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# Barriers to and Strategies for Engaging Non-Indigenous Canadians in First Nations Water Rights: A Qualitative Inquiry

Katelin H. S. Neufeld

*University of Manitoba, katelin.neufeld@umanitoba.ca*

Laura M. Funk

*University of Manitoba, laura.funk@umanitoba.ca*

Katherine B. Starzyk

*University of Manitoba, katherine.starzyk@umanitoba.ca*

Michelle I. Gorea

*Queen's University, 14mg21@queensu.ca*

Lisette Dansereau

*University of Manitoba, Lisette.Dansereau@umanitoba.ca*

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## Abstract

Many First Nations homes lack adequate water and sanitation services. One way to address these conditions is to develop effective public engagement strategies. Thus, in this qualitative interview study, we explored how 22 non-Indigenous Canadians from one city interpreted this issue and their interest in it. We analyzed the transcribed data using thematic coding and constant comparison. Though most participants were aware of the issue and expressed sadness or anger, understandings were relatively shallow and rarely translated into active involvement. Barriers to engagement included racism and a lack of resources, capacity, and personal responsibility. Based on these findings and social psychological literature on social action, we provide recommendations for public advocacy strategies to engage non-Indigenous Canadians on the issue.

## Keywords

First Nations, water rights, advocacy, public engagement

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## Barriers to and Strategies for Engaging Non-Indigenous Canadians in First Nations Water Rights: A Qualitative Inquiry

Although Canada is one of the world's wealthier countries (International Monetary Fund, 2018), systematically impoverished material and social conditions in some First Nations communities<sup>1</sup> mean that too many First Nations people are struggling to simply survive. The main narrative of contemporary Canada is that of a cultural mosaic that is strengthened by its differences (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 2015). Yet, anti-racist and Indigenous scholars contend that portraying Canada in this way may reproduce dominant ways of knowing and further silence Indigenous voices because it ignores ongoing racial discrimination and privilege (Mascarenhas, 2007; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). This narrative also erases the inequities experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada, such as the lack of clean running water in many First Nations.

Not having safe water and sanitation services causes economic, physical, psychological, and cultural harm (Craft, 2014; Gregory & Trousdale, 2009; O'Gorman & Penner, 2018); nonetheless, thousands of on-reserve homes do not have adequate access to clean running water and flush toilets (Indigenous Services Canada, 2019). In 2009, the United Nations found that Indigenous people are 90 times more likely to not have piped water compared to non-Indigenous people in Canada. Some First Nations have running water, but the water is not potable. As of March 11, 2019, 3,031 homes and 175 community buildings in First Nations communities were impacted by long-term drinking water advisories—that is, an advisory that has lasted more than one year (Indigenous Services Canada, 2019). One of the longest standing water advisories (21 years) is in Shoal Lake #40 First Nation in northern Ontario. Part of the reason that Shoal Lake #40 does not have drinking water is that the creation of an aqueduct in 1919 resulted in flooding that transformed the reserve into an island (Perry, 2016). Importantly, the aqueduct was not for Shoal Lake #40 residents; rather, it provided drinking water to the City of Winnipeg over 275 km away. A lack of government action, among other factors, has long prohibited the construction of a proper water treatment plant. Due to the strategic advocacy and resilience of Shoal Lake #40, all levels of government have committed to making clean running water a reality in this community. Although the Liberal government has made some progress in addressing this and other water challenges in First Nations, there is still much work to be done (Mason, 2019; McClaren, 2019).

Resolving this important issue requires a multi-faceted approach that engages multiple stakeholders and knowledges. Towards this goal, an interdisciplinary partnership of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people sought to develop methods of advocating for clean drinking water in First Nations. Organized by Professor Karen Busby and Helen Fallding of the Centre for Human Rights Research, representatives for partner Indigenous political organizations in Manitoba (e.g., the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the non-profit organization Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak), and various University of Manitoba faculty members came together to brainstorm possible projects. Those at the initial meeting discussed what research would be useful to our Indigenous partners and how that research should proceed.

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<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the terms *Indigenous* and *Aboriginal* refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, whereas the terms *non-Indigenous* or *non-Aboriginal* refer to people with settler or immigrant heritage. The term *Indigenous* is preferred to *Aboriginal*. The Indian Act (1985) applies to First Nations people who meet its criteria for *Indian status*. The Indian Act stipulates that reserves are “to be held for use and benefit of Indians” (Reserves section, para. 1).

Ultimately, there was consensus that we should aim to focus on water and sanitation on First Nations. To further understand the specific questions we should address, one of us (Starzyk) and Fallding then traveled to a remote community deeply affected by poor water and sanitation services. With the understanding gained from spending time in the community, a small group then applied for grant funding to support our work. The principal partner throughout the project was the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. Other partners, in alphabetical order, included Amnesty International Canada, Brock University, the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, the Public Interest Law Centre, and the University of Winnipeg. Finally, but certainly not least of all, individual communities partnered for some projects.

The partnership consisted of three main research clusters: legal, including perspectives from international law (Busby, 2016) and Anishinaabe water law (Craft, 2014); economic (O’Gorman & Penner, 2018); and public engagement (Bonnycastle, 2015; Starzyk et al., 2019). The three clusters worked independently but communicated frequently. A goal was to have an Indigenous co-lead for each cluster, but this was not consistently possible for all clusters. Through Busby, Fallding, the Create H2O Program, the Centre for Human Rights Research, and others, everyone met at least yearly through a free local conference. The goals of these meetings were to learn how we should work together (e.g., one session focused on respectful research practices; First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2019); to communicate findings to our partners, both across clusters and throughout the broader community; and to exchange other knowledges. Elders, academics, and community partners presented at each conference. We made efforts to continuously include partners in decisions about the project, though this was often challenging due to both the very large size of the water rights team and the increasing pressures on our partners as they faced funding cuts. Generally, such collaborations worked better when the groups were smaller.

