



ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE: COLONIALISM AND MENTAL HEALTH ON CAMPUS

PART 2

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The purpose of part two of the Anti-Oppressive Practice toolkit is to help its users gain a fuller understanding of the history of colonization on college and university campuses in Canada and how that history plays a part in the current structure of these institutions. The toolkit also aims to dive into the link between colonialism and student mental health on campus in the present day while also providing some tangible tools that can be used to begin dismantling colonial structures and policies on post-secondary campuses. From the summaries below we can see that colonization and colonialism go hand in hand because colonialism is needed to maintain the actions of colonization.

Colonization and Colonialism

There are two important terms whose definitions will help to support our understanding of the content of this toolkit. The first is colonization. Colonization occurs when a person or group of people settle in a geographic area and work to establish control over the Indigenous people in that place (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.). Colonization is an active action or process that is put into motion by those who settle on a piece of land. Colonialism is the policies and practices that a person or group of people engage in to exert control over an Indigenous population, as well as to exploit that Indigenous population and their land (Blakemore, 2019; University of Saskatchewan, n.d.).

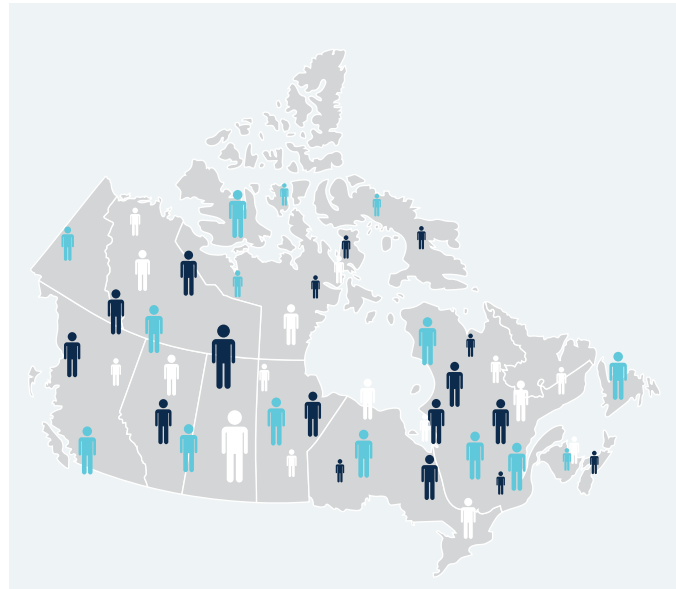
Colonization and colonialism are not exclusive to a particular country or a particular part of the world. Many ancient empires like the Greeks and Romans engaged in colonialist actions, but the acts of colonialism that took place across the Americas are considered to be more 'modern' because they occurred in the 15th century during the age of discovery (Blakemore, 2019). By the early 20th century, most of the world had been colonized in one way or another by European countries (Blakemore, 2019). Some notable historic acts of colonization include Portugal's conquering of Mozambique, Angola, and Cape Verde (among many other countries); Christopher Columbus' subjugation of Indigenous people in the United States of America, and France's colonization of Algeria, Guadeloupe, and Haiti.

Acts of colonization and colonialism are not without harm. Within the Americas alone, it has been estimated that 56 million people died due to colonialism, colonization and their after-effects (like war, disease, and slavery) (Pruitt, 2019). Colonization and colonialism also led to the separation of families and forced Indigenous peoples to flee their homes for fear of losing their lives. These harms, however, are not limited to the past. Intergenerational trauma has passed the effects of these harms from those who experienced them down through familial lines to their present-day descendants (Conching & Thayer, 2019). Intergenerational trauma is the transmission of oppression and the effects of historically harmful events (Duke University, n.d.) Intergenerational trauma compounds the harm that people experience since it transmits the effects of past trauma experiences within their families and comingles these harms with the present-day traumas a person is experiencing. These intersecting traumas can have a deleterious toll on mental and physical wellbeing. An example of how colonization and colonialism move from the past to the present is the Indian Act, a piece of legislation that curtails Indigenous people's ability to self-govern, much in the same way that the original act of colonization did (Gone et al., 2019).

The Indian Act also forced Indigenous people to choose between having status and attending university by making it so that if an Indigenous person graduated from university, their status would be revoked. Canada has its own unique history of colonization and colonialism that has a broad impact on Canadian society, touching every realm, including that of post-secondary education.

