

Uncharted Narratives: Amplifying the Voices of Indigenous, Black and Racialized Women in Academic Leadership

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Abstract

Academic leadership demands diverse voices to drive equity and innovation in psychology. This conceptual paper explores leadership experiences of Indigenous, Black, and diverse racialized women in academia, featuring their historical marginalization within higher education. Grounded in intersectionality, liberation theory, and social constructivism, it advocates centring overlooked narratives to disrupt dominant paradigms and foster inclusive psychology environments. Beginning with authors' social location and reflexivity, it contextualizes inequities, reviews representation and challenges in the field, applies decolonial-to-anticolonial lenses alongside accountable collaboration, and examines transformative frameworks plus benefits of these narratives. The paper proposes a critical evaluation as we shift from equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) toward accessibility, belonging, and community (ABC) paradigms for equitable advancement, culminating in recommendations for policy, institutional practice, training, mentorship, future research, and a synthesising conclusion.

Introduction

Despite recent efforts to advance equity and inclusion, Indigenous, Black, and racialized women faculty in Canadian academia continue to be significantly underrepresented and to encounter persistent inequities. This paper examines the scope and structure of that underrepresentation by drawing on national demographics and institutional data, while grounding our analysis in the theoretical frameworks detailed later in this text. To establish a shared understanding of the identities and social constructs central to this discussion, we begin with key definitions.

In Canada, *Indigenous Peoples* refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people—the original inhabitants of the land as defined by international law (*Constitution Act, 1982*, s. 35(2); Government of Canada, 2022). This term, despite its use as an umbrella identifier, also reaffirms the diverse Indigenous communities, nations, and traditions within this collective. We define and state this identifier first and foremost to show our deference to Indigenous Peoples, those who have lived on this land since time immemorial, as well as to illuminate their unique histories and experiences here. *Black* denotes people of African descent whose identity is self-determined through ancestry, parentage, culture, and community (Government

of Canada, 2024); and *racialized* describes people of colour—such as Asian, South Asian, Arab, Latin American, bi-racial, and other non-white groups—systemically affected by racism or discrimination (Souissi, 2024). In this work, we intentionally use lowercase “w” to decentre whiteness and the dominance and privilege traditionally attached to this social construct. This deliberate, non-performative choice invites critical reflection on how whiteness operates within academic and societal structures. For the above reasons and in honouring nation-to-nation relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, we intentionally refrain from using the term Black, Indigenous, Women of Colour (BIPOC). For us, this concept perpetuates a blending of all racialized people as one. While it aims to offer solidarity, it can limit the scope of broader, unique systemic issues facing these groups and minimize the distinct identities of Indigenous Peoples.

Since the release of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015) Report and the associated Calls to Action, there has been increased awareness of racial disparities and growing calls to address the historical and ongoing harms of colonialism (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Borrowing from Hele’s (2026) work, *colonialism* is the “process through which a foreign people establishes control over a territory and, if applicable, its Indigenous peoples” (para. 1). In post-secondary institutions, there has been a notable shift toward hiring more Indigenous faculty members (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). However, despite these efforts, Indigenous Peoples continue to be significantly underrepresented in the academic workforce. Despite Indigenous Peoples comprising approximately 5% of the Canadian population, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis faculty and researchers comprise only 1.9% of the academic population (Statistics Canada, 2020, 2023). Similarly, the Universities Canada (2019) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Survey reports that just 2.9% of senior university leaders identify as Indigenous.

Notably, the preceding patterns persist for Black scholars; although Black Canadians accounted for 4.3% of the national population in 2021, they held only 0.8% of senior university leadership roles (Domey & Patsiurko, 2024; Universities Canada, 2019). Drawing from *The Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Canadian Higher Education* (Blackett et al., 2022), *equity* ensures fair access to opportunities, *diversity* encompasses varied identities and perspectives, and *inclusion* enables belonging where all can contribute fully. For reference, *higher education* signifies postsecondary training and instruction at universities, colleges, and institutes beyond secondary school (Sheffield & Sá, 2013). *Academia* denotes an institution of higher education or higher learning such as a college or university (Howell, 2022), while the *academy* connotes the collective community of faculty, researchers, and scholars within these institutions (Britannica, 2026). These terms will be used interchangeably given the nature of our work.

Building on this understanding, this paper explores the leadership trajectories of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in postsecondary institutions, spotlighting the ways their narratives have been systematically marginalized. Prevailing gender frameworks such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), liberation theory (Montero & Sonn, 2009), and social constructivism (Stewart, 2009) resist androcentric and Eurocentric paradigms common in higher education spaces. As explored later, these paradigms obstruct Indigenous, Black, and racialized women’s advancement through entrenched biases and reductive stereotypes (Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). For context, *androcentrism* elevates maleness as the universal standard while sidelining Indigenous, Black, and racialized women’s priorities (Hegarty & Buechel, 2006). *Eurocentrism*, by contrast, filters non-Western histories through a Euro-Western prism (Pokhrel, 2011). This conceptual article, therefore, advances novel paradigms that amplify Indigenous, Black, and racialized women’s standpoints while deconstructing entrenched ones. We assert that centring these overlooked narratives is essential to dismantle hegemonic structures and engender equitable scholarly communities, revealing their

transformative potential and mapping pathways for genuine inclusion, robust support, and enduring advancement. This analysis furnishes conceptual tools and actionable strategies for policy reform, institutional transformation, and future scholarship that affirm Indigenous, Black, and racialized women's pivotal roles in academic governance.

To frame our paper, we first detail our social location and reflexivity, shedding light on the ways our intersecting identities position us in this work. Second, we contextualize the problem using national statistics and institutional data, then establish theoretical foundations to ground our approach. Next, we examine Indigenous, Black, and racialized representation in psychology, followed by a distinct analysis of leadership inequalities and challenges in academia. We then shift perspectives from a decolonial to anticolonial lens on leadership, while also rethinking action through accountable collaboration beyond allyship, accomplice, and co-conspirator roles. The paper continues with the need for transformative leadership and equity frameworks, then highlights the benefits of centring Indigenous, Black, and racialized women's narratives. Finally, we close by offering practical recommendations for policy, institutional practice, training, mentorship, and future research.

Authors' Social Location and Reflexivity

The authors occupy distinct positions within Canadian higher education, bringing intersectional lenses shaped by their social locations. In sociological terms, *social location* captures the interplay of social categories—such as race, gender, and profession—that position individuals within power structures (Sexual Violence Training Development Team, 2021). Self-location is particularly important in Indigenous contexts, enabling relational accountability, cultural humility, and ethical knowledge-sharing by clearly situating the speaker within kinship networks, territories, and worldviews (Peltier et al., 2019). *Reflexivity* complements this intention by deepening self-awareness as knowers within cultural and historical contexts, ensuring scholarly accountability and recognizing diverse truths (Dixon & Chiang, 2020; Sinacore et al., 1999).

To start, the first author is a cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, Black Canadian immigrant woman who serves as Associate Professor in Counselling Psychology (University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada), Associate Faculty (City University, Calgary Virtual Campus, Alberta, Canada), Registered Psychologist (Alberta), Certified Professional Life Coach, and scholar-practitioner. She navigates predominantly white academic spaces while centring equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) alongside anti-Black racism and culturally responsive counselling (Blackett et al., 2022). The concept of EDI will be explored later in the paper. Here, *culturally responsive counselling*—through co-creating collaborative treatment interventions with clients (Dixon & Okoli, 2023)—directly informs academic leadership by modeling relational authority that repositions marginalized epistemologies in clinical and scholarly spaces. Her ongoing reflexivity and lived experience offer a vital lens for reimaging leadership that amplifies Black and racialized voices.

Additionally, the second author is a Dene/Métis woman from the Northwest Territories and a member of the K'atl'odeeche Dene First Nation. She currently resides in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton, Alberta) on Treaty 6 territory. As a descendant of three generations who attended Indigenous Residential Schools, she has worked nearly 20 years as a Registered Psychologist serving urban First Nations communities, residential school survivors, and children who have experienced abuse. Drawing on her family's teachings and legacy, she brings a perspective shaped by those experiences. Now an Assistant Professor in counselling psychology, she humbly shares her insights while recognising the diverse cultures and perspectives among Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island, or what we consider North America.

Lastly, the third author is a Canadian-born settler woman from the dominant white group and a master's student in counselling psychology. Her position within systems of privilege shapes her engagement with this work, recognizing how whiteness operates within academic leadership and knowledge production. This aligns with the manuscript's focus by emphasizing accountability and the responsibility of those in white dominant groups to support more inclusive and transformative academic spaces. Collectively, our social locations and reflexivity enable multidimensional insights that subvert Eurocentric norms, engendering culturally accountable leadership analysis throughout this paper.

Contextualizing the Problem

Given Canada's restrictions on collecting race-based demographic data in academia, we draw on U.S. geographic contexts to address gaps for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in *academic leadership*. We operationalize *academic leadership* as relational, heterarchical roles (such presidents, provosts, deans, chairs) that centres diverse epistemologies through accountable collaboration over Eurocentric hierarchies. Recent U.S. faculty demographics highlight persistent disparities: in fall of 2022, white faculty comprised about 76% of full professors, 70% of associate professors, and 60% of assistant professors at degree-granting institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Evidently, inequities persist in Canada's tenure and research outcomes as well. Statistics Canada (2020) found that 21% of Indigenous faculty members held tenured positions, compared with 37% of non-Indigenous faculty. Gender disparities were also evident, with 31% of female faculty holding tenure compared to 43% of male faculty (Statistics Canada, 2020). Additionally, Indigenous faculty were less likely to receive research funding (37%) than non-Indigenous counterparts (42%) (Statistics Canada, 2020). Collectively, this data spotlights the systematic underrepresentation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized faculty within Canadian academia and suggests that, when intersecting with gender, Indigenous and racialized women may experience compounded barriers to academic advancement.

In a politically charged climate rife with backlash against institutions renaming and revising hiring policies related to EDI (Williams, 2026), the marginalization of Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars intensifies. This resistance not only dilutes transformative language but also endangers robust EDI frameworks within academia. For instance, Alberta has exemplified this retrenchment through the *Regulated Professions Neutrality Act* (Alberta, 2025) also referred to as Bill 13, the *Professional Freedom of Expression Act* (Alberta, 2025), introduced on November 3, 2025. Both laws restrict regulators from mandating training on political, historical, social, or cultural issues when directly linked to professional competence or ethics. They prohibit penalties for off-duty, non-violent expression and ban compulsory sessions on anti-racism, unconscious bias, cultural competency, or EDI, aiming to safeguard free speech. Critics, however, assert these measures weaken anti-racism efforts by curtailing training essential for ethical, culturally safe practice (B. Salami, personal communication, December 8, 2025; Canadian Nurses Association, 2025; CUPE Alberta, 2026).

These restrictions appear to contradict initiatives aimed at promoting inclusion and equity within academia, including the TRC (2015) and the *Scarborough Charter* (Blackett et al., 2022). As a result, they contribute to an academic environment that further excludes Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars and creates the potential for deprioritizing their work. This paper, therefore, centres on reform, pursuing accountability and policy evolution to build resilient leadership pathways notwithstanding inequities. Concurrent with these shifts in academia, colonialism continues to regulate Indigenous land, populations, power, and language, particularly by determining whose knowledge gains legitimacy in academic settings (Stewart, 2019). Consequently, Indigenous and racialized

women's leadership narratives face marginalization, positioning them as research subjects rather than authoritative knowledge creators—a dynamic that further bars access to senior roles through entrenched domination (Stewart, 2019). Compounding this, dominant norms pathologize their divergent viewpoints, while mere institutional presence fails to secure narrative authority (Hall, 1997; Stewart, 2019). Such patterns echo historical neglect in recruiting, retaining, and advancing Black scholars, where equity efforts have yielded insufficient representation despite their vital contributions to campus vitality (Henry et al., 2017; Opini & Henry, 2023). Ergo, the persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women leaders undermines equity, social justice, and the credibility of higher education itself.