Two of us (Starzyk and Funk) were faculty co-investigators of the public engagement research cluster, which at one point included nearly 30 members. Our cluster developed three interrelated projects. One project, led by Professor Colin Bonnycastle, worked with youth in a northern Manitoba community to develop a photovoice project that documented the effects of living with threatened water services. Another project (Starzyk et al., 2019) used a quantitative approach to understand how best to “frame” the issue in order to increase support for government action among non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada. In this article, we describe the third project. Taking a qualitative approach, the goal of the third project was to understand how people think about First Nations water and sanitation services and why they have not helped to fix things. We hoped to develop this understanding before beginning the quantitative project, but our research projects did not come together in the order we expected. Nonetheless, our projects developed complementary knowledges.

### Context

Canada was built upon territorial expropriation and the signing of treaties, which gave First Nations specific title to reserve lands and other entitlements from the federal government (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). The formerly titled Department of Indian Affairs claimed a position of power and governance over First Nations, placing themselves responsible for the welfare of First Nations people who have Indian Status. For generations, the federal government has operated in accordance with the White-settler agenda—one of assimilation and patriarchal colonialism rather than respect

(White, Murphy, & Spence, 2012). This long-term approach often operates in a much more limited sense than First Nations' laws and rights and is sometimes at odds with them (Borrows, 2017). This is true both generally and regarding water more specifically.

Many perspectives converge on the idea that all First Nations homes should have clean running water. International law asserts that water is a human right (United Nations General Assembly Resolution, 2010). Canada has implied that it takes this right seriously through not only signing and ratifying this convention in 2011, but also through subsequent actions (Busby, 2016). Canadian constitutional laws and treaties may also afford First Nations other legal rights to water (Busby, 2016; Phare, 2009). From the perspective of Indigenous laws, however, First Nations' rights and responsibilities to water are inherent to their being (Craft, 2014; Phare, 2009).

Nonetheless, federal departments continue to enforce paternalistic policies over First Nations that directly impact their access to clean running water. According to federal policy, the federal government and First Nations share management of drinking water and sanitation in all provinces but B.C. (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2018). Yet the federal role is not straightforward: Duties and responsibilities are fragmented across various governing bodies (Simeone, 2010; White et al., 2012) and are also negotiated with local and regional regulatory authorities. In negotiating access to safe running water, First Nations must also confront budgetary constraints and bureaucratic prioritizing (Mascarenhas, 2007); as a result, promised deadlines are often unmet (e.g., Porter, 2017). Government action on this issue is therefore necessary but may not come without sufficient public pressure. For this reason, Indigenous partners in our research group identified the importance of finding ways to increase public engagement. To do so, it is useful to consider known barriers to public engagement in the current context.

### **Barriers to Public Engagement**

Collective action theory (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) contends that there are three main determinants of whether a person will help to resolve an injustice: efficacy, identity, and perceived injustice. People are unlikely to engage with an issue if they think it is difficult to solve, not "their issue," and not unjust to begin with. As such, fostering engagement can be particularly challenging when it involves garnering support from people who are not directly impacted by an injustice. This is the case with non-Indigenous people in Canada and the lack of safe running water in First Nations: They may harbour psychological motivations or beliefs that colour their perceptions of these three factors in a way that affects their potential engagement.

Other social psychological theories (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) predict that people are motivated to believe that overarching social systems (e.g., the Canadian government) are legitimate, that their social groups (e.g., White Canadians) are benevolent and good, and that people get what they deserve. Information that threatens these beliefs, such as learning that not everyone in your country has safe running water, can be psychologically uncomfortable. Instead of acting to resolve such injustice, people will sometimes engage in mental gymnastics to remedy their discomfort. For instance, they might minimize or deny the injustice or blame the victims.

Relatedly, racism towards Indigenous Peoples may also erode non-Indigenous Canadians' potential for engagement. In this article, we construe racism as a multi-faceted construct that operates at both a

societal and a personal level. At the societal level, racism is reflected in policies or other practices that systematically deny intergroup equality or equity (Allport, 1954); the disproportionately high rates of First Nations homes without clean running water is only one such example. Racism also occurs at the individual level and takes many forms, including overt hostility or antipathy (Allport, 1954). Furthermore, sometimes racism manifests in subtler ways, such as “othering” (Zevallos, 2011). In Canadian contexts, Indigenous Peoples are often constructed as the “other” in relation to dominant White/Canadian culture (Clark, Walsh, & de Costa, 2012; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Positioning seemingly “natural” categories of social identities as binary opposites maintains existing social hierarchies (Bauman, 1991; de Beauvoir, 1949), which perpetuates ongoing systemic inequalities. Another form of racism is victim blaming (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Indigenous Peoples are routinely seen as accountable for the systemic effects of racism and colonialism (Satzewich, 2011; Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Even among allies, sympathizers, and would-be collaborators, such unexamined “common sense understandings” of the status quo can be racist and hegemonic at their root, further perpetuating inequality and privilege (Denis & Bailey, 2016; Quayle & Sonn, 2013). In sum, in this article, we define racism as consisting of systemic inequality at the societal level and practices, including othering, victim blaming, and antipathy, at the individual level.

### **The Current Research**

Our overarching goal was an applied one: To learn how to better engage the public on the issue of access to safe running water in First Nations in Canada. A more substantive focus of the inquiry was learning about how everyday practices of “othering” manifest in how non-Indigenous people in Canada interpret access to safe running water in First Nations. Given our exploratory and context-specific research questions, we used a constructivist qualitative approach. In-depth inquiry into how non-Indigenous people interpret these and similar issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada may help identify instances of buy-in or disengagement among the general public.

### **Method**

#### **Participants and Recruitment**

We recruited a purposive participant group of 22 non-Indigenous Canadians in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, through advertisements on social media, in local classifieds, and in public spaces such as coffee shops. As Winnipeg has the highest urban population density of Indigenous Peoples of all major Canadian cities (Statistics Canada, 2017), we expected the non-Indigenous population would have some awareness of issues impacting First Nations. As the study progressed, we made a theoretical sampling decision to further recruit self-identified allies of Indigenous communities ( $n = 3$ ) through word-of-mouth.

Our initial recruitment postings stated our desire to speak with non-Indigenous adults about challenges faced by First Nations. Interested participants contacted the second author directly, from whom they learned more about the nature of the study. If they were eligible and still wanted to participate, they contacted the interviewer (the fourth author), who arranged the interview at a private, convenient location (either a private library study room or a university office).

On average, participants were 42 years old (range = 20-72 years). Nine were men and 13 were women. Three participants' highest level of formal education was high school; 14 had completed some university or possessed an undergraduate degree, and five had graduate level training at university. Five reported their current occupation as a university or college student, and four were not in the paid labour force (retired, unemployed, or full-time parent). The remaining 13 participants worked in education, administration, or communications and marketing. Most ( $n = 18$ ) identified as White or European (or with the vaguer term "Canadian"), and four identified as visible minorities (South Asian, East Asian, or African).

## Procedure

Participants gave informed consent before each interview and received a small honorarium (gift card) at the end. The fourth author conducted the interviews between December 2013 and May 2014 using the same semi-structured qualitative question guide (see the Appendix at the end of this article). The second and fourth authors created and revised the guide based on input from the broader research team (expert scholars in social psychology as well as representatives from First Nations organizations and a non-governmental organization). The fourth author also digitally recorded and transcribed each interview. We analyzed the data after each interview and ended recruitment after reaching theoretical saturation in the themes identified in the data. The Human Ethics Review Board at the University of Manitoba approved this research.

## Analytic Approach

Analytic steps included multiple transcript readings by the second and fourth authors; sifting and sorting data within interviews, through identifying and grouping text segments into similar descriptive topics; and the development, refinement, and application of thematic codes (Gibbs, 2007) to all interviews (individually conducted each using Word software). After these steps, we generated further insights and came to a consensus on a refined set of thematic codes. We arrived at this consensus by comparing independently generated thematic codes as well as by comparing and contrasting data within each code across analysts and across participants. For example, one code was developed to reflect participants' descriptions of their own levels and types of engagement (action) with the issue of Indigenous water rights; another code focused on participants' explanations for their level and type of engagement. A constructivist approach drawn from interpretive inquiry (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000) and symbolic interactionism prompted us to move beyond an examination of the explicit, substantive information participants described ("what" was said), to what remained "unsaid" as well as "how" it was said. That is, our approach pushed us towards engaging the symbolic meanings or broader ideas invoked by participants as they make sense of their worlds and behaviours (including their own level or type of engagement with Indigenous water rights) through language. This approach helped us develop theoretical insights and highlight the complexity of participants' interpretations.

## Results

We identified three main themes through this analysis process: Understanding water in First Nations, engagement with issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and barriers to public engagement.

## Understanding Water in First Nations

Participants had a limited understanding of the water issues facing many First Nations. For instance, the opening interview question asked participants to identify issues of concern for First Nations: Only five of the 22 participants spontaneously mentioned safe water. When asked directly about the issue, it seemed that while most participants were aware of the issue, their knowledge was limited. Many participants incorrectly believed that water issues are confined to isolated northern communities, as in this example:

I know that up north they have a lot of problems maintaining water. And for my limited knowledge, it's lack of funding and construction costs and frozen, like the permafrost shifting, which breaks the pipes and then they can't afford to fix the pipes. And they were talking about doing above ground water systems but they had to figure out insulation . . . so it's like an engineering puzzle as well as lack of funding to get them clean water.

However, there was greater knowledge among allies who spoke about current water issues as indicative, at least in part, of dislocation and colonization:

It's an expression of an underlying problem . . . as we so-called "modernize," we pull people and disconnect them from their own land base. And so we create water systems that are Westernized water systems, which are appropriate for large concentrations of people but then therefore, because we always do these things on the cheap, create water and sanitation problems and E. coli and all of that.

As a means of understanding the problem (and potentially to present an empathetic stance), some participants drew parallels between on-reserve water issues and their own urban experiences of occasional discolored tap water or frozen water supply pipes:

They just asked that we boil it [our tap water] for a while. And, if it was brown or discolored then we would just abstain from using it for a couple of hours. But obviously it's frustrating and it hinders what you're doing that day. So I guess for them to not have it . . . is kind of like a panicky feeling. And what do they do?

[In the news I saw] people going down and breaking the ice and getting water out by pails and drinking bottled water and trying to keep their children and babies clean. I can't imagine. We are getting a little taste of that with frozen water pipes in Winnipeg and having to bring water in. Imagine that being your way of life.

Approximately midway through the interview and after the interviewer asked participants about their awareness of First Nations water issues, she presented them with prevalence statistics. In response to hearing this information, participants expressed a variety of emotions. Most expressed concern and described emotions such as confusion, disbelief, and surprise. The overriding emotional theme was shock, frustration, and anger that any people in Canada would have problems accessing safe drinking water. This is an encouraging sign, as perceiving a situation as unjust is a potent predictor of social action (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Many employed social comparisons, indicating that they believed that a lack of access to clean running water is a problem of poor, developing, or "third world" countries. However,



this interpretation also represents a form of “othering” of “third world” countries and implies a reluctance to admit or accept that Canada or “first world” countries might have such problems:

Coming from my background, having African roots, I wouldn't expect to hear this. So it's shocking that this is happening in Canada. It's not Nigeria or Somalia, you know? . . . why is this happening here, why?

It just makes you angry because there's not a reason with all the money and everything that we have in Canada, and calling ourselves a first world country, people should be living without [safe drinking water] . . .

I think it's horrible because I never thought that people in Canada would not [have] access to clean water. Usually they would talk about people in the developing countries not having access to clean water and things like that.

There should be no . . . community anywhere in Canada without proper water pipes and indoor plumbing and heating and sanitation. That's just third world.

Shame was another common emotional reaction to learning about the lack of safe running water in First Nations. For instance, one participant described feeling “embarrassed as a Canadian citizen” and another stated, “it's disgraceful and embarrassing.” The following quotes highlight the disconnect between an idealized reputation of Canada and the reality of conditions in First Nations:

It's Canada's dirty little secret, you could say a skeleton that's in our closet. Our country can be very critical of other developing nations and their infrastructure in terms of providing basic needs and in the meantime Canada is dropping the ball for their own Aboriginal people.

It's hugely embarrassing as a Canadian . . . [there are] other countries in the world where Canada would say that “That's against human rights!” but then we've done these things . . .

Shame such as this, which stems from some negative association with one's group identity (e.g., “Canadian”), can promote prosocial intergroup behaviours including support for reparations (Brown & Čehajić, 2008; Brown, Gonzalez, Zagefka, Manzi, & Čehajić, 2008) and collective action to resolve an injustice (Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007; Shepherd, Spears, & Manstead, 2013).

As above, participants often couched their understandings of First Nations water supply and sanitation issues within a human rights framework:

I have a postcard or two on my fridge that's very vivid . . . with a First Nations child, saying “Water is a human right.” And I do believe it is.

Human rights on a very basic level. People need clean water to survive . . . clean drinking water has to be a human right because you can't survive without it.

It's something that the government should address. It may be costly, I don't know, but I think it is a basic need, a basic human need.

Self-identified allies also brought up the framework of Indigenous rights as important when grappling with issues of concern for Indigenous Peoples, as in:

If we look at the water issue through the lens of Aboriginal rights, we would say if the communities controlled their traditional territories, they would be able to access better water supplies and find much more creative culturally based ways of dealing with all of their problems, including the water problem. So I would say . . . the systemic problems . . . are mostly best addressed through an Aboriginal rights perspective rather than a human rights perspective.

In sum, most participants knew little about the lack of safe running water in First Nations. Though some participants drew parallels between access to safe running water on reserves and their own urban experiences, many indicated that they believed that a lack of access to clean running water is a problem that should not exist in Canada and expressed feelings of shame and anger. The majority of participants drew on a human rights framework to express their opinions about the issue, whereas allies used the framework of Indigenous rights.

### **Engagement in Issues Impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada**

In general, participants were not very engaged in issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the three allies were active in advocacy efforts, including grass-roots organizations and academic research. One ally explained that he has dedicated his life to issues important to First Nations but was uncertain about the extent of his impact.

Some other participants, who did not identify as allies, indicated that they engaged with issues impacting Indigenous Peoples through attending or volunteering at Indigenous events, or volunteering with social organizations targeting urban homelessness and poverty. For example, one participant explained that she sees her volunteer work at a core-area soup kitchen as a first step. She indicated that the work was exposing her to the fact that Indigenous Peoples face a great number of challenges, and she expected her increasing awareness to lead to greater involvement in the future. In comparison, other non-allies indicated relatively passive or subtle forms of engagement with Indigenous issues: their expressions of concern rarely translated into involvement that was as active or sustained. Many of these participants indicated that they raised awareness of the issue through discussions and debates with friends, family, and acquaintances. Similarly, a participant with a teaching position indicated that they felt engaged through educating their students in the hopes of changing their opinions. Others felt engaged through expressing their opinions on social and mainstream media and through participating in this research study.

### **Barriers to Public Engagement**

Our analyses suggested a range of factors that may serve as barriers to public engagement regarding safe running water in First Nations, as well as other issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The findings presented below draw on what participants said to explain their own levels of involvement, participants' perceptions about barriers to public engagement more broadly, and our interpretations of their (spoken or unspoken) words that implied barriers to their personal engagement. Participant explanations of personal and public non-engagement tended to focus on a lack of capacity as well as a lack of knowledge and awareness. Participants additionally identified racism when striving to explain

public complacency more broadly. Given that participants' own talk also included racism (sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly), and no participants articulated a sense of personal responsibility, we advance these as additional barriers to public engagement.

**Claims of (in)capacity.** Social psychological literature on collective action finds that people are unlikely to act to resolve injustice when they view doing so as unfeasible (Starzyk & Ross, 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2008). One way in which feasibility concerns manifested here was perceived (in)capacity. When explaining barriers to the public's engagement, participants sometimes suggested a lack of capacity, such as feeling powerless to make a real difference and a lack of belief in the efficacy of action:

[People] don't want to take the time to become aware because they don't feel that they can do anything about it.

More often, however, participants provided specific reasons that they were personally unable to take appropriate action, often centering upon financial capacity or political clout:

I don't have money so I can't do anything money-wise.

I don't have any connections or political power, so I don't know what I would be able to do.

A more unconventional rationale for non-involvement was advanced by one participant, who suggested his individual personality traits would in fact hinder any attempt to help:

I tend not to get involved in anything political because . . . I lack a lot of patience. So I would be the person just standing up and screaming, "Are you guys fucking morons?" (laughing), which isn't going to do anybody any good and I know that. So for my sanity and for the benefit of everybody else involved it's better for me to just do the informal things that I do.

