

Exploring non-Aboriginal Attitudes towards Reconciliation in Canada: The Beginnings of Targeted Focus Group Research

Reconciliation in settler societies like Canada is an optimistic but vague aspiration, one that most broadly connotes improved relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The motivations of would-be reconcilers and opponents of reconciliation vary widely, as do the specifics of what they think they mean by the word—and so it has a diverse array of critics and supporters. However defined, reconciliation is also a leading element of the mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), one of the key institutions of the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*. In its variety and complexity, it has become an integral part of the response to the long and brutal history of residential schooling in Canada.

Part of reconciliation's difficulty is its malleability, which appears to ignore or even to normalize numerous other injustices of colonization—indeed many suggest the very process of reconciliation implies the legitimization of Canadian colonization itself. That its main vehicle in this case, the TRC, is an agency partly beholden to the state means such criticisms must persist. While the churches have a special role in the residential schools history, discussing that has become politically contentious, including for the TRC's own staff. Revealingly, the TRC's founding mandate does not define or characterize the responsibilities of Canada's non-Aboriginal population.

Our approach is to consider reconciliation as national discourse. Indeed, the TRC is largely mandated as an exercise in discourse. Its methodology, starting with the June 2010 national event we attended in Winnipeg, prioritizes testimony—residential school Survivors “telling their stories.” That means research into its processes is first and foremost a case study in applied communications. It is also a study in discourse control: instead of testimony being “given,” which implies an agency of the Survivor, the TRC (effectively an arm of the state, although it would position itself differently) is engaged as a proactive witness of sorts, soliciting and co-opting the expertise of Witness-Survivors in such statement-recording, and putting in place all the mechanisms of support deemed necessary.¹

What should and can non-Aboriginal people seek to do as the TRC undertakes its work of documenting the history of residential schools and being “witness”

to its legacy? As two non-Aboriginal academics with familiarity of the Australian experience of reconciliation, we argue that this is something that requires greater attention.² Moreover, we argue that the nature of Canadian social diversity and change has not been attended to in discussions of reconciliation; an assumption of an undifferentiated category of “non-Aboriginal Canadians” is no more a useful way to proceed than is the persistent generalization of Aboriginal people in a range of cultural discourse and policy discussions. We are currently engaged in a project that we hope will last at least the duration of the TRC, and what we present here are some initial findings.

In seeking to understand non-Aboriginal diversity then, and what role it may have in shaping attitudes towards reconciliation, we do not seek to make some defined groups more or less responsible for reconciliation than others. Our firm view is that all “newcomers” need to understand not only that Canada is a nation-state built on the territories of existing communities largely without their consent, but also that the original expropriation must always mark our response. Nevertheless, we do seek to understand how attitudes toward reconciliation vary, according to such factors as location, language spoken, and familial experience in Canada.

Two interrelated challenges for our research are: (1) how to understand the meanings of reconciliation among non-Aboriginal people in Canada; and (2) how to reflect on the ideological commitments underlying those meanings. In particular, we are interested in “quotidian discourses” of reconciliation. By this we mean ideas about reconciliation among groups who do not identify themselves as particularly politicized or actively engaged in issues affecting Aboriginal people in Canada. That is a conscious choice: we think the reality for many non-Aboriginal people is that they have few opportunities to articulate their attitudes towards reconciliation or Aboriginal people in social contexts and, consequently, misinformation and prejudice inform those few occasions when such issues arise. In moving from an understanding and practice of reconciliation that is less vague and more effective, we believe we need to know more specifically the patterns of misunderstanding that prevail.

Moreover, we think that this non-engagement is a crucial obstacle to a substantive shift in relations, whether that means greater autonomy for Aboriginal people on their own territories, or greater access to the prosperity of and in non-Aboriginal society, or both. For example, in our research we ask whether non-Aboriginal people in Canada have regular interactions with Aboriginal people. Of those, how many are positive or even civil? If reconciliation is to be of concern to more than a social and political elite, it will need to be grounded in a better understanding of everyday life than it currently is.

