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The Social Difficulties of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples: Escaping a Legacy of Oppression

It is most certainly not a novelty that throughout history Canadian Aboriginal Peoples have gone through hardships imposed on them by the colonizers and, as a result, have faced a unique set of challenges affecting several areas of their lives. Although over the course of the 20th century and in the last two decades laws have changed and amends have been made, Aboriginal Peoples are still affected by the consequences of their past. In my paper, I will focus on the present-day social situation and the current difficulties of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples. In addition, I will examine the history-related root cause of the depicted issues.

The term 'Aboriginal' or 'Indigenous' refers to individuals who had already lived on Canadian territory in pre-colonial times. There are generally three subgroups of Aboriginal Peoples mentioned: First Nations, Inuit and Métis.¹ 'Indian' is the old term used to describe these groups, however, as this word has pejorative and patronizing connotations today, it is commonly avoided.² The term 'Aboriginal' appeared in the 35th section of the Canadian Constitution in 1982, and is widely used today.³

One of the most significant historical sources of inequality between Aboriginal Peoples and the white settlers would be the Indian Act of 1876, which confined Aboriginals to living in reserves; however, it was established that white men could occupy certain parts of these reserves for founding English schools or for erecting administrative buildings.⁴ Furthermore, the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 commanded Aboriginals to learn English by the age of twenty-one, and it also endorsed the existence and operation of residential schools.⁵ The Act was found problematic from several perspectives, thus, certain elements of it were withdrawn, but this did not necessarily result in the discrimination of Aboriginals disappearing from society. For instance, the Sun Dance was originally prohibited in the Act, and even though the ban was later lifted, the practice of Sun Dance is still considered problematic in certain Canadian circles.⁶ Furthermore, even though a formal apology was issued to Aboriginals by the Government of Canada

¹ Half Aboriginal, half French.

² Indigenous Foundations: 'Terminology', indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/terminology/ [accessed on 25 November 2019]

³ 'Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms', s. 35, Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982.

⁴ 'Indian Act', S.C. 1876, ch.8.

⁵ 'Gradual Civilization Act', 20 Vic., c.26, 1857.

⁶ E. K. CALDWELL, *Dreaming the Dawn: Conversations with Native Artists and Activists*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1999.

due to the operation of residential schools,⁷ it could be rightly assumed that an apology in itself will not make the impact of the 120 year-long history of residential schools—beginning in 1876 and ending in 1996—disappear overnight, just as the discrimination of Aboriginal Peoples will not cease to exist either.⁸

One of the core issues can be traced back to the lack of a sense of identity: according to Jean-Paul Restoule, in spite of an increasing number of recent initiatives to facilitate accepting one's identity as an aboriginal person, for older individuals and for individuals in certain geographical areas or communities it is more difficult to embrace their difference from the majority, as they were given absolutely no opportunity to be proud of their identities. Instead, they were widely ridiculed and often faced exclusion for their origins—and this repression of their personality could potentially manifest in serious consequences, such as marital abuse, or contracting AIDS.⁹

Restoule describes that the definition of identity is itself a challenge for minorities, as the word 'identity' entails a sense of sameness, permanence and homogeneity, which, considering the Aboriginal experience is certainly problematic. Aboriginal Peoples come from various tribes: they have their respective ceremonies and they practice different customs all of which change over time. Moreover, Aboriginal identity is generally defined from the outsider majority's perspective. As several Aboriginal Peoples now live on a territory different from where they originate from, they often find themselves rootless, which makes the construction of an identity even more difficult for them.¹⁰

According to Valentine, in Southern regions, where Aboriginal Peoples are better mixed with the white population, they tend to see and define themselves through the eyes of white people. However, in the North, where Aboriginal communities are stronger, the presence of self-definition is more prevalent.¹¹ Pinneault and Patterson, who have examined the situation of Aboriginal students in classes, put the difference in the following way:

Attempt to put yourself in the following story. You are living in a land which is the first and only foundation of your philosophy, spiritual beliefs, historical patterns, cultural distinction, and ancestral connections. At the same time, you never see a reflection of yourself within the philosophy of others, the educational system, popular culture, or day-to-day events within the community. Stereo-

⁷ S. HARPER, 'Statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools', *Indian and Northern Affairs Canada*, Ottawa, 2017, n.p.

⁸ J. R. MILLER, 'Residential Schools', in: MARSH, J. (ed.), *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 2012.

⁹ J. P. RESTOULE, 'Aboriginal identity: The need for historical and contextual perspectives', *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 24, no. 2, 2000, 102.

