

RECOGNIZING THE EFFECTS OF SYSTEMIC RACISM TO ENSURE GREATER CULTURAL SAFETY FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS



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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In recent years, Quebec universities and CEGEPs have implemented a growing number of initiatives to provide Indigenous students with adapted services and an environment more respectful of their realities. These initiatives involve recognizing the cultural, linguistic and geographical realities of Indigenous students. However, Indigenous students are affected by institutionalized discrimination, an aspect of the education system rarely documented in Quebec. This article aims to provide avenues for understanding how systemic racism impacts Indigenous peoples in the university system—a key component for reflection on support measures for Indigenous students.

A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN MONTREAL

This article presents the findings of my doctoral research conducted to gain a better understanding of Indigenous students' experience at university (Lefevre-Radelli, 2019). From 2013 to 2018, I conducted interviews with 24 First Nations students who were studying, or who had studied, at French language universities in Montreal. When I began my research, special education needs associated with cultural differences and geographically remote communities were well documented. However, contrary to what I expected, culture shock was not the biggest obstacle students faced during their studies. Most of the students I interviewed had grown up in a city or had completed most of their schooling in a city, their first language was French, and they confirmed that they did not have academic difficulties related to the geographical remoteness of their community.

However, the entire group faced a problem that rarely appears in the French language literature: racism within and outside the university institution.

SYSTEMIC RACISM: WHAT IS IT?

What do we mean by “racism”? In everyday language, racism usually refers to acts committed by “deviant” individuals who intentionally target people based on their ethnic or national background. However, as a sociological term, systemic racism has a broader meaning, designating all of the processes that maintain particular groups in a position of exclusion or social, economic, political or cultural inferiority. Racism occurs at several levels, in particular individual and institutional.

- Individual racism refers to an individual's prejudices (i.e., thoughts and beliefs) and behaviour targeting people based on racial or ethnic background. Although some people openly admit to being racist, individual racism is more often unconscious and unintentional, and is connected to prejudices firmly anchored in society that influence perceptions and decisions.
- Institutional racism occurs when “institutions or actors within institutions adopt practices that result in the exclusion or inferiorization” of certain ethnic or national groups (Pala, 2007, p. 28, free translation).

Systemic racism involves an unequal power relationship in which one ethnic or racial group holds legal, political and economic power, and imposes it on one or more other groups. Although Quebec is in a minority position

within English Canada, there is indeed a power imbalance between Quebecers and Indigenous peoples, who are widely exposed to demeaning portrayals and social and economic discrimination (Posca, 2018; Québec, 2019).

CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

All of the Indigenous students I met with for doctoral research experienced racism in one form or another. The table below summarizes the main points identified in my research, which have also been documented in English universities elsewhere in Canada.

INDIVIDUAL

Some participants came face to face with prejudices and ignorance. According to the students I met, certain professors who did not specialize in Indigenous issues approached the topic with racial bias or in a superficial manner, without being properly informed or questioning collective prejudices. When such a situation plays out in the classroom, the professor’s position of authority makes denunciation a dangerous choice.

One participant reported:

“We had a lecturer who said, “You know, for example the Indians . . .” And then he gave us a huge cliché. I was in the back, and my friends were holding me back with both hands, saying, “Don’t put your hand up; you’ll have problems with him; he’ll give you trouble” (Mathilde, 2017, free translation).”

Several interviewees said they experienced being perceived as the “expert” Indigenous student in the class. When professors knew that a student was Indigenous, they would sometimes ask them to give their opinion on Indigenous issues, thereby placing them in an uncomfortable position, especially with the whole class staring at them. In a similar situation, one participant said that she sometimes felt like a “guinea pig,” while another said that she did not like being “the Indigenous student who always has to explain everything.”

