Social Reproduction Theory, Hegemony and Epistemicide as a Historical Materialist Framework for Evaluating Intersectional Research on Race, Gender, Disability and Class: A Method for Social Science Literature Reviews

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Abstract

In this paper, we present an historical materialist framework to evaluate academic research literature focused on intersecting systems of oppression, specifically race, gender, disability and class. We integrate social reproduction theory (SRT) and Gramsci's concept of hegemony, as well as theorisation on decolonisation, epistemicide and disability, as a proposed framework to critically assess literature in higher education. SRT emphasises the significance of unpaid domestic and care work in maintaining capitalist relations, highlighting how gender and race are integral to capitalism's functioning. Gramsci's notion of hegemony is explored to show how dominant ideologies are perpetuated in academia through cultural institutions. We additionally explore imperialism and epistemicide, which marginalise non-western and Indigenous knowledge systems, reinforcing expropriative capitalism. We critique the exclusion of scholars with disability and scholars of colour, emphasising systemic ableism and racism within academic structures. We assert that deploying an intersectional analysis for systematic literature reviews reveals how multiple oppressions shape educational experiