

Black Students' Voices on Social Relations of Race in Québec Universities

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This article features results from a research project aimed at shedding light on the role of the University as a space contributing to the (re)production of relations of domination.

For more details, please consult: Magnan, M.-O., Collins, T., Darchinian, F., Kamanzi, P. C. & Valade, V. (2021). [Student Voices on Social Race Relations in Universities in Quebec. Race Ethnicity and Education.](#)

Background

The Effects of Discrimination and Systemic Racism

Research shows that, for some racialized groups in the province of Québec, effects attributable to school discrimination, or even systemic racism, punctuate the pathway of students from elementary school to post-secondary education. For students from Haiti or sub-Saharan Africa, the academic literature highlights an overrepresentation in special education and general adult education as well as a lower university graduation rate (Mc Andrew & al., 2015). More specifically, for primary and high school students born to Haitian parents, there is a greater exposure to racial profiling as well as to experiences of racism and discrimination by peers and school staff (Collins & Magnan, 2018).

These trends, affecting certain racialized groups, are also observed in other Canadian provinces (Dei & Kempf, 2013) and other countries (Gillborn & al., 2012). Accounts of experiences of a perceived racial climate, and daily experiences of isolation, discrimination, racial conflicts and microaggressions on campuses have been analyzed in various research (Bhopal, 2017; Suarez-Balcazar & al., 2003). In particular, the students interviewed

denounced the ethnocentric content of the courses, which did not reflect their community or group (Bailey, 2015).

Key Concept

The Concept of Microaggression as Defined by the Critical Race Theory

The concept of racial microaggression proposed by the Critical Race Theory was used for our research. Microaggressions include all forms of racism that go unnoticed in everyday interactions. They are not direct and usually have an elusive, ordinary and banal appearance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Unlike overt manifestations of racism, microaggressions manifest themselves in subtle ways in ordinary, routine activities. They often go undisputed (Chapman, Dixson, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2013). When considered as a whole, they can contribute to marginalization and social exclusion.

Methodology

A Methodology that Focuses on the Perspectives of Racialized Groups and the Desire for Racial Justice

🔍 Type of research: Qualitative

👤 Study population: 30 students born to Haitian and sub-Saharan African immigrant parents, and in the first year of their bachelor's degree

📍 Place and period of research: Montréal, between 2017 and 2020

We collected student voices to better understand how racism operates through everyday interactions and institutional practices. The analysis of the qualitative interviews first led to the identification of discourses about social relations of race in universities and narratives of experienced microaggressions. These research findings then allowed us to reflect on courses of action that could improve racial equity and justice in higher education.

Results

Social Relations of Race in Montréal Universities

1

Students reported a boundary between Whites and Others, as well as situations of microaggressions.

Our data reveal unequal social relations of race in the daily lives of students and in practices of academic institutions. The students we met emphasized the existence of a boundary linked to power relations between those they name “Whites” and Others. They relate incidents of microaggressions, which seem normal or banal for the majority group. These situations often take the form of humour, which constantly bring them back to their “otherness” and their social positioning vis-à-vis power relations, which they describe as inferiorizing. These microaggressions contribute to the sense of alienation felt by these students. For example, Tiam (parents born in Haiti) expressed that he had experienced these microaggressions in interactions with teachers:

The professor would say: “I’d change sidewalks on the street.” He was saying that in a silly way... You know little jokes: “You’re always dressed all in black, are you up to something?” – Free translation

The joke here serves as a tool that reinforces the stereotypes about Black people that are prevalent in the media in the province of Québec (Thésée & Carr, 2016). This example demonstrates that university staff from the majority group can reinforce the perception of “Blackness/Whiteness” within the student population.

2

Students reported having difficulty developing belongingness to the University in the absence of a model who resembles them.

They also highlighted the perception of boundaries between “Whites” and racialized groups at the institutional level in the choice of staff hired, in the whitewashed image of the institution, in promotional materials, in the predominance of a (formal and hidden) ethnocentric curriculum, and in student life. For example, many pointed to the fact that the majority of teachers are White or from the majority group. They say they have difficulty developing belongingness to the University in the absence of a model that resembles them. They also mention not feeling represented or included in student life.

Through the discourses of Black students that we have analyzed, a web of social relations of race is woven at the University at various institutional levels. These narratives raise a perceived asymmetry of power relations between groups.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

From Training to the Application of the Employment Equity Act

1

White staff and students in universities should be subject to more awareness campaigns and training on racial discrimination and microaggressions.

Issues of discrimination and microaggressions are often invisibilized both in the university community and in the Québec society in general. Moreover, the legacy of a colonial past marked by white supremacy is still very much present. Consequently, training should be mandatory in academia in order to move more toward racial justice.

