
10. Intersectionality as an antidote to coloniality in social work and family therapy

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INTRODUCTION

The social work profession is presently at a critical moment in history, tasked with developing solutions at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels to address multifaceted, highly complex issues. For example, we continue to experience the devastating ongoing and lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only impacted individual health but has also been a significant force driving an increase in global poverty (Aguilar et al., 2024). Reports by leading experts from the World Inequality Lab (Chancel et al., 2022) point out that global wealth inequality continues to sharply rise, with specific and disproportionate impact on Southwest Asia and North Africa countries. The United Nations (Azcona et al., 2023) reports that global initiatives to achieve gender equality have fallen dramatically short and gender inequality has grown and remains entrenched. Complicating factors politically, there has been a consistent decline in the quality and effectiveness of democracies. According to a critical report by The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, “For the past six consecutive years, more countries have been experiencing declines in their democratic quality than have been improving, with 2021 the worst year on record” (Casas-Zamora et al., 2023, p. 12). The interlocking nature of these crises further exacerbates the human impact of climate change, the threat of nuclear war, and the precarity of millions of displaced people and refugees. The stakes could not be higher.

Social workers around the world are essential providers of critical health and social services and must develop strategies that address colonialism and coloniality. As clinical practitioners and educators interested in de-linking social work practices from the grip of coloniality, we view decoloniality and intersectionality as a helpful antidote. Our chapter opens with a discussion of coloniality and decoloniality, followed by examples of the ways coloniality is manifested and reproduced across multiple social settings. We offer a definition of intersectionality and provide examples of how it is key to operationalizing decoloniality and liberatory praxis within all realms of social work.

DEFINING COLONIALITY

Colonialism: Matrix of Power, Privilege, and Oppression

Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (2007) suggest that the strength of colonization lies in its control of (a) the institutional narratives informing history and education and (b) the resources that privilege some, oppress others, and secure the resulting hierarchy. Almeida represents the hierarchy as a triangle (2007) or a prism (2018). The intersecting influences of patriarchy,

capitalism, and coloniality converge at the apex of power and privilege, held by wealthy white heterosexual men.

This colonial matrix of power establishes beneficiaries of economic, political, and social power by privileging those possessing valued characteristics. Privileging may at first occur by force; later, it is bestowed through favor, resources, and inclusion by the most powerful or resourced. Those found wanting—the marginalized or “otherized”—become practically invisible unless they intrude on the boundaries of safe spaces or declared rights of the privileged. Transgressing this order occurs by (a) failing to uphold or endorse the rules and roles of privilege, (b) making public those needs (physical, mental, or relational) misaligned with those of the privileged (consider, e.g., ongoing public policy debates in the US concerning education, homelessness, and substance abuse), or (c) being a member of a marginalized group whose value within the social structure is disregarded by those who occupy sites of privilege within the matrix of power.

Coloniality Emerges from Colonialism

Mignolo (2021) draws a distinction between colonialism and coloniality. He explains, “Colonialism refers to the historical event of Western European colonialism from 1500 to 2000 ... while coloniality refers to the underlying logic of all Western projects of colonialism” (Mignolo, 2021, p. 13). The underlying logic to which Mignolo refers is the system of ideas, values, and norms of race, gender, class, age, ability, and so on that have been constructed into categories of superior and inferior and enforced through policies, laws, institutions, and social and cultural customs. Despite the promises of decolonization movements during the twentieth century, the logics of colonialism endure to maintain the global hierarchies of dominance and inferiority, also known as coloniality. Maldonado-Torres (2007) explains that

Coloniality ... refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism ... that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday. (p. 243)

Reproducing Coloniality

Colonial ideologies and institutions have been transformed over time to preserve racial and gender hierarchies in society. Even as the language, structure, and processes of colonization—derived from colonial European “Enlightenment” thinkers—are reworked over time and across sectors, the resulting boundary markings remain as camouflage for the ideological pillars of coloniality. Quijano (2000) tracks colonial domination in myriad forms: from the control of labor, resources, and production to the evolution of global capitalist power centered within a post-Enlightenment era, to contemporary Eurocentrism. This new capitalist, Eurocentric system of global power is centered around the conceptualization of race, including the privileging of “whiteness.” These imaginary concepts of demarcation re-establish constructs of superiority and inferiority. This is represented in the matrix of coloniality.

