The Simmering Pot Boils Over:
Racist Backlash in Edmonton after September 11

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aftermath of September 11, 2001 has ushered in a new world of victimization of individuals in the name of national security and anti-terrorism. This report describes the findings of a community consultation process held in Edmonton between December 2001 and April 2002. The main objective of this project was to mobilize the Edmonton religious and ethnic communities to identify issues, concerns, and experiences and to work together to build a more understanding anti-racist environment as a result of September 11.

Specifically, the project's goal was to raise public awareness of the bias directly stemming from the September 11 events and how the events affected specific ethnocultural and religious groups including Arabs, Muslims, East Asians, and other people of colour. Though the project identified the state of race relations within the context of a particular time period (after September 11), it was not limited to experiences in that time period. It was also within the scope of this project to examine the way communities were dealing with racism post-September 11.

The project included several activities: a literature review; community leader planning meetings; consultation meetings with ethnocultural groups and the general public; educational sessions with youth; and a community action/building component aimed at promoting solidarity and effectively confronting post-September 11 bias.

The research methodology adopted in this project was a participatory action research (PAR) approach that allows people to draw on their own experiences to achieve tangible and applicable outcomes, and allows for review, discussion, modification, approval, initiation, and utilization of research activities by community members in ways that will specifically benefit their community (Van Manen, 1997). Thus, the goals of the project were to engage in action that challenges racism and bias, empowers those affected, and ultimately transforms their lives and those around them.

Eighteen community meetings took place with an attendance of approximately 100 participants. A diverse spectrum of Edmonton society participated in this research. We had community leaders, immigrant counsellors, religious leaders, and ordinary Edmontonians participate, representing diverse ethnocultural and religious communities. Based on our conversations with the participants, it was clear to us that racism was and continues to be a problem in society regardless of the specific events of September 11.

The participants acknowledged some form of collective bias against people of certain groups, especially racial/ethnic (Arab-Canadians, African-Canadians, and South Asians) and religious minorities (particularly Muslim women, and Sikhs). The participants also indicated that this bias became more overt after September 11. A theme emerged in our conversations with the participants that the events of September 11 motivated certain people to commit discriminatory acts. Thus, the terrorist attacks brought certain biases and racist tendencies to the surface and that the tolerance Canadians prides themselves on was perhaps never there. We heard stories of resilience, pain, and resistance. Almost all the people we talked to expressed their horror at the events of September 11 and yet the majority gave a thought provoking critique of the U. S. foreign policy, Canadian multiculturalism, systemic racism, and most importantly, the media.

Questions that came into most minds included: Why are Arab-Canadians or Muslims being blamed for what happened in East Asia? Most participants also wondered about how they are viewed in Canada. Are they not Canadian enough? What is a Canadian? From the conversations with the participants, it was clear that racism towards Arabs, Muslims, and people "who look Middle Eastern" is widespread. Muslims and those perceived as Muslims struggle against racism and September 11 did not help the situation. When emotions are so raw and the general population seem inconsolable, the participants wondered if it is possible to keep others from developing an unbounded hatred.

For them the aftermath of September 11 validated what they have been experiencing in terms of employment discrimination, housing bias, and media misrepresentation. Some participants voiced their opinions about the dishonesty in the immigration process, stating that prior from leaving their countries of origin, they were promised employment commensurate with their educational experience and that as they arrived, that never materialized. The participants acknowledged that September 11 had some significance in that racism became overt, and people expressed their bigotry openly. According to the majority of the participants, people of colour including Aboriginal peoples continue to struggle with racism everyday of their lives. Specific incidences of harassment that the participants shared included:

- The most obvious effect of September 11 was on the taxi drivers who because of the hesitation of regular Canadians to enter a taxi with them led to a decrease in their income.
- People revealed that recently some women chose not to wear their *hijab* to disguise their religious background.
- A bus carrying students was stoned immediately after September 11.
- A man changed his name on a resume so that he could get selected for an interview.
- A man was pointedly asked of his religious affiliation and refused an interview as a result (He was Muslim).
- A family was evicted from their two-year apartment because the wife was visibly Muslim (she wore a *hijab*).
- A parent took his children away from a public school due to harassment by other students.
- A man was ridiculed and given the finger while driving with his son.

The media, according to most participants, is responsible for fuelling hatred and feeding stereotypes towards certain groups. Most participants critiqued the mainstream media's use of anti-Islamic terminology, focus on negative incidents committed by minorities, and bias in reporting. According to the participants, the distorted perception that Islam or Muslims condone(s) and encourage violence feeds hate and bias towards them and leads to societal anxiety among all Canadians.