Participants who were active in social justice issues indicated that people might lose interest or "burn out" if their efforts appear to be ineffective. For a few participants and allies this was a significant personal issue:

I think the people that know the problem are just so fed up of it that they just sort of wash their hands of it . . . It's just like how do you do anything?

I don't think my efforts have made any difference whatsoever, zero.

Participants suggested that the scope of issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada was a significant barrier for both personal and public engagement, and some indicated this was overwhelming, leading to a sense of helplessness:

I'm pretty concerned but I have no idea . . . What needs to be changed, you know? . . . How daunting this task of change is, where do you start with a problem like this?

Time and energy were barriers both for participants personally and for others. They cited responsibilities such as studies, work, children, and other social causes. They also communicated a general sense that people can only do so much:

How thinly do you spread yourself? I almost feel that you need to choose your issues . . . it would be energy and time.

Those active in social justice issues also noted that people's level of involvement in issues they care about may be significantly impacted by their personal capacity, including personal stability, family and work responsibilities, and the flexibility to respond when action is needed:

I'm able to do some of that work to a large extent because my life is fairly uncomplicated. I don't have children so I don't have a lot of family obligations . . . my income level and housing situation is a lot more stable than many of the people that I work with . . . it makes it easier to get some work that needs to be done quickly if asked.

[If something is happening] you want to be able to pull that together and help and either get stuff out to the site where it's needed, and you can't because you have to be at work. Sometimes if there is enough notice and we know that there's going to be a demonstration or a round dance call during the day you can move a vacation day around and that kind of thing.

**Knowledge and awareness.** A lack of knowledge and awareness was another way in which feasibility concerns posed barriers to engagement: Participants overwhelmingly cited not knowing what to do and not knowing enough about a given issue as a barrier, both for themselves and others. This applied to involvement in issues impacting Indigenous Peoples generally:

It's hard to even volunteer and help out if you don't know what, or who you are working with, or what issues there are that people are facing.

When it comes to like specific reserves or specific treaties I'm totally ignorant . . . I know of the reserves but I don't know specifically what each reserve's issues are . . . I have an idea of what's wrong, but . . .

When asked specifically about the issue of safe running water, participants similarly claimed that their own personal lack of knowledge and awareness was a primary reason they did nothing:

If I knew something that I could do then I would do it. But I don't know what to do.

[I'm not involved] just because I don't know about it.

I don't really know how long they have been dealing with this problem or how long this problem is going to continue for and what they are doing about it. So . . .

On one hand, it is understandable that people cannot take action without knowing a solution or being aware of a problem. On the other hand, claims of not knowing may justify disengagement motivated by other factors, such as the racist attitudes and stereotypes these participants revealed elsewhere in their interviews. Claims of ignorance can be a means of avoiding an uncomfortable truth, as we discuss later.

Ignorance was also cited as a barrier to public engagement on Indigenous matters beyond water, and participants identified various sources of this ignorance. First, a number of participants linked ignorance to the fragmented and overwhelming nature of communication in modern society: They blamed information overload for creating a situation where it is challenging to engage people's attention on any given issue:

There's so much information out there these days, and it's coming at us so quickly, through the Internet and all these different methods that people see one news item and then the next minute they forget it and move on to something else.

There's just so many things that . . . it's almost like you're desensitized because there's so much.

They also frequently stated that issues impacting Indigenous Peoples are misrepresented or unreported in traditional sources of information:

I don't think that the general public knows of these things. They just hear what the media is telling them, and that's not really what the problems are.

Participants applied similar logic in explaining ignorance around safe running water in First Nations specifically. Many felt the traditional news media were not covering the issue frequently enough:

The fact that it hits the media very, very sporadically, and then usually not some sort of longer term in-depth research piece, is a big problem.

There's not enough information about it. It can't just be a [news] special every couple of years.

Some participants also felt that when mainstream media *do* cover issues impacting Indigenous Peoples, they often do so in ways that perpetuate stereotypes. Participants further suggested that part of the reason mainstream media do not inform the public about Indigenous "issues" is because of a lack of Indigenous representation among the ranks of those who decide what is newsworthy. Thus, participants saw traditional news media as a source of the ignorance and misinformation that pose barriers to public engagement.

Another source of ignorance that participants identified was the lack of interaction between the rural north and the urban south, which is where participants lived. As one participant said:

I think it's sort of "out of sight, out of mind" for northern communities. A lot of people don't make those links because they don't know people; they have never travelled there.

Participants offered another explanation for public ignorance: a desire to deny and ignore. As noted above, several social psychological theories suggest that people are often motivated to ignore information that reflects poorly on their group memberships or government (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Given that Canadians pride ourselves in being egalitarian, multicultural, and not racist, they (and White Canadians in particular) can become quite uncomfortable when presented with evidence of their racially-based privilege (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). Consequently, they may ignore or

rationalize injustice to minimize their discomfort. Several participants described a tendency for Canadians to do so:

It's like this weird . . . denial or it's like a place where people don't want to go, almost, in their head.

People don't want to acknowledge it because . . . I mean it's out of sight, out of mind.

I do talk about [Indigenous issues], but people really don't want to hear unpleasant things.

White people in Canada are kind of programmed, trained, to get a bit defensive when things are brought up. Because it's probably a way of dealing with the guilt, it's a way of . . . feeling like part of us is being threatened because of something else and so it's a way of reacting.