Analysis and Manifestations of Coloniality

Building from Quijano's framing of coloniality, Almeida (Almeida and Williams, 2025; Almeida et al., 2015) identifies three systems active in establishing power, privilege, and oppression:

1. Systems of hierarchies: Racial division and classification as the organizing principle of white supremacy.
2. Systems of knowledge: Privileging of Western or Eurocentric forms of knowledge as universal and objective.
3. Systems of social organization: Reinforcing hierarchies through the construction of the state and specific institutions to regulate, segregate, and diminish decolonizing systems of healing and lived experiences.

Applying this analytic framework reveals how muting the perspectives and knowledge of the marginalized—whether by the colonizer or the colonized, or both—maintains the power dynamics of the social structure of coloniality. Castro-Gomez (2010) argues that in modern colonialism, or coloniality, domination by force is not the only method of domination. We witness this in discourse about “the other” embedded within the everyday lives of both colonizers and colonized. For example, whiteness was the first cultural and geographical imagery of the world system from which the ethnic division of labor and the transfer of capital and raw materials was legitimized globally (Battalora, 2018), reflecting Quijano's analysis of race hegemony as a dominant factor in the project of globalization.

DECOLONIALITY

The process of restoring justice to colonized peoples was the process of decolonization. This historic initiative is encased in the writings of Franz Fanon (1963), W.E.B. Du Bois (1903 [1994]), James Baldwin (1990), Paulo Freire (1978), Mahatma Gandhi (2007), Nelson Mandela (2008), Kwame Nkrumah (1967), Sylvia Wynter (2003), The Combahee Collective (1978), and countless others. Many of the struggles toward nationalism that followed were eclipsed in cycles of violence and corruption that separated the elites from the regular populations (Soyinka, 1996). The problematic discourses around nationalism and colonialism are well documented (Lazarus, 1993). These historical waves challenge the concepts of “post”—much of what exists in multiple diasporas resonates deeply with colonization.

Decoloniality refers to the contemporary and ongoing project of acknowledging the inheritance of the processes of decolonizing, postcolonialism, modernity, and coloniality. Much of the scholarship around decoloniality has originated in the global south, Africa, and parts of Asia. The pursuit of decoloniality requires a deep analysis of contemporary structures and processes that perpetuate coloniality and the centering of scholars and activists currently missing from this discourse (Afolabi, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Smith (2012), and Hundle (2019) attribute the continuous weaponization of knowledge production of colonized people in contemporary, colonized spaces as a continued marking of coloniality.

The conceptualization of the modern world both at the empirical and imaginary levels was the otherizing and the consistent erasure from history of the production of the modern world which was largely developed in the colonized spaces. The very structure and process of decolonial thinking and action refutes this pattern of Western epistemologies (Grosfoguel, 2011, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The resistance and challenge to a colonial social order is the process and structure of decoloniality (Bhambra et al., 2018).

INTERSECTIONALITY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO COLONIALITY

Naming and Challenging Individualism and Postmodernism in Mental Health

The emergence of a Progressive Era in social work witnessed two entities that led organized efforts to respond to the needs of families who were the victims of the effects of rapid social changes introduced by rapid urbanization and industrialization. The joint efforts by the Charity Organization Society and the Settlement House Movement responded to the disruptive influences of urban community life. Of particular relevance to this chapter is the fact that rigid values of individualism and “self-reliance” dismissed the social and political significance of these organizations. This concept of the individual versus systems, be it family or community, remains the bulwark of service delivery not only in Western contexts but also extended to other nations through the pipeline of coloniality.