Colonization in Canada

Colonization in Canada dates back to the early 1500s when Jean-François de la Rocque de sieur Roberval, the viceroy of Canada was tasked with creating a permanent colony in the New World (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.) Over time, many other New World explorers and religious orders like the Jesuits joined Roberval in the colonization of Canada and began to engage in economic actions such as the fur trade (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.) By the 1600s, the Hudson's Bay Company was created, taking over the fur trade (Gismondi, 2020) and the forced transportation of slaves to the new world had begun (Parks Canada, 2020). The 1700s saw infighting amongst colonizing nations as they sought to take for themselves what they felt were the best parts of the land (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.). As further emissaries from colonizing nations arrived in Canada, they brought along with them a disease that would go on to decimate Indigenous populations over the entire millennia, smallpox (Spaulding & Foster-Sanchez, 2020). Through all this, Indigenous people and the British government in Upper Canada (Ontario) were working towards one of the first land agreements in Canada, the Niagara Treaty of 1781 (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.). The start of the 1800s brought about the beginnings of relief from the smallpox epidemic when the first smallpox vaccinations were given out by a doctor named John Clinch (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.). This millennium also brought with it the creation of the [Underground Railroad](#) (The Canadian Encyclopedia, n.d.). This particular piece of history helps to position Canada as a safe haven for slaves. But as alluded to earlier in this section with the mention of the beginning of the slave trade in Canada, and what the next section of this toolkit represents, Canada's relationship to slavery is much more complex than that. These past events helped to create the foundation on which our post-secondary institutions were formed and influenced the structures that brought these institutions into the present day.



Slavery (Content Warning: This section contains graphic depictions of bodily harm)

Slavery played a significant part in creating, sustaining, and maintaining the colonies created by the European countries taking part in colonization. Many of them relied on economic arguments to justify the slave trade because the use of slaves was to their benefit for two main reasons (Parks Canada, 2020). The first is that using slaves to build up colonies was a money-saving measure as slaves were not paid for their work. The second is that, in times of hardship or economic fundraises, colonies could sell their slaves, or their children, in order to raise funds for new projects and colony expansion (Wilder, 2013). The practice of slavery was separate from that of indentured servitude, which happened during the same historical time period (McRae, n.d.).

For some time now, the myth that slaves in Canada were subject to better conditions than slaves in other parts of North American has pervaded Canadian history, however, this is not true (Henry, 2022). Enslaved African and Indigenous people were exposed to deplorable conditions and treatment and their human rights were ignored (Henry, 2022). They were treated as subhuman, subject to extreme beatings and whipping, and many were subjected to sexual violence (Parks Canada, 2020). For those slaves who made attempts to reach freedom and were caught, punishments ranged from having appendages cut off to being put to death (McRae, n.d.). In spite of these terrifying consequences, there is a rich history of resistance to slavery by enslaved people (Henry, 2022).

Enslaved people were forced to work in a variety of industries, from agriculture to domestic work, to providing free labour to local shops (Henry, 2022). They even built and worked on the campuses of the colleges and universities being established in Canada at that time (Wilder, 2013). Not until the 1700s did any parts of Canada start to make any movement towards the elimination of slavery. Upper Canada imposed limits on slavery in 1793 but it took until 1834 for the Slavery Abolishment Act to be made law (Parks Canada, 2020). Though this act freed slaves, it did nothing to bring about equity within Canadian society. That lack of equity still pervades Canada and its institutions to this day.

Structural Racism



Structural racism is a society-wide system that enables our public policies, norms, and institutional practices to perpetuate racial inequity (The Aspen Institute, n.d.). Like structural oppression ([see AOP Part I](#)), structural racism operates at the level of our societal institutions, including within post-secondary institutions.

Due to the nature of their origins, part of the narrative of post-secondary education is a history of racism which is, unfortunately, a part of our institutions' foundations. Many of the original policies of colleges and universities were created during times when particular races of people were being actively excluded from post-secondary education. Some of that foundation is still present today in both colleges and universities. Structural racism also plays a part in how campus policies are enacted as well. This manifests in many ways, including which types of students are approached aggressively by campus security and campus police (Tomlinson et al., 2022), what types of people are hired for roles on campus, and which people are assumed to be professors on campus (Eisenkraft, 2010)

Colonization and Slavery – A Short History of Colleges and Universities

It is not only the Canadian society at large that was touched by and complicit in colonization and slavery. Canadian post-secondary institutions were active participants in colonial processes. The structural blueprint initially used to create colleges and universities during colonial times was used from that point onward to build post-secondary institutions across Canada. Universities were also heavily involved in the residential school project. These institutions also served a similar purpose to residential schools, in that they both aimed to assimilate Indigenous people to western culture and ideologies while attempting to eradicate Indigenous ways of being and understandings of the world.