Finally, a few participants seemed to believe that the systemic exclusion of Indigenous People from mainstream society has played a significant part in public ignorance about issues impacting Indigenous People. For example, some implicitly tied a lack of knowledge to an education system that does not impart students with knowledge of Indigenous perspectives, but largely “remains reflective of White, Western, or Eurocentric interests” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 298).

**Racism: The Indigenous “other,” misinformation, and victim-blaming.** When participants talked about a lack of public awareness about issues impacting Indigenous Peoples, they placed a great deal of the blame on the public's racism and ignorance:

There's a negative stereotype towards First Nations people.

That cultural barrier thing, I think it turns a lot of people off, actually.

More specifically, participants identified that the public harbours stereotypes of First Nations' incompetence and corruption, especially regarding financial matters:

The broader public's understanding, you hear so much . . . “Well, we came over from whichever country and we look after ourselves, why can't they?”

There's probably still a lot of discrimination. Even my parents, they haven't got a lot of nice things to say. And like, “When are we going to stop paying for them?” “They have so much money but nobody uses it properly.” All of that kind of stuff. So there is a lot of ignorance.

Every time you turn around people are saying, “It's got to be the fault somehow of First Nations People,” or “Well, we give them all this money.” You hear that all the time, “They are given all this money, they're given enough money and why don't they . . . work with that?”

Although many participants agreed that other Canadians' general racism and ignorance are a barrier to public engagement, we found that their own talk occasionally contained racist attitudes and misinformed assumptions. What participants said likely contained other manifestations of racism that we, the authors, as White people of privilege ourselves, were unable to perceive. Nevertheless, we

identified racism in varying degrees of subtlety (Neely & Samura, 2011; Quayle & Sonn, 2013). For instance, we contend that racism underlies this participant's words:

I'm starting to get apathetic. Look, if they don't care, why should I?

Further, euphemisms for racist beliefs, such as "cultural differences," were sometimes employed, perhaps reflecting a sense of discomfort with the idea that Canada is a racist society (Schick & St. Denis, 2005), and aligning oneself instead with the dominant narrative of respecting cultural differences. Subtler forms of racism also manifested, for instance in the words of another participant. Although couched in terms of concern with paternalism and power, this participant positioned their "Whiteness" as a justification for inaction:

I would love to help, but I don't know if it's my place to be one more White person to come in and say, "I've got the solution!" because I clearly don't. But if Native people came and said, "This is what we need," I would do anything to help them, absolutely.

Aligning with Collective Action Theory (van Zomeren et al., 2008), this participant used their identity to distance themselves from the "Indigenous other" and responsibility for engaging the issue.

We also identified several misconceptions, often intertwined with subtle racism, in what most participants—all except those who self-identified as allies—said. For instance, participants frequently framed colonization as something that happened historically or in the past, without acknowledging that it is ongoing and embedded in the nature of Canadian society. The following examples are illustrative:

I don't think everybody, the general public will be that concerned because it has a long past . . . issues that happened a long time back.

I see them . . . protesting and stuff, it irks me because really technically speaking some of those issues are treaty rights which go back to 1870/71 where it's completely different, like 200 years, it's different and let's revamp it, things have to change.

The second example shows an evident lack of sympathy for Indigenous perspectives regarding treaty rights. Other participants expressed suspicion about the motives of Indigenous groups who were asking for help or employing rights-based arguments. Again, money appeared to be an important factor for some participants:

In general, when I hear on the news when they talk about money and stuff and wanting to get money, that kind of irks me a bit. Sometimes I wonder about that, and a lot of other people do. Is that a legitimate complaint, or are First Nations just after more money? I mean people get cynical, and I do too sometimes . . .

This same participant later expressed uncertainty about whether or not the news is biased. He also explained that his non-Indigenous friends describe First Nations as "complaining all the time about something," to which he rather hesitantly responds, "well yeah, maybe that's true, there is a lot of complaining, but it's probably legitimate, it could be legitimate reasons." This participant expressed a

high level of ambivalence regarding issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in Canada and seemed to be trying to combat personally held stereotypes where he recognized them.

Racism also manifested as victim blaming. In discussing the inadequacies of First Nations water systems, some participants held First Nations responsible rather than blaming underfunding of on-reserve services. This corroborates anti-racist scholars' assertions that Indigenous people are routinely subjected to victim blaming and held accountable for the systemic effects of racism and colonialism (Satzewich, 2011; Schick & St. Denis, 2005); it also aligns with the social psychological theories (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that predict, when faced with an uncomfortable injustice, people may engage in victim blaming instead of resolving the issue. Three participants suggested that First Nations People were part of "the problem" by behaving in non-constructive ways, such as being resentful or stubborn. In another form of victim blaming, some participants interpreted self-government as responsible for inequities. One particular topic of contention was the idea that monies are often squandered or misused through First Nations governance structures:

The federal government provides money to the administration, the people who run the reserves, the chiefs. And some of us have the opinion, I tend to lean towards this too in particular situations, is that they get the money and they basically spend it on themselves . . . there has been more than one scandal where the money has been spent on cruises when it should have been going to things that it was rightfully meant for, and it wasn't.

Further, some participants explicitly linked incompetency and corruption to the lack of safe running water in First Nations:

To me, from day one they have been getting infrastructure money. And what have they done with it? Absolutely nothing. Some of those reserves don't even have running water? So . . . is it the chief and council that is responsible? . . . and I think it is. So . . . that tends to make me feel negative about the whole situation, and about the people who are receiving the money and should be using it for what it is properly meant for.

If [a water and sanitation system] was established . . . and then they didn't take care of it and ruined it, that would put me off because you have to have maintenance. You have to care about it. So that would put me off.

The above quotation also demonstrates how racial stereotypes can contribute to (or justify) disengagement.