This redefining of individuals in their context led to the beginnings of redefining individuals as part of their family systems and a more systemic view of individuals (Davis, 1973; Janzen et al., 2005). The evolution of family therapy itself has experienced a re-visioning through the incorporation of narrative and postmodern approaches into its lexicon. However, the pattern of resistance and interruption to the colonial social order in social work and allied disciplines is essential to the process of decoloniality (McDowell and Hernandez, 2010).

With the advent of cognitive behavioral therapy and dialectical behavior therapy methodologies—evidence-based and firmly rooted in cognitions of individuals—families and communities are once again relegated to the shadows. The National Institute of Mental Health and other departments that control mental health in the US have explicitly colluded with the capitalist system of the insurance models of payment to shift the focus away from family and community healing to individual, short-term fixes.

Postmodernism—a timeline that represents a shift from colonial thinking to post-Enlightenment—is viewed by clinicians in the West as a more evolved form of therapeutic practice. Decolonial scholars view this framing as a false historical arc. Decolonial scholars see vestiges of colonial ownership in the prison-industrial complex, the hierarchy of public education systems funded through property taxes (and exclusive, privately funded alternatives), and disparities in disease and longevity affected by social determinants of health, such as access to safe housing and healthy agricultural products (Blackstock, 2024; Koski-Karell et al., 2024).

Consider, for example, the common postmodernist descriptor “developing” to characterize nations where colonizers ravaged existing cultures, economies, governments, and natural resources. Today, emissaries from colonizing nations return as “saviors,” to provide aid intended to coax recipients toward the funders’ vision of modernity and even postmodernism. The very structure and process of decolonial thinking and action refutes this pattern of Western

epistemologies (Almeida and Williams, 2025; Grosfoguel, 2011, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Decoloniality represents a break from Eurocentric theorizing, knowledge, and action. In defining the colonial matrix of power, Quijano describes decolonial thinking and doing as the acknowledgement and identification of the colonial wound (Quijano, 2000, 2007). It is a process of disengaging from Eurocentric forms of knowledge and action that have been consolidated from modernity to postmodernism. Decoloniality brings to light forms of knowledge and action from subaltern and border spaces that systems of coloniality have silenced and repressed.

For example, author Andrew Solomon (2009) recounts an experience in Rwanda, where he learns from a Rwandan colleague about their view of Westernized mental health approaches.

[colleague] “We’ve had a lot of trouble with Western mental health workers, especially the ones who came right after the genocide.” I [Solomon] said, “What kind of trouble did you have?” And he said, “Well, they would do this bizarre thing. They didn’t take people out in the sunshine where you begin to feel better. They didn’t include drumming or music to get people’s blood going. They didn’t involve the whole community. They didn’t externalize the depression as an invasive spirit. Instead, what they did was they took people one at a time into dingy little rooms and had them talk for an hour about bad things that had happened to them.”

Solomon’s story illustrates coloniality, the intersecting logics of individualism, postmodernism, and mental health. Westernized clinical approaches are exported and normalized as the standard for healing. The Rwandan’s response is decoloniality in action—the speaker names colonial practices and roots the antidote in local cultural customs and norms for healing.

Intersectionality as a Departure from the Structures and Processes of Western Psychological Perspectives

Cooper (2016) traces the roots of intersectionality to early Black feminists who called attention to the various social, cultural, political, and institutional manifestations of how “patriarchy interacts with other systems of power—namely, racism—to uniquely disadvantage some groups of women more than others” (p. 387). Building from the scholarship and activism of Black feminism, such as the Combahee River Collective (1978) and critical race theorists, Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality in 1989 to highlight the problems of anti-discrimination laws that failed to address the interactional nature of racism and sexism oppressing Black women. As Wesp et al. (2019) note, intersectionality “asserts that various oppressions create and mutually constitute one another to sustain a complex matrix of power that is rooted in, and actively maintained by, social structures and institutional systems” (p. 288). We view intersectionality as a helpful antidote to naming the interconnected nature of oppression, power, and privilege dynamics, shifting away from binary logics or single-axis thinking (Cho et al., 2013).

