

The Paradox of Diversity Initiatives: Structural Disadvantages for Global South Scholars in Academia

Mvikeli Ncube, PhD.

Department of Psychology,
University of Derby, Derby,
United Kingdom.

Abstract

The implementation of diversity initiatives at Western universities serves as proof of institutional dedication to equity programs. These diversity initiatives represent mechanisms that perpetuate colonial power dynamics despite being presented as reform efforts from a critical psychological viewpoint. The article argues that diversity policies convert fundamental epistemic violence into individual problems that divert attention from implementing complete structural changes. The analysis employs decolonial theory, critical psychology, and postcolonial studies to show how diversity programs silence decolonisation movements while maintaining Eurocentric epistemologies and current hiring practices. The inclusion offered through these initiatives centres "Whiteness" and neoliberal logic instead of eliminating coloniality, so they fail to dismantle power structures. The article ends by supporting actual decolonisation processes instead of diversity paradigms, which would acknowledge multiple epistemologies while distributing power in academic institutions.

Key Words: decolonisation, diversity initiatives, coloniality, critical psychology, epistemic violence, higher education.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium or format, provided the authors and journal is properly cited.

© 2025 The Authors. JORMA International Journal of Health and Social Sciences | Publisher: **JORMA Journals**.

Introduction

The implementation of diversity initiatives which claim to be progressive creates paradoxical situations that harm Global South scholars by preserving structural inequalities while presenting themselves as inclusive programs. Despite their purpose to correct past discrimination diversity programs in academic institutions frequently implement Western-based definitions of diversity which exclude non-Western knowledge systems (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007). These initiatives only provide token representation to Global South academics while maintaining a preference for scholars who follow Euro-American academic standards and linguistic conventions (Alataz, 2006). Scholars who introduce different research methods or native intellectual traditions alongside colonialism analysis become excluded from full participation because their work does not match Global North institutions' standards of 'diverse excellence' (Mignolo, 2011). Diversity programs operate through neoliberal systems by

turning scholar identities into organisational prestige assets that fail to alter the fundamental power structures of knowledge (Ahmed, 2012).

The inclusion of Global South academics typically consists of tokenistic recognition because their academic contributions lack sufficient value or face appropriation (Santos, 2014). The situation intensifies epistemic violence in international academic exchanges because Global North institutions maintain control over which knowledge qualifies as authentic (Spivak, 1988). Diversity-focused scholarships tend to choose applicants whose research aligns with established paradigms while excluding disruptive decolonial approaches that question prevailing perspectives (de Sousa Santos, 2016). The evaluative systems governing these scholarships typically lack Global South scholar participation thus creating assessment frameworks which fail to address system-level challenges faced by candidates from minority backgrounds (Bhambra, 2014). When Global South scholars achieve success through these initiatives they typically need to avoid political content in their work to receive continued funding and institutional support which weakens their potential to create transformative epistemological change (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

The actual goal of diversity initiatives proves to be the perpetuation of power inequalities since institutions use these programs to maintain their appearance of progressiveness without facing the complex challenge of decolonising knowledge systems (Ahmed, 2012). Global South academics experience a contradictory situation that includes being simultaneously included and marginalised and visible yet silenced and celebrated yet constrained. The focus needs to shift away from representational politics and towards epistemic justice for genuine advancement (Santos, 2014). This requires the elimination of academic power structures combined with alternative funding models that support different knowledge systems and authentic Global South scholarship. Without fundamental changes the empowerment mission of diversity initiatives will persist as control mechanisms that harm the scholars they aim to support. Western universities maintain a reputation as institutions which prioritise equity alongside diversity and inclusion. Since universities have faced years of criticism regarding their racist systems along with their discriminatory practices in hiring staff they have created new diversity programs to fix historical inequalities. Critical psychological and decolonial scholars question whether diversity policies lead to real change. These change initiatives function as mechanisms to preserve existing colonial structures while appearing to implement alterations according to Ahmed (2012) and Maldonado-Torres (2007).

Professionals who oppose traditional approaches to knowledge face discrimination (Steele, 1997) and institutional opposition that includes hidden prejudice in peer evaluations and social isolation and attacks on their scholarly credentials. The environment of cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994) results in minoritised faculty members carrying excessive diversity service duties while their academic achievements receive inadequate acknowledgment.

The framework of symbolic threat alongside system justification theory from Jost and Banaji (1994) helps researchers understand how diversity rhetoric serves institutions as a protective mechanism. Symbolic diversity enables institutions to showcase progress through the strategic deployment of images and slogans and tokenistic hiring practices that leave fundamental epistemological and material structures untouched. The psychological mechanism reduces cognitive tension for powerful groups while simultaneously easing feelings of group-based remorse which strengthens established systems.

Western universities implement tokenistic diversity practices through limited racialised scholar hiring and brief global perspectives programs in curriculum design which remain symbolic instead of creating fundamental changes. Research by Rosette and Livingston (2012) demonstrates that small token representation strengthens stereotypes and intensifies perceptions of discriminatory practices among dominant group members which results in stronger resistance to systemic changes.