Theoretical Foundations

Current theoretical frameworks in women's studies have largely evolved within androcentric and Eurocentric epistemologies, inadvertently reproducing gendered, racial, and colonial hierarchies that constrain the progress of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized women (Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). These dominant paradigms have often universalized Western feminist narratives, rendering invisible the knowledges emerging from Indigenous worldviews, Black feminist thought, and diasporic epistemologies. To move beyond these limitations, this paper draws upon three complementary frameworks—intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), liberation theory (Montero & Sonn, 2009), and social constructivism (Stewart, 2009; Mahoney, 1991)—to foreground marginalized knowledges and challenge institutional power within academia. Each framework contributes to a more inclusive theoretical foundation that centres Indigenous and racialized women's leadership, recognizing these perspectives not as peripheral but as essential to restructuring epistemic authority in higher education.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw's (1989) *intersectionality framework* exposes how traditional analyses focused solely on gender or race fail to capture the compounding and simultaneous oppression experienced by those positioned at multiple axes of marginalization. In academic institutions, these dynamics materialize when policies or leadership paradigms reflect white, middle-class women's experiences while neglecting those of Indigenous and racialized women. Building on Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) scholarship, Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) emphasize that intersectionality is not merely an analytic tool, but a political and ethical stance that demands responsiveness to power and history. Similarly, Indigenous feminists like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017), Joyce Green (2007), and Kim TallBear (2014) extend intersectionality by incorporating colonialism, land, and kinship relations as central to women's lived realities. For Indigenous women, gendered oppression cannot be disentangled from settler colonial structures that dispossess both land and bodies.

In academic leadership, intersectionality allows for a nuanced examination of the ways Indigenous, Black, and racialized women navigate layered cultural, structural, and epistemic exclusions. By situating their experiences at the intersection of gender, race, and coloniality, intersectionality helps reimagine leadership not as individual achievement within white institutions, but as a collective practice grounded in relational accountability and community uplifting.

Liberation Theory

Liberation theory, initially developed within Latin American psychology (Montero & Sonn, 2009), seeks to transform the systemic conditions that generate oppression. Its emphasis on praxis—reflection and action toward social transformation—parallels the decolonial agendas of many Indigenous and Black scholars who reject passive inclusion within dominant institutions in favour of reshaping them from within or creating alternate spaces of knowledge. This framework resonates with Black radical traditions of collective resistance, as articulated by thinkers like Frantz Fanon (1963) and Audre Lorde (1984), who argue that liberation demands dismantling the hierarchies that define whose knowledge is legitimate. Similarly, María Lugones' (2007) concept of the *coloniality of gender* aligns with liberation theory's focus on identity reconstruction, exposing the ways colonial systems fracture Indigenous and racialized women's self-definitions through Western gender binaries.

Applied to academic leadership, liberation theory reframes Indigenous, Black, and racialized women not as exceptions within patriarchal institutions, but rather as transformative actors redefining what leadership means. The theory's dialogic orientation—valuing community knowledge, relational learning, and cultural resurgence—encourages leadership that uplifts marginalized voices and legitimizes multiple modes of knowing from storytelling to ceremony. In this regard, liberation theory invites a reconfiguration of academic leadership as relational liberation rather than individual advancement.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism asserts that reality and knowledge emerge through social interactions shaped by cultural, historical, and political contexts (Mahoney, 1991; Stewart, 2009). This perspective aligns closely with Indigenous epistemologies, which also view knowledge as relational, contextual, and co-created within community (Wilson, 2008). Similarly, Black and diasporic scholars like Sylvia Wynter (2003) argue that Western constructions of "Man" have defined who counts as fully human and, by extension, whose knowledge counts within the academy. Within academic leadership, these socially constructed norms often privilege Eurocentric understandings of authority as rational, individualized, and competitive, thereby marginalizing relational, collective, and restorative forms of leadership commonly practiced in Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities.

Furthermore, recognizing leadership as a social construct exposes the ways institutional norms replicate exclusionary standards and opens pathways to reconstruct them through plural epistemologies. This includes critically questioning how academic institutions define authority and how these constructions are embedded within a Eurocentric framework of knowledge production. When Indigenous, Black, and racialized women embody leadership practices rooted in reciprocity, storytelling, and care, they challenge the very ontological assumptions of institutional power. Social constructivism, therefore, provides a critical lens through which to dismantle the myth of objectivity in leadership and affirm multiple ways of knowing and leading as equally valid and necessary.

Integrative Theoretical Reflection

Together, intersectionality, liberation theory, and social constructivism provide a multidimensional theoretical scaffold for examining race, gender, and power in academic leadership, particularly as they shape the experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) grounds this analysis in the lived realities of those navigating compounded oppressions rooted in racism, sexism, and colonialism, unveiling

how institutional structures often privilege white, Western norms while marginalizing other ways of knowing and leading. Liberation theory (Montero & Sonn, 2009) extends this understanding by connecting personal and collective struggle, positioning Indigenous, Black, and racialized women as agents of change whose leadership resists and transforms inequities within academic institutions. In equal measure, social constructivism (Mahoney, 1991; Stewart, 2009) illuminates how dominant definitions of leadership are culturally produced and can be reimaged through the epistemologies and relational practices embedded in Indigenous worldviews, Black feminist thought, and diasporic traditions.

Viewed in tandem, these frameworks underscore the necessity of centring the voices and knowledge systems of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women to redefine leadership itself. Their approaches, grounded in reciprocity, resilience, and community accountability, challenge colonial hierarchies of authority. In doing so, they create alternative models of academic practice rooted in compassion, collaboration, and collective advancement. Thus, intersectionality, liberation theory, and social constructivism not only provide necessary analytic tools, but also affirm Indigenous, Black, and racialized women's leadership as a transformative force capable of reshaping academia into a more just and inclusive intellectual space (Collins, 2000; Simpson, 2017; Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). We bring this integrated framework into our analysis of psychology and the necessity for greater attention to the role of leadership related to Indigenous, Black, and racialized women.