Unlike American post-secondary institutions, which have been grappling with their link to colonialism and unearthing their history of slavery for some time, Canadian schools have only just begun to do this difficult work. This means that there is not as much research available to paint a fulsome picture of our past. What is out there, however, can help give us an idea of how Canadian post-secondary institutions were connected to and complicit in colonization and slavery.

The original post-secondary institutions established in Canada were intended as places where the elites of Europe could send their sons to seek out education in order to prepare to take on family business or strike out on their own in colonized territories (Nelson, 2020). Enslaved people played a large part in supporting the education of these students, in part by cooking, cleaning, and maintaining campus (Nelson, 2020). But it was not just their labour that was used to sustain institutions, their bodies were used for that purpose as well. Enslaved people were often sold to raise money for various post-secondary institutions growth and expansion efforts (Wilder, 2013). Both in death and in life, enslaved people's bodies were also used to advance the causes of science and medicine within colleges and universities as well (Bachynski, 2018; Berry, 2018; Shashkevish, n.d.)

One post-secondary institution whose colonial history we have a bit more written information about is McGill University. McGill University was founded in 1821 and named after James McGill. McGill was a merchant whose fortune was built from selling enslaved people and the fur trade (Nelson. Charmaine, 2021). McGill University was created in the years after his death in 1813 after he bequeathed the land he bought with said fortune to the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning on the specific condition that they create a post-secondary institution and name it after him within a decade of his death (Nelson. Charmaine, 2021). In the immediate years after its creation, McGill University struggled greatly with its finances. So much so that in 1860, the government organization known as ‘the Executive Council of the Crown from the Province of Canada’ took £40,000 out of their General Indian Trust Fund meant for the Six Nations of the Grand River without their knowledge (Nelson. Charmaine, 2021). Though the Six Nations of the Grand River pushed for the return of the money, it was never paid back. This stolen investment helped to set McGill University up to become one of Canada’s preeminent post-secondary institutions.

Another example of a post-secondary institution whose history we have a better understanding of is Algoma University, which opened in 1965. This post-secondary institution was built on and around the site of the Shingwauk Indian Residential Day School. Shingwauk was in operation from 1873 to 1970 (Algoma University, 2022). This residential school is one of the many sights across Canada where the ongoing work of uncovering unmarked graves is occurring (Sault Online, 2023). Today, Algoma University has established the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre with support from the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association (CSAA), in order to educate the broader public about the history of Shingwauk (Algoma University, 2022).

As stated earlier, very little information is available about the history of colonization on college and university campuses in Canada. But as time goes by more and more information has been uncovered. Within recent years, post-secondary institutions like Dalhousie University and University of King’s College have taken the steps to uncover this lost history, not as an exercise of shaming, but one of revelation and truth-sharing. (Nelson. Charmaine, 2021)

Colonialism’s Impact on Students

Colonialism and Student Mental Health

Colonialism had an enormous impact on those who lived within its grip. However, they are not the only people impacted by its legacy and present-day remnants. The descendants of populations impacted by colonialism feel its impacts as well. One way in which these impacts are felt is via mental health and wellbeing (Gone et al., 2019).

For Indigenous students, the mental impacts of colonialism are profound. Colonization stripped many things away from Indigenous people. Their land, resources, family structures, culture, language, and communal relationships sustained severe negative impacts from Europe’s colonial project (Potvin-Boucher & Malone, 2014). This decimation was not confined to Indigenous communities, it became embedded in post-secondary institutions as well. The oppressive structures seen within broader

society were replicated within post-secondary institutions and contribute to feelings of oppression and demoralization that Indigenous students may encounter when dealing with a post-secondary system that was not originally built to be welcoming to them (Potvin-Boucher & Malone, 2014). Consistently dealing with the stress of these issues can lead Indigenous students to experience depression, isolation, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues that would require them to seek support (Wilk et al., 2017). But seeking support may be difficult for these students because they do not see themselves or their cultures represented in the programs and services available on campus. For more information on Indigenous student mental health, please see CICMH's [Evaluating Indigenous Needs on Ontario Post-Secondary Campuses webinar](#).

