



Gendered Colonialism: An Intersectional Analysis of Ethnicity, Race and Gender in Education

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Abstract

While post-secondary institutions have become progressively diverse, systematic forms of oppression continue to impact marginalized groups, particularly women of colour. As a result, racialized women tend to have more negative experiences throughout the duration of their educational pursuits. Using qualitative research methods, this study seeks to uncover how race, ethnicity and gender intersect to produce various forms of oppression, which are preserved by power relations that reinforce hierarchical structures within society. This study addressed three main issues: (1) how women of colour understand their experiences of oppression (2) how white dominance is internalized and (3) how oppressive ideologies are contested and coped with. An intersectional analysis and decolonial feminist framework were implemented to explore how intersecting oppressions impact self-identity construction for women of colour in higher learning.

Keywords: race, ethnicity, gender, oppression, education, diversity, inclusion

1. Introduction

The lives of women of colour are located in an intricate web of racialized and gendered intersections that lead to various forms of oppression. As women of colour enter professional spaces, their day-to-day experiences are implicated by these interrelated facets. The progression into higher education for a racialized woman puts her in the 'heart of whiteness', in which her identity is constructed as an out-of-place, silenced being.¹ Situated in a setting with the constant feeling that one does not belong bears

¹. Heidi S. Mirza, "Decolonizing Higher Education: Black Feminism and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, no. 7/8 (2015): 2.

emotional and psychological consequences.² Research indicates that minority students are at a greater risk of leaving university before finishing their degree due to feelings of exclusion and perceived hostile academic climate.³ Consequently, it is important to understand how racialized women internalize these power disparities and make sense of the barriers that arise in their struggle to define themselves in spaces of learning. The concept of intersectionality is exceptionally useful for providing an ontology that uncovers the experiences of women who are implicated by structures of domination and control as racialized, gendered, sexualized and colonized “others”.⁴ The objective of this research is to explore the ways in which women of colour are shaped by intersecting oppressions in education by providing a breakdown of the complex power relations that give rise to social inequality and systematic oppression.

The notion of positionality will be critical in this research exploration. Understanding this concept requires a comprehension of where one stands in relation to power.⁵ This acknowledgment is crucial for Western researchers as our positionality is nuanced by various influences of privilege and control.⁶ As author Reni Eddo-Lodge describes, there are many ways in which we as outsiders are also insiders.⁷ I am able-bodied, middle-class, with a post-secondary education and vernacular that is comparable to those I read and critique. These are characteristics that place me in a position where I am taken seriously and put my voice ahead of others. Developing an awareness of our positionality as researchers allows us to identify the potential biases and limitations that seep into our explorations (i.e., qualitative reflexivity). We tend to possess a subjective view of the world that we seek to reinforce through discourse with ourselves and others. However, it is more of a monologue than a dialogue in which we encourage others to assume our ways of thinking.⁸ Only by listening and developing an appreciation for others’ views and narratives can we truly gain an understanding of the world.⁹

2. Literature Review

Intersectionality and Power

Persistent disparities in the experiences of post-secondary students are magnified by power relations that are implicated by race and gender. To truly understand these intersecting oppressions in education, it is critical to deconstruct the ways in which postcolonial women navigate through racialized, classed and gendered limitations. The objective is therefore to uncover latent structures that give rise to social

². Ibid., 3.

³. Ibid.

⁴. Ibid.

⁵. David Takacs, “Positionality, Epistemology, and Social Justice in the Classroom,” *Social Justice* 90, no. 4 (2002): 169.

⁶. Mark Griffiths, “From Heterogeneous Worlds: Western Privilege, Class and Positionality in the South,” *Area* 49, no. 1 (2017): 3.

⁷. Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2017).

⁸. Takacs, “Positionality, Epistemology, and Social Justice in the Classroom,” 169.

⁹. Linda T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Otago: University Press, 2012).

segregation in the lives of women of colour.¹⁰ To fully understand how racism and sexism operate in society, it is vital to acknowledge how these concepts intersect with other forms of oppression in different contexts. The notion of intersectionality was first developed by American critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1995.¹¹ This concept provides us with the ability to understand how individuals' identification with a given group may lead to certain forms of discrimination, while being tied to other minoritized groups influences one's experience with that discrimination.

To understand the interrelated components of oppression, it is essential to first analyze power relations that foster these inequities, as this is where race and gender are situated. In contemporary society natural resources, human life and employment are dominated by the elite. The potent influences that sustain their position have created a delicate web of domination around the world, and the processes for enabling this to occur have become structured and systematic.¹² When entering the world, we are faced with an established script that dictates what to expect from others based on social prestige, race, gender and so on. While the words 'power' and 'privilege' often stimulate ideas of luxury and comfort, this is not the underlying feature of these ideologies. Power does not necessarily signify a life without struggle; instead, it acknowledges that being part of an elite group (i.e., male, white, heterosexual) will almost always benefit one's course throughout life.¹³ It is this position in society that simultaneously oppresses and reduces others to less than human.¹⁴ For the woman of colour, it is simply not possible to avoid this experience in her navigation of day-to-day interactions.

Decolonial Feminism

Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones further deconstructs the intersections of gender, race, class and sexualities through the notion of decolonial feminism,¹⁵ a concept she developed. This theory provides us with an understanding of the complex interaction between economic, ethnicized and gendered systems that each colonized individual faces throughout their life. The analysis of these intersecting oppressions is the coloniality of gender and the opportunity to overcome it is what Lugones defines as decolonial feminism.¹⁶

Coloniality was, and still is, fostered in situations that allow certain groups to be oppressed by a forceful establishment of the modern, colonial gender system. When the Americas and the Caribbean were colonized, a dichotomous classification between human and non-human was distinguished through a Western lens. Among this hierarchical division was a distinction between man and woman, which has now become the feature of humankind and civilization.¹⁷ Colonized groups, such as

¹⁰ Mirza, "Decolonizing Higher Education: Black Feminism and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender," 2.

¹¹ David Gillborn, "Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory, and the Primacy of Racism: Race, Class, Gender, and Disability in Education," *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (2015): 278.

¹² Anne Bishop, *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2015).

¹³ Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*.

¹⁴ Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 745.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 753.

¹⁷ Ibid., 743.

Indigenous peoples and Africans were equivalent to animals in the sense that they were secondary and incapable of critical thinking. This resulted in the voices of these groups being suppressed.¹⁸ Not even the European woman was equivalent to the European man; rather, she was a mere distortion of male perfection. Women were understood as individuals who reproduced an ideal race and capital through their sexuality. Hence, not only is the gender system classified by hierarchy, it is also racially differentiated, fostering bias and allowing gender to be colonized.¹⁹ It is the oppressing intersections at the center of the colonial difference that women of colour experience by those who try to deprive them. This intrusive process is what occupies them in a manner that is intriguing yet commanding, discouraging any type of features that would maintain their own sense of self. The concept of coloniality is therefore more than a dichotomous hierarchy of society in terms of power, it involves the practice of dehumanizing certain groups in accordance with their classification in the hierarchy.²⁰ While this sounds like a fad of the past, colonialism is still present in contemporary Canada as the elite maintain power over various groups.²¹ Author Linda Smith contests the dominant structures that continue to hurt people of colour. She argues that these powerful institutions, such as education, need to be decolonized in order to truly appreciate the history and experiences of women of colour from their own narratives.²² Decolonial feminism is critical to understanding the interrelated components of race, colonization and class, and it further goes beyond the oppression of women to provide them with the ability to realize their experiences without surrendering to them.²³

3. Methodology

Using a phenomenological framework with a decolonized lens, the purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth comprehension of racialized and ethnic women's experiences with oppression in education. Michael Patton's recommendation for *empathetic neutrality* was followed, which seeks to prevent one's own bias and respective beliefs from influencing the data collection. This involves deep consideration for participants' perspectives while still maintaining a neutral stance about the information they disclose.²⁴ Qualitative methods were employed to develop a thorough understanding of ethnicized women's lives, in addition to the interplay of race, gender and other social influences that impact their lived experiences.

The analysis addressed three exploratory questions/issues:

1. How women of colour understand their experiences with oppression in higher learning
2. How white dominance is internalized
3. How oppressive ideologies are contested and coped with

¹⁸ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

¹⁹ Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 745.

²⁰ Ibid., 748.

²¹ Anthony D. Clark, Sela Kleiman, Lisa B. Spanierman, Paige Isaac, and Gauthamie Poolokasingham, "Do You Live in a Teepee? Aboriginal Students' Experiences with Racial Microaggressions in Canada," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 7, no. 2 (2014): 112.

²² Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

²³ Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 753.

²⁴ Edgar Pacheco, Miriam Lips, and Pak Yoong, "Transition 2.0: Digital Technologies, Higher Education, and Vision Impairment," *The Internet and Higher Education* 37, (2018): 3.