Indigenous, Black and Racialized Representation in Psychology and Ongoing Efforts

Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars remain markedly scarce in Canadian psychology academia. A recent Faber et al. (2025) study looked at faculty representation in Ontario universities, including York University, University of Toronto, University of Ottawa, Carleton University, Queen's University, and Western University, and found that white faculty overwhelmingly dominate teaching, research, and leadership roles. In addition, Ansloos et al. (2022) estimated that there were approximately 15 Indigenous doctoral-level psychologists practicing or teaching across all Canadian universities, a figure that underscores profound underrepresentation. This too severely limits the integration of Indigenous healing practices, such as land-based therapies and ceremonial approaches, into psychology curricula, clinical training, and departmental leadership structures. Beyond these numerical gaps, faculty disproportionately cluster in precarious adjunct, sessional, and lecturer positions with limited job security, professional development opportunities, and influence over program direction, while white scholars secure the majority of stable and influential tenured and tenure-track roles (Faber et al., 2025). This stratification stifles diverse governance, perpetuates Eurocentric pedagogical norms, and undermines the profession's capacity to deliver culturally responsive training essential for serving Canada's multicultural population equitably.

Furthermore, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) explains how implicit bias and outgroup homogeneity—the “they all look alike” effect—trigger imposter syndrome and racial identity dissonance among Indigenous, Black, and racialized academics (Bhatt et al., 2020, para. 8). These pervasive dynamics not only intensify multigenerational historical traumas, such as the forced assimilation of residential schools for Indigenous peoples and slavery legacies for Black communities, but also steadily erode the psychological resilience required for pursuing and succeeding in competitive tenure-track positions, departmental chairs, and faculty leadership roles. Consequently, systemic hiring biases perpetuate the “vertical mosaic” (Bhatt et al., 2020, para. 10), where the most senior and influential positions are most often occupied by white professionals and racialized professionals are systemically confined to lower organizational tiers. Such entrenched inequities breed

profound self-doubt, prompting voluntary withdrawal from leadership pathways like deanships and program directorships, even as these scholars possess invaluable communal strengths rooted in cultural wisdom and collective support.

Addressing these intertwined structural and psychological barriers demands urgent reform, as Faber et al. (2023) and Williams et al. (2025) assert. They advocate targeted changes in recruitment practices, graduate admissions criteria, and institutional policies to forge robust leadership pathways that elevate Indigenous, Black, and racialized voices. In doing so, we can ensure psychology and academia reflects Canada's diversity and fulfils TRC Calls to Action for making education more equitable and culturally safe practice.

In 2018, the CPA, alongside the Psychology Foundation of Canada, published a response to the TRC's final report. In this document, the CPA (2018) issued a statement of accountability, recognizing psychology's role in marginalizing Indigenous Peoples. The report acknowledges that the profession developed within a colonial context that contributed to cultural genocide and residential schools, breaching the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists—particularly the principle of respecting the rights and dignity of all individuals. The CPA (2018) offered a formal apology:

We acknowledge that these failings have roots as far back as the development of this profession in Canada. We apologize for not opposing discriminatory governmental policy. We apologize for colluding with policies and laws that have promoted the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous Peoples. (p. 9)

While the CPA's response marks important institutional recognition, whether these commitments will yield lasting change in psychology's academic and professional spheres remains to be seen.

Since the publication of this CPA response, numerous articles have underscored the urgent need for transformation regarding decolonization and Indigenization within the psychology profession in Canada (Ansloos et al., 2022; Fellner et al., 2020; Fish et al., 2024; Stewart, 2019; Wada & Fellner, 2024; Wendt et al., 2022). To further reconciliation and address persistent inequities in psychology, these scholars collectively call for substantial reforms in the profession's practice and training. This includes establishing best practices for working with Indigenous peoples in psychotherapy, decolonizing assessment and treatment models, and meaningfully involving Indigenous Peoples, Knowledge Holders, and communities in training and research. Building and nurturing authentic relationships with Indigenous communities is vital, as is reconstructing psychology curricula and pedagogy to include Indigenous perspectives. Additional efforts should focus on increasing Indigenous student enrolment by removing barriers to entry and expanding the number of Indigenous psychologists and scholars who can mentor future generations. Equally important is the need to foreground, amplify, and support Indigenous, Black, and racialized leadership; however, persistent structural inequalities often make this goal challenging to achieve.

Leadership Inequalities and Challenges

Leaders within academic institutions are called upon to effect meaningful change by actively challenging and transforming practices and policies that have historically excluded or marginalized Indigenous, Black, and racialized perspectives and ways of being. Leadership disparities are influenced by the combined effects of gender and race, creating additional challenges for racialized women. Many experience marginalization due to holding both non-dominant racial and cultural positions within professional environments (Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). Studies show that white women tend to advance more quickly than racialized women,

as the barriers they face are mostly related to gender, while Indigenous, Black, and racialized women deal with both gender and racial discrimination (Collins, 1990). Immigrant women in leadership roles also often report having to work twice as hard to gain legitimacy and credibility at work (Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). Together, these trends underline the ongoing scarcity of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in senior decision-making positions across academic, professional, and organizational settings (Snaggs-Wilson, 2021).

To illustrate, when it comes to Indigenous leadership, a lack of adequate representation can perpetuate the status quo, allowing exclusionary systems to persist. As Louie (2019) warns, when academic spaces do not make room for Indigenous scholars to engage with their work through diverse knowledges and practices, Indigenous hires risk being assimilated into a colonial framework rather than empowered to foster genuine change. While the need for Indigenous leadership is clear, it is important to recognize that Indigenous, Black, and racialized conceptualizations of leadership often differ significantly from Euro-Western models. Some may feel discomfort with the label of “leader,” which is frequently associated with power and privilege within hierarchical, individualistic organizations. For instance, Indigenous perspectives understand leaders as deeply interconnected with the communities they serve, embodying strong ethics and a profound sense of communal responsibility (Cajete, 2016; Warner & Grint, 2006).

Along this line of differing leadership frameworks, Defriend and Cook (2024) subvert the patriarchal and settler-colonial structures embedded in conventional leadership models by advocating for a resurgence of Indigenous matriarchy. They shed light on the vital role women play in ensuring the health of systems, noting, “Matriarchs represent how interdependent ecosystems form the wholistic aspects of personal, community, and universal wellness” (p. 160). Traditional matriarchal leadership upholds the principle of relationality—fostering connections among people, their environments, and broader systems. Navigating these differing leadership paradigms can create tension and internal conflict for Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals occupying formal leadership roles within academic institutions. Such leaders frequently manage the challenges arising from contrasting epistemologies, navigating the intricate in-between spaces that result from these differing worldviews (Debassige & Brunette-Debassige, 2018).

Based on the above understanding, Indigenous, Black, and racialized leaders in academia are frequently required to operate within policies and procedures that may not align with their values, while at the same time having courage to speak out against injustices. Existing as a racialized leader within a colonial institution can compel individuals to adapt or contort themselves in ways that feel inauthentic, in order to conform to established university norms. Brunette-Debassige (2023) thoroughly documents the paradoxical, tense, complex, and often lonely nature of the “tricky grounds” Indigenous women navigate in Canadian university administration (p. 242). This reality reveals the urgent need for institutional transformation to honour their authentic leadership.

Yes, Indigenous, Black, and racialized leaders are needed to blaze new trails and to voice the concerns of those who are not yet empowered to do so. Debassige and Brunette-Debassige (2018) attest to the necessity for Indigenous leaders to be resolute and wilful in confronting the “unquestioned biases inherent within white colonial systems of power.” In the same vein, Ferguson underscores the critical need for Indigenous leadership in psychology, arguing that such leaders are uniquely positioned to “cut the cord of white supremacy that supports every level of education” (Ansloos et al., 2019, p. 269). Indigenous, Black, and racialized leaders serve as essential advocates, working to dismantle systemic barriers that have historically excluded their participation and that of their communities. In professional psychology training, for example, Ansloos et al. (2019) note that Indigenous leaders must be adept at subversive decolonization, creating space and cultural safety for

Indigenous students, and persistently advocating for equity at admissions and scholarship decision-making tables. For meaningful progress in the profession, Indigenous leaders must be at the forefront. These leaders are essential to advancing this important work and can ensure that academic institutions do not become complacent or caught up in polarization and politicization around EDI. Cultivating strong Indigenous leadership requires a commitment to anticolonial principles, which are detailed in a following section.

Shifting from a Decolonial to Anticolonial Lens in Leadership

According to Gone (2021), *decolonization* has been described as “the ‘undoing’ of colonization” (p. 260), a methodology that advances social justice in counselling psychology. This concept is often used interchangeably with *decolonialism*, which similarly emphasizes challenging Eurocentric power structures in psychological knowledge and methods (Barbosa & Pimentel, 2023; Talak et al., 2024). Together, these approaches seek to centre Indigenous healing traditions and prioritize culturally grounded interventions over imposed Western models. Gone (2021) further suggests that employing decolonization promotes reflexive analyses of power, helping psychologists recognize how therapeutic processes can silence, control, or pathologize Indigenous clients. Traditional Indigenous healing practices are often not documented or accessed through conventional research methods and are thus not recognized within the profession, given Euro-Western standards of evidence-based practice (Wendt et al., 2022).

However, elevating community voices and preserving tradition aligns with a decolonizing approach, as it prioritizes Indigenous methods of sharing knowledge (Gone, 2021). Decolonial practices support professionals in reconsidering how knowledge is received and interpreted and in assessing whether it is based on fairness or inherited colonial norms. While decolonization is commonly referenced in Indigenous psychological literature and serves as an important lens for understanding colonial harm, the implication of “undoing” suggests a goal that may not be fully attainable (Gone 2021, p. 260). For this reason, there is a need for an alternative frame of reference that more accurately reflects the ongoing process of challenging colonial systems and practices in academia and psychology. In this context, *anticolonialism* presents a compelling alternative, as it denotes opposition to colonial domination rather than the notion of reversing it (Fish & Gone, 2024; Hartmann et al., 2019).

Central to this framework is the notion of refusal (Fish & Gone, 2024). Anticolonial scholars reject Eurocentric assumptions about Indigenous peoples, dominant research standards, and restrictive definitions of effective psychological practice. Vizenor’s (1999) concept of *survivance* upends prevailing social narratives that depict Indigenous Peoples solely as survivors of historical adversity and loss. Instead, survivance amplifies active presence, creativity, and vitality as forms of ongoing resistance and lived experience even amidst efforts at genocide. This perspective also sheds light on how Indigenous, Black, and racialized academic leaders, despite continual silencing and marginalization, continue to persist and assert their agency within academic settings.

At the heart of anticolonialism is the recognition of Indigenous resistance, tribal sovereignty, and nationhood as fundamental strengths, principles that psychologists must uphold throughout their research and practices (Fish & Gone, 2024). This involves actively challenging hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric knowledge and marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems. Further, anticolonial approaches create space for innovative Indigenous methodologies that exist beyond Eurocentric traditions (Fish & Gone, 2024). In counselling psychology, anticolonialism supports psychologists in resisting, challenging, and pushing back against established frameworks. It also empowers Indigenous, Black, and racialized

voices to draw on their own knowledges in ways that benefit their communities (Fish & Gone, 2024).