Other groups have suffered as well. One prominent example is students who identify as racialized women. Racial hierarchies established during colonial times saw racialized people valued as less than white people. Once again, these racial hierarchies made their way into the policies and practices of post-secondary institutions in both implicit and explicit ways. The policies, procedures, and practices on our campuses have lent themselves, whether intentionally or not, to perpetuating an atmosphere that allowed racism to flourish at the structural and individual levels. The racism and discrimination these students face can lead to feelings of decreased self-worth and demoralization, which can contribute to mental health issues such as depression and substance use disorders (Lal et al., 2021). Racism and not being able to access culturally appropriate services or providers who understand their life experiences, both create barriers to accessing mental health resources on campus and contribute to low mental health resource uptake overall (Lal et al., 2021). Continued discrimination coupled with a lack of services leads to a harmful positive feedback loop where the structural harms of colonialism that are built into post-secondary systems are continually perpetuated.

Exclusion

One of the things that current and past policies related to post-secondary education have done is to exclude students from equity-deserving groups and make them feel unwelcome. These acts of exclusion can harm the mental health of students because they play into the narrative that they are not welcome on campus and have no place there. When we exclude students, intentionally or unintentionally, we also neglect their mental health needs and are unable to provide programs and services to meet them where they are at. Below are a few instances of exclusion that have happened to various equity-deserving groups on post-secondary campuses (note: the below sections are not exhaustive of all excluded groups).



Indigenous Exclusion

Indigenous students were originally excluded from colleges and universities when they first began to be established in Canada. One of the few exceptions were religious colleges and universities. These schools hoped to recruit small numbers of Indigenous students in order to teach them the tenets of Christianity so that they may return to their home communities to proselytize and convert other Indigenous people to Christianity (Wilder, 2013). In 1982, Indigenous people's right to attend post-secondary education was enshrined as a constitutional right through the Canadian Constitution Act (Canadian Federation of Students, 2021) Funding is now provided for Indigenous education through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and the University and College Entrance Preparation Program (UCEPP) (Canadian Federation of Students, 2021). However, these programs are not perfect. They are underfunded, difficult to access, and Métis people are not eligible to access them. Though some progress has been made, it is not enough to close the gaps that exist. Even today, many Indigenous students must travel far from their reservations or home communities in order to attend post-secondary education because of the lack of institutions closer to home. This forces them to leave behind a support system that affirms their cultural identity, which could negatively impact their mental health. The recommendations from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (see 'What Can We Do Now?' for more information) are a starting point that post-secondary institutions can build on to ensure the just inclusion of Indigenous students

Exclusion of Black People

From the time of slavery until the early 20th century, Black people were excluded from post-secondary education in one form or another. During the time of slavery, they only participated on post-secondary campuses in their capacity as enslaved people, providing manual and domestic services to staff and students (Wilder, 2013). In the 1900s many Canadian post-secondary institutions, including McGill, Dalhousie, Queens, and the University of Toronto excluded Black students from their medical and nursing schools (Henry, 2021). Black students were excluded from law schools as well (Smith, 2004). In present times, acts of racism such as racist posts in student group chats and the use of harmful language in the classroom, continue to exclude Black students from a campus experience that has positive impacts on their mental health (Burke et al., 2021; CBC News, 2021; Rodriguez, 2019).

2SLGBTQ+ Exclusion

2SLGBTQ+ students and staff have also had a fraught history with colleges and university. During the 1960s in the United States, students who were suspected of being in same-sex relationships were questioned and expelled from the university (CITE (Gerard, 2021)). Those who had the chance to remain on campus were forced into psychological treatment (Gerard, 2021). In 1991, Delwin Vriend, a lab instructor at King's College University in Edmonton was fired from his job for being gay (CBC News, 2012). His case ended up going all the way to the Supreme Court where it was found that his exclusion from his job violated the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CITE (Simons, 2018)). For information on the mental health of queer students on campus, please see [CICMH's Invisible Intersection toolkit](#).