Each aspect of an individual’s identity exists concurrently in multiple spaces. These facets manifest differently in the context of various contiguous life-affirming and disruptive contexts, creating an intersectional experience with embedded aspects of advantage, disadvantage, and nuance. The resulting identities convey privileges, advantages, disadvantages, and varying levels of power—some of which are mutable, and others not. Intersectionality offers possibilities to decolonize the political and institutional aspects of social location and

the standpoints of people in their lived experiences in multiple contexts (Harding, 2003). Any consideration of social location and standpoint must include the various and intersecting identities imposed and embraced by individuals.

Collins (1993, 2009) cautioned about the veiled usage of intersectionality within academic spaces that would offer yet another perspective while leaving the structures of coloniality intact. Bilge (2013) warns of the depoliticizing of intersectionality through advancing the neoliberal corridors of feminism that link to the whitening of intersectionality that connects it to the dominant platform of white feminism that serves a particularized set of power relations.

Those seeking freedom through liberatory healing must grapple with the challenge of acknowledging both the ways in which their own identities make them vulnerable to oppression (as, e.g., middle-class white women face oppression by middle-class white men), and also the ways that their identities grant privilege (those same middle-class white women often forget the plights of women of color, women in poverty, and lesbians, trans women, and others on the gender spectrum). To be effective, professionals, students, and activists alike must keep the entire matrix of power, privilege, and oppression—coloniality—centered within the landscape of freedom conversations and liberatory strategies for healing.

Intersectionality as a Blueprint for Decoloniality

Intersectionality provides a blueprint for practitioners across disciplines to better understand “how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Indeed, shifting away from the coloniality of single-axis thinking, we can embrace clinical practices that affirm the multi-layered dynamics of lived experiences within coloniality. Further, we can begin to map out the power dynamics affecting and structuring lived experiences. As Prescod-Weinstein (2016) explains,

intersectionality is not merely the intersection of multiple identity axes, but also a framework for considering what it means to live at intersections of identity in the context of acknowledged, very real power dynamics that determine the every day of people who have traditionally been forced to the margins. Those power dynamics have been determined in part by legacies of colonialism that have treated people of color as bodies to be experimented and capitalized on and their lands and anything contained therein as resources to be collected and capitalized on. (para. 39)

Learning to listen and center the experiences of those who have historically been marginalized helps practitioners and clients better understand the diversity of lived difference. In the next section, we offer case studies to operationalize an intersectional decoloniality paradigm within social work.

EXAMPLES OF OPERATIONALIZING DECOLONIALITY AND LIBERATORY PRAXIS WITHIN SOCIAL WORK

Liberatory praxis, through intersectionality, offers a pathway to decoloniality, critical consciousness (Freire, 1978), and empowerment. We offer a case analysis for the application of decoloniality through the pathways of intersectionality. Lastly, we detail healing circles

as a tool for building critical consciousness, accountability, reparation, and transformation. By redefining and contextualizing the structures where family and community relationships reside, liberatory praxis facilitates individual and community-level healing.

Building a Liberatory-Based Social Work Classroom

As social work educators, we are informed by bell hooks's (1994) ideas on education that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). Indeed, rooting pedagogy in radical possibility allows for imagining "a world where many worlds fit, as the Zapatistas of Chiapas put it" (Kothari et al., 2019, p. xxviii). To enact this vision is to create a liberatory praxis where the relationships between student and teacher are de-linked from the confines of coloniality. To build a liberatory-based classroom, we utilize a pedagogical framework composed of three interrelated and simultaneously occurring pillars: (a) critical consciousness (e.g., learning to think critically about the systematic and interconnected nature of oppression), (b) empowerment (e.g., learning to develop individual and collective confidence and strength in oneself and community), and (c) accountability (e.g., learning to understand responsibility toward self and others).