**Absence of personal responsibility.** Participants had many ideas about both who was responsible for the lack of safe drinking water in First Nations and how to remedy the issue. Overwhelmingly, participants assigned responsibility through delegation to others (deCosta & Clark, 2016). As evidenced above, some placed responsibility on First Nations. Sometimes participants named systems, such as capitalism and the Canadian government, accountable. In some attributions of government responsibility, though, we again inferred a subtle subtext of the incompetence stereotype: Some participants suggested that the federal government holds the authority for oversight while implying that First Nations are incapable of self-governance. For example, one participant said:



Sometimes I think, well, is it the government's fault because they're not monitoring it?

Notably absent from participants' talk, however, were mentions of their personal or group responsibility for rectifying the lack of safe running water in First Nations. Clearly, an absent sense of responsibility is a barrier to public engagement. One participant even alluded to *non*-responsibility, implying that because many issues facing Indigenous Peoples today are rooted in the past, non-Indigenous Peoples today should not be held accountable:

I'm not the one who took their land away, the people who are living now are not the ones. And should we have to be responsible for what happened in the past? To a certain extent yes. And to a certain extent no.

These words are yet another example of how perceiving an issue as not linked to one's identity—of being “their” issue and “in the past”—is a barrier to engagement (van Zomeren et al., 2008).

### General Discussion

The goal of this research project was to learn how to better engage non-Indigenous people in Canada on the issue of access to safe running water in First Nations. Toward that goal, we used a constructivist qualitative approach to interview 22 non-Indigenous Canadians living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Three main themes emerged from these interviews. The first theme was understandings about the lack of safe running water in First Nations. Many participants were aware of this issue; yet, few could speak about it in much detail, and a handful claimed to not know much at all. Though most expressed concern about access to safe running water in First Nations, this rarely translated into active involvement in creating change. Whereas the three self-identified allies were quite involved in working alongside Indigenous People, other participants' involvement was minimal. The second theme was a relative lack of participant involvement. This theme helped shed light on the third theme: barriers to public engagement. Listening to what participants did and did not say, we identified the following barriers: a lack of awareness and knowledge, racism (both that participants perceived of the public and revealed in their own talk), and an absence of personal feelings of responsibility.

### Policy Recommendations

Our Indigenous partners hoped our research would result in useful recommendations for engaging non-Indigenous Canadians on matters including providing safe running water in all First Nations. Drawing from (a) social psychological research on (overcoming) psychological barriers to engagement and (b) our current analyses, we make six policy recommendations for public engagement strategies. Although we present them separately, we suggest combining them into one approach when appropriate. These strategies may be deployed by people or groups in various spheres, including those in all levels of government and non-governmental organizations, journalists, educators, social marketers, and activists. As relationships and mutual understanding are widely considered central aspects of reconciliation in Canada (e.g., Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), we encourage collaboration between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples when creating and executing these strategies. Such strategies can also be useful beyond the policy level, as anyone could incorporate many of the recommendations in their daily lives and conversations.

**Strategy A. Provide information about the issue and tie it to systemic discrimination.** People cannot take action on an issue if they are unaware of or misinformed about it. Although non-Indigenous people in Canada may not know a lot about the lack of safe running water in First Nations, they may have some knowledge about other challenges facing Indigenous Peoples, the history of colonization, and the systemic nature of oppression and racism. It is possible that this other, broader knowledge could contextualize and develop greater awareness about water in particular. For those unaware of these systemic forces, such a campaign may work to address stereotypes that contribute to victim blaming. Of course, it is important to educate in a way that does not counterproductively elicit the psychological threats discussed earlier; see Strategies C and D below for suggestions.

**Strategy B. Provide concrete suggestions for active involvement.** Without the resources to fix an issue, mass injustice and suffering are simply too psychologically uncomfortable for people who are motivated to view their social systems as legitimate and just (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003). When a solution to an issue seems feasible, however, people are more inclined to engage in its resolution (Starzyk & Ross, 2008; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Thus, public engagement strategies cannot only educate non-Indigenous Canadians about violations of First Nations water rights; they must also educate people about ways to make a difference that align with the strategy's exact goal. Examples include participating in or donating to existing campaigns (e.g., Amnesty International Canada, 2019; Blue Dot, 2019; Council for Canadians, 2019). People can also purchase products from Indigenous-owned companies committed to improving access to clean running water: Birch Bark Coffee Company (2019), for example, uses profits to install water purification kits in First Nation homes, and Her Braids (2019) raises awareness through workshops and donates 10% of pendant sales to the Blue Dot, a grassroots campaign promoting a healthy environment that includes clean water.

**Strategy C. Use frames that increase feelings of responsibility.** People are more likely to engage in an issue when they feel it is their place to do so (Ratner & Miller, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). But when discussing the lack of safe running water in First Nations, many participants used "othering" language and none expressed feeling personal responsibility. Public engagement strategies such as using inclusive frames can foster these feelings. Calls to action that explicitly state all Canadians have a role to play may work, as might framing the issue as a "Canadian issue" or its resolution as "part of the Canadian way." The latter suggestions may also harness peoples' motivation to view the government as just (see Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Gaucher, Friesen, Neufeld, & Esses, 2017; Jost, 2015). Such frames may help to shift the observed mindset of delegating responsibility to a mindset of embodying responsibility (de Costa & Clark, 2016).

**Strategy D. Use rights frames.** Participants naturally used human rights frames when speaking about the lack of safe running water in First Nations, suggesting that this frame resonated with them. Other work by our research group has found evidence that this strategy is indeed effective for increasing public support for fulfilling First Nations water rights (Starzyk et al., 2019). Although the Indigenous community members interviewed in that project deemed this frame an appropriate one, we acknowledge that the concept of human rights does not always sit comfortably with conceptions of Indigenous rights (Kulchyski, 2013), and so may not always be appropriate. All three self-identified allies used Indigenous rights frames in their interviews, which suggests that this frame may be effective either among those who are already knowledgeable about the issue or when used alongside efforts to educate people about Indigenous rights.

