

# DECOLONIZING THE CONTACT HYPOTHESIS: A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF SETTLER YOUTHS' EXPERIENCES OF IMMERSION IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

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*This case study explores non-Indigenous youths' experiences of cultural immersion in Indigenous communities in Canada. This research acknowledges and situates itself in the socio-political context of Aboriginal-settler relations, drawing upon historical and recent impediments to these relations, with an emphasis on continued colonial injustices to Indigenous communities. As such, a critical post-colonial emancipatory paradigm is adopted in understanding the theoretical framework of the contact hypothesis. In this study, two groups of youth composed of undergraduate university students participated in a series of focus groups and interviews, while keeping journals about their experiences in an Indigenous community-immersion program. Participants' experiences of immersion impacted their relationship to Indigenous community through the personal connections they formed with the host community and the heightened awareness they developed related to challenges facing Indigenous communities. Findings suggest potential areas of social intervention that could ameliorate relations and foster intercultural understanding, while also highlighting critical considerations for intercontact theory. Furthermore, it is proposed that the contact hypothesis can, ironically enough, be used to decolonize Canadian youth.*

**Keywords:** indigenous immersion, contact hypothesis, intercultural contact, community psychology

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between Indigenous<sup>1</sup> and non-Indigenous people in Canada is marred by a legacy of oppression, colonial imperialism, and institutionalized segregation (Barker, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> The word Indigenous refers to all peoples who consider their heritage to be Indigenous to the land situated in Canada's current political boundaries, and is inclusive of all people who might identify as Indigenous regardless of government designation (i.e. status or non-status). The term "Indigenous" differs from "Aboriginal" which is terminology specifically used by the Government of Canada to designate people with official status from either First Nations, Métis, or Inuit communities. "Aboriginal" is used when referencing articles or organizations that explicitly use this term, or when discussing Indigenous people with reference to political contexts (Aboriginal Identity & Terminology, Indigenous Foundations, <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/?id=9494>; Clarke et al., 2012).

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Despite these circumstances, knowledge on improving these relations is virtually non-existent, while being simultaneously vital to programs focused on building non-Indigenous and Indigenous relationships. Contemporary psychology suggests the importance of intercontact theory, or the contact hypothesis, as a means of understanding and designing programs aimed at improving intergroup relations (Hean & Dickinson, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Further, recent research supports intercontact theory in a variety of socio-political contexts, while community psychology has suggested its potential use as a tool for building intercultural relationships (Townley, Kloos, Green, & Franco, 2011). However this theory has neither been critically examined in the post-colonial context of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada, nor has it been explored by community psychology as a tool for building these relations. Meanwhile, there exist numerous community-immersion programs across Canada designed for non-Indigenous youth to build relationships with Indigenous communities. This case study applies the contact hypothesis as a theoretical framework to critically understand how youth experience cross-cultural immersion in Indigenous communities. Specifically, this research strives to 1) understand how non-Indigenous youth experience cross-cultural immersion to Indigenous communities, and 2) generate knowledge on how intercultural contact can be used to inform intervention on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations.

### ***1.1. Historical Perspectives***

In the centuries following contact with European settlers, Indigenous people in Canada have been segregated from the non-Indigenous population, often by being isolated to “Indian Reserves” (Government of Canada, 1985). The Indian Act stipulated that trespass by persons who are not registered to the reserve be deemed an offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment (Section 30 of the Indian Act; Government of Canada, 1985). Segregation was but one way in which racist historical policies impacted Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. The residential school system was born in the 1840’s with the purpose of indoctrinating and assimilating Indigenous children to European culture (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2009). Children between the ages of six and fifteen were typically removed from their Indigenous family by Indian Agents contracted under the federal government to preside over an Indigenous community (AFN, 2009). Depending on the residential school, estimates of the death rate among Indigenous children ranged between 24% and 69%, most of which was caused by physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and contracted disease. Similar to survivors of genocide (Evans-Campbell, 2008), residential schools have had traumatic effects on its survivors such as posttraumatic stress disorder and adjustment disorder, the repercussions of which persist in the form of intergenerational colonial trauma (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). The effects of colonialism stemming from reserves and residential schooling have been insidious, compounding the present-day strained relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and communities into a myriad of complexities.

### ***1.2. Current Socio-political Context***

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, enforced Indian reserves and residential schooling are no longer in effect and Indigenous people in Canada are not restricted to reserves; in fact, by 2006, it was reported

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that 60% of First Nations people live off-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2006). The impacts, however, of intergenerational colonial trauma continue to reverberate in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Uribe, 2006). The current sociopolitical climate further contextualizes Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. Beginning in November 2012, an Indigenous grassroots movement called “Idle No More” has brought considerable attention, as well as scrutiny, to Canada’s relations with the Indigenous population on both the national and international stage<sup>2</sup>.

Idle No More<sup>3</sup> first started in Canada to bring attention to and demand consultation on several bills proposed by the federal government affecting Indigenous rights and environmental degradation. While the Idle No More movement has galvanized many Indigenous people to take action against the federal legislation through railroad blockades and protests<sup>4</sup> and has been deemed culturally important<sup>5</sup>, it has simultaneously drawn criticism from non-Indigenous Canadians and has been accused of fomenting “volatile” Aboriginal relations<sup>6</sup>. An opinion survey by Ipsos Reid<sup>7</sup> reported that the Idle No More movement received an approval rating of 38% by Canadians and that the majority of Canadians agree with the statement “Most of native peoples’ problems are brought upon by themselves.” This sentiment is corroborated by the abundance of prejudice found in editorials, newspaper commentaries, and social media. For example, editorial headlines from major national newspapers in the wake of Idle No More include: *Natives want a bigger slice of pie*<sup>8</sup>, *Too many first nations people live in a dream palace*<sup>9</sup>, and *Native romantics dream of a king who will never come*<sup>10</sup>, while an invitation for letters to the editor was themed *How do we resolve the Native issue?*<sup>11</sup>.

Given the recent socio-political tensions presented as well as the purported commitments of the federal government<sup>12</sup>, Canada’s current societal context is opportune for investigating how

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<sup>2</sup> Starr, S. (2013, April 6). ‘Idle No More’ inspires Canada’s Indigenous. *Aljazeera*. Retrieved April 20, 2013 from <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/03/20133267596704469.html>

<sup>3</sup> Idle No More Web Page (n.d.) Retrieved April 6, 2013, from <http://idlenomore.ca/about-us>

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC]. (2013b, January 16). Idle No More protesters stall railway lines, highways. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. Retrieved April 20, 2013 from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/01/16/idle-no-more-lookahead.html>

<sup>5</sup> McCue, D. (2013, January 9). Current affairs: The cultural importance of Idle No More. *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. Retrieved April 10, 2013 from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/01/08/f-vp-mccue-idle-no-more.html>

<sup>6</sup> Press, J. (2013, January 3). Idle No More situation becoming ‘volatile’. *National Post*. p. A4.

<sup>7</sup> Mahoney, J. (2013, January 16). *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved March 20, 2013 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/canadians-attitudes-hardening-on-aboriginal-issues-new-poll/article7408516/>

<sup>8</sup> Ivison, J. (2013, January 3). Natives want a bigger slice of pie. *National Post*. p. A4.

<sup>9</sup> Simpson (2013, January 5). Too many first nations people live in a dream palace. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved August 30, 2014 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/too-many-first-nations-people-live-in-a-dream-palace/article6929035/>

<sup>10</sup> Ibbotson, J. (2013, January 10). Native romantics dream of a king who will never come. *Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <http://m.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/native-romantics-dream-of-a-king-who-will-never-come/article7154706/?service=mobile>

<sup>11</sup> National Post. (2013, January 14). Letters to the editor: How do we resolve the Native issue? p. A11.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the United Nations ratified the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008) signed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2010 (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, November 12, 2010 - <http://aptn.ca/pages/news/2010/11/12/canada-finally-backs-un-Indigenous-declaration/>) and Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s televised formal Apology to Canadian Aboriginals in 2008.

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non-Indigenous and Indigenous relations can be improved. The dyadic nature of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations has often reflected a disregard for personal relational change. Rather, Canada's "relationship" *to*, and not *with*, Aboriginal peoples has focused on policy changes from a predominantly non-Aboriginal government and federally-sanctioned funding which reinforces state dependency (Alfred, 2009), rather than on settler (re)education and advocacy which could promote the much needed shift in societal attitudes and personal relations. Hence, this research is concerned with building knowledge on improving the relationships of non-Indigenous *to* Indigenous people in Canada while acknowledging that these relationships are historically and socio-politically-situated. Toward this end, the role of settlers in rebuilding relationships and arguably the appropriate conditions for doing this, remain discouragingly vague, leading some scholars to question how the racism<sup>13</sup> that inspired the aforementioned atrocities can be extinguished (Davis, 2010; Regan, 2009). In this research, the contact hypothesis is essential as a framework in order to explicitly examine the capacity for contact to generate social change and understanding among non-Indigenous people in Canada while acknowledging the colonial precedent of contact itself in rebuilding these intercultural relations.

### ***1.3. Intergroup Conflict and the Contact Hypothesis: Cross-cultural Applications and Criticisms from a Critical Post-Colonial Emancipatory Perspective***

Intercontact theory, originally referred to as the contact hypothesis<sup>14</sup>, was proposed by Allport in 1954, and postulated four situational conditions under which intergroup contact could improve intergroup relationships (Tajfel, 1982).<sup>15</sup> These four conditions include equal status between the groups, common goals, cooperative intergroup interaction, and support of laws, authority, or customs (Pettigrew, 1998). Since the contact hypothesis was first proposed, it has become one of the most effective tools in contemporary psychology for building positive intergroup relations (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakawi, 2003). In the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, studies guided by intercontact theory were deliberately juxtaposed against tense socio-political and cultural contexts such as interracial tensions following the Rodney King beatings, Islamophobia following 9/11, interreligious relations in Northern Ireland (Hean & Dickinson, 2005) and both during and following Apartheid in South Africa (Finchilescu & Tredoux, 2008). The historical segregation of Indigenous people juxtaposed with the current socio-political events and cultural movements in Canada similarly positions the contact hypothesis as a relevant framework for understanding intergroup contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

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<sup>13</sup> Racism in the context of this research is conceptualized as settler cultural supremacy, or cultural racism. Cultural racism is central to colonial ideology that perpetuates settler notions of normalcy such that "whiteness is considered to be the universal [...] and allows one to think and speak as if whiteness described and defined the world" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 327), and is further manifested by "the ways in which racialized whiteness becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior" (Henry & Tator, 2006, pp. 46-67).

<sup>14</sup> For the purposes of this research, intercontact theory and the contact hypothesis are used interchangeably. Although there are arguably differences, the objective of this research is not to make distinction and generally the two terms have been used interchangeably as well. For more details on their distinction, see Pettigrew and Tropp (2005).

<sup>15</sup> Intergroup contact refers to "Whenever individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification" (Sherif, 1966, in Tajfel, 1982).