Enacting decoloniality in the classroom emerges by centering scholars like bell hooks alongside decolonial movements such as the Zapatistas, serving as actions of recognition and acknowledgement of the inherent interconnections among various layers of oppression. Decoloniality in the classroom is fortified through transdisciplinarity and the inclusion of radical, liberation-based, decolonial scholars and practitioners from around the globe. We intentionally seek out decolonial examples that provide students with encouragement to imagine possibility, to dream, and to enact. For instance, from the outset we engage in conversation about how we can establish what Hedva (2022) refers to as a "politics of care." Collaborating with students to develop concrete ways we will take care of one another during each class—and over the course of a semester—is a practice in applying intersectionality since we are acknowledging and sincerely regarding our diversity of identity markers, social locations, power, and privileges. Critics of this approach worry that spending time to establish our politics of care detracts from time devoted to foundational course content, readings, competencies, and so on. However, our view is that establishing a relational connection through intersectionality is content that must be deeply engaged with—not rushed, or merely reviewed in a syllabus. Establishing classroom communities that can work through difference and conflict requires trust, respect, and an understanding that it is okay to take risks in learning. Importantly, we are creating a classroom space where students can engage in critical self-reflection around power and privilege. Our experience has been that when students and teachers can openly acknowledge power and privilege differences, critical consciousness, empowerment, and accountability result.

Applying intersectionality within the classroom can also occur through the intentional selection of a diverse range of course materials (e.g., readings, videos, podcasts, art installations, music, etc.) that explicitly challenge coloniality. For example, when teaching courses on human behavior and social environment, we can include materials such as Blackstock's (2019) *Breath of Life Theory* that de-center "traditional" developmental theories (e.g., Erikson, Piaget, Maslow, Bronfenbrenner, etc.). In policy analysis courses, we can incorporate media such as Raoul Peck's (2021) *Exterminate All the Brutes*, which provides a critically conscious

global analysis of colonialism and genocide; in clinical practice courses, we can use texts like Almeida's (2018) *Liberation-based Healing Practices*, an analysis of coloniality within mental health and family therapy, as well as specific clinical techniques and practices that de-link from dominant Western healing approaches.

Social work educators can make use of art-based research assignments, designed to intentionally and critically de-link from coloniality. For example, to disrupt solidarity with cis-heteronormative social work education and practice, we have developed an arts-based visual historical timeline activity of global LGBTQIA2S+ communities and liberation-based movements. From the outset, students are informed that they will earn full credit simply by completing all aspects of the assignment. Students are asked to read selected chapters from Mogul et al.'s (2011) incisive text *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States*, in order to build a working foundation of LGBTQIA2S+ history and resistance movements, along with the queer criminal archetypes historically used to oppress LGBTQIA2S+ people and communities. Students work in pairs or trios, each group selecting a time period from the year 1900 to the current day to explore LGBTQIA2S+ liberatory-based movements. As students begin to research their historical period, they are asked to: consider dominant narratives of the time; apply the analysis from the *Queer (In)justice* text and identify the queer criminal archetypes and how they have been used to marginalize, subjugate, and control; apply an intersectional analysis and observe whose experiences are centered in the research, and whose are left out; search out primary source material that describes the strength, creativity, and courage of LGBTQIA2S+ people and communities, as well as their organizing strategies and tactics used to fight for liberation; report back on the challenges activists faced, and the role of cisheterosexual allies. Students are asked to incorporate an intersectional and decolonial analysis of the historical period; for instance, how does capitalism affect/influence LGBTQIA2S+ social movements? How is white supremacy reinforced or challenged within these movements? What impact has slavery had on LGBTQIA2S+ movements? What is the relationship between colonization and gender-based violence? Lastly, we ask students to draw connections to current social work practice, highlighting areas for change in policy, institutional and cultural practices. Once students have completed their research and analysis, they are invited to share their findings through the creation of a visual arts-based presentation that centers LGBTQIA2S+ people's lived experiences, knowledge, memory, and culture; they are encouraged to use art images, collage, poetry, music, song lyrics, film, etc. to build an intersectional story of their historical period. During class, we assemble students' art-based research into a visual timeline of LGBTQIA2S+ activism and liberation-based movements. Students provide a brief presentation of their findings, highlighting direct material from *Queer (In)justice*, and clearly centering the perspectives, histories, and knowledge of LGBTQIA2S+ people.