Research Participants

Participants for this study consisted of racial and ethnic women attending post-secondary institutions either at the undergraduate or graduate level. The intersecting characteristics of race, ethnicity and gender were significant as they led to different forms of oppression, impacting self-identity construction and daily navigations of life. The differentiation between undergraduate and graduate students was used to explore how participants' experiences differed as they progressed through their studies. In addition, age was a confounding factor beyond the education level since people tend to have more life experiences as they mature. Post-secondary institutions are critical in shaping the ways in which women of colour come to understand their worlds as they provide an extensive setting for interaction between individuals of all backgrounds. The goal was to listen to the voices of these women and develop an understanding for their personal struggles with oppression. For this reason, I chose only to explore the experiences of women of colour, as it is not necessary to validate their narratives against other groups.

A snowball sampling method was used to invite participants to be a part of this study. This phase of recruitment began with personal contacts sharing details about the exploration with interested individuals who then contacted myself directly if they self-identified with the participant groups. Each new participant communicated with myself through information either provided by a previous participant or through a personal contact. I also attended a variety of lectures and tutorials inviting students to participate in the research, which also proved to be effective. Ultimately, participants were able to self-identify and self-select.

A total of 11 participants took part in the study: 7 undergraduate students and 4 graduate students attending an established post-secondary institution in Canada. Participants ages ranged from 20-41 years old, with a mean age of approximately 24 years old. Diverse academic backgrounds were reflected, as participants came from disciplines within education, law, sociology, psychology, political science, architecture and biopsychology. Approximately 50% of participants were born and raised outside of Canada, representing an additional intersecting factor. See Appendix A for visual representation of racial/ethnic dispersion.

Data Collection

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were the primary method of data collection. Personal interviews allowed participants to express their thoughts and beliefs in an environment that was safe, while also providing them with the ability to discuss their own narratives on their own terms. Linda Smith discusses the importance of research benefitting the researched.²⁵ Accordingly, an effort was made to create a space in which participants could discuss subjects they would not necessarily have the opportunity to in their everyday lives.

Participants were provided with consent forms prior to the data collection taking place. During the interviews, participants were audio-recorded while field notes were taken for data analysis. The

²⁵. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

maintenance and use of field notes provided me with the ability to account for emotions and non-verbal language that would not have been recognized in audio recordings. This aided in drawing on situational factors that later proved to be critical for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Transcribing and Coding

All recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis taking place. The transcription was carefully reviewed as pseudonyms, notations (e.g., pauses) and contextual dynamics were factored into the study. Once the recordings had been transcribed, the transcript was coded to uncover recurrent themes and patterns. In an effort to be tremendously thorough in the data analysis process, the data was coded manually. This allowed me to become immersed in the data and ensure that the analysis was not only detailed, but also accurate. The main patterns were organized into broad themes which were further categorized into subthemes within each category. It was during this phase that a comprehension of the participants' circumstances began to surface.

5. Findings

The coding analysis revealed four major themes: experiences with oppression, academia, coping and recommendations.

A.1 Experiences with Oppression

A significant part of being a woman of colour involves one's race implicating their experiences, interactions and situations they find themselves in. This theme refers to the process of an individuals' race or ethnic background influencing their daily living, such as how they behave or communicate with others. Participants unanimously agreed that oppression was something they had experienced throughout their lives. While understandings of oppression differed from participant to participant due to diverse backgrounds, academic levels and experiences, there was still a shared underlying belief as to how it manifests itself in society. For the purpose of this research, oppression will be defined as the systemic use of power to subordinate members of a social group through a process of othering that works to maintain unequal power distributions within society. This definition is based on a summation of participants' responses about how they understand and utilize the concept.

Participants reported that oppression was an enduring experience that began as early as the elementary age due to a process of socialization. It was at this point they developed a sense of otherness as they came to realize there were few others who looked like them. This was a feeling that progressed throughout high school and into their post-secondary educational pursuits. The educational system played a critical role in shaping identity construction and encounters with other students or faculty. Unlike public setting where individuals may not possess a higher education, university and college campuses provide a context in which individuals are present for the sole purpose of advancing their knowledge in a specific area. Accordingly, professors and students in this setting tend to have more knowledge and awareness of social inequalities. While participants reported that campus climate was generally positive, oppression manifested itself in more minute ways. As one participant describes,

“You have to deviate, we have to manage our behaviour, our presentation—just having to think about it is a burden in and of itself. It’s cultural gaslighting... I just think it’s this constant sense of being told that what you’re feeling is not valid, there’s no discrimination, there’s no oppression, meanwhile you do feel like there are certain ways you are being treated differently and the statistics don’t lie, you know? That life outcomes for people of colour or women of colour are limited. It’s this almost like, embodied imposition where we just feel like we’re out of place even though no one has told you you’re out of place and we regulate ourselves to fit into it or you know, pass.” There is a perpetual reminder that one is out of place in higher learning as they are occupying a space that has not historically been designed for them. Managing these environments and one’s self-presentation becomes an active process, which can be tiring and distressing.