Consequently, we are especially interested in the *ways* in which non-Aboriginal people talk about reconciliation in Canada in non-Aboriginal discourses. The central insight of critical discourse analysis is that language is an important indicator of people's understanding of, and endorsement of, prevailing power structures and of their ideologies.³ This manifests in the (referential) themes people discuss in relation to reconciliation, of course, but it also plays out in the (textural) poetics of their discourse. As Klemperer wrote, reflecting in the aftermath of another genocide, "What a man says may be a pack of lies – but his true self is laid bare for all to see in the style of his utterances."⁴ Obtaining a deeper understanding of non-Aboriginal attitudes towards reconciliation in a multicultural settler society such as Canada's requires us to augment the thematic analysis of public and private discourses with the analysis of their poetics.⁵

Methodology

Scholars have fruitfully used analyses of comparative literature, of mainstream media, and of public or institutional documents to set out important insights and offer critical frameworks for understanding dominant discourses, particularly those pertaining to questions of race and identity. In Canada, scholars have, for example, written about the valorization of Canadian citizenship,⁶ or non-Aboriginal violence affecting Aboriginal people, particularly women.⁷ In other settler societies we can draw out various ideas from research that studies settler identities and attitudes using interviews⁸ or ethnography.⁹ However, in this research we are seeking out everyday discourses, initially using a methodology of focus groups. Focus groups have been used in comparable research elsewhere,¹⁰ and lend themselves to the identification and mapping of latent discourses that emerge in social contexts. So far, we have learned some preliminary things about non-Aboriginal discourses.

Our approach is to locate or solicit non-Aboriginal discourses about reconciliation and particularly about residential schools among those not engaged in activism, solidarity, or campaigning on any Aboriginal policy issue. We held a small series of focus groups among undergraduate students at York University in June of 2010. Students were recruited with a poster campaign and using student bulletin boards on campus, and participants were offered compensation for their attendance. We gave potential participants a short questionnaire to ascertain their existing levels of knowledge, and also to learn whether they, their parents, and their grandparents were born in Canada. We divided the respondents into three groups: those who had been born in Canada and whose parents and grandparents had all been born in Canada (category A); those who had been born outside Canada (category B); and a group comprising

those born in Canada but for whom more than one parent/grandparent had been born outside the country (category C). Our goal in doing this was to explore any role that one's length of personal or familial experience with Canada might play in shaping everyday discussions.

In total, we recruited four focus groups and a total of 29 people arrived to participate, with each group having between five and nine participants. We had enough respondents to form one group for category A (hereafter FG1) and category C (FG2), and two groups for category B (FG3 and FG4). Each discussion lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes. We recorded these sessions and made transcripts of the recordings. Each focus group was facilitated using the same Discussion Guide, which covered the Indian residential school (IRS) system, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the national apology to those affected by the IRS system. Using these as a lens, we explored the following general themes:

- (1) Is there an obligation to learn about Aboriginality and what should that entail?
- (2) How is Aboriginal history understood; for example, as genocide, as misfortune, as survival, or as progress?
- (3) Is there acceptance of Aboriginal cultural difference as an enduring fact of Canadian life?

Findings

For the focus groups, we had significant difficulty in recruiting people in category A. By the time we had recruited barely enough people for a group in that category, we had enough for two full groups in category B. We do not draw elaborate conclusions from this: there could be multiple explanations to do with the method of recruitment, the campus, or the time of year.¹¹ However, we are interested in the broader issue of non-Aboriginal people's willingness to engage in subjects that may lead to uncomfortable or unsettling realizations. Indeed, for some recent writers, it is precisely the question of "decentring" or "unsettling" the settler within that is the key to reconciliation.¹² Low response rates and levels of participation, then, may be an indication of a deeper concern.