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Despite the wide variety of uses and methods for the contact hypothesis (see for example Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006 for an exhaustive list), the reviewed literature raises concerns related to the colonial undertones of “contact” and is therefore understood with a critical lens in this research. From a methodological and axiological standpoint, the contact hypothesis has neglected colonial injustices and the potential for contact to either reinforce colonial ideologies or exacerbate colonial harm. Furthermore, classical psychology research has studied Indigenous people unethically<sup>16</sup> and in non-Indigenous contexts, effectively ignoring both their cultures and histories (Duran & Duran, 1995). This research seeks to counter psychology’s colonial legacy among Indigenous people (Glover, Dudgeon, & Huygens, 2010) by focusing primarily on the experiences of non-Indigenous people in an Indigenous community.

Considering the seemingly innumerable studies published using the contact hypothesis, research concerning the contact hypothesis tends also to neglect the broader social context. Often, this research occurs in laboratory settings rather than in community settings, focusing instead on individual experiences of contact (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). Moreover, research using the contact hypothesis has concentrated on interracial or multicultural school and housing situations (Pettigrew, 1998), and more recently on industrial-organizational outcomes in the workplace or business contexts (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996). While much of this research has documented to some extent improved intergroup relations between ethnic groups under the criteria of the contact hypothesis in the workplace, the values that guided this research are ostensibly mal-aligned with the values of community psychology (such as social justice, praxis, and conscientization; in Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Indeed, a recent review suggests that community psychology further explore the possibility of intergroup contact as a potential research tool for social intervention (Townley et al., 2011). The current research addresses the aforementioned critiques by exploring the impact of the contact hypothesis in a community setting (i.e. in an Indigenous community) and by using a research paradigm aligned with the principles of community psychology.

This case study adopts a research paradigm that aligns with values of community psychology research via a critical post-colonial emancipatory perspective. This perspective is focused on decolonization, the process of removing cultural hegemony and social domination (Rigney, 1999). According to Hart (2010), Western academia tends to disregard other worldviews and often assumes peoples’ understandings of the social world are consistent across different groups of peoples. This naïve tendency is relevant because intercontact theory emerged from post-World War II social psychology in the context of understanding and ameliorating intergroup relationships in Western countries (Allport, 1954). In many ways, psychology has reified cultural assimilation by reinforcing the dominant and colonial ideology, ultimately creating research that perpetuates the oppression of Indigenous people (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jefferey, 2004; Kovach, 2005). Given the paucity of research on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in psychology, the aforementioned lack of qualitative research on intercontact theory, and disregard for colonial subtexts and injustices, this research provides a unique opportunity to address these concerns.

#### ***1.4. The Contact Hypothesis as a Conceptual Framework for Indigenous Community Immersion***

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<sup>16</sup> “Unethically” meaning that there was little to no informed consent, or that research findings were misappropriated and not necessarily used to benefit the communities that were researched.

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Social psychologist Kenneth Cushner argues that the world we live in is becoming increasingly globalized and consequently, intercultural contact is inevitable (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). One example of globalization is the increase in cross-cultural community-immersion programs that attend to intercommunity relationships and social justice education (Cushner, 2004). Despite this increase in organizations designed to promote peaceful intercultural relations, there is scant attention to the burgeoning of organizations that focus on cross-cultural immersion in Indigenous communities. In Canada, there exist several Indigenous community-immersion programs offered by non-governmental organizations predicated on the interaction of non-Indigenous and Indigenous people and communities.

Global Youth Network is a Canadian youth-driven and registered non-profit organization that engages Canadian postsecondary students in social justice education both locally and internationally through a variety of programs such as social justice workshops, community gardens, and month-long community-immersion programs (Global Youth Network [GYN]). During the Indigenous immersion program, participants immerse themselves in the community by engaging in a variety of interactions such as meeting with community members, participating in Band Council meetings, attending Elder lunches, and visiting community schools.

The contact hypothesis helps conceptualize GYN's Indigenous immersion program because several of the contact hypothesis' conditions are congruent with the organizational values of GYN and elements of the Indigenous community-immersion program:

*Equal status* is supported in GYN programs by team training prior to the immersion that emphasizes participatory learning and being mindful of situations where participants might inadvertently exert power. Although a power status differential can be assumed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, equal status is necessary only during intergroup contact in spite of one's perceived power status prior to intergroup contact (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

*Common goals* is supported by GYN's application and interview process for potential immersion candidates. The application explains the values of the organization and the interview verifies that participants have interests in building relationships to the Indigenous community during their immersion. Likewise, the Indigenous communities that partner with GYN share similar goals and values related to building Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships.

*Intergroup cooperation* is offered by the types of projects and activities in which participants and the community engage during a GYN immersion program. For example, participants in the immersion and community members will prepare meals together, meet with Elders, collaborate on restoration projects or community gardens, and participate in community events together.

*Support of local customs/authority* is ensured through the permission of the Band Council for the participants to enter into the community. GYN typically acquires this permission prior to the immersion although the participants might be asked to meet with Band Council upon entry to the community for a full briefing on local customs.

## **1.5. Research Questions**

The congruence between the overarching aim of GYN to improve relationships and build friendships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in addition to the intention of the contact hypothesis to both understand and improve intergroup relations, promotes the use of the

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latter as a theoretical framework to inform this investigation of youths' experiences in Indigenous communities.

The contact hypothesis will be used to address the following research questions:

1) How do non-Indigenous youth experience cross-cultural immersion, or "contact", in an Indigenous community?

2) What are the implications of non-Indigenous youth's experiences of immersion in Indigenous communities for interventions aimed at improving settler relations to Indigenous people and communities in Canada?

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Design

Through a two-case case study design (Yin, 2009), using a variety of data sources, two different Indigenous community-immersion programs were investigated. Each of the cases represented in this study are programs that were organized by GYN from May 1-30 2013, one occurring in Lac La Ronge First Nation, and the other in Tsartlip First Nation. Several forms of data were gathered to inform understanding of non-Indigenous youths' experiences living in Indigenous communities; focus groups and interviews were conducted as well as the collection of journal entries written by youth for both instances—termed 'literal replications' in a two-case case study design (Yin, 2009)—each of which contributed distinct findings in response to the aforementioned research questions.

**Focus groups with non-Indigenous youth.** Focus groups were conducted separately for both cases during their program orientation and immediately prior to their immersion in the Indigenous community. Prior to the immersion, focus group questions concentrated on participants' knowledge related to the general Indigenous community and culture in Canada, as well as their attitudes toward, and expectations of, their upcoming experiences. Following the immersion, another focus group was conducted with the Saskatchewan case during their program debrief outside of the community. This focus group focused on participants' learnings from their experience as well as their perceived impacts on themselves and their host Indigenous community. Due to logistical issues, one-on-one phone interviews were conducted instead of a focus group with the participants of the British Columbia case in the week following their immersion.

**Journaling.** The participants of each community-immersion were asked to complete between eight to twelve personal journal entries throughout the month of their immersion. The journals were handwritten in a notebook provided to each participant prior to their entry into the community. It was suggested that they aim to write two or three entries, between 100 and 150 words each, per week following the provided journaling guide which contained four sets of three questions—one set for each week. Questions that guided the journal, similar to the focus groups, centered on participants' experiences and feelings about their immersion in the Indigenous community, with an additional emphasis on participants' temporal observations about themselves throughout the month, for example. Participants submitted their journals to the researcher following the second focus group and upon arrival at Toronto's Pearson Airport for the Saskatchewan and British Columbia groups, respectively.

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**Direct Observations.** Direct observation in the community-immersion was conducted by the researcher in the Indigenous immersion program in Saskatchewan, in the form of written research identity memos (Maxwell, 2009) at the end of each day. These notes were hand-written in the researcher's residence in order to not directly intrude on the experiences of the participants with the community. The purpose of these identity memos was for the researcher to engage in self-reflexivity by reflecting on how and when personal experiences converged or diverged with the experiences of the participants.

## **2.2. Participants**

All participants were part of the GYN Indigenous immersion program, and not originally recruited for the sole purposes of this research. The participants in the immersion program are non-Indigenous youth who applied for a position in the immersion program during autumn 2012. Their application process consisted of a written form and an in-person interview with volunteer leaders and interns within the organization. The youth from the two groups were students between the ages of 19 and 23, representing four different universities across south-western Ontario. There were five women and one man, and five women and two men in the Saskatchewan and British Columbia groups, respectively. Participants from the Saskatchewan group identified their heritage with a range of European backgrounds (Scottish, German, Ukrainian etc.) and/or Canadian, while one participant identified her heritage as first-generation Indian-Pakistani. In the British Columbia group, four participants identified themselves primarily in terms of European backgrounds while two identified as first-generation newcomers (from Pakistan and South Korea) and another as mixed European and Grenadian ancestry. None of the participants self-identified as Aboriginal.

## **2.3. Analysis**

Analysis began with the transcription of focus groups discussions, interviews, and journal entries onto a computer word document. A preliminary three-stage analysis process of line-by-line open-coding of the transcripts was performed using NVivo computer software. Axial coding was then used to identify interconnected categories of codes, described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) as "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (p. 90). Third, a thematic analysis of the categories was used to identify emergent themes.

Next, a separate analysis was conducted for each immersion group, or data "unit". For the unit in which research memos were incorporated (i.e. the Saskatchewan immersion program), an explanatory approach was adopted using a modified grounded theory analytical technique (as described in Corbin & Strauss, 2007) to inductively use the identified themes in building an explanation that addressed the research questions. Then, for the second unit (i.e. the British Columbia immersion program), a confirmatory approach was used to verify the explanation produced in addressing the research questions in the first unit. A pattern-matching analytical technique was used for this verification to compare the identified themes of both units and determine how and where the themes matched and did not match (Yin, 2009).



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## 2.4. Intersectionality and Research Ethics Considerations

Intergroup contact in tense socio-political contexts has been fraught with many instances where it actually worsens intergroup relations (Pettigrew, 1998; Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2007). Further, the destructive nature of colonial systems has been compounded in academic research by Euro-centric perspectives of Indigenous knowledge systems (Reid, Teamey, & Dillon, 2002). How then, does this work reconcile the non-Indigenous identity of its researcher who is motivated to decolonize youth by conducting research on them in Indigenous communities?

The motivation of this study is to gain knowledge from non-Indigenous people so that non-Indigenous people can learn to integrate and align themselves with the aims of decolonization. Historically, psychology has traditionally studied Indigenous people in non-Indigenous contexts (Duran & Duran, 1995). As such, there is an element of decolonization in that this research focuses purposefully on studying non-Indigenous people in an Indigenous context. This paradigm shift is reflected in recent research that focuses inquiry on the institutions and barriers that challenge Indigenous self-autonomy in Canada, rather than on Aboriginal peoples themselves (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchison, & Sookraj, 2009). Considering the numerous seemingly irreconcilable ontologies of Indigenous and Western worldviews, it is crucial to acknowledge the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality argues that systems of oppression cannot be understood independently but rather as intersecting identities that reinforce each other such as gender, race, sexuality, age, and class (Cole, 2009). In the context of Indigenous people, colonialism further intersects with various identities for example through gender-based violence (Clarke et al., 2012; Alfred, 2009), two-spirited identities (O'Brien Teengs & Travers, 2006), and the coerced supplantation of Indigenous spiritualities (Coates, 2004). The intersectionality of Indigenous identities and colonization in the context of community-immersion informs this researcher's understanding of intergroup "contact" that can justifiably be burdened by current and past traumatic colonial relations. The concept of intersectionality will be revisited vis-à-vis empathic pathways that can facilitate intercommunity relationship building and possibly building trust by recognizing the intersecting identities of Indigenous community members and non-Indigenous youth (in Section 4.2). In light of intersectionality, each Indigenous community should be recognized as being distinct; moreover, the experiences of the participants are not a reflection of the broader Indigenous community in Canada. This research names both communities involved in the participants' immersions: Tsartlip First Nation and Lac La Ronge First Nation. Lac La Ronge is generally termed a Plains Cree First Nation and surrounded by several other Cree Indigenous communities all of which are isolated from major urban centres. The closest urban conglomeration is the Greater Saskatoon Area, located five hours away by car. Tsartlip is more broadly known as a coastal Salish community and is close to several other Indigenous communities as well as the city of Victoria.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1. *How non-Indigenous youth experience cross-cultural immersion, or "contact", in an Indigenous community*

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### ***Entry.***

Prior to the immersion, or “contact”, both groups described feeling anxiety and distress, expressed by participants as vulnerability, apprehension, feeling “weird at first”, and worried about rejection from the community. As Bernadette<sup>17</sup> discussed, “I feel like I’d get put down at first, so I was kind of anxious about it; that being said I’m also afraid of being hated and then just being like, ‘Oh gawd what are we doing here?’” Elaine described in her journal:

Everyone was super nervous going into this experience. My host family made a comment that we looked like we were from Spain, not Canada, because of how lost we looked. [...] I felt nervous that we would be unwanted at the events, and feared resentment from the First Nations community towards us.

Participants of the British Columbia immersion similarly expressed anxiety or distress at the thought of transitioning or integrating into the community, and further described feeling “uncomfortable at first” and worried about potentially offending the community. However, once settled in the communities, participants in both immersion programs felt their transition was “easy” and felt like they were welcomed by, and even part of, the community. Derek wrote in his journal: “The community as a whole has been amazing. I felt welcomed and it was as if they truly wanted us there.” Participants also expressed feeling surprised and comforted by the degree to which they were welcomed, in Marcella’s words:

Everybody seemed so welcoming and so willing to share their experiences and their stories, I was definitely surprised I thought they would be more hesitant, and it would be harder to like kind of get close to the community [...] but it was a lot easier than I thought it would be.

### ***Expectations.***

Initially, participants of the Saskatchewan immersion were hesitant to describe any potential expectations about the community to be visited. As Danielle described, “I’m just trying not to have any expectations for it, because I don’t wanna psyc [sic] like myself out for anything—so far I’ve come here with no expectations and kind of just, like, gone with it.” Similarly, a few participants from the British Columbia immersion stated that they did not have expectations about their upcoming immersion. For example, Ivan expressed “I don’t have a lot of expectations, I think, well, I always try to go in to any kind of trip or experience or cross-cultural experience with as few expectations as possible.”

Following their immersion, participants from the Saskatchewan and British Columbia groups acknowledged and discussed the expectations that they held prior to the immersion in their journals. Some participants expected their month would be upsetting or unhappy, but overall they felt those feelings did not reflect their experience. Elaine expressed that “it wasn’t like a super heavy downer trip at all, and I think we came in expecting that it was”. Derek, who had expressed having “null” expectations prior to the immersion, acknowledged that having expectations is unavoidable:

I think that not having expectations whether I knew it or not [...] is completely idiotic. You know you can’t keep them separated, it’s impossible so I mean just with our expectations,

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<sup>17</sup> Pseudonyms used for all participants’ quotes

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whether we reflected on them before or like we, we have to acknowledge that it happens either way.

***Racialization and minority empathy.***

Participants discussed their experience in terms of racialization, either feeling that they were the “other” or that they could relate to their host communities. For example, participants who were white developed awareness and self-reflexivity of their racial identity in the community, expressing self-consciousness and shame of their skin colour.

I feel right now a little bit awkward at times. Not that people weren't welcoming but I think that it just took me a little while to kind of feel like, 'Yeah I'm a little bit different like I don't really belong on this reserve' and it's pretty evident the way that I look, like my skin colour.  
(Danielle)

From the British Columbia immersion, Rhea further exemplified a similar awareness, “A lot of times these days I am very aware that I am white and that even though I am being welcomed into the community. I feel like a stranger or a stuck up person, sitting around a table with three chiefs.” A participant of this immersion program who did not identify as white further relayed their group's experience in the following journal entry:

Today was Patty's soccer game [pseudonym for daughter of host family]. The team went to watch and cheer for her. When we arrived, there weren't any stares or glares at us, since some of the members are white, as expected.

In contrast, an alternative experience of racialization was provided through the empathy of those participants who did not identify as white (i.e., racialized persons, “visible minority”: Department of Justice Canada, 2011) or who were able to recall colonization and marginalization in their family histories. One participant related Indigenous marginalization in Canada to their family's history in Ukraine, formerly a part of the Soviet Union which was dominated by Russians. Another participant described her family's connection to colonization in Afghanistan.

Similarly, participants of the British Columbia immersion who were immigrants or who identified as a “visible minority” felt a heightened capacity to relate to, or empathize with, the Indigenous community. Jade explained:

Because of my personal identification, being a first generation Canadian from a South Asian family, I'm used to not being the norm in the society that I grew up in [...] I felt like maybe I could connect with some of the experiences that could have been similarly felt in some of these communities in terms of having not such a good relationship with Canadian society.

***Confirmation and recalibration of beliefs about Indigenous community and people.***

The experiences of some participants from both groups conformed to prior knowledge and ideas they had about Indigenous communities and peoples before their immersion in the Indigenous community. Some participants described these experiences in terms of stereotypes they harboured. As Derek disclosed, “He was telling us stories about how many accidents he's been in, and how many times he's almost killed himself, and flown through windows and stuff like that; it sort of perpetuated a stereotype.” Other participants discussed their interactions with

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individuals in the community in terms of recalibrating their stereotypes to the challenges and trauma that community members had endured. For example, some participants found that community members were “resilient” and able to persevere through colonial and intergenerational trauma. Bernadette commented:

There were really amazing people who overcame traumatic pasts or whose parents didn't drink, and then there was people like Sandra [pseudonym] who went through that and crawled out of it, like not crawled out of it, but literally pulled themselves out of it.

The data collected from both immersion programs exposed contradictions in participants' experiences through both their confirmation and recalibration of their beliefs about Indigenous people and communities.

***Optimistic attitudes toward Indigenous people and community.***

The attitudes of participants from the Saskatchewan group were impacted positively in terms of participants observing qualities such as resilience and happiness, gradually becoming aware of the community's perseverance despite ongoing social disadvantage and colonial trauma. As Anna suggested, “They're so resilient and just happy doing things, normal things [...] There's the whole thing, like they're underfunded and all this stuff again but like money doesn't equal happiness or learning, or knowledge or wisdom or anything.” Several participants further expressed admiration and envy concerning these qualities and a perceived sense of community.

The participants of the British Columbia immersion echoed the development of positive attitudes toward Indigenous community, as Olivia noted:

Many of my perspectives of Aboriginal people have changed more positively. I heard and learned a lot of negative things about Aboriginal people in my past but I now have a more positive perspective and greater understanding I have been able to grow through gaining more knowledge, interacting with people that I don't know. (Final journal entry)

Despite having some of their expectations earlier confirmed, the opportunity for contact altered participants' attitudes toward, and understandings of, those experiences.

***“Normal”ization of Indigenous community.***

The participants from both groups made comparisons between their host community and their home communities, coming away with a sense that Indigenous people are “normal” or similar to themselves. Furthermore, some participants believed that they saw many of the issues in their own lives mirrored in the lives of the Indigenous people in the community. For example, participants described feeling like they were able to “relate” to the Indigenous community. As Mackenzie noted:

They're like us [...] they're the same people they have the same issues with their families or their phones or their work jobs and they're just the same, I didn't feel like we were two different people in two different communities, and it was like I could totally relate. I didn't think it was going to be so like my own communities, almost it didn't feel different. There were stores just like we have them, there were like, I dunno, banks, it just seems so normal.

***Impact on personal action and future interactions.***

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Following the immersion, participants from both immersion groups discussed how they felt less anxious and more comfortable about interacting with Indigenous people. As Savannah described,

I gained from this that I would have not anywhere else I don't think cuz [sic] I mean even if I do end up going to the Friendship Centre in Toronto and other places like now I'm comfortable, whereas maybe I would be a lot more intimidated to do that or interact in my day to day life otherwise.

Participants also expressed wanting to engage friends' interest in Indigenous community and colonial trauma and wanting to change other people's views of Indigenous people and communities in Canada. Ivan commented in his journal:

With this experience I hope to be able to educate other people about the Aboriginal culture and the people I met. [...] I hope that I will be able to put a positive spin/change people's perspectives of Aboriginal people, if there [sic] perspectives are negative.

### ***3.2 The implications of youths' immersion, or "contact", in Indigenous communities for interventions aimed at improving non-Indigenous relations to Indigenous people***

#### ***Sensitization to racism.***

Over the course of their immersion, participants observed and cultivated a critical posturing toward racism and stereotypes against the Indigenous community. For example, participants became aware of the subtleties of racism toward Indigenous people, as Derek noted in his journal, "I see a lot of issues around me and the subtle racism is starting to become apparent." Furthermore, participants noticed an asymmetry in the way the non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities interacted with one another. They observed that Indigenous people were often resented by non-Indigenous people while Indigenous people did not express resentment toward non-Indigenous people. Mackenzie explains: "I noticed that it was more resentment from the white community towards the Cree than the Cree has to the white, like the white people were always framing them into this... 'oh their parents don't care about the kids and they don't get fed' and all this stuff." Participants' direct observations and participation in the Indigenous community engendered their increased consciousness of, and sensitization to, racism against Indigenous communities.

#### ***Confidence in advocacy.***

Through their immersion, participants from both groups were able to build confidence as advocates and friends of Indigenous people and felt encouraged to challenge prejudices against Aboriginal communities. Moreover, all participants stated that their experiences from the immersion would help them to stimulate the curiosities and interests of their friends and family related to Indigenous injustices in Canada. As Savannah suggested,

I know that a lot of my family or friends have very stereotypical understandings of Aboriginal First Nations communities and life on reserves and I feel like it was really important for me to go and experience first-hand because when they say things it's just like

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‘Really is that true?’ like ‘Why would you say that?’ if you don’t even know, like understand, that they may have read it in a book but that’s not always accurate.

Participants disclosed that their advocacy for Indigenous community members was supported by their personal relationships in the Indigenous community. These personal connections further enabled participants to “humanize” Indigenous injustice, described by participants as putting a “human face” to issues affecting Indigenous community. As Alicia explained, “It’s an issue that’s connected to people that I know, whose names I know, because it’s... when you talk about native people and issues, it’s not just an issue but you think of specific people that you know, so I feel as though I can be a better ally.”

### ***Recognizing diversity.***

Participants from both immersion groups began to recognize diversity not only among Indigenous communities in Canada but within their host communities themselves. Bernadette explained, “I learned like that every Nation is so different, but it also like just made me rethink things, like differences in each Native community.” Furthermore, participants were able to recognize the importance of diversity and individual identities among the Indigenous community members themselves. In Anna’s words:

We think that almost that if they’re not traditional they’re integrated into mainstream society but why does that have to be that? Like everybody here has a culture, tradition from their background, but we live in a community today that we all pursue our different professions and interests, and they should be able to, and we shouldn’t box, put them in a box, and I think that we do and we don’t realize that.