To summarize:

- September 11 gave people license to openly express their racist attitudes. What had often been implicit became more blatant. The Muslim community regardless of ethnicity or nationality

was adversely affected. Additionally, other people of colour including members of the Arab, African, Sikh, and Aboriginal communities were also affected.
- Areas in which racism manifested itself was employment, housing (rental accommodation), schools, on the job, and in the media
- People feel intense anger at the media for bias in news reporting about September 11, Arab cultures, Islam, and the war on Afghanistan.
- The whole issue has become much worse since the situation in Palestine / Israel has escalated. The participants felt the continual negative portrayal of all Arab /Muslim issues by the media, was fuelling the already raging fire of racism.

Several recommendations were suggested by the participants. These included:

- Dispelling myths about Islam in schools. The Muslim community should facilitate educational forums with the assistance of NAARR and other groups to raise understanding and respect.
- Schools need to play a key role in challenging racism. Schools should provide educational opportunities and understanding for persons disadvantaged by racism. Public education should include anti-racism education to teach young people to counteract discriminatory attitudes they absorb from their homes and their community. Social studies curriculums should include critical understanding of Islam, Arabs, and other religious/cultural understandings.
- Forums and workshops for youth on positive and effective ways to deal with racism in their everyday lives.
- NAARR should establish some form of a support group or an ongoing community dialogue on racism to offer people an avenue to tell their stories.
- NAARR should establish a community media monitoring committee to encourage media accountability in reporting.
- NAARR and community members should call a press conference to dispel media misinformation and hold discussions with editorial boards of print media on word usage.
- NAARR, with the assistance and contribution of the community media monitoring committee, should write a guest column to the Edmonton Journal or other media outlets about specific findings of the backlash project in order to raise awareness.
- NAARR should establish an ongoing antiracism theatre group

comprised of diverse youth to perform plays about racism.
- NAARR should organize a healing ceremony with a spiritual component that offers an interfaith perspective on antiracism.

INTRODUCTION

If we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.-

Over the course of Canadian history, entire communities of people have become targeted following aggression or war abroad when they shared religious, ethnic, and national background with aggressors to Canada. During the Second World War Japanese Canadians were uprooted from their homes and send to internment camps, because they were Japanese (Boyko, 1995; and Kobayashi, 1998). More recently during the United States Gulf War with Iraq, the tremendous escalation of discrimination towards people of Arabic descent and Muslim religion was reported (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1994; Wannas-Jones, 2002; and Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, 1999).

Research conducted on the post-gulf war student narratives indicated that Arab and Muslim students encountered explicit racial discrimination in schools, malls, and other public places (Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1994; and El-Yassir, 2001). According to Wannas-Jones (2002), the memories of the Gulf war period are a powerful testimony to how Canadians of Arab descent have paid a heavy price for developments in their home countries.

During that tumultuous time, Arab-Canadians were regarded with suspicion and treated as "guilty until proven innocent" by both society and government. In this study, some
Arab students encountered harassment, racial epithets thrown at them, and were blamed for political events in the Middle East. One participant in Wannas-Jones' (2002) study summarizes:

"Yeah, see in the Gulf War, it was totally like Iraq

**bashing, which turned into Arab bashing...Like a, a
teacher could have calmed the situation down? Yeah,
no actually made a very strong conscious effort. Like
we came to school and we heard just people laughing,
guys laughing about how much soldiers that had died
last year, like Iraqi soldiers and, and...Like they're so
happy and it's like that would just cause us to then
laugh if we heard of a plane getting shot down or
whatever and we'd tell them yeah so you know, they
have a lot of soldiers or whatever, it was just like, like
nobody took, during war nobody takes into account
the other side's feelings, I think...**

This, according to Wannas-Jones (2002), created an atmosphere of
intimidation in which Arab-Canadians of all faiths felt silenced, devalued,
misunderstood, and misrepresented. Latent racism manifested itself in
schools with possible consequences of feelings of anger, loss of identity,
and self-esteem, especially among Arab and Muslim youth. Racial
stereotypes against Arabs, Muslims and people from the Middle East
have certain commonalities with other minority groups, but also distinct
roots and manifestations that merit attention. Anti-Arab and Muslim
stereotypes remain persistent in Canadian culture, fueled by foreign
policy attitudes and assumptions, competing domestic constituencies
and public ignorance about this population. El-Yassir (2001) summarizes
this point:

> **Canadians generally tend to be very ignorant about
> Arabs, their culture, religion and history. The images
> they conjure of Arabs are derived from negative
> stereotypes created over many years through travel
> writings, art, colonial government reports, pseudo
> academic research, the media, the cinema and popular
> culture in general. As a result "Arab" and "Muslim",
> have become associated in many minds with violence,
> terrorism, treachery, irrationality and fanaticism.
> Arabs and Muslims are thought to live and think
> differently. They are portrayed as irrational; driven by
> raw emotion (hate, jealousy, anger) and instincts (sex,
> violence). They are thought to have no attachment to
> land and no regard for women or human life. These
> negative stereotypes are constantly re-enforced in the
> two most influential knowledge sources; the
> educational system and the media (p.10).**

As a consequence of the terrorist action in the United States on
September 11, 2001 there has been a significant concern in Muslim,
Arab, and other minority communities in Canada about possible backlash

stemming from racism, fear, and misinformation. Immediately following the terrorist attacks, news reports come in daily of an escalation in racially motivated hate crimes. Arab-Canadians, Sikhs, Muslims, and other people of colour were recipients of attacks because of their ethnic or religious background and were blamed for the horrific incidents in New York and Washington D.C.