¹⁰ RESTOULE, 103–105.

¹¹ L. P. VALENTINE, *Making It Their Own: Severn Ojibwe Communicative Practices. Anthropological Horizons*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1995, 164.

typing remains entrenched in most societal situations and you are constantly in the position of needing to defend your rights and position. When you are able to visualize yourself, it is through the interpretation of others who have little understanding of who you are. You are constantly being defined and redefined from an outside system.¹²

According to Mitchell, several mental difficulties arise from this transgenerational trauma: Aboriginal Peoples are much more likely to develop mental disorders, such as depression or anxiety, and they are more prone to committing suicide.¹³ Mitchell also mentions that one particular mental illness is exceptionally common in aboriginal individuals: PTSD (standing for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), which stems from a traumatic experience that makes an individual lose their sense of predictability and control.¹⁴ In Mitchell's estimate, out of the 127 survivors of the residential school system in British Columbia, 64,2% met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD—and, as the researcher suggests, this data could be extended to the overall sufferers of residential schools.¹⁵ However, one difficulty regarding this issue is that Aboriginal Peoples tend to view mental health differently from Western medicine—for instance, Aboriginal individuals tend to attribute different reasons to depression—therefore, there is an inevitable difference, and a ground for misunderstanding when it comes to diagnostics.¹⁶

Perhaps one of the most significant gaps between Aboriginal Peoples and Non-Aboriginal people is in education: according to Mai Nguyen, in Canada, education is seen as the ultimate way to move between classes and to break out of disadvantageous circumstances in order to create a better future—which is especially important in case of Aboriginal Peoples, who are generally associated with poverty and lower life expectancy. 38% of Aboriginal Peoples are children, therefore, they could convert the negative educational experiences of the previous generations to a more positive one. However, as Nguyen specifies, the historical trauma and the loss of self-sense make this breakout quite difficult.¹⁷

There is a significant discrepancy regarding the schooling data of Aboriginal Peoples and Non-Aboriginals: looking at the youth between the ages of 15 and 24, 50% of Non-Aboriginals were enrolled in school, however, in the case of Aboriginal Peoples, this number decreases to 43%.¹⁸ Only 26% of Non-Aboriginals have no

¹² A. PINNEAULT and C. PATTERSON, 'Native support circles in urban schools.' *Orbit* 28, no. 1, 1997, 27.

¹³ T. L. MITCHELL, 'Healing the Generations.' *Journal of Aboriginal Health, March*, 2005, 15.

¹⁴ MITCHELL, 15.

¹⁵ MITCHELL, 16.

¹⁶ A. VUKIC, et al, 'Aboriginal and Western conceptions of mental health and illness', *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 9, no. 1, 2011, 68.

¹⁷ M. NGUYEN, 'Closing the Education Gap: A Case for Aboriginal Early Childhood Education in Canada, A Look at the Aboriginal Headstart Program', *Canadian Journal of Education* 34, no. 3, 2011, 232-234.

¹⁸ NGUYEN, 234.

secondary education, however, in the case of Aboriginal Peoples, this figure nearly doubles (48%).¹⁹ Similarly, while 50% of Non-Aboriginals have no post-secondary education, this number for Aboriginal Peoples is 66.6%—two thirds of the examined control group.²⁰

The lower participation in education can also be traced back to transgenerational trauma: in boarding schools, apart from stripping Aboriginal Peoples from their culture, their language, their religion and names, students often suffered physical, psychological and even sexual abuse. Once this generation grew up, they were rather reluctant to send their own children to school. Further, the children who did end up in public education, often had their needs and culture disregarded. The education of Aboriginal Peoples only tends to work in case of on-reserve individuals who are able to get acquainted with their own roots and history—however, according to data, 75–80% percent of Aboriginal people live off-reserve, therefore, they are exposed to education mixed with Non-Aboriginals.²¹

Another question related to education is employment: even though it has been shown that racial bias against indigenous people still exists, and in certain cases there is still a significant difference between the salaries of an Aboriginal person with a Bachelor's degree and a Non-Aboriginal person with the same qualification, it seems that the presence of education has proved to be the most effective method to increase the standard of Aboriginal Peoples' living, as well as to close in on the wage gap.²²

In their study, Daniel Wilson and David MacDonald elaborate on some shocking data with regards to the salary differences of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people. In 2006, the median of annual salary for Aboriginal Peoples was \$18,962, nearly thirty percent lower than the \$27,097 median of Non-Aboriginal Canadian citizens.²³ Wilson and MacDonald's data also show, however, that the margin between the two incomes is constantly decreasing—for instance, between 1996 and 2006 this number has decreased by more than a thousand dollars.²⁴ Yet, at the current rate, it would still take 63 years for the income gap to be bridged. Further, the income gap depends on various factors, such as the location: in urban settings, the gap is significantly higher than in rural environments. Oddly enough, the amount of salary earned does not reverse on reserves either: in urban reserves, Non-Aboriginal people earn 34% more than Aboriginal workers, whereas in rural reserves, this number is as high as 88%.²⁵

¹⁹ NGUYEN, 234.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ NGUYEN, 234–237.