The opportunity for youth to engage directly with people from an Indigenous community provided them with the understanding that not only are Indigenous communities diverse, but the people composing them are as well.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### ***4.1. Theoretical Outcomes of Contact***

The findings presented in the preceding section overlap with theoretical outcomes of intergroup contact in three areas: affective, cognitive, and behavioural changes.

*Affective changes:* Participants demonstrated affective changes consistent with intercontact research such as anxiety, admiration, and empathy. Prior to the immersion, participants described anxiety and fear of being resented or rejected by the Indigenous community while also feeling apprehensive about potentially offending the community. During their visits, however, participants were surprised by the degree to which they felt welcomed in the community, and several participants described feeling comfortable living in, and interacting with, the Indigenous community. Second, participants experienced affective change through their admiration of qualities they observed in the community such as the happiness and resilience of the Indigenous people they met. Finally, the participants also experienced affective change through their empathy for Indigenous community and peoples. Specifically, participants who identified with

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colonial family histories or otherwise could identify as a newcomer to non-Indigenous Canadian society, felt that they could relate to the Indigenous community they had visited. These participants related their lived experience, or “colonial empathy”, to the experiences of people they met in Indigenous communities, which were similarly understood as manifestations of marginalization, discrimination, and social isolation.

The concept of colonial empathy reveals an important demographic for whom opportunities of intercultural contact are critical to building positive intercultural relations. Recent research in urban regions of Canada suggests that contact accounts for positive relations through reduced intergroup antagonism in racially diverse neighbourhoods (Wu, Hou, & Schimmele, 2011). This finding is especially relevant to urban populations, which are increasingly driven by newcomers (Chui, 2013) and Aboriginals (Government of Canada, 2010). Thus colonial empathy positions newcomers as a key demographic in the process of settler decolonization and reeducation in Canada.

*Cognitive changes:* Participants demonstrated cognitive changes through the dissonance between their experiences living in the community and their prior beliefs and attitudes about Indigenous people. Specifically, participants discussed romanticized ideas about Indigenous communities or the idea that the host community would be “traditional” or “organic”, but were surprised at how similar the community felt to the rest of Canada. It can be inferred from the notion of dissonance that participants were able to be sensitized to racism toward Indigenous community. The participants observed that prejudice was directed toward the Indigenous community yet they did not observe prejudice from the Indigenous community toward the non-Indigenous community.

Findings strongly suggest that the opportunity to live in an Indigenous community can help disintegrate seemingly antiquated notions of Indigenous people and communities that evidently persist in the social zeitgeist and continue to be perpetuated in the media. This leads to a third remark about dissonance, which relays how participants understood racism toward Indigenous community. Participants observed that racism was directed toward the Indigenous community yet they did not observe racism from the Indigenous community toward the non-Indigenous community. This finding is resonant of the portrayals of Indigenous people in popular news media that frequently cast Indigenous communities in a negative light such as the aforementioned media coverage of the Idle No More movement. Participants’ experiences in the Indigenous community offers hope that Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships developed through community-immersion can actually mitigate some of the negativity of the media while generating a critical response to media exposure.

According to Regan (2009), the educational system and media perpetuate dissonant understandings of Indigenous communities in Canada. Indeed, as some participants reflected, their experiences did not mirror what they were taught in school. Regan suggests that this miseducation perpetuates non-Indigenous communities’ “path of innocence”. Perhaps this path can be repaved if intercultural contact can dispel the dominant narrative cast by the State through education and media.

*Behavioural changes:* Changes in behaviour were observed through participants’ confidence in Indigenous advocacy and their desire to maintain or build intercultural friendships. Participants felt more confident in confronting ignorance and racism against Indigenous communities and peoples because of their personal relationships with, and connectedness to, Indigenous community, a concept known as the extended contact hypothesis (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Changes in behaviour related to building intergroup

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friendships are critical because interpersonal relationships are important in overcoming social distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada and can build capacity for intercultural community relations (Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, & Garcea, 2013).

#### ***4.2. Considerations for non-Indigenous decolonization: Why should Indigenous communities care about non-Indigenous community immersion?***

Through their immersion in Indigenous community, participants were confronted with the realities of Canada's colonial past and imbued with a sense of personal responsibility for colonization, learning to become critically self-reflexive of their participation in the continued marginalization of Indigenous communities. Participants' reflexivity and consequent sense of agency in reconciliation with Indigenous nations represents a parallel process of decolonization, that of decolonizing the dominant ideologies and discourses harboured by non-Indigenous youth.

In addition, intercultural contact has been arguably used to promote assimilatory practices such as employee cohesion in the workplace (Green, 2008). In contrast, this study found that contact exposed cultural differences, in turn fostering an appreciation of diversity and increased understanding rather than promoting assimilation. Participants' experiences of intercultural contact further generated critical responses to the status of Indigenous-settler relations providing hope that interpersonal relationships can actually mitigate some of the prejudice encountered in Canadian society, and can instead embrace cultural differences. Given the emphasis on emancipation and liberation from both a critical post-colonial emancipatory perspective and a community psychology background, the immersion of settler youth in Indigenous settings is critical because it provides exposure to alternate views of "Canadian" history and understandings of contact. By using contact in the endeavour of contributing to Indigenous social justice and educating non-Indigenous community, immersion presents opportunities for the decolonization of non-Indigenous Canadians.

##### *Intersectionality, empathy, and decolonization.*

Through their immersion, non-Indigenous youth began to understand diversity not only among Indigenous communities, but within the communities themselves. This finding can be understood through decolonization as these youth began to dismantle their singular and homogenous views of Indigenous communities, instead situating Indigenous-identified individuals within the complex mosaic of historical, cultural, and individual dimensions. In order to advance decolonization of settlers, community-immersion programs should not only consider how they approach edification of colonial oppression facing Indigenous communities but how this axis of oppression intersects with gender, disability, or sexual minority status.