Unlike the static connotation of decolonization, anticolonial approaches privilege active resistance and the disruption of colonial structures and institutions, begetting tangible sovereignty for Indigenous communities. Anticolonial work cannot be achieved without the involvement of Indigenous peoples, nor can it proceed in ways that silence Indigenous voices (Fish & Gone, 2024). Hence, anticolonial methodologies stress centring Indigenous voices in all aspects of research, psychological practice, and leadership. An anticolonial perspective inherently recognizes the critical importance of Indigenous leadership, advancing reflection on existing power structures. This approach not only subverts dominant paradigms but also creates conditions for Indigenous epistemologies to anchor leadership spaces.

Critically, anticolonial leadership is relational, characterized by a heterarchical, communal, and collaborative structure. Such a viewpoint recognizes that the transformation of entrenched disciplinary systems cannot be accomplished by individuals acting alone. Instead, it requires the collective commitment and dedicated efforts of all members involved in the process. Within this framework, it is essential that Black and racialized scholars who share these commitments are positioned distinctly and alongside each other in anticolonial initiatives. Their collaboration is recognized as a vital component in challenging and rebuilding dominant academic structures.

Accountable Collaboration in Anticolonial Work

Given the importance of collective commitment in an anticolonial context, it is imperative to examine our viewpoints concerning individuals supporting leadership in social justice efforts. The term *ally* is frequently used in scholarly literature to describe individuals who support social justice initiatives. Despite its prevalence, the notion of allyship has been critiqued for potentially enabling superficial engagement with systemic inequities (Burm & Burleigh, 2022; Rudy, 2014). Performative allyship may reduce advocacy to symbolic gestures lacking substantive accountability. Consequently, there is a need for terminology that underscores intentional and impactful action in confronting dominant power structures. In response, the concept of an *accomplice* has emerged, denoting active participation in efforts to counter institutional racism and colonization (Swiftwolfe, 2019). Accomplices strategically leverage their privilege in collaboration with marginalized groups and play an active role in advancing liberation, including engaging in actions that challenge existing institutions. The term *co-conspirator* further develops this framework, emphasizing consistent, risk-bearing engagement aimed at dismantling barriers in education and other spheres (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022). Co-conspirators recognize their role is not to speak on behalf of marginalized communities but to work alongside them, sometimes at the expense of their own personal comfort or safety.

While these roles do signal a more engaged and action-oriented approach (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022), this language can imply unlawful behaviour, which may be intimidating or inaccessible for individuals new to these efforts. For those at earlier stages of awareness, designations such as co-conspirator may evoke associations with violence, illegality, or risk of arrest. Language that is perceived as extreme can unintentionally deter engagement rather than nurture meaningful involvement in change efforts. This terminology moreover frames equity work as external to the individual, suggesting it is intended exclusively for the benefit of marginalized groups, rather than recognizing its potential advantages for all members of the community.

To address the shortcomings in this approach, we propose *accountable collaboration*, an action-oriented framework rooted in relationality that collectively resists colonial

structures. Unlike secretive or performative efforts, accountable collaborators openly address systemic wrongs while sharing ethical responsibility and co-leading social justice initiatives with Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities, not merely for them. This approach centres impacted communities' leadership and knowledge, ensuring advocacy produces substantive, community-driven change rather than symbolic gestures. Accordingly, challenging prevailing Eurocentric frameworks extends beyond advancing the interests of a specific group, as an anticolonial perspective recognizes that such reform and transformation benefits the entire academic system. This stance enables a more balanced and holistic environment, where everyone stands to gain from the inclusion of diverse ways of knowing and being. All participants thereby become both beneficiaries and bear responsibility for accountability in the process. Meaningful and sustainable collective action is only possible when it is determined and led by transformative leadership and equity frameworks.

Transformative Leadership and Equity Frameworks

In this work, *transformative leadership* signifies an active posture that aims not only to inspire institutional change but to embed equity, accountability, and relational ethics into all levels of leadership practice. Within Canadian academia, such a stance often loses traction when confined to senior administrators or when equity is treated as a final goal rather than a guiding ethos (Burkus, 2010; Snaggs-Wilson, 2021). To be meaningful in this context, transformative leadership must intentionally centre equity—addressing systemic barriers that determine whose voices are valued and whose contributions are recognized across institutions.

Framed in this way, transformative leadership serves as a conceptual bridge to equity frameworks that translate these ideals into policy, practice, and representation. The Universities Canada (2017) principles, for example, conceptualize EDI as interconnected values that extend across teaching, research, and governance. They advance equitable resource distribution and increased participation across dimensions including gender, race, ability, and nationality (Universities Canada, 2017; University of Lethbridge, 2019). Building on this foundation, the emerging EDI-to-¹ABC (Accessibility, Belonging, Community) framework signals a shift toward more action-oriented change. *Accessibility* expands beyond disability accommodations to dismantle structural barriers faced by racialized groups. *Belonging* seeks to foster psychological safety and affirmation of distinct identities, though it risks diverting focus from persistent racial exclusion. *Community* emphasizes relational growth and collective empowerment but offers limited guidance on advancing diverse leadership trajectories (University of Alberta, 2025; University of Lethbridge, 2025).

However, despite its intention to deepen institutional inclusion, the ABC model risks diverting focus from the structural realities of racialized exclusion and inequitable leadership pathways. This linguistic shift in equity discourse, while rhetorically progressive, often reproduces performative politics—signalling change without delivering structural transformation. When culturally responsive leadership development and the lived experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women are not explicitly centred, such frameworks fall short of their transformative promise. To address these systemic deficiencies, institutions must move beyond symbolic commitments by implementing anti-colonially attuned practices, including intentional brave spaces and dispersed leadership opportunities that support marginalized scholars' advancement (Dixon & Batta, 2024). *Brave spaces* allow

¹ It should be noted that *ACB* is the acronym adopted by the University of Alberta to refer to the Accessibility, Belonging, and Community framework (University of Alberta, 2025).

uncomfortable discourse in academia, providing Indigenous, Black, and racialized women a platform for open sharing of thoughts and feelings without fear (Arao & Clemens, 2013). By contrast, favouring these narratives invites inclusive, relational leadership shaped by histories of colonization and racism—disrupting institutional norms and promoting genuinely equitable authority (Treviño & Nelson, 2004).