Following the attacks, hate and bias crime police units in major cities in Canada reported an increase in the number of racially motivated hate crimes. It was not clear from the reports if this was a result of increase in incidents or an increase in reporting as a result of police outreach programs to targeted communities. Several community organizations, particularly those associated with targeted communities reported anecdotal evidence of harassment, intimidation, and outright violence immediately following the terrorist attacks. Reports of insults hurled at Arabs, Sikhs, Muslims, and other people of colour "who look like they are from the Middle East" as they walked on the streets, restaurants, and other public spaces.

In the United States, human rights and non-for-profit organizations reported that immediately after the terrorist attacks, Americans of Arab and Muslim heritage faced racial harassment in their communities, on their jobs, and at their places of worship (Sheridan, 2002; and Mitchell, 2001). Incidents included: children being harassed in schools and parents not sending their children to schools; women getting their traditional *hijab* scarves pulled off; men' turbans plucked off from their heads or been ridiculed because of their beards; religious leaders being physically assaulted and in some cases murdered, and places of worship vandalized or set on fire.

In a detailed report by the Toronto Police Services' hate crimes unit task force, it was revealed that the greatest increase in racially and religiously motivated hate crime activities took place in September and October of 2001, immediately following the terrorist attacks (Toronto Police Services, 2002: 4). Of the 338 incidents reported in Toronto, 121 were linked directly to September. 11. The biggest jump in reported hate crimes was against Muslims, Arabs, Hindus, Sikhs, South Asians, Africans, and anyone who appeared Middle Eastern or East Indian. Further, the majority of incidents recorded in that report were directly attributable to the terrorist attacks in the United States and these hate crimes were based on the perpetrator' perceptions.

Responding to such reports, politicians from most parties and levels of government called on their constituencies to strive for tolerance and

understanding. In Alberta, Premier Ralph Klein voiced his concern that Muslims across Canada were being tarred with the same brush and called on Albertans to resist scape-goating. Prime Minister Jean Chretien called for the public to uphold Canadian values of respect for diversity and tolerance. In addition, Ontario NDP leader Howard Hampton called on governments to deal with the problem by implementing policies that deal with racially motivated hate crimes. He suggested that racist incidents occur all too often with no action to stamp out this sort of crime.

In Edmonton, community and religious leaders expressed concern about a possible scape-goating of Arab-Canadians and Muslims as a way of dealing with the pain of September 11. For instance, Edmonton' Canadian Arab Friendship Association (CAFA), Executive Director, Nora Abou-Absi urged fellow Canadians not to do a "knee-jerk reaction" against fellow Canadians of Arab heritage. Other leaders urged calm and a halt to judgement until those responsible for the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. were found.

On October, 2001, Dr. Hedy Fry, the former Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Status of Women held a round-table discussion with Edmonton community leaders to assess the state of race relations after September 11. From the discussions with the secretary, it became very clear to those who attended that there was some kind of negative reaction towards certain groups throughout Canada. There was certainly a broad scale indication from the round-table discussion that harassment of certain groups in explicit and implicit ways was a problem.

The anecdotal reports from various members of the community indicated that Muslim women who wore the *hijab* were afraid to go out of their homes, parents of children of colour are escorting the students to and from school because they felt they were not safe, and that the bias was being felt among all people of colour. It was crucial from that point that some form of community mobilization / public education project be launched in the Edmonton area to educate people on respecting diverse ethnic groups, understanding of their faith, and fostering a sense of community void of racial discrimination.

This community outreach project was, therefore, designed to give a clearer picture on how people are dealing with the aftermath of September. 11 in Edmonton. It was also designed to assess the state of race relations following the events and attitudes towards people of colour including Arabs, East Asians, Africans, Muslims and their friends

after September. 11.

METHODOLOGY AND INFORMATION GATHERING

(a)　The Analytic Framework for the Project

In developing a framework for the analysis of the findings in this project, the research team drew heavily on the participaratory action research (PAR) framework. A participatory action research method was devised with the aim of creating a two-way learning and information sharing process between the research team and the participants. According to participatory action research (PAR) methodologists, PAR is a meaningful communicative form through which individuals express themselves while forming images of themselves within a wider context and understanding their own actions and experiences (Van Manen, 1987; Clandinin and Connelly, 1994; and Van Manen,1997).