The paper employs critical psychology principles to explore how diversity initiatives create barriers toward knowledge decolonisation in Western university staffing. Such initiatives deliver symbolic changes instead of real transformations because they turn systemic problems into individual issues while strengthening neoliberal mindsets and sustaining Eurocentric knowledge dominance. The article starts by introducing critical psychology's decolonisation framework and continues with a discussion of

diversity discourse analysis before examining epistemic and staffing impacts and ending with proposals for decolonial solutions.

Coloniality and the Production of Knowledge

The field of critical psychology investigates the social history of psychological knowledge development to debunk positivist neutrality claims (Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009). Critical psychology differs from mainstream psychology because it positions power dynamics and ideological structures as essential factors to study along with material conditions to understand how psychological methods benefit established powers. Higher education becomes transparent through critical psychological examination of institutional diversity initiatives that conceal more profound oppressive systems. The concept of coloniality developed by Anibal Quijano (2000) explains how Western knowledge systems continue to rule global knowledge systems even though colonial governments ended their existence. Coloniality describes the permanent power dynamics which determine cultural systems and work systems as well as social relationships and knowledge generation. Academia displays Eurocentric preference in its frameworks alongside non-Western epistemological suppression (Mignolo, 2011). The integration of critical psychology with decolonial theory enables deeper evaluation because university diversity should target both demographics and fundamental colonial power networks which determine institutional structures and knowledge systems.

Diversity Initiatives: Symbolic Reform, Management of Dissent or Structural Change?

Western universities created diversity initiatives as their response to civil rights movements and postcolonial critiques and neoliberal requirements for global competitiveness (Ahmed, 2012). These initiatives typically include equity statements, cultural sensitivity training, targeted recruitment, and the creation of diversity officer roles. The institutionalisation of diversity initiatives leads to its “depoliticisation” through which historical complex injustices get reduced to representation and interpersonal prejudice issues (Melaku, Beeman, Smith, & Johnson, 2020). Sara Ahmed (2012) points out that university diversity work primarily exists to contain opposition instead of dismantling discriminatory systems. The implementation of diversity committees together with initiatives by institutions functions as a method to demonstrate responsiveness yet maintains existing power structures intact. Workers who carry out diversity responsibilities often experience marginalisation since they must handle institutional obligations without possessing genuine power to effect change. Through their branding strategy universities implement diversity as a core value instead of an approach to demand justice thus they maintain progressiveness without needing to transform their structural systems (Ahmed, 2012).

Institutional Performances of Diversity

The critical psychology field points out that diversity initiatives perform through "diversity days" and symbolic appointments while making empty public statements without implementing actual policy changes. Institutions use these performances to demonstrate moral accountability while sustaining systems which advantage particular knowledge systems and social capital networks (Puwar, 2004). Institutional approaches to justice as feelings and attitudes steer people away from understanding real historical and material causes. Equitable actions become routine practices which eliminate their transformative abilities.

Neoliberal Logics in Diversity Practices

Most diversity initiatives operate through neoliberal frameworks which base their approach on personal achievement and free choice and market-based competition (Giroux, 2014). Through its focus on celebrating difference universities turns diversity into a commercial product that uses marginalised identities to market progress instead of using them to address systemic inequality. Critical psychology sees this approach as a form of oppression individualisation which makes marginalised individuals focus on adapting to the system while demonstrating their strength instead of working to eliminate marginalising systems (Spears, 2021). Under "empowerment" rhetoric the psychological strain of

enduring racist or exclusionary environments gets transferred to individual students and faculty members.

Tokenism and Representation Without Power

Universities often implement tokenistic hiring practices because diversity initiatives prioritise numbers over fundamental institutional transformation. The practice of putting a few scholars of colour into prominent positions lets institutions demonstrate their diversity achievements without changing educational materials or research directions or institutional leadership or knowledge structures (Puwar, 2004). The critical psychology model shows that individuals who experience excessive public attention but lack institutional power develop "psychic dissonance" which describes their state of heightened visibility alongside their powerlessness (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Academic tokenism requires minoritised professors to act as representatives of their communities which diverts their attention from independent research and professional validation.

Epistemic Violence and the Limits of "Inclusive" Knowledge

According to Decolonial theorists the introduction of diverse bodies to universities fails to decolonise knowledge when Eurocentric epistemologies continue to govern (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Critical psychology demonstrates that Western-based theories maintain their position as dominant frameworks while treating alternative perspectives as auxiliary knowledge that is supplementary rather than core. The inclusion of different viewpoints in academic syllabi tends to maintain Western academic theories at the centre of the curriculum while relegating knowledge systems from Indigenous, African, and Asian traditions to supplementary roles. This particular approach of inclusion actually strengthens epistemic domination because it presents non-Western knowledge systems as peculiar or secondary or secondary elements (Bhambra, 2014).

