

SOCIAL NORMS IN CANADA RESEARCH 2020-21

Building metrics to address racism in Canada

RESEARCH PROSPECTUS

Context

The Challenge. As much as we may appreciate how invaluable our differences are, there continues to be persistent prejudice and intolerance directed at people because of their race, culture, religion, gender and/or sexual identity. While Canada is not yet experiencing the disturbing rise in intolerance taking place elsewhere, the problem in this country and its corrosive consequences remain entrenched; the status quo is unacceptable for too many people in a society that likes to pride itself on embracing diversity.

Dismantling prejudice and intolerance is a daunting challenge because it is so firmly embedded in society, and resistant to legal and policy interventions. They are a function of history, deeply-held values, institutional frameworks, and social or economic insecurities. The expression of prejudice and intolerance is largely governed by collective social norms governing what is considered to be acceptable behavior and speech (how people believe they can act in social settings).

Why social norms matter. Social norms are widely held expectations about what is and is not acceptable or appropriate behaviour in particular settings and situations. Such norms are well entrenched but can change over time, and sometimes as a result of intentional efforts. One of the most striking examples involves the successful campaign to change in social norms around smoking. Just a generation or so ago, smoking was the sign of the sexy, interesting maverick; today it has become effectively “de-normalized” as inconsiderate and self-defeating. Regulatory measures that restrict smoking are essential but it is the norms more than laws that govern behaviour (by contrast, consider jaywalking – also legally forbidden but socially accepted and rarely sanctioned).

Social norms play a key role in the dynamics of prejudice and intolerance. They create the frame for how people act toward those who are deemed the “other.” Changing these silent but behaviour-defining social norms may be a key strategy for building tolerance and social cohesion among Canadians. Ultimately, how people choose to act is more important than what they think and feel, and actions can be influenced more effectively than attitudes and beliefs. This makes social norms the key to tackling prejudice head on.

Changing social norms first requires that they are properly understood, and there has been little to no relevant empirical research on this topic in Canada. This project is aimed at addressing this gap by establishing population-based metrics and indicators, that can support the development of strategies that strengthen positive norms and de-normalize negative ones.

The Research

The Environics Institute for Survey Research and its partners are planning a landmark research project to map selected social norms in Canadian society pertaining to treatment of individuals and groups from specific parts of society who experience prejudice and intolerance. The research will provide empirical measures of the norms in terms of their overall strength, their distribution across the population (e.g., by region, community size, demographic characteristics). A second dimension of the research will focus on how individuals within these targeted groups experience the breaking of these norms.

2/ ...

This research is intended to serve as a foundation for future research to identify how social norms are evolving over time, and for more in-depth focus within specific communities, population subgroups and organizational culture. Once social norms are clearly defined and measurable, strategies can then be formulated around changing them. Because this research will break new ground, it presents a tremendous opportunity for demonstrating leadership in developing the knowledge required for effectively addressing the endemic challenges of prejudice and intolerance in our society.

Phase 1: Baseline survey of social norms in Canada. The first phase is a national survey with a representative sample of Canadians (aged 18 plus), along with oversamples of specific populations (to be determined in collaboration with research partners). Once completed, the results of this research will be publicly released through media partnerships, followed by targeted outreach to organizations by sector.

Phase 2: Follow-up targeted research. Based on Phase 1 results and insights, a second phase would focus on particular population groups or within organizations interested in understanding the social norms dynamic among staff/employees. This research would be conducted in partnership with one or more specific organizations focusing on their target populations.

Timetable. Phase 1 will be conducted over a six month period, commencing once the project funding is in place. The timetable for Phase 2 will be determined in consultation with participating partners.

Budget

Phase 1: \$60K – \$95K *(with the range reflecting options for population coverage).*

Phase 2: To be determined based on target population and sponsor focus.

Partnership Opportunities

We are seeking research investment partners. This research will be instrumental in providing valuable intelligence for both the public conversation about dismantling prejudice and organizations interested in strengthening social cohesion within communities, whether defined geographically, organizationally or socially. Being involved from the outset offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate leadership in the diversity and inclusion space. Benefits of partnership include:

- Full recognition as a Partner
- Input into research design and scope
- Participation in the Phase 1 public release
- Pre-release briefings and access to all the data and analysis
- Customization for your organization in Phase 2

For more information:

Keith Neuman, Ph.D., Environics Institute (416) 272-6628 or keith.neuman@environics.ca

The Environics Institute for Survey Research conducts original public opinion and social research related to issues of public policy and social change. The Institute's primary mission is to survey those not usually heard from, using questions not usually asked. Survey research - properly conducted and published - helps all of us better understand our world as it is today, how it's changing, and where it may be heading. Environicsinstitute.org