One challenge that the researchers anticipated in the consultation process was using research methods, which objectify the participants' experiences and exclude their full participation in the research process. PAR addresses these concerns by providing a grounded framework for community research that reflects cultural sensitivity and relevance by including all members of the community in leading the direction of the discussions. It also encourages community members to define issues of concern to them and participate in developing an effective plan for response and resolution.

In accordance with the PAR methodology adopted, it was hoped that the consultation process would be an empowering one for those who participated. Thus, listening to participant stories provided a means to understand their experiences. Through telling of their stories, it was assumed that participants would actively voice how racism affected them after and before September 11.

(b)　Community Consultation Process

The information gathering process was intended to model the participatory action research approach. While we did not seek to achieve a statistically representative sample of participants, we did seek to include community members of all ages, genders, classes, religious, and ethnic backgrounds from as many neighbourhood locations in Edmonton as possible to reflect the diversity that exists in this city. To do this we planned to include members of the Arab community; South East Asian (including the Sikh and Hindu communities); Western Asian communities; African communities, and other people of colour as main participants. In addition, the mainstream Edmonton community would

be engaged through ten discussion meetings to which the general public was invited.

The community consultation process had several important elements including:

- creating circumstances and spaces in which the participants could share experiences and express their needs, issues, and opinions.

- validating the participants' knowledge and lived experiences with respect to communication procedures and meeting facilitation.

- progressively consulting and reporting back on the research outcomes and findings.

- promoting and creating linkages and ties at the community level for people to share experiences.

These elements were carried out using the following project activities and participatory processes:

- holding two round table planning meetings with community leaders or keenly interested people to solicit input in order to ensure that the issue was dealt with sensitively and effectively.

- scheduling meetings with leaders of specific ethnocultural and religious groups so that we would become aware of all relevant factors that will inform the project, and to develop a positive rapport with groups we had not worked with previously.

- visiting community leaders and soliciting participation from community members.

- evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies by engaging in periodic critical reflection exercises on the progress.

- progressively disseminating findings through educational or information sharing sessions directed at youth and the general public.

(c) Participant Selection Strategies

Originally, the plan was to have 1480 people participate in this project. Two planning meetings (30) people, ten community meetings with (150 people) and later fifteen educational meetings with youth (1300). We held 2 planning meetings (attended by 14 leaders in the community)

and 18 community meetings. To encourage participation we relied on immigrant serving agencies, anti-racism youth groups, community leaders, and religious leaders. Many community leaders informed us that their members would not necessarily attend a general meeting especially if they come from particular ethnocultural communities. After reconsidering our strategy, the research team decided that we would do on-site visits to community facilities, youth organizations, mosques, and churches.

Two strategies were developed:

- Solicit participation from specific ethnocultural and religious groups (designated groups including Muslims, Arabs, Sikhs, Hindus, Arab- Christians, East Indians, and Africans). We contacted community associations, immigrant service agencies, university student groups, Mosques, and Churches. Accordingly, 18 community meetings (each with 13 participants or less) were held. We kept the number of participants fairly small to ensure that each participant had an opportunity to speak and was able to reflect on their own situations. Community organizations and agencies assisted us in setting up and advertising the meetings to their clients. This proved to be useful because individuals felt a sense of security being around people who share similar experiences.

- Solicit participation from wider Edmonton community. These meetings were scheduled in public places such as libraries, community halls, and institutions of learning. This proved to be useful because mainstream Canadians had an opportunity to participate, as were people of colour who were otherwise unable to be involved.

After the meetings were set up and community leaders gave conformation, the research team advertised the general meetings via different avenues including list-serves, posters, electronic media (see appendix 6), and public service announcements. As a result, we received email messages and phone calls from individuals interested in attending the meetings. Because of the sensitivity of the issue, we expected a modest turnout.

(e)   Ethical Considerations

Because of the sensitivity of the issues discussed in this project, several ethical protocols were considered. A request of participation in the form of a letter or a person-to-person invitation was given to those interested in participating. Letter to community groups, religious organizations,

and community leaders were written to introduce the purpose and nature of the project. An explanation of the overall objective of the research, the intended duration of the meetings, and an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity was specified.

In each meeting, the research team reassured the participants that their confidentiality would be maintained and that they should to feel that their responses were voluntary. The participants were also given an option to opt-out of the meetings at any time. Detailed notes were undertaken during the course of the meetings. The researchers, while facilitating the meetings also adopted the Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles of non-judgement, valuing of lived experiences, sensitivity to issues raised, and democratization of contextual knowledge.