Indeed, category A was the most reticent of all four focus groups we conducted. They appeared and sounded uncomfortable when the discussion began, and particularly on questions of present responsibilities for the IRS system. In particular, we observed numerous instances of the "why weren't we told?" syndrome.¹³ In the following exchange from FG1, there is an implication that

this was a policy carried out without public knowledge and against Canadian values and expectations:

LINDA: But also I think Aboriginal cultures have been and still are so isolated from mainstream Canada. Like, I didn't even know this was going on and I'm sure that there were a lot of people even over that same time period that didn't know it was happening. The government obviously didn't tell people, "Hey we're taking this culture and trying to eradicate them." Maybe people would have been more up in arms about it, had they known. I don't know.

MICHAEL: Well, it was founded in 1870, like, back then it was easy for people to grab on to catchphrases, right, that were easy to print like, "Kill the Indian in the child," right, and it becomes something that can kind of continue, yeah, taking over 100 years to fix it.

Indeed that assumption, about the inherent goodness of dominant societies, is, we think, one of the key obstacles to deeper social transformation. It is made possible by recurrent errors about the most basic facts of Indian residential schools. Across all four focus groups, the levels of knowledge about Aboriginal issues were limited and often mistaken about fundamental details. Our expectations here were not high, but we were still struck by the extent of respondents' misconceptions, spanning both those more and less sympathetic to the goals of the TRC. Among those who were cynical about its aims, one participant in category A suggested that the apology was a response to blockades that were going on around the country, a view that was uncontested by others in the group. No one in any of our focus groups could confidently provide more than rudimentary information about what took place in residential schools or what responses there had been. What they declared usually restated the few facts we had shown in a video extract from the Prime Minister's apology speech to the Commons. This is not a surprising finding—indeed much of the discussion about reconciliation and the TRC has sought to "break the silence" about residential schools—but given that these are students currently receiving education in a Canadian university, it does reveal the magnitude of the challenge that the TRC has in educating Canadians, or in imagining that such education will help to effect reconciliation.

Several participants recollected material on the IRS system from their school experiences, but several observed a distance between the issue and themselves or peers. Janet's (FG2) comments were indicative:

JANET: Well, how I feel about that, as Canadians who've been born here, who've grown up here or immigrated here or whatever, I feel like a lot of people are aware of these kinds of things in a basic understanding, but I feel that a lot of students feel very segregated from it. Do you know what I mean? We're not exposed to it a lot and we're not really aware that much of it. Even in the media, I feel like there's such a lack of awareness, um, I don't

know—as a student here, I feel very, very separated from the issues that are going on. Do you know what I mean?

All groups thought more education is necessary, but there was less consensus on what education should comprise and who it should be for. Some felt that better education should be provided for Aboriginal people so that they could succeed in Canadian society. Most participants felt non-Aboriginal people should learn more about Aboriginal people and their history, but there was a division in some groups over whether that should encompass learning about Aboriginal culture and history in general, or simply the specific history of residential schools and its legacy. Some felt these issues were fundamentally intertwined, but others saw them as very distinct. Several participants felt that learning about the IRS system constituted their own personal responsibility, but most discussed the need for education without specifying who it was that should be educated.

A related topic that we sought to explore was the idea of interpersonal relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Our respondents reported very little personal contact with any Aboriginal people (only two made any reference to such contacts), and yet there was a universal agreement that more extensive personal connections would be important to improving relations. Of the two who discussed Aboriginal individuals whom they knew personally, one in category B reflected that her relationships with Aboriginal people had helped her overcome considerable prejudices. One in category A mentioned that he knew Aboriginal people but went on to characterize them as victims, hopelessly afflicted by a life of drugs and alcohol.