A.2 Academia

Academia was significant in participants’ lives as they were all pursuing a post-secondary degree. Specifically, participants reported the education system predominantly being taught through a Western lens that lacks diversity in terms of gender and race. As we live in a Western society, it is unsurprising that academia is often taught through a Eurocentric perspective. However, this can be problematic when learning about social inequality and systematic discrimination. Participants reported that the theories, resources and information they were taught with had an absence of women, people of colour and intersections of the two. Learning about history through one viewpoint skews individuals’ understanding of history, while reinforcing the idea that one’s ancestors are not worth learning about. The lack of reference to marginalized groups is an example of the colonial process at work as it maintains power through historical resources by disregarding the contributions made by the other. Consequently, participants reported having to independently seek outside resources to include voices from people or women of colour. One participant counted, mentioning that approximately 10% of the scholars they read were women, 10% were people of colour and some intersected. If she wanted to learn beyond the white, male, heteropatriarchy, she would have to do so on her own time since it was rarely provided. This has the implication of obscuring other epistemologies and ontologies.

A further issue for participants in terms of academia was the lack of representation on campus. Particularly, they reported few women or people of colour depicted in the faculty or student population. This amplified the feeling of being an outsider, as they reported not seeing faces that looked like theirs or their families. While this is not a blatant attack on women of colour, the lack of representation contributes to a sense of interiority. Representation is a substantial issue as it hinders participants’ ability to feel that they belong when they do not see others who look or can identify with them. It can be an isolating journey when you are the only one of your kind, especially being part of a minoritized group.

A.3 Coping and Recommendations

Participants discussed how they coped with their experiences and contested the challenges they faced. In their descriptions, they mainly recalled talking the issue out with others to bring awareness to the problem. In this, family and friends were significant in providing a strong support system for participants struggling with feelings of othering and silencing. At the same time, they were also able to validate their experiences and help them to embrace who they are in their educational pursuits.

Participants also addressed the importance of their education in providing them with knowledge and words to conceptualize their understandings. If one does not know the term of the term microaggression for example, it may prove difficult to describe what they are feeling and they may be more likely to brush it off. Numerous participants further reflected on remaining positive as they emphasized that they cannot, and have no desire to spend their entire lives analyzing whether something was oppressive or not; rather, they just had to keep moving forward, especially since it occurs so frequently.

Participants offered recommendations for changes that could be made to enhance feelings of inclusivity, diversity and anti-oppressive ideologies in higher learning. Specific reports were made in regards to institutions implementing structural modifications. While they acknowledged that the institution does an impeccable job of paying service to being inclusive, participants were unsure as to how this translated into practice. They reported a desire to move past the outward feelings of diversity; instead, they wanted to see changes being made systemically. The academy may depict images of students of colour in posters or develop clubs targeted towards marginalized groups, but participants reported that this would not be effective until women of colour see themselves in the campus; that is, in the course material, in the student population and in their faculties.

6. Discussion

Throughout this research I have depicted a narrative of racialized women's lived experiences, illustrating the occurrence of oppression across space and time. The objective was to put the reader in the shoes of women of colour for their circumstances to be understood on their own terms. Listening to the perspectives of racialized and ethnic women provides insight into often concealed issues that have profound consequences. It is further important to note that participants generally had positive feelings about the campus climate and acknowledged that improvements were being made. Many participants expressed that some professors and curriculums were beginning to incorporate more Indigenous authors and voices from people of colour, which contributed to fostering inclusivity and representation on campus.