Exclusion of Disabled People

In the 18th and 19th centuries, disabled people were mainly excluded from education and instead institutionalized (BC Disability, n.d.). It was not until the late 1900s that we began to even think about the particular needs of disabled students and only in 2010 did Canada ratify Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which plainly states that disabled people have a right to education (BC Disability, n.d.; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Despite this article, we still have gaps that create barriers for disabled students to participate fully in post-secondary education. Issues like a lack of services and funding, as well as barriers to supports and accommodations mean that disabled students still do not have equitable access to post secondary education ((Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

What Can We Do Now?

Individual

Critical Self-Reflection

Critical self-reflection is a key component of this work. It allows us to better understand our work practices, how they came to be, and how they affect and impact others. This is very important because our individual actions can support and maintain the status quo of our institutions, which is based in colonialism. By engaging in critical self-reflection, we can identify ways in which we may be upholding unhelpful norms and begin to work on reformulating our practices so that they can instead help dismantle barriers to mental health on campus.

CICMH has a set of reflection questions, created by Dr. Carol Wade, that can help you start your journey with critical self-reflection. You can find those questions [here](#).

Training

While you are engaging in the process of unlearning through critical self-reflection, you can also take steps to gain new knowledge about equity-deserving groups on campus and how colonization impacts them both directly and indirectly. There are many training opportunities out there, but below are a few recommendations to help you get started.



[YouthRex Centering Black Youth Wellbeing Certificate](#)

The Centering Black Youth Wellbeing certificate is a free, online training that helps participants to better understand anti-Black racism and its impact on Black youth. The training also provides skills and tools that can be used to build practices that will help them push back against and dismantle anti-Black racism through their day-to-day work.

[San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Online Training](#)

The San'yas training is an Indigenous cultural safety training that provides in-depth coverage of the history of Indigenous people in Canada and the impacts that colonization has had on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. This training supports participants in learning how to work with Indigenous people in a way that is beneficial to them, minimizes the risk of harm, and actively combats anti-Indigenous racism.

[Indigenous Health Equity Training](#)

This free, online training, provided by the Dalla Lana School of Public Health at the University of Toronto provides webinars and resources to help deepen your understanding of the impacts of the social determinants of health on Indigenous people.

Institutional

Taking up post-secondary specific calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's (TRC's) report

One step that post-secondary institutions can take to dismantle colonial structures on campus is to answer the post-secondary-specific calls to action from the [TRC's 2015 report](#). Two specific calls to action that colleges and universities can look to are:

- Number 11 — We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.
- Number 16 — We call upon post-secondary institutions to create university and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages.

The implementation of recommendation number 16 would go a long way to helping to right the historical wrong of excluding Indigenous languages from higher education as a means of “civilizing” Indigenous people (Wilder, 2013) The fulsome inclusion of these languages would demonstrate to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students that their languages are welcomed in academic spaces, hopefully helping them to feel more included on campus. This potential increase in feelings of inclusion would also contribute to increased positive mental health among Indigenous students, who would be able to see parts of their own histories represented within academia.



Utilize the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework to analyse current and new campus policies

The [IBPA](#) is a policy analysis framework that works to identify the forces and power structures related to a policy that can impact the health wellbeing of particular populations due to their social locations (Hankivsky et al., 2014). It can be applied to any health-related policy or program. Using an analytical framework like the IBPA can help colleges and universities see how campus policies specifically and uniquely impact the mental health of particular student groups (e.g., Black students, queer students, Indigenous students, disabled students). The framework can also help to pinpoint gaps in policies so that corrections can be made to current policies, or new policies can be implemented, to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students on campus.

Assess and create campus policies using the “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) approach

In the same way that it is important for us to critically reflect on the practices we use in our individual work, it is important to reflect on the processes we use to create campus policies. The WPR approach was created by Dr. Carol Bacchi, a Professor Emerita at the University of Adelaide, and is intended to help with the examination of policies (Bacchi, 2012). Its purpose is to help identify the root problem or issue one is trying to solve with a policy. Most often used in the realms of public policy and research, the critical questioning it invokes can be translated to the post-secondary context. The method consists of applying the following six questions to a policy that one is appraising or creating:

1. What’s the ‘problem’ (for example, of ‘problem gamblers’, ‘drug use/abuse’, ‘gender inequality’, ‘domestic violence’, ‘global warming’, ‘sexual harassment’, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

(Source: Bacchi, 2012)

The questions above can assist in clarifying the problem(s) at hand, identify gaps and limitations in how the problem’s being represented, and highlight policies and practices that have enabled the understanding of the problem at hand (Bacchi, 2012).



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