxis. The fourth prototype, the Active Bystander Resource, is inspired by the Guide to Prevent Gender-based Street Harassment by the feminist organisation Hollaback (now known as Right to Be). 40,000+ copies of it have been distributed across Alberta. Finally, the last prototype, Diversity Certified, is a landlord-tenant cultural competency course currently in development for the rental housing market.

Conclusion

Tackling a wicked problem like racism is emotional, messy work. It defies definition and is filled with uncertainty. Its inherent localness renders universal answers impossible to pursue, but with keen understanding and care, it may be possible to scale up these solutions to work in other contexts. Our exploration aims to build on what works, debunk what doesn't and ascertain what is effective, not what is perfect.

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