Research is often undertaken with the assumption that it will create value for humanity and contribute to something greater than itself. Providing an accurate account of individuals' narratives and telling them well is therefore imperative.²⁶ As Patricia Hill Collins describes, marginalized groups are often faced with circumstances in which their voices will be heard only if their thoughts are similar or suitable for the dominant group.²⁷ In turn, this alters the meaning of their beliefs while simultaneously allowing the ideologies of dominant groups to supersede. The contributions of this research have provided women of colour with the opportunity to discuss how they have been impacted by dominant structures in society, while providing a raw description of these experiences without the influence of prevailing groups. In addition, the research provides an alternative perspective on social inequality from the viewpoint of the other, as this is a standpoint that has historically been disregarded.²⁸ This study provided a safe space in which participants were free to discuss oppressive institutions without

²⁶. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

²⁷. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

²⁸. Ibid.

the fear of feeling scrutinized by authoritative, political or social pressures. The knowledge gained through this research investigation will also benefit society by identifying and revealing dormant issues in institutions that are often overlooked. The findings can be used to develop new insights into the ways in which power relations reinforce social divisions and inequity in contemporary society, ultimately providing a foundation for further research to be completed in detecting and rectifying issues of oppression.

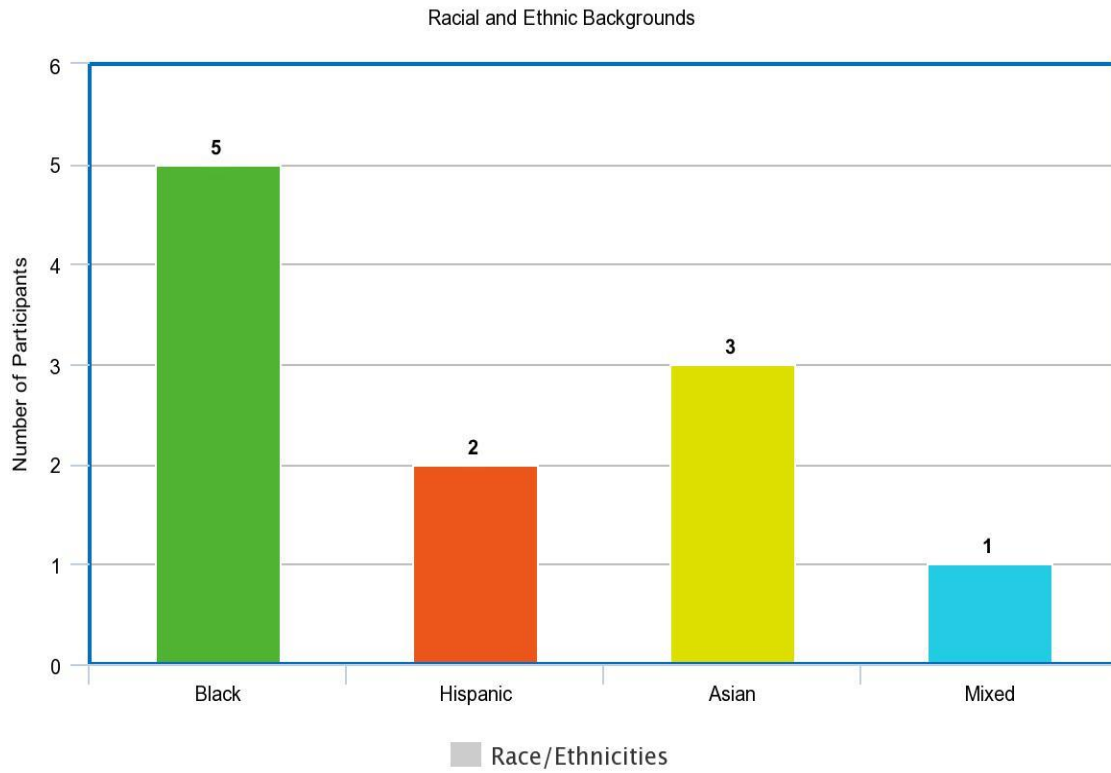
Conclusion

This research study explores how women of colour in education experience intersecting oppressions and come to understand these processes. The objective was to gain a comprehension of how ethnic and racialized women interact with dominant structures in addition to how they internalize white dominance and combat these challenges. It is particularly useful in sociological research to explore how individuals depict and perceive their state of being and develop their self-concept, allowing researchers in this area to identify various challenges and methods of resolution. Intersectionality and decolonial feminism are critical perspectives that provide a comprehensive analysis of how race, gender and other social identities are interrelated to create diverse forms of oppression. This aids in developing an understanding of the othered woman's fight for autonomy and recognition in her educational pursuit.²⁹ The findings of this research are of great relevance not only to women of colour, but also for elite and dominant groups in understanding their position of power that subliminally functions to silence marginalized groups.

²⁹. "Decolonizing Higher Education: Black Feminism and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender," 9.

Appendix A

Figure 1: Illustration of racial and ethnic dispersion among participants.



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