**TABLE 1
Manifestations of racism at different levels**

Level of racism	Description
1. Systemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism and structural colonialism in North American societies • Effacement/ignorance of Indigenous realities • Inequitable access to resources (including education)
2. Institutional practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under-representation of Indigenous professors and students • Teaching in the colonial language (English or French) • Physical environment that renders Indigenous peoples invisible • Absence of institutional mechanisms that effectively protect Indigenous peoples against racism
Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs that efface Indigenous perspectives or reproduce stereotypes • Marginalization/inferiorization of Indigenous courses or programs
3. Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistence of stereotypical portrayals: the drunk, exotic or vulnerable Indigenous person • The burden of stigmatization: being seen as the “expert” Indigenous student • The task of raising awareness is placed on Indigenous students and professors • Indigenous students feel isolated every day

In addition to a context in which ignorance and prejudice against Indigenous peoples is widespread, the students themselves were often tasked with raising awareness. During the interviews, I often heard participants say, “We always have to explain,” and “We are always educating people.”

PROGRAMS

Even when programs do not directly promote racist attitudes, Indigenous students face the effacement of their realities in most of their courses. This manifests through Indigenous issues being “overlooked, only superficially addressed, or grossly distorted in the curricula... across disciplines” (Clark et al., 2014, p. 119). It is much easier to access a course in sign language or Portuguese than to take an Indigenous language class, just as it is easier to study 19th century French literature than works by contemporary Indigenous authors. Courses examining Indigenous realities are few and far between, receive little publicity and are limited to students in specific programs, in particular anthropology.

In this context, knowledge produced by Western authors is often considered indispensable, while Indigenous knowledge is considered optional or of little importance. Thus, to succeed, students of European heritage are under no obligation to learn the languages, values or history of Indigenous peoples. Remaining completely ignorant of Indigenous traditional knowledge has absolutely no bearing on their academic career. Conversely, in order to graduate, Indigenous students must agree to prioritize the authors and concepts identified as underpinning Western civilization (European or North American) and presented as symbolically superior, if they are given any options at all.

INSTITUTIONAL

Finally, let’s not forget that students are in an environment in which Indigenous voices struggle to be heard, with Indigenous professors and students a minority, or simply absent. Only one participant reported having taken a course given by an Indigenous teacher (tenured professor or lecturer). The under-representation of Indigenous professors is the result of institutional and systemic barriers, such as discriminatory hiring criteria (in some departments), and the fact that few Indigenous people hold a graduate degree.

Most of the participants were the only Indigenous students in their program, which increased their minorization within the institution. The students interviewed often said that they were unsure who the other Indigenous students at the university were. While white Quebecers studying at the institution would have no trouble finding friends with similar backgrounds and skin colour who share a language and common references, many of the Indigenous participants reported feeling isolated every day, and these feelings were amplified by the fact that the representation of Indigenous peoples was often imbued with prejudice.

CONCLUSION: IMPACT ON CULTURAL SAFETY

The findings documented in this doctoral research allow us to rethink and gain new insight into perseverance and academic achievement among Indigenous students. In order to implement effective measures at the institutional level, it is vital that we recognize the institutional mechanisms that result in the exclusion and inferiorization of Indigenous peoples.

There are no simple solutions to systemic mechanisms, which are embedded in the colonial relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, recognizing systemic racism gives us a better understanding of the political scope of cultural safety. The concept of cultural safety was developed in New Zealand and introduced in Canada to ensure better services for Indigenous peoples in the areas of health care and education (HCC, 2012; Dufour, 2019). However, the fundamental reflection underlying the concept is political: establishing measures for cultural safety involves going beyond the cultural dimension to analyze “power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization and colonial relationships” (NAHO, 2008, p. 3). Thus, guaranteeing cultural safety could rely on measures that drive structural change, for example:

- having a clear institutional commitment to Indigenous initiatives and standing against discrimination and racism
- increasing Indigenous staff, in particular professors, which may require revising hiring policies
- ensuring better representation of Indigenous realities in programs
- raising awareness among all staff and students

- making at least one course on the realities of Indigenous peoples mandatory for all students

These examples serve as an invitation for a global assessment of the impacts of institutions, our perceptions and our individual practices, in order to ensure a truly safe environment, free of racism, for Indigenous students.♦

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