Perhaps the most striking finding in terms of the subject matter was the readiness of the groups in categories B and C to talk about race and racial discrimination, whereas category A did not raise this at all. We did not use any of these terms in the topics we posed but many participants in categories B and C were able to swiftly represent the IRS system as racist. In thinking about the government's response to the IRS system, Catherine (FG2) asked: "They've said this apology, but what have they done? Just in their actions, what have they shown? They still have their discrimination, their biases towards the First Nations people in Canada, and it's really shameful." Zach's (FG4) comments were among some of the most sustained remarks of this sort:

ZACH: I'm not sure if we even have a full grasp for what they went through. Because technically the proper term for residential schools and all these people went through is social and cultural genocide. And that is a horrific thing to go through, regardless of on whatever stage. It's not as simple as, "You're assimilating them into our culture." We were stripping them of all

of their needs, made them naked in every society, and powerless, and then turned them into little Indian robots for Canadian kind of wellbeing or what's good for us.

In fact, several respondents in categories B and C saw the discrimination against Aboriginal people as part of a broader orientation in Canada affecting all minorities. Ehi (FG3), who identified himself as being from Nigeria, put it as follows:

EHI: It's almost the same concept of trying to create the perfect, white model of society. So I say it's Canadians like the government itself has a big responsibility like, trying to merge the cultures together, because it's the second Canada is multicultural above, it's... there's a model of an ideal Canadian and Aboriginals don't fit into that. Most immigrants don't fit into that. They have to walk on the aspect of the old Canadian cultural system to like, incorporate all different cultures into, because Aboriginals have certain beliefs, Blacks have certain beliefs, Italians have certain beliefs, and you know, it's...they have to merge that into taking stock of each person's perspective.

As we have suggested above, in addition to surveying literal questions of topicality—of *what* people know and believe—we want to explore *how*: the terms in which respondents express their knowledge and beliefs. In part, this is because it helps us understand what respondents think they mean by the terms they use, the information they cite. An especially revealing case in point was the use of personal pronouns *we* and *they* and their various grammatical aspects (*us*, *our*, *ours*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs*). When discussing reconciliation in an Aboriginal context, all respondents in all focus groups articulated a *we* that included all non-Aboriginal Canadians and a *they* that specifically and exclusively indexed Aboriginal people in Canada. In the context of reconciliation between *us* and *them*, this categorization entailed that all of Canada's non-Aboriginal people had a shared stake in the process. The only moment this lexis slipped was when one of our category B groups interrogated it explicitly—but the conclusion they drew (unprompted by us) was to affirm the prevailing us/them dichotomy. These remarks from recently immigrated Canadians seem extremely pointed in the broader consideration of non-Aboriginal attitudes—in mentioning the topic explicitly, these respondents have posed the exception that proves the rule:

CYNTHIA: It's interesting that we're talking about, "they, they" and you said Canada, and I'm always asking myself, so Canada: who? Who is Canada? Who represents it? And who is responsible to make that apology? And you also mentioned about the Chinese experience, and that goes with so many other cultures. I could talk about the Black experience, I could talk about the Jewish experience, so everybody has their own issue they're all waiting for some sort of um, compensation or something that the government recognizes, but who? Who are we holding accountable at the end of the day? We say we are Canadian, that's a wild question to ask.

MARIA: It's hard to point fingers at someone. There were so many people involved in the process, the whole residential school, like, some of the priests they were never caught in their whole lives, so I don't know where they are. [Group laughs] Actually, some people, I found out later from my professor that some Aboriginal peoples were courageous enough to file a lawsuit. So some of the police they did get the justice even though, uh, it was ten years later. Yeah, so it's kind of hard to point fingers. There are so many. A lot of people took part in the process and some of them never admitted they were wrong, so, um, yeah.

THELMA: It's just easier to point the finger at the government.

MARIA: Yeah it is!

THELMA: As she apologizes, it's like, "Okay, well, clearly they're taking the blame so we can point at them when there are pictures, but it should be all our problems, at the end of the day." If we're Canadians, we're a part of this society.