Having used this assignment for over ten years, it has been our experience that students initially experience this activity as unorthodox and view the instructions as vague. For some students, what initially seems like an unstructured assignment generates a sense of anxiety about how to complete the assignment in order to earn a passing grade. The goal for the instructor in this case is to actively practice de-linking from the coloniality of education through the use of critical inquiry. We inquire about the history of assignments that students have generally had. What sort of expectations were there? Have they ever had the freedom to design and craft an assignment with art? Have they ever had an instructor tell them in advance that they would be

earning full credit? Through this dialogue, students reveal a pattern evocative of what Freire (2000) referred to as a banking concept of education, where “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Students generally resonate with this definition and are encouraged to critically self-reflect about how they are now viewing an assignment in which their knowledge and history are centered, validated, and acknowledged. As educators, our hope with assignments like this is to instill confidence in students’ critical thinking and help them learn to trust their instincts as learners. Positioning students themselves as valuable sources of knowledge from whom we can learn de-links from the banking model. As students complete the assignment, they learn both from their own research and art and directly from one another. Year in and year out, students go above and beyond in creating some of the most dynamic, critically conscious, and empowering art-based research projects. They come away from the assignment sharing that they feel liberated and empowered to continue questioning and building power relationally and collectively.

Structuring and Building Healing Circles in Liberatory Settings

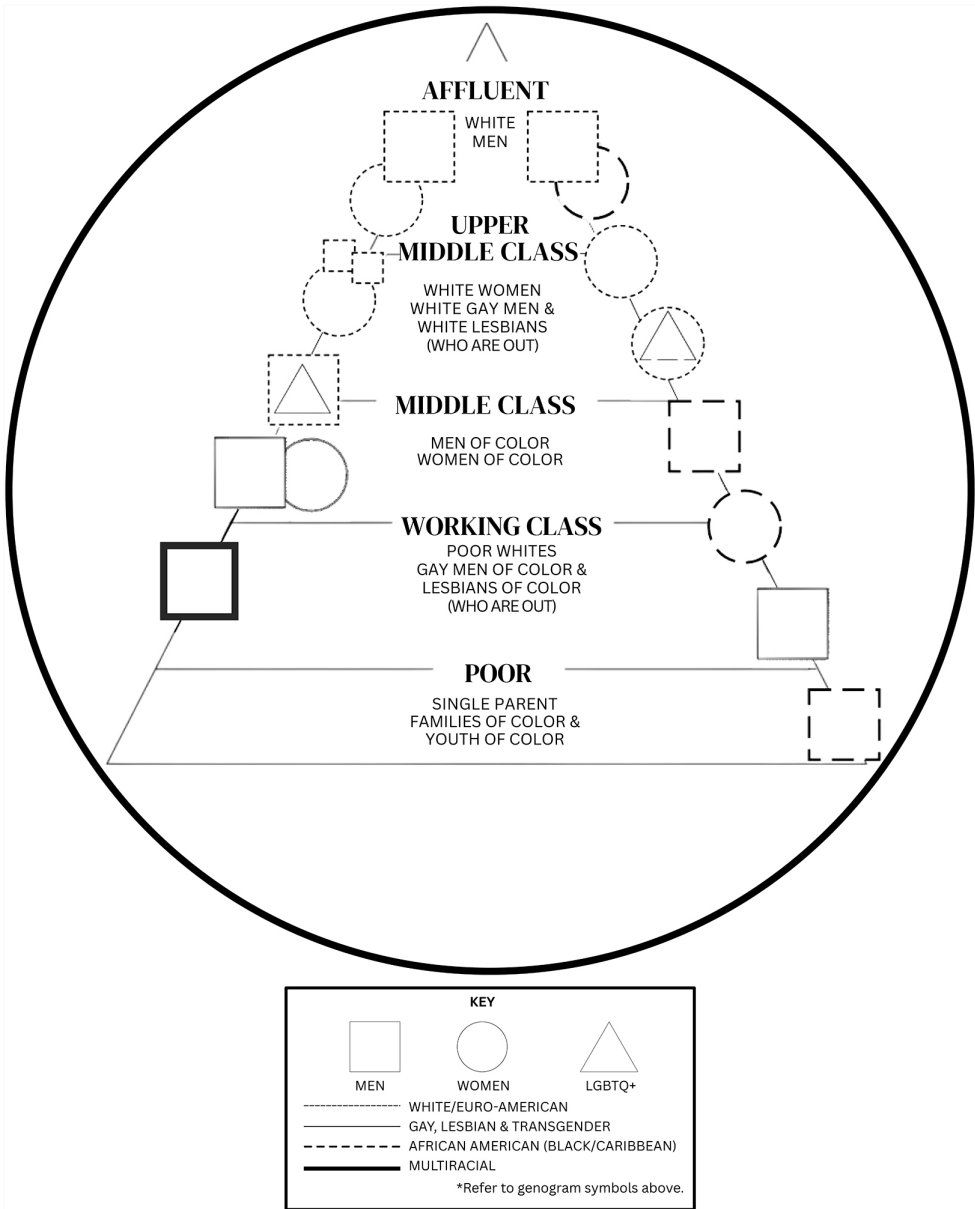
Silence from and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies. What I am interested in are the strategies for breaking it. (Morrison, 1992, p. 5)