The decolonization of settler youth could be further engendered through their deepened understanding of intersectionality as a reflection of systematic racism and discrimination. For example, community-immersion programs could use the opportunity for intergroup contact to promote empathic connections of similarly experienced axes of oppression (e.g. the racialization described by some participants' lived experience) by having settler youth "locate" themselves in Indigenous community. Participants' social location could help non-Indigenous youth critically understand their identities and position of privilege and how they exhibit this power in the context of community-immersion programs relative to the people they are meeting. Participants' awareness of their social location could further help them understand the dissonance and observations that confused them such as the purported "normal"ness of the communities. A focus



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on intersectionality and decolonization may prove useful not only because it recognizes and embraces diversity in communities, but also because it could lend itself toward the mutual dismantling of stereotypes and oppression by recognizing intersectionality within Indigenous communities.

### ***4.3 Critical considerations for intercultural contact through Indigenous immersion***

This research considers the potential negative ramifications of “contact” especially in (1) maintaining transparency for the communities implicated, and (2) ensuring that other communities involved in immersion programs can be informed about the potential harms of these experiences.

#### *Expectations about Indigenous community and people.*

Participants began their immersion with little attention to their expectations and prejudices about Indigenous community; however, following their immersion, they compared their experience to expectations that they held – or rather, withheld – before the immersion. The participants’ attention to their expectations only following the immersion demonstrates that non-Indigenous people may have internal, or latent, expectations and prejudice about Indigenous communities. Latent expectations could also explain the finding that participants emphasized strengths they observed in the community rather than negative aspects that they were perhaps already anticipating, thereby remaining latent. Participants’ purported absence of, or hesitation to discuss, expectations could not only hinder participants’ relationship to the community in terms of being perceived as disingenuous, but also impede one’s ability to reflect critically on colonial relations and traumas.

#### *Stereotype confirmation.*

Participants found that some interactions they had with community members affirmed ideas or knowledge (both positive and negative) that they already held about Indigenous people and communities, a concept known as stereotype confirmation. This phenomenon could lead to the uncritical acceptance of stereotypes among non-Indigenous youth and a failure to locate them within the broader context of colonization, as well as further stigmatize or romanticize Indigenous communities. Given that stereotype confirmation is a form of prejudice (Barlow et al., 2012), experiences that confirm previously held beliefs about Indigenous communities and peoples are a potential threat to improving social relations and could create further animosity in these relations.

#### *Uncritical sense of optimism for the community.*

Participants’ sense of optimism and admiration of their host communities contrast with the social inequalities they observed, raising the concern that intercultural immersion can promote uncritical, or naïve, emphasis on positive aspects of communities facing cultural marginalization. In Indigenous scholarship, this phenomenon has been dubbed “social amnesia” (Tamburro, 2013) or more explicitly “settler denial” (Regan, 2009). This phenomenon also can be understood through cognitive dissonance theory, as rationalization occurs to mediate unwanted cognitions and make perceived incongruencies tolerable – or even admirable (Festinger, 1985; p. 73).

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This uncritical sense of optimism engendered through intergroup contact is concerning because it could foster apathy among settler youth and create further social distance in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. In the context of intercultural immersion, it is crucial that programs attend to colonial trauma while encouraging participants to locate themselves in terms of their status and privilege in the community.

#### **4.4. Contributions to Community Psychology**

The findings from this study proffer several contributions to recent research in the field of community psychology, however it also brings to light questions concerning transformative change in Indigenous communities and Canada. The key findings confirmed areas suggested by Townley and colleagues (2001) where intercontact theory could inform intervention strategies for communities experiencing intercultural conflict or tension while aligning with the key values of community psychology such as attention to diversity, sense of community, and holistic well-being. Further, the impacts of the immersion to Indigenous communities support emerging theory in community psychology on critical consciousness-raising (Dittmer & Riemer, 2012). This study found evidence for increased critical consciousness of Indigenous communities through means such as increased attention to diversity in Indigenous community, a respect for Indigenous people and cultures, and an understanding of interculturality in Canada. Participants developed empathy for Indigenous communities as a result of their immersion in the community.

##### *The ecological model and considerations for transformative change.*

According to the ecological model, the recognition of individuals as situated in multilayered systems is critical to improving relational well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The key findings highlighted non-Indigenous youths' understanding of the complexity of issues facing Indigenous communities while situating Indigenous individuals at the confluence of temporal and systematic societal dynamics. However, despite contact's positive contributions to intercultural relations through changes in affect, cognitions, and behaviour, its impact is ostensibly asymmetrical (i.e. engendering more change among the non-Indigenous youth), a concern expressed in literature around the contact hypothesis (Tredoux & Finchilescu, 2008). From a community psychology perspective, the theoretical disparity in benefits from intergroup contact is a symptom of ameliorative change which poses a concern to the core values of community psychology which emphasizes using research to foster transformative change (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). The asymmetry of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations raises the importance of future research investigating Indigenous perspectives of intercultural immersion. It is suggested that research aims at capturing the experiences of the Indigenous communities in which the immersion programs occur. An exploration of Indigenous perspectives is critical to fully understanding "contact", however would require particular attention to Indigenous worldviews and ontologies of relationship (Kovach, 2005).

Overall, although community-immersion may have precipitated ameliorative or transformative relational changes among the participants and individuals in the communities, building intergroup relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities necessitates transformative changes beyond the individual level. Nonetheless, changes at the macro-level of the ecological model underscore the need for grassroots intercultural relations and movements

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geared to bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as these relations could later serve as the foundation for effectuating political, social, and institutional change.

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