A second virtue of stylistic analysis is that it reveals the acts of affiliation and dissociation that respondents perform as they endeavour both to articulate and to develop their points of view. An ability to capture this process of discursive alignment as it unfolds is central to the genius of focus group methodology. As numerous communications theorists have argued, it is also central to the negotiated development and exchange of political identity.¹⁴ That is to say, people who want to express similarity to others will attempt to emulate their style. Within the focus groups, we found many instances of formula-repetition that revealed deeper agendas of affiliation and contestation.

A small number of respondents used formulas to indicate that they subscribed to an ideology they suspected most of their colleagues did not share and they were unwilling to negotiate with. Note the putative completeness of these popular formulations; they constitute what Wetherell and Potter have termed "self-sufficient propositions"¹⁵ in the rhetoric of race relations. In this example, also from category B, the phrase "rationality" has become axiomatic, its value and relevance beyond question:

FACILITATOR: Patric ... you sort of said you sound impolite if you do certain things, but what do you think is the source of that?

PATRIC: I think it's the moralistic approach to education as opposed to a rational perspective. Because the moralistic approach says, "These people were bad," or did the wrong, and then, "These people are good," or were the innocent victims, and therefore you get this entire perspective of good and evil. You get this biblical conception of what happened when, like I said, the rational perspective is usually in a medium. Because not everybody in Canada participated in taking land, in raping children and killing babies and doing all this stuff. It was specific government officials or laws or things which are no longer part of the constitution, and if there

are remnants of it, they're being worked on. So, therefore, I'm thinking the rational perspective will always benefit more so. Removing the moralistic perspective, the emotional aspect, that way we can see things clearly.

Other respondents used formulas recognizable from Canada's broader public discourse. This was abundantly true of respondents in all our categories. Such usages indicate individual and group alignment in the terms of political formations defined in public discourse, outside the controlled space of the focus group. In other words, through such formulas as these, we can see focus group participants clearly conscious of a need to relate their "present moment" conversation within the group to ongoing conversations outside it. This example, from a category C respondent, shows that urge to relate and align her opinions clearly overriding her lack of confidence about listing the facts in detail:

CATHERINE: What are they doing to help people—like all these cultures, all these communities? They still don't have clean drinking water, they don't have adequate healthcare, they don't want to give them, um, mouthwash or you know, hand sanitizer when there was that breakout of—not SARS, that bird flu, because they fear, the government feared that Indians would—First Nations people—would use it to get high.

Conclusion

Of course, participants also conspicuously reused formulas their colleagues had uttered within the group, quoting (and misquoting) one another frequently. Olga captures the complexity and agility of this discursive strategy as she tries to reconcile the pro-apology stance of one colleague (Zach) with another's (Patric's) view that it was "ridiculous:"

OLGA: I agree with Zach. I'm also not from Canada and I never heard about anything like that before I came here. I never heard about this apology. I have heard about residential schools from my friend because she is Native. So, and like, I've been to powwows and stuff like that, and she told me about it, that's how I found out. And I do agree with what Patric said, I do think it's ridiculous because they're apologizing for it now but like they're not doing anything to improve their lives. Like, she just came back from a residence, and, 'cause she like she volunteered there for the summer, and she said that people literally have nothing to eat. But like you're apologizing for them right now but at the same time you're not doing anything to improve their lives, so it's like an empty "I'm sorry" kind of thing. Like back it up, show them that you care about them, show them that you're sorry. Same thing like right now Indian people they still have like trouble, they're still fighting for their lands because a lot of companies want their lands to build like factories and stuff and they want their lands to like, go hunting and stuff, and still they're fighting the government for their rights. I don't think it's right for you to come up and say it's better than nothing, I guess, to say that you're sorry, but I don't think that you should... I think actions speak louder than words.

There is no turn of rhetoric more slanted towards consensus than quoting your interlocutor's own rhetoric back at her or him, as analyses of "affiliation behaviour" in talkback radio have demonstrated particularly clearly.¹⁶ Group-internal affiliation behaviours are critical to understanding formations of private opinion about public matters across a society as large and complex as a university undergraduate population, let alone Canada as a whole.