FINDINGS

(a)   Brief Profile of the Participants

One hundred respondents participated in the community consultation meetings. In addition, 229 youth were also consulted during the information gathering process. Participants were recruited from diverse ethnocultural, gender, and religious communities. This was important because we anticipated much variation in experience and opinion in the aftermath of September 11 due to religious background, ethnicity, gender, and national origin.

The sample reflected the multicultural spectrum of Canadian society including: Arab-Canadians, Aboriginal peoples, African-Canadians, Euro-Canadians (white), and South Asians; as well as diverse religious groups: including Muslims, Arab-Christians, Jews, Canadian-Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus. In addition, the majority of participants were first, second, and third generation immigrants from countries including Sudan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Egypt, Kazakistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Ireland, South Africa, India, United States of America, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

(b)   Racism as a Social Problem

According to the overwhelming majority of the participants in this project, racism was seen as an issue of widespread concern. For the participants, a starting point for understanding the post-September 11 racism was awareness of how racism permeates Canadian society. One common thread in our conversations with the participants was an acknowledgement that racism exists and takes many forms, ranging from the relatively rare but serious incidents of violence to the more frequent incidences of racial verbal abuse, racist jokes, and condescending behaviour. The participants reflected on their general struggle with racism in all spheres of their lives including immigration processes, employment, housing, in the workplace, and in everyday life.

The issues that the participants raised ranged from the subtlety of institutional and systemic Canadian racism, the paradox of multiculturalism, and everyday incidents in public places. The participants pointed out that racism in Canada is nurtured and sustained by systemic power. For racism to flourish with the vigor it enjoys in Canada there must be an extensive climate of acceptance and participation by large numbers of people who constitute its power base. According to most participants, those who control power, including the power of information production (i.e. curriculum, media, etc.) have the

capacity to limit the rights of others to participate. Power is the capacity to command, control, and dominate social reality for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome. To deny others such rights is to deny their humanity.

Drawing from their personal experiences, the participants highlighted several issues of concern that they felt should be discussed. These included racism in employment and housing. Employment issues identified included discrimination in the workplace, devaluing of foreign credentials, and inequity in employment practices by managers and employers.

Some participants reflected on what they saw as unfair treatment by co-workers or managers in the work place. Generally, participants who are recent newcomers, pointed out that they were targets of racial profiling, harassment, and bias especially when seeking employment. Immigrant workers remain vulnerable to workplace abuse and exploitation, often face huge challenges in attempting to fight for fairness. Despite high levels of education attained by newcomers (especially of visible minority background), they still suffer from low levels of employment and income.

Discrimination occurs in the hiring process and practices of employers. Since September 11, certain individuals were asked what religion they belonged to and decisions were made on the "suitability" of potential employees due to their nationality or religious background. Participants identified employment discrimination in the following forms: judgement because of accent, foreign qualification not being recognized, and the employer's criteria for employees. During the immigration process, people were led to believe they would be able to find jobs commensurate with their education and experience, but this had not happened. Immigrants are consistently underemployed.

Housing was another issue that participants identified as characteristic of Canadian racism. In neighbourhoods, immigrants must live in the shabbiest buildings work in lowest paid jobs, no matter what their level of education was. Landlords were discriminatory in dealing with immigrants. Landlords refused to rent people because of their ethnic and religious backgrounds. One participant identified a scenario of a nice vacancy advertised and the vacancy disappeared, when they inquired about renting.

(c)   Aftermath of September 11

Immediately following the terrorist attacks in 2001 news reports come in

daily of an escalation in racially motivated hate crimes committed against Arab-Canadians, and Sikhs, and Muslims, throughout Canada. In Edmonton, the situation was fairly calm with isolated incidents reported. The climate was tense in the beginning according to most participants. There was worry among community leaders that people of colour would be blamed for the September 11 terrorist attacks. There was also concern in Muslim, Arab, and other minority communities about possible backlash stemming from racism, fear, and misinformation.

Within many ethnocultural/religious communities, there was concern that the events would make life for all people from the Middle East difficult. Further, the participants we spoke to suggested that talk of retaliation against Afghanistan was the wrong way of dealing with frustration and anger. They felt that the anger was legitimate but should only be focused toward the small group of people that had committed the horrific terrorist acts. Participants sympathised with the victims of the terror attacks and reflected on how this had affected them personally. The participants were also concerned about a climate that was created in which dissidents or people who held different perspectives about the situations would be silenced. The participants spoke of what the "criminalization of dissent" that was prevalent weeks and even months after the September 11 events.

Participants considered the new immigration and anti-terrorism laws (Bills C36, C11) as reactionary, having the potential to take away civil liberties, and creating a climate in which it would be impossible for progressive people to speak their minds. Most participants reflected that in the post-September 11 climate, those in power were severely restricting basic democratic rights, especially the right to dissent.