One of the most powerful weapons of the colonial matrix of power is hiding crimes against Indigenous and enslaved peoples and keeping all of those harmed by the crimes “linked” to the sickness of a conquering society. Critical consciousness, empowerment, and accountability serve as vital antidotes to coloniality. These tools of resistance can be cultivated both in therapeutic, clinical settings (healing circles) and in organizational or community settings (caucusing) (Almeida and Williams, 2025). Over time, participants in healing circles and caucuses chart a decolonial course that disrupts the Western psychological project of coloniality (Figure 10.1).

In these dedicated spaces, liberatory practitioners invite participants—in all their multidimensional, intersectional complexity—to collectively engage one another’s experiences living within and traversing intersecting and compartmentalized worlds. Working together, participants expand the borders of their lived experiences and explore those subaltern spaces of liberation and wounding.

Healing circles redefine and expand the therapeutic context and invite participants to engage in the contextual aspects of healing in community. These heterogeneous helping communities include individuals with an array of presenting issues, as well as members of families who seek healing, clients at the end of their healing trajectory, and a team of therapists that includes interns. Working together, they encourage resistance to norms that maintain hierarchies of power, privilege, and oppression. They embody epistemic disobedience (Almeida, 2018; Almeida et al., 2015; Mignolo, 2011).

Gathering and curating knowledge about the lived experiences of those who reside at the intersection of the colonial wound is essential to create pathways for emancipation and liberation. Thus, healing circles should contain a cross-section of people of diverse backgrounds—social classes, race, culture, and religion—who are seeking therapy for a variety of problems. In more homogeneous communities, alternate and expansive perspectives may be introduced through film, popular media, literary writings, and even invitations to activists from diverse



Source: Almeida (2018).

Figure 10.1 *Healing circles*

communities. Despite the general value of heterogeneity within healing circles, we have found that offering intermittent gatherings segregated by gender or sexual orientation can be supportive of many participants.