Recognizing the geographic diversity just mentioned, one of the main aims for our research is to administer a much wider series of focus groups, using our sub-categories of non-Aboriginal Canadians. We aim to do this in a range of locations around the country, to deepen our understanding of the everyday speech of non-Aboriginal people in its variation. It is too soon to draw firm conclusions about the discourses we have examined and the commitments underlying them. However, what we have found obliges us to wonder what the connections may be between, on the one hand, a sense of belonging to or membership in a country, and on the other, attitudes toward those who belong nowhere else. One's sense of belonging, of entitlement to speak of and for others, and comfort in talking about race and racism appear to be factors in how non-Aboriginal people think about Aboriginal people and their histories. We need a much better understanding of these dynamics.

Observing the emergence of political identities and opinions in a group context will be a key to understanding these complexities, possibly harnessing and transforming the non-Aboriginal collective stake in Canada's reconciliation process. We anticipate conducting this research in the next two to three years, reporting significant findings as we encounter them.

Notes

- 1 We are grateful to Ashok Mathur for bringing this angle to our attention.
- 2 See: de Costa, R. (2002). *New Relationships, Old Certainties: Australia's Reconciliation and the Treaty-Process in British Columbia* (Doctoral dissertation) (retrieved 5 November 2010 from: <http://adt.lib.swin.edu.au/public/adt-VSWT20050627.092937/>); de Costa, R. (2009, May 20–22). *Truth and Reconciliation and the Politics of Community. The Politics of Community and Identity: Learning from One Another Conference*, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada.
- 3 Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: Papers in the Critical Study of Language*. London, UK: Longman Group Ltd.
- 4 Klemperer, V. (2000:11). *The Language of the Third Reich, LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii: a Philologist's Notebook* (Trans. M. Brady). London, UK: The Athlone Press. (Original work published 1947)
- 5 Clark, T. (under review). Sorryness as public poetics: Rhetorical figuration and poetic formulas in the Australian and Canadian 2008 Parliamentary apology debates.
- 6 Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- 7 Razack, S. (2002). *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
- 8 Bell, A. (2009). Dilemmas of settler belonging: Roots, routes and redemption in New Zealand national identity claims. *Sociological Review* 57(1):145–162.
- 9 Hage, G. (1998). *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- 10 See: Augoustinos, M., Tuffin, K., and Rapley, M. (1999). Genocide or a failure to grieve? Racism, history and nationalism in Australian talk. *Discourse & Society* 10(3):351–378; Wetherell, M., and Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- 11 Our category A was not defined in ethnic terms, however, those whose grandparents and parents and who themselves had been born in Canada did not include any non-white individuals. This is not surprising even in a small sample, given the discrimination in Canada's immigration system until the late 1960s.
- 12 See: Regan, P. (2011). *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Canada*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press; Bell, A. (2008). Recognition or ethics? De/centering and the legacy of settler colonialism. *Cultural Studies* 22(6):850–869.
- 13 The question, “why weren't we told?” served as the title of a book by one of Australia's highest profile historians on Aboriginal-settler relations in Australia. Reynolds, H. (2000). *Why Weren't We Told?* Sydney, Australia: Penguin.
- 14 See: Voloshinov, V.N. (1973). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Trans. L. Matejka and I.R. Titunik). New York, NY: Seminar Press. (Original work published 1929); Fairclough (1995); Wetherell and Potter (1992).
- 15 Wetherell and Potter (1992).
- 16 See: Fitzgerald, R., and Housley, W. (2009). Membership category work in policy debate. In R. Fitzgerald and W. Housley (eds.). *Media, Policy and Interaction*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing: 13–25; Crofts, S., and Turner, G. (2007). Jonestalk: The specificity of Alan Jones. *Media International Australia* (122):142–149; Ferencik, M. (2007). Exercising politeness: Membership categorisation in a radio phone-in programme. *Pragmatics* 17(3):351–370.