For example, a man recalled an incident in his work place whereby he was branded an "Osama Bin Laden" sympathizer because he objected to sweeping generalizations about Muslims and the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Specific incidents:

a. The most obvious effect of September 11 was on the ctaxi drivers who because of the hesitation of regular Canadians to enter a taxi driven by a person perceived to be Arabic or Muslim led to a substantial decrease in their income.
b. People revealed that recently some women chose not to wear their *hijab* to disguise their religious background and therefore feel safer.
c. An Edmonton bus carrying students was stoned immediately after September 11.

d. A man changed his name on a resume so that he would have a better chance of being selected for an interview.
e. A man was pointedly asked of his religious affiliation and refused an interview as a result (He was Muslim).
f. A family was evicted from their two-year apartment because the wife was visibly Muslim (she wore a *hijab*).
g. A parent took his children away from a public school due to harassment by other students.
h. A man were ridiculed by being given a rude manual gesture while driving with his son

(d)   Media Bias and Representation

The majority of participants described how media representation is accepted uncritically as truth. According to the participants, there exists a double standard in the media. Most respondents offered a critique of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, known for its support not only of the state of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq) and its inattentiveness to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have valid grievances against these regimes.

According to most participants, criticizing American foreign policy is not based on a hatred or envy of the West, but it is based on what their family and friends have seen and experienced in the Middle East. The media was seen as an accomplice in the misrepresentation of the motivations and actions of people from the Middle East and in fact most participants accused the media of sensationalizing pain and suffering throughout the world. Narrative of media misinformation, distortion, one-sidedness, and lack of historical context were seen as problems in media reporting and as damaging to race relations in Canada.

Specifically, most participants critiqued the mainstream media's use of anti-Islam/Arab terminology, negative portrayal of minorities in general, and bias in reporting against Arabs and Muslims in particular. According to the participants, the media creates the distorted perception that Islam or Muslims condone and encourage violence and it leads to anxiety among Canadians.

The participants also pointed out that young Muslim Canadians of dark complexion, especially women with *hijabs* (traditional head covering) or males with full beards, are particularly vulnerable to anxiety and fear, and receiving discrimination. The media feeds into the perception that the Muslim religion is violent, backward, restrictive, fundamentalist, and intolerant of opposing or alternative viewpoints. Worse still, according to

the participants, was the portrayal of Muslims and Arab-Canadians as potential terrorists, posing such a serious "danger" to the country, that CSIS, the RCMP, and local police could target them, revoke their citizenship, freeze their financial assets, and ask them if they had connections with Osama bin Laden.

To summarize, the participants saw tremendous bias in the media and felt that this fed into the stereotype of Muslim = terrorist. They also felt that this representation instigated unnecessary fear and hate amongst Canadians and this had the effect of negating Canadian values of multiculturalism and respect for diversity. Almost all participants we spoke to distrusted the media and our plan to involve them in the project became problematic for the researchers.

(e)   Community Links and Outreach

On a lighter note, the participants pointed out that some positive developments emerged following the terrorist attacks. Some Canadians reached out to the Muslim community to try and understand the historical context, motivation, and possible theories behind the attacks. Many of these people wanted to gain understanding of the basic tenets of the religion so that they could formulate an informed opinion. This helps them to be critical of messages presented in the media. If anything, the events of September 11 has led some people to want to associate more with "others" and try to understand their perspectives. This community outreach opens lines of communication for people and fosters understanding.

(f)   Additional Findings

1. Causes of the September 11 terrorist attacks should create a desire among the North American public to understand why such a thing could occur. What could create such intense hostility to motivate people to commit suicide in order to kill others?

2. This project gave people the opportunity to express frustrations with the lack of understanding regarding conflicts in the Middle East. Some participants we spoke to noted the fact that because a Christian, Timothy McVeigh, committed the Oklahoma City bombing did not indicate that Christianity teaches people to kill. Using the same logic, North Americans should not attribute the

actions of a few Muslims to a problem inherent in Islam. The research project allowed people to speak of the ironies and half-truths the U.S. capitalizes on during times of war, conflict, or the fulfilling of their national economic and political interests. Participants felt that the whole issue was very complex.

3. The introduction of new laws such as Bill 11 and Bill C-36 was a concern to some participants. The fact that RCMP were given more powers to put "suspected terrorists" under surveillance seemed a serious threat to Canadian human rights. Given that this research was being conducted at a time when the Canadian state had granted itself intense powers, people were reluctant to participate because they did not trust NAARR to respect their confidentiality.

4. The media educates the public; most North Americans get all of their information on world events from the media. It is not in the national interest of the U.S. and/or Canada to reveal the truth about its policies especially during times of war. Participants in this research project made reference to the outcry from the U.S. public before Vietnam and compared it to the present time. Many believed that the United States now uses deception to get away with starting wars. September 11 was seen as an excuse to bomb all the so-called terrorist nations who do not support the U.S.

