CENTERING BLACK VOICES: EXAMINING ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS IN THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK RPNS

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INTRODUCTION

Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) are vital contributors to the Canadian healthcare system, providing essential care across diverse practice settings. However, Black RPNs experience distinctive and compounded barriers stemming from anti-Black racism. This review specifically examines how anti-Black racism shapes the professional realities of Black RPNs. While RPNs across the profession face widespread challenges including burnout, staffing shortages, and role strain, Black RPNs navigate additional obstacles rooted in historical exclusion, racialized credentialing processes, and systemic inequities. The purpose of this review is to center the voices and experiences of Black RPNs, critically analyze the ways anti-Black racism undermines their professional development, retention, and well-being, and explore strategies that advance equity and systemic change.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to highlight the experiences of Black RPNs and propose strategies to optimize the RPN role by fostering high-functioning, inclusive, and resilient nursing teams.

RELATED LITERATURE

- The COVID-19 pandemic has globally exacerbated pre-existing hardships in the nursing profession , contributing to a nursing shortage (Buckley et al., 2025).
- Nurses have experienced extreme workload pressures, leading to high levels of burnout, psychological distress, and job dissatisfaction (Buckley et al., 2025; RNAO, 2022). These workload pressures are further complicated by underlying racial, and discriminatory practices embedded in Canadian healthcare institutions (RNAO, 2022).
- Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) are a foundational part of the nursing workforce, employed in various fields such as acute care, long-term care, research, policy, and public health (Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario, 2024).
- RPNs, particularly Black RPNs, frequently encounter systemic barriers to advancement, and job retention, contributing to job stagnation, higher turnover rates, and psychological burdens (Thomas-Hawkins et al., 2022; Nowrouzi-Kia et al., 2022)

METHODOLOGY

A narrative review of eight qualitative and quantitative studies was conducted.

Thematic analysis identified four core themes:
- **Racism**
- **Historical Exclusion**
- **Leadership and Advancement, and**
- **Diversity and Inclusion in the workforce.**

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Anti-Black Racism (ABR) remains a pervasive barrier across institutional levels. Historical exclusion curtailed access to nursing education, while career advancement is limited by systemic inequities and a lack of mentorship. Internationally educated Black nurses often face credentialing and immigration challenges, leading to underemployment and deskilling. Diversity efforts are frequently perceived as performative rather than transformative. Workplace disparities, such as higher rates of lower salaries, heavier workloads, and increased job strain, were also found.

CONCLUSION

This review underscores the need for workforce strategies that centre equity, inclusion, and team cohesion. Creating psychologically safe and communicative work environments is essential for optimizing the RPN role and fostering professional growth. Recommended actions include leadership development programs, conflict resolution training, and mentorship models grounded in anti-racist principles. By centering the experiences of Black RPNs, this research contributes to the development of evidence-informed policies and practices that promote sustainable, inclusive, and equitable healthcare workplaces.

OUR THREE-PHASED APPROACH

PHASE I:
NARRATIVE REVIEW: CONSISTS OF AN ACADEMIC LITERATURE AND GREY SEARCH EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK RPNS.

PHASE II:
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS: RECRUIT 25 BLACK RPNS WHO ARE WILLING TO SHARE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

PHASE III:
FOCUS GROUPS: RECRUIT 2 FOCUS GROUPS OF 8 (N=16) BLACK RPNS WHO ARE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Policy reform and institutional accountability
- Leadership development through mentorship
- Mental health and workforce support
- Inclusion of Anti-Black Racism curriculum in nursing education, and training
- Future community-engaged research on Black RPNs

STRENGTHS

- Narrative manuscript utilizes the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Reviews (SANRA) to assess the quality of the paper.
- The researchers worked with WeRPN, our community engagement partner, in developing this paper. Their expertise and perspectives helped guide and refine the understanding.

LIMITATIONS

- Only English-language publications were reviewed
- No manual reference lists checks were done.
- Paucity of literature on Black nurses, especially Black RPNs in Canada

CITATIONS

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