**Strategy E. Promote positive interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in**

**Canada.** Intergroup contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice, especially when that contact involves cooperation towards a common goal (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Engagement strategies would do well, then, to bring together these groups with the expressed purpose of working together to find solutions to the lack of safe running water in First Nations. For White Canadians in particular, contact with Indigenous Peoples could also increase their feelings of personal responsibility around this issue (Tropp & Barlow, 2018). As contact alone sometimes only decreases overt hostile prejudice but not subtler forms (e.g., paternalism; see Denis, 2015), it is important to combine contact with critical educational efforts that illuminate systemic racism (e.g., Strategy A).

**Potential Limitations**

To varying degrees, people are often consciously or subconsciously motivated to present themselves in a positive light (Paulhus, 1984); as such, participants may have expressed support for access to safe running water in First Nations because to do otherwise might seem ignorant or racist. Although such motivations were likely at play, we do not believe that they invalidate the current results. First, to really understand participants' support for any one specific issue, we attempted to interpret their comments within the context of the interview as a whole, including their understanding of colonization, attributions of responsibility, and subtle racism; doing so arguably provides a more accurate and nuanced representation of their views. Second, documenting how people construct their ideas about First Nations water rights is crucial to the process of creating a public engagement strategy. Participants' social desirability concerns around issues impacting Indigenous Peoples in this study were also likely present throughout their daily lives; thus, how participants spoke about these issues here likely reflects how they, and perhaps other non-Indigenous Canadians, sometimes speak in other interactions.

Another potential limitation pertains to our sample. The 22 non-Indigenous Canadians were not representative of the non-Indigenous public. This makes it difficult to infer generalizations about the level or extent of particular attitudes to the population whose engagement barriers we seek to reduce. For example, people who decided to participate in a study about challenges facing First Nations might be more informed and engaged than the general public. Aside from the three allies, however, participants had relatively low awareness and engagement and often expressed racist sentiments. Given that larger national surveys have reported similar trends (Environics Institute for Survey Research, 2016; Starzyk et al., 2019; Trudeau Foundation, 2013), it is reasonable to surmise that our attitudinal findings reflect those perceptions present, potentially to a greater extent, among the larger Canadian population. More importantly, as statistical generalization is not the goal of qualitative methods, the theoretical insights of this analysis (i.e., the nuances and complexity of participants' interpretations) may be transferable to other contexts and settings.

**Conclusion**

Compared to other homes in Canada, on-reserve homes are systematically less likely have adequate water and sanitation services (Neegan Burnside, 2011; United Nations, 2009). Public pressure from non-Indigenous Canadians is one important route to resolving this inequity; yet, many Canadians are not taking action. This article provides insights into potential barriers to public engagement, on water specifically and broader inequities facing Indigenous Peoples; it also offers suggestions to overcome

these barriers. We hope that those with the responsibility to effect change will integrate these findings into their policy, programming, or advocacy efforts to fulfill First Nations' right to water.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

During this interview, I will use the term "First Nations." This group belongs to a larger group that people sometimes called "Aboriginal." There are no right or wrong responses to any of my questions. What matters is that you feel comfortable providing your honest opinion, so please tell me what you truly think and how you really feel. We are not interested in your personal views, but those of Canadians in general. Your responses are confidential and will not be associated with your name in any way.

1. Tell me about your understanding of some of the key issues faced by First Nations communities in Canada today? Probes if needed:
  - Can you tell me more about that?
  - How much of an issue do you think this is, and why?
  - Can you think of an example of this?
  - Can you think of any other issues?
  - How do you know this?
  
2. What is your understanding of water or sanitation issues faced by First Nations communities, if any? Probes if needed:
  - How much of an issue do you think this is, and why?
  - How do you know this?
  - Can you think of an example of this?
  - Do you have any understanding of possible solutions to this issue? Could you tell me more?

3. A 2011 report indicated that approximately 28% of homes in First Nations communities in Canada do not have access to clean running water.<sup>2</sup> In hearing this, what are your first thoughts? Probes if needed:
  - How does hearing this make you feel?
  - Can you tell me more?
4. How would you describe your own level of concern about these issues? (Probes: water in particular, or other issues affecting First Nations communities)
5. How would you describe your own involvement in these issues? (Probes: nature and form of the involvement – how they seek change)
  - a. If involved: Can you tell me about how you became involved (What convinced you, etc.)? How do you think it will make a difference? What are the greatest barriers to action a) for you personally and b) for others?
  - b. If not involved: Explain why/why not (Involved in other areas but not this, etc.)? What would convince you to support better water services on First Nations, if anything? What would put you off from supporting better water services on First Nations?
6.
  - a. Can you tell me about your understanding of the meaning of “human rights”?
  - b. Do you think human rights are relevant to the issue of First Nations’ access to water? Why/why not? Tell me more.
7.
  - a. Can you tell me about your understanding of the meaning of “public health”?
  - b. Do you think public health is relevant to the issue of First Nations’ access to water? Why/why not? Tell me more.
8.
  - a. Have you had personal experience interacting one on one with First Nations persons? Can you tell me more about this?
  - b. Is there anything you want to tell me about your interactions with or impressions of First Nations persons?
9. Is there anything else you’d like to add? Anything that you’ve told me that you wish to clarify?

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<sup>2</sup> This estimate may be incorrect. A more accurate estimate is approximately 3,000 homes (H. Fallding, personal communication, June 24, 2014).