5. The North American public was perceived as a naïve people who have no idea of suffering abroad. The target groups of this research felt they were educated on international corruption in politics through their nations' respective governments and the media for their countries of origin.

6. Some participants of ethnocultural groups felt comfortable discussing their emotions on the subject. Perhaps it was due to the proximity of their home countries to Afghanistan or maybe due to the fact that Arabs are more sensitized to what they perceive as lies about their nations and wars involving Israel. Arabs have heard what they consider to be lies dating from before the establishment of the state of Israel, and then during the 1948, 56, 67, 73, 82, and the recent war all involving Israel. During all of these conflicts, the media made Arabs look like terrorists.

7. Some Christians from the Middle East used this opportunity to describe their discomfort with extremist ways of achieving political goals regardless of how legitimate the struggle is. These participants were opposed to the Western methods of dealing with

issues from the Middle East. They objected to the common perception of Muslim Arabs that because they are Christian they are allies with the West. Some Christians from the Middle East recognize the complexity of the issues and are in solidarity with their Muslim brothers and sisters, especially when Arab culture is misrepresented.

8. The responses of students (appendix 5) clearly demonstrates that the "backlash" of September 11 and its official explanations aired in the media, led to increasing levels of ignorance and hate within mainstream Canadian society.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(a)   Healing Process and Intercultural Dialogue

The participants suggested that it is imperative for communities to work together to promote harmony and social cohesion. Participants in many meetings suggested an ongoing dialogue on race relations and racism. This proposed dialogue would function to open lines of communications between the mainstream and minority groups and work to minimize scapegoating of one by another. For instance, a few participants suggested a *women's interfaith dialogue on race and racism* facilitated by NAARR to assist in breaking down myths and stereotypes among different faith communities and racial groups.

The participants added that by creating such opportunities, people from all walks of life can learn from each others' experiences and find a common ground in order to foster better relations between people of different faiths and ethnocultural groups. NAARR may organize an interfaith dialogue on racism with the assistance of the Edmonton Interfaith Centre and interested community leaders who participated in this project.

(b)   Media Dialogue

The following recommendations to deal with the media were offered by the participants:

- Hold workshops on quality news coverage and sensitivity writing with media personnel.

- The use of anti-Islam terminology by the media, particularly

print media, drawing public attention to the use and misuse of terms such as "Islamic-inspired terrorist attacks," "murderous Islamic militant," "Islamic terrorist," "Muslim militant". The participants suggested that as Canadians, we should no longer accept the image of: (a) the oppressed brainless Muslim woman with *hijab* (b) the violent young Black man (c) the drunken Native (d) the militant religious fundermentalist Muslim man (e) the turban wearing militant Sikh perpetuated by the media. The media should be held accountable.

- Establish a multicultural/religious media action committee that monitors and challenges media misrepresentations of groups.

- Engage in a dialogue and reward journalists for quality, sensitive and informative coverage.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

Viewing the world through in the lens of the participants in this study was certainly a learning experience. Although the researchers had been familiar with many of the issues examined in this community consultation process, approaching them from the perspective of the participants shed new light on their meaning and possible impact. The participant' narratives about how they were coping with the post-September 11 racism has shed some light on the state of race relations in the city of Edmonton.

Moreover, the participant's political awareness of recent world events has also shed some light on what people are thinking, and saying, where they draw their conclusions from, and why. Most participants in this study overwhelmingly acknowledged that racism in all its manifestations is a huge problem in Edmonton. There were a variety of descriptions of how racism is manifest and the extent to which September 11 has influenced its expression.

The majority of participants spoke of their lived experiences with racism in general and how racism has affected (and is still affecting) their everyday lives. For most participants, racism was a problem before September 11 with some people benefiting from racism and others victimized by it. However, the horrific events of September 11 gave people a licence to express their prejudices openly. Their stories are shocking.

In conclusion, this project validated the lived experiences of the

participants. A clearer understanding of the depth and complexity of racism after September 11 was developed. We believe that this project gave Edmontonians a chance to engage, reflect, and discuss. In the process of engagement, Edmontonians can seize the opportunity to challenge and uproot racism from their personal lives and communities. Clearly, this issue needs to be dealt with systematically and racist attitudes and stereotypes need to be challenged in order to ensure *respect* for all. Working to eliminate racism becomes an effective catalyst for change and healing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As a result of the consultative process with members of the community, several implications for further research have been identified by the researchers.

(a) Further research should focus on educating the mainstream about racism. NAARR's work has focused on these issues and we feel directed to tackle issues of racism in employment and in the media.