Benefits of Centring Indigenous, Black, and Racialized Women's Narratives

Centring the narratives of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in academic leadership holds transformative potential by dismantling narrow authority paradigms and reimagining institutional practice. Their approaches—forged through colonization, racism, and *historical trauma*, operationalized as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations from massive group trauma (Brave Heart, 2003)—embody inclusive relationality and authenticity. Spirituality, faith, and mindfulness serve as vital conduits, empowering these leaders to subvert entrenched inequities while nurturing resilient professional bonds (Treviño & Nelson, 2004). Empirical evidence validates this potency: Black supervisors excel in subordinate advocacy, barrier removal, and shared visioning, creating adaptive environments that enhance task complexity tolerance (Okoyi et al., 2009, as cited in Snaggs-Wilson, 2021, p. 239). Persistent marginalization of these paradigms renders narrative elevation both subversive reclamation and blueprint for collaborative institutional renewal.

Despite these opportunities, amplifying uncharted narratives faces significant obstacles, particularly *tokenism*, where Indigenous and racialized women receive formal titles without genuine decision-making power (Agócs, 1989). Surveys show senior women managers often hold symbolic positions lacking real authority, demonstrating that true integration requires more than hiring; it demands empowered voice and institutional influence. Authentic progress thus requires careful safeguards against superficial inclusion, ensuring these leaders' unique perspectives drive lasting institutional change rather than serve as mere decoration.

Recommendations for Policy, Institutional Practice, Training, Mentorship and Future Research

This analysis illuminates actionable pathways for equitable transformation in Canadian higher education. In what follows, we offer concrete policy mechanisms, institutional practice, training, mentorship, and future research to amplify Indigenous, Black, and racialized women's leadership.

Policy

Canadian universities must implement concrete policy reforms to address structural racism and underrepresentation of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in academia. Key recommendations include establishing clear anti-racist policies that streamline human rights processes for discrimination complaints, alongside fully resourced equity offices mandated to deliver training and foster equitable communities (Deckard et al., 2021). Annual targets for Indigenous, Black, and racialized staff and student representation, dedicated postdoctoral fellowships for Black women scholars, and promotion committees prioritizing equity considerations for racialized applicants counter persistent bias in evaluation processes (Hodo, 2017; Sian, 2019).

Hiring policy revisions should mandate recruitment of Indigenous, Black, and racialized faculty (Kohli, 2009), as well as curriculum decolonization committee integration of Indigenous knowledge systems and diverse cultural perspectives (Sian, 2019; Ugwuegbula, 2020). Acknowledging whiteness as a structural barrier, institutions must operationalize equitable practices that address economic disparities and legal underrepresentation, ensuring equal opportunities in hiring, promotion, leadership appointments, and grievance procedures for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women (Linden, 2012; Sawyer & Waite, 2021; Waldron-Moore & Jacobs, 2010). For example, Louie (2019) notes that universities might seek to bring in more Indigenous faculty but are often unprepared for the realities involved. They advocate for modifying promotion and tenure policies to better acknowledge the cultural and community obligations and heavy workloads carried by Indigenous scholars. These reforms transcend performative inclusion to enable substantive authority and institutional transformation.

Institutional Practice

Equity-based hiring must extend beyond the initial process itself to prevent tokenism and ensure sustained impact, incorporating clear metrics for tracking leadership involvement, career advancement, influence on institutional decisions, and long-term retention of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women throughout their academic trajectories (Agócs, 1989). Institutions require concrete mechanisms, such as dedicated leadership trajectories and participatory governance structures, to meaningfully uplift their voices in academic leadership, providing genuine space for decision-making authority and strategic influence rather than relegating them to symbolic or tokenistic roles (Sawyer & Waite, 2021).

Likewise, culturally responsive mentorship structures, tailored to intersectional needs and realities, should be prioritized alongside anticolonial leadership development programs that explicitly reject Eurocentric frameworks in favour of models rooted in communal accountability, relational ethics, and diverse epistemologies (Henry, 2017). These initiatives must include cohort-based peer networks, Elder and community-guidance circles for Indigenous women, and affinity spaces for Black and racialized faculty to address unique barriers like microaggressions and isolation. By embedding these practices, institutions not only empower Indigenous, Black, and racialized women faculty with the resources for thriving careers but also model authentic, transformative leadership for future generations, reshaping academic culture toward true equity and shared power.

Training

Developing decolonial leadership training for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in higher education requires integrating theory with practice to redistribute power and centre collective agency. Drawing on the *consensus decision-making model* (Charles-Rodriguez et al., 2026) and anticolonial leadership, these frameworks foreground shared governance, trust-based collaboration, and relational accountability; all critical elements that support the professional growth and empowerment of these groups within academic institutions. Through the consensus decision-making, participants engage in experiential learning that redefines leadership from a hierarchical construct to a relational practice rooted in reciprocity and mutual respect. *Relational cultural theory* (Lertora et al., 2020) complements this approach by nurturing empathy, authenticity, and co-learning through practices such as dialogue circles, storytelling, and reflective mentorship. Combined, these practices challenge the isolation and competition often normalized within academia, instead cultivating connection, belonging, and solidarity across diverse identities.

Building upon contemporary decolonizing scholarship, forward-thinking training initiatives should aim to advance structural change within higher education. Kassan et al. (2026) emphasize that decolonial approaches must move beyond awareness-raising to dismantle systemic inequities embedded in institutional culture. For Indigenous, Black, and racialized women, this involves gaining space and resources to critique policy, influence decision-making, and lead initiatives that confront exclusionary practices and epistemic hierarchies. Similarly, Malott et al. (2025) describe education as an evolving paradigm grounded in epistemic pluralism and collective liberation—principles essential to reimagining leadership development through decolonial lenses. Guided by these insights, the creation of anticolonial training programs co-designed with Indigenous, Black, and racialized women, alongside supportive administrators, is vital. Such collaboration envisions academia not merely as a site to navigate but as one to change—where these women are recognized as visionary leaders shaping equitable, relational, and inclusive institutional futures. When it comes to supporting the development and retention of Indigenous, Black, and racialized leaders, mentorship is an important element of training that must not be overlooked.