Epistemic Exploitation

Kristie Dotson (2011) develops the idea of epistemic exploitation which requires oppressed academics to teach dominant groups about oppression at their own professional and personal expense. Diversity initiatives make this situation worse because they force marginalised scholars to participate in environments that value their different perspectives above all else instead of seeing them as equal creators of knowledge. Critical psychology demonstrates the damaging effects of epistemic exploitation which results in burnout and identity conflicts and alienation specifically among marginalised academics (Jones & Reddick, 2017). The process of creating counter-narratives alongside advocating for curricular change remains unrewarded which strengthens exploitative dynamics through the illusion of inclusive practices.

Barriers to Structural Change

Universities continue to have their senior leadership positions controlled by White male Western-educated individuals despite diversity hiring efforts (Morley, 2018). The fundamental biases within recruitment systems and promotional processes and research funding decisions maintain colonial power structures while visible diversity numbers rise according to critical psychology. Selection committees may unconsciously favour candidates who conform to dominant norms of scholarship, communication, and professionalism, thus preserving epistemic homogeneity (Hancock & Warren, 2017). The criteria used to define academic excellence include publishing in top journals and securing grants from elite funders and having ties with prominent institutions, yet these criteria reflect colonial biases that discriminate against researchers who question Eurocentric paradigms.

Whiteness as Property.

Critical race theorists define Whiteness as institutional property which produces advantages within organisational settings (Harris, 1993). The university's whiteness system controls both the composition of student bodies and the established standards of conduct, physical presentation and academic traditions. The inclusion of new participants in diversity initiatives leads to Whiteness recentring itself while the fundamental colonial structure remains intact. Whiteness operates as an oblivious system

which creates itself as universal and unbiased so decolonial analysis appears particular and biased thus reinforcing coloniality behind a neutral mask.

Beyond Diversity, decolonisation as a Paradigm Shift

Tuck and Yang (2012) famously assert that "decolonisation is not a metaphor." The process of true decolonisation involves the complete destruction of colonial systems rather than their modification for increased inclusivity. A university-wide decolonisation requires faculty to dismantle Western epistemological leadership while redistributing power structures to make Indigenous and marginalised knowledge systems central. The field of critical psychology emphasises that genuine decolonisation needs to address all dimensions of oppression including material structures psychological processes and epistemic systems because these elements are deeply connected to colonial historical events.

Transformative Strategies

The following essential methods will help institutions progress from diversity initiatives toward achieving decolonisation:

1. Epistemic Disobedience: People need to actively reject Western paradigm supremacy while acknowledging multiple knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2011).
2. Structural Redistribution: Historically marginalised groups should receive redistributed resources and decision-making authority and leadership positions.
3. Curricular Transformation: Universities must reshape their academic programs to place Indigenous, Black, Asian and additional non-Western knowledge traditions at the centre instead of keeping them as supplementary materials.
4. Community Accountability: The accountability of universities should extend toward local and global communities instead of market-based performance metrics.
5. The path toward fundamental institutional change exceeds comfortable language of inclusion to demand genuine structural transformations which create unavoidable discomfort but remain essential.
6. The affective dynamics of academic settings need decolonial examination because privileged groups experience fear and anxiety and resistance when discussing colonial systems.

Conclusion

The paper establishes that diversity initiatives create obstacles instead of promoting knowledge and staffing decolonisation in Western universities despite their supposed progressive character. A critical psychological analysis using decolonial perspectives shows that diversity operates as a managerial approach which blocks complete change while making systemic oppression individual and transforming minority identities into market commodities and upholding European epistemological authority.

The process of decolonisation requires more than diverse staff representation because it needs the total destruction of colonial power structures which determine how knowledge is produced and how staff members are managed and how institutions operate. Universities pursuing justice must stop focusing on diversity initiative perfection and start performing transformative decolonial praxis to transform the basic concepts of academic work. Through epistemic plurality acceptance combined with power distribution and colonial legacy disruption universities can achieve real systemic transformation beyond their symbolic diversity displays.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press.
- Alatas, S. F. (2006). *Alternative discourses in Asian social science: Responses to Eurocentrism*. SAGE Publications.
- Bhambra, G. K. (2014). *Connected sociologies*. Bloomsbury.
- Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Polity Press.
- de Sousa Santos, B. (2016). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.
- Jost, J. T., & Banaji, M. R. (1994). The role of stereotyping in system-justification and the production of false consciousness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 33(1), 1–27.
- Leonardo, S., & Porter, R. K. (2010). Pedagogy of fear: Toward a Fanonian theory of 'safety' in race dialogue. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(2), 139–157.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press.
- Padilla, A. M. (1994). Ethnic minority scholars, research, and mentoring: Current and future issues. *Educational Researcher*, 23(4), 24–27.
- Rosette, A. S., & Livingston, R. (2012). Failure is not an option for Black women: Effects of organisational performance on leaders with single versus dual-subordinate identities. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(5), 1162–1167.
- Santos, B. de S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.
- Smith, W. A., Hung, M., & Franklin, J. D. (2011). Racial battle fatigue and the miseducation of Black men: Racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stress. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 80(1), 63–82.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613–629.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonisation is not a metaphor. *Decolonisation: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40.