(b) The term "backlash" assumes that because of September 11 people would be experiencing an increase in racism from Canadian society. Members of the target communities described racism before September 11. For them, September 11 made it easy for people justify their prejudices. This significant finding has several implications for further research. The people we spoke to resented the fact that their struggles with racism were not deemed so important before September 11 and now because of the horrorible events it has come to surface. They felt uncomfortable limiting their struggles with racism to the fallout of September 11. Whether this was due to the sensitive nature of the research, fear of re-victimization, a social desirability factor, this does not alter the fact that participants were uncomfortable with the "backlash" term. Further research should perhaps not focus solely on the effects of a single event in examining the phenomenon of racism.

(c) Research involving Arab or Islamic nations should be historically and sociologically informed. Members of the community should be consulted prior to the research and their opinions should be respected and valued. The socio-political

values of Arabs in the Middle East and Muslims throughout the world should be understood within a sociological context that changes over time and with political context. The histories and political opinions of the people from the nations in question should be a formative part of the research project, not as a distraction but as a central and key element to gaining rapport.

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APPENDIX 1

SELECTED QUOTATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

- If you disagree or show a critical point of view, you are marginalized and branded a terrorist supporter. In addition, if you are a person of colour, it is even harder to dissent or become critical because others assume he/she is prone to bias.

- People ask me all the time to say what I really think about the events of September 11, I always tell them that I think of September 11 of 1984, when the Chilean democratically elected government was ended with the support of the CIA. America has done a lot of things in the world and many of us have suffered the results. If you say that, people don't like that...

- God bless the Muslims and the Christians. Islam respects human beings and Islam is very good IF you follow it then there will be a response (i.e. change in negative behaviours). This society has too much freedom; the ethics and values are not strong morally. Eighteen year olds leaving their homes, they come here and seek guidance and guidelines about prayer etc. The Christians are part of the people of the book and so God loves everyone.

- Canadian society has advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, there is justice for individuals, respect for different individuals. The society provides education and services for people with all sorts of abilities and disabilities.

- One of the most obvious attacks on Arabs and Muslims was the Fort McMurray incident where three Arab males suspected of being Al-Qaeda had the police break into their home and a dog attack the man who was completely innocent (no immigration or visa violations). Four roommates were charged on immigration violations and one was let off (the one bitten by the dog).

- Racism was here before September 11. There have been media stereotypes portraying Islam in a very negative manner for a long time. However it seems like things have been tougher. The media stereotypes regarding Islam and Arabs are strong and the effects of that on the community is obvious.

- To be honest, I don't know a lot about the Arab culture. I am not exposed to their religion/culture personally and I try not to take for granted what is revealed on television. I know that their countries are not like ours and that they're fighting for something they believe in.

- We lost our apartment because other neighbours complained. They kicked us out - said we were noisy, we were not noisy. Other people were breaking rules - big dog when no pets allowed. The kicked us out because some neighbours complained about my wife (She wears a *hijab*). I lived there for two years and I was kicked out, it was not fair!

- There has been a positive development since 9-11 and that is the interfaith dialogue between different religious groups. People are starting to ask questions and want to learn more. If you have an analytical or critical view of 9-11 you could get slotted into the "against us" zone in "you're either with us or against us" (coined by George W. Bush). This is especially the case since the media here shapes public opinion especially since 9-11. What is needed is a public dialogue.

- Stop using September 11. It is a weapon of the enemy of human beings. September 11 connotes sympathy for the victim. Let's shed that day. It does not validate the experiences of people. By using September 11 we are legitimizing it. We should use things like September 11 as a launching pad for good things.

- In Islam we are not taught to act as terrorists, but when the U.S. or Israel terrorizes the Palestinians it is considered acts of self-defence. The Palestinians on the other hand, seem to have no right to defend themselves no matter what atrocities they have to go through. This is the way it is presented in the media and this makes it difficult for everyone.

- Right after the events in September one consequence was the end of freedom of speech. It's like Orwell's 1984. And what is the US doing? It's humiliating those in Gauntanomo Bay, shaving off heads and beards of people when they know their

religion forbids it. Why are they doing it if not to shame them?

- There are conspiracy theories from the Middle East or those from America. Everybody agrees that the terrorists must be routed out - you cannot justify either side. Being frustrated doesn't justify terrorist attacks. Oppressive policies do not justify the new war on terror.

- There has been a lot of positive outreach. I know of several churches that have reached out to Muslims. I know synagogues have made statements from the pulpits.

- Media gives little bites, no in-depth analysis. Alternative media would be good - more in depth. What parts has North America played in the situation? Coverage is worse than shallow.

- "Canada was supposed to be the land of opportunity", said a financial analyst who had worked in Saudi Arabia. Shocked when he arrived here - all jobs required Canadian experience.

- My kid was called nigger in class. And when I complained to the school personnel, I was asked: "Why are you complaining, that is what he is". Racism is everywhere here. It is the land of opportunity if you want to clean toilets.