Paying attention to the larger context of organizing variables—as well as inner space markers—is key to healing. Liberatory healing disavows simplistic notions of cognitive pain, dressed as symptoms, without a contextual analysis of that pain situated in histories of coloniality. Legacies of colonialism, coloniality, racism, homophobia, sexism, and religiosity ought to be centered in healing endeavors. Other nuances of marked advantage and disadvantage as in physicality, age, migration or citizenship status, and other such markers all add to the complexity of this mapping. Consider how an intersectional perspective highlights the exclusionary nature of certain initiatives meant to “even the playing field,” such as affirmative action. People with multiple identities can be excluded because such efforts focus on only one oppressed identity, rendering other identities invisible. Structures, systems, practices, and policies developed within coloniality negatively impact communities in border spaces (Phelan et al., 2024).

The following analysis highlights the multiple ways in which the organic processes engaged by healing circles create paths for liberatory consciousness and healing.

Both a children’s circle and two adult circles—one of women, one of men—view a short video featuring American culinary historian Michael Twitty, whose Louisiana kitchen and restaurant occupy an antebellum slave house, complete with period utensils. In the clip, Twitty entwines his own Jewish and African American family legacy with regional history as he highlights the oft-marginalized and erased individuals who contributed to America’s rich legacy of food.

The heritages of the children, ages 10–12, include Colombian, Latinx, African American, and Palestinian. Their video prompted a discussion of their desire to share their favorite foods, including pasta and chicharrón—a pork dish—which turned the conversation to cultures that choose not to eat pork for various reasons. Through the process of dialoguing and reflecting on these foods, and the legacies connected to lived experiences, the youth then grappled with their schools’ limited focus on the histories that had shaped their families. They all questioned the reasoning behind curricular programming compressed into a single month—as with African American history—and reflected on possibilities of spending the entire school year engaging with the histories of all children.

The women’s circle represented multiple cultural/social identities including Arab, Colombian, English, German, Irish, Jewish, Pakistani, and Palestinian. Their responses to the clip included themes of limited engagement by the men in their families around food and cooking; they shared examples of fathers who cooked select dishes of their liking for the family, and others so removed from the daily rituals of meal planning and cooking that they waited to be invited to the table. Reflecting on these rigid gender norms around such an important family ritual, most emphasized the importance for families to share cultural food practices with children and require their participation. Others addressed the complexity of privilege and oppression surrounding the experience of food.

The men’s circle—similarly from varied cultural and racial backgrounds—shared the universality of not learning how to engage with food preparation or the richness of sharing this ritual except to indulge in the final act of enjoying the eating. Some of them spoke of not realizing how much they had missed until their partners insisted on their participation.

These conversations emerged organically through dialogue, reflection, and problem posing in response to the video clip. These conversations were wide-ranging, engaging generational themes around gender, the nexus of lived experiences between students and education, and the historical power of food as it travels across multiple lived experiences in multiple contexts.

CONCLUSION

Intersectionality offers a matrix of pathways toward decoloniality across multiple sites. This broader approach diverges radically from seeing the solitary (rugged) individual—or even families—as isolated, self-sustaining systems. A commitment to intersectionality and decoloniality pushes therapists—including therapists in training and social workers from all specializations—to think more broadly about how we can empower people to make liberatory and transformative change in their lives through investments and developments of enormous social capital. Such change extends beyond the boundaries of the individual and the family to alter hierarchies of power, privilege, and oppression.

Our lifelong connections to our multiple identity groups profoundly shape the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors we bring to each personal encounter. Therefore, we each face the challenge of identifying how our particular community connections bring with them privileges we take for granted and prejudices we've been indoctrinated into embracing. Accepting this reality marks the beginning of the journey toward critical consciousness. Rewards along the way include an increased consciousness of the social, economic, and political forces driving interpersonal behavior, a deeper and more complex understanding of collective and personal accountability, within a matrix of meaningful and sustaining personal and community connections.

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