Mentorship

Mentorship is defined as the relationship between a senior and junior colleague with an emphasis on career development and/or psychosocial support (Bearman et al., 2008; Young & Perrewé, 2000). While mentorship is widely recognized as valuable, studies uncover persistent gaps in access and guidance for Indigenous, Black, and racialized students in postsecondary institutions. Research by Opini and Henry (2023) shows that Black graduate students often receive little or no mentorship, largely due to a lack of culturally similar professors, unsupportive environments, and ongoing experiences of racism and anti-Black racism. The scarcity of Black and Indigenous faculty and peers contributes further to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and stress for these students, highlighting the structural barriers that hinder access to meaningful and culturally relevant mentorship throughout their academic journeys. These mentorship disparities extend to racialized faculty, especially women, who face compounded challenges due to intersecting systems of race and gender. Research indicates that mentorship experiences are often negative, marked by exclusion, lack of relevant guidance, and mismatched academic interests or identities (Bova, 2000; Davis et al., 2021). As a result, equitable and culturally responsive mentorship structures are essential for supporting the academic and leadership development of Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars.

Traditionally, mentorship is understood as a relationship between two individuals, typically characterized by an inherent power imbalance in which the mentor guides and supports the development and learning of the mentee. However, to ensure mentorship is truly meaningful for Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars, it is necessary to reconsider this relationship from an anticolonial perspective. Such a perspective encourages viewing mentorship through a relational, collaborative, and action-oriented lens, rather than one solely based on hierarchy and authority. Building on this understanding, Poitras Pratt et al. (2021) introduce the *ensemble mentorship framework* as a model that is collectivist, dynamic, decentred, and heterarchical. This framework emphasizes care, reciprocity, and respect for the autonomy of Indigenous students. It is grounded in the principle that mentorship should not be a one-way transfer of knowledge from mentor to mentee; instead, it should be a shared, ethical space where all participants both teach and learn from one another. This perspective honours the wisdom and capability that is already held by Indigenous, Black, and racialized scholars, while recognizing the importance of mutual growth and shared responsibility within mentoring relationships. Additionally, adopting an anticolonial approach

as a mentor requires actively advocating for and assisting mentees as they manage challenging and inequitable institutional situations.

Future Research

Future research must centre Indigenous, Black, and racialized women through methodologies that honour their epistemologies, directly benefiting their leadership by amplifying silenced voices, promoting healing from institutional trauma, and generating evidence for policy transformation. For instance, storytelling serves as a relational epistemology, transmitting knowledge, healing, and power beyond mere technique. This approach is particularly for empowering Indigenous women by centring Elders' guidance for new understanding and cultural resurgence, while enabling critical examinations of power dynamics affecting Black and racialized leadership (Blue et al., 2015; Ruano, 2005). This approach heals racialized wounds, validates lived experiences, and equips communities with narratives to challenge Eurocentric hierarchies.

Arguably, *duoethnography* is a collaborative methodology that positions Indigenous, Black, and racialized researchers themselves as inquiry sites of investigation. In this approach, researchers' lived experiences become the primary data sources, engendering dialogic narratives that provoke self-reflection and contextual connections (Burleigh & Burm, 2022). Created by Rick Sawyer and Joe Norris (Sawyer & Norris, 2013), duoethnography represents a relatively new research genre rooted in storytelling traditions. It examines how two or more individuals ascribe similar and different meanings to shared phenomena across their lived experiences (Norris et al., 2008), critically juxtaposing disparate personal stories to sidestep autoethnography's hegemonic meta-narratives. These narratives build relational solidarity and visibility for intersectional identities often erased in academia (Burleigh & Burm, 2022; Burm & Burleigh, 2022). In turn, such methods elicit data-driven insights into leadership barriers, informing targeted interventions that enhance retention, authority, and cultural safety for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women across Canadian higher education.

To advance these research efforts, comprehensive demographic data on Indigenous, Black, and racialized individuals within psychology and academia remains essential. Aggregated and disaggregated statistics that track representation across faculty ranks, leadership roles (e.g., chairs, deans), and student pipelines would illuminate current gaps and guide evidence-based reforms. This data infrastructure is critical for spotlighting leadership disparities, empowering institutions to enact equitable hiring, mentorship, and promotion strategies that beget sustained transformation.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper examines the leadership experiences of Indigenous, Black, and racialized women in Canadian academia through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), social constructionism (Stewart, 2009, 2019), and liberation theory (Freire, 1970). It unmask how colonial, Eurocentric, and androcentric structures—socially constructed to privilege dominant identities—persistently marginalize their voices and restrict meaningful authority (Dixon & Batta, 2024). Building on this analysis, counselling psychology demonstrates how these dynamics exacerbate racial trauma and identity erosion. This unearths growing calls for culturally competent practices that validate lived realities rather than pathologizing resilience, with a theoretical focus on dismantling oppression for collective empowerment.

Thus, true transformation demands institutions abandon performative inclusion for non-performative activism. By this, we mean sustained, measurable actions such as equity

audits (Deckard et al., 2021), trauma-informed governance (Shelton, 2024), and decolonized decision-making (Sian, 2019) that prioritize lived expertise over symbolic gestures. These practices embed intersectional justice (Crenshaw, 1989) into every layer of academic life, igniting genuine power-sharing and healing for Indigenous, Black, and racialized women leaders (Sawyer & Waite, 2021). The policies, institutional practices, and research methods shared here will make this possible to develop sustainable and long-term change.

Editor's Note:

Following publication, a small number of minor editorial adjustments were identified in the manuscript. These minor changes do not affect the interpretation, results, or conclusions of the work. The errors have been corrected in this version of the article. We appreciate the readers' understanding and apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

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