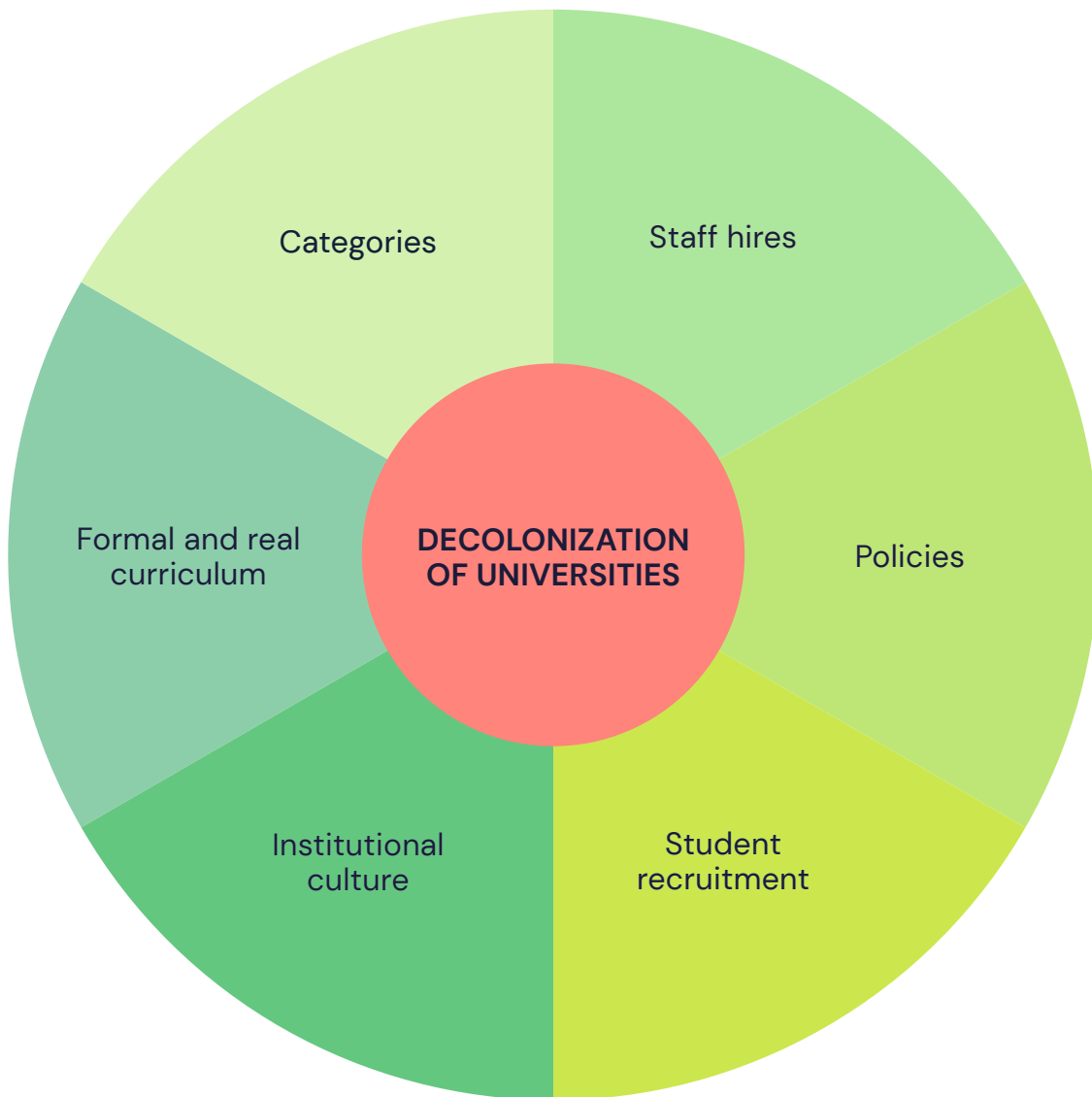
2

Universities should impart soft skills related to inclusion and social justice through university pedagogy and the curriculum in order to avoid unconsciously reproducing a dominant white ideology.

Our results call for a reflection on the role of the University and its practices, as well as on its formal and hidden curriculum. These findings allow exploring beyond academic policies and discourses, most of which formally value diversity, equity and inclusion. The students' comments raise questions about the role of the University in deconstructing power relations and social relations of race in the province of Québec.

In a context of massification of higher education, these interviews invite us to consider the role of the University in the transmission of soft skills related to inclusion and social justice through university pedagogy and the curriculum in order to avoid unconsciously reproducing a dominant White ideology (Bailey, 2015). These student voices call for the decolonization of universities in their categories and policies, in the formal and real curriculum and in their institutional culture. They also call for the diversification of the staff hired and the students recruited (see Figure 1). One of the first courses of action proposed, apart from the application of the *Employment Equity Act* (S.C. 1995), could be to make DEI training mandatory for management teams and human resources departments in order to raise awareness about and promote institutional action vis-à-vis social relations of race in Québec universities.

Figure 1
Decolonization of Universities



Courses of Action

- ✓ Raise awareness and train the entire university community on how to fight systemic racism, discrimination and microaggressions.
- ✓ Train professors in inclusive and anti-racist pedagogy as well as in decolonizing the formal curriculum, including course outlines and required readings.
- ✓ Welcome the voice of racialized groups in courses, both among the student community present in the class and through the invitation of speakers from racialized groups.
- ✓ Diversify university staff to increase racial diversity, to provide inspiring models visible to Black communities and to make the university's decision-making bodies more representative (e.g. diversifying those in key decision-making positions).

Lines of Research

- ✓ Analyze the implementation of DEI policies in universities.
- ✓ Gather the perspectives of Black students in universities on the implementation of DEI policies and on the actions they propose to achieve racial justice in higher education.

For Further Reading

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Biographical Note

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