²² NGUYEN, 235.

²³ D. WILSON and D. MACDONALD, *The income gap between Aboriginal Peoples and the rest of Canada*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ottawa, 2010, 1.

²⁴ WILSON AND MACDONALD, 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

Wilson and MacDonald illustrate the importance of education with a truly remarkable example: they state that the primary facility that has provided a solution to decreasing the income gap, which has been a persistent issue of the era, is education. It has been noted that the speediest income gap decrease happened to individuals who possess a bachelor's degree: in 1996, the difference between the median income of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal individuals was \$3,382, whereas by 2006, this number dropped to \$648.²⁶ Furthermore, Aboriginal women have the tendency to be more likely to earn a degree than Aboriginal men, and—surprisingly enough—they also tend to earn more in their occupation than Non-Aboriginal women. The sole issue in relation to the tertiary education of Aboriginal Peoples is that only 8% of them take part in it, whereas this number is 22% for the Canadian average. Wilson and MacDonald too see—and elaborate on—the connections between the traumatic past of Aboriginal Peoples with regards to schooling, as well as the general perception of being misunderstood and dismissed.²⁷

Another significant area where Aboriginal People tend to lag behind is health—both physical and mental, with the two interconnecting in certain cases. Mitchell states that in Canada, at least 60% of Aboriginal individuals have been reported to have some kind of a chronic condition.²⁸ She connects these physical conditions with PTSD: as discussed in her essay, certain conditions, such as thyroid issues, hormonal problems, chronic pain disorders, heart disease, as well as stomach problems are all more likely to appear in a co-morbidity with PTSD—what is more, several people suffering from PTSD self-medicate with alcohol or drugs, which could also contribute to the development of long-lasting illnesses.²⁹

In their essay 'Aboriginal Health', Harriet MacMillan et al. discuss the difficulty of Aboriginals to access healthcare: several of them have poorer circumstances than Non-Aboriginal Canadians, just as others live on reserves, or in similarly remote regions, with no access to transportation, making it difficult to receive healthcare. In this scenario, money is also an issue—Aboriginal Peoples living in remote regions may not be able to afford transportation due to their generally meagre income—which, as it has been established, is characteristic of Aboriginal society. This also entails that they are less capable of leading a healthy life, which results in high rates of obesity and increased health problems. Local health practices are also at question: more traditional communities might feel less receptive to the application of Western medicine. However, government-ordered steps to understand Aboriginal needs better are now being taken.³⁰

²⁶ WILSON AND MACDONALD, 1.

²⁷ WILSON AND MACDONALD, 2–5.

²⁸ MITCHELL, 15.

²⁹ MITCHELL, 17.

³⁰ H. L. MACMILLAN, 'Aboriginal Health', *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 155, no. 11, 1996, 1570–1572.

Although the most traumatic part of their past is over in all likelihood, Canadian Aboriginal Peoples are still affected by several issues which are rooted deeply in their colonial past and all of which seem to intertwine in a way: for instance, poor mental health leads to poor physical health, the lack of education results in lack of employment and poverty, and poverty leads to health issues. All of these issues are also closely connected to the perception of their social outcast status. However, as steps are being made for Aboriginal Peoples to facilitate the rediscovery of their roots and to involve them more in society, the forthcoming generations will hopefully face progressively fewer difficulties.

Abstract

The Social Difficulties of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples: Escaping A Legacy of Oppression
In the course of history, Canadian Aboriginal people have faced a unique set of challenges and have suffered-from subjugation and discrimination deeply rooted in their shared history with the French and British settlers during the pre-Confederation Period. Although laws have changed over the course of centuries, amendments have been made, and Aboriginal rights have been granted (and are generally taken more seriously), Canadian Aboriginals are still secondary citizens in Canada in certain ways. In my paper, I intend to offer a survey of the present-day social situation of Canadian Aboriginals, the difficulties they face as well as examine the history-related root cause(s) of these difficulties.

Keywords

Canadian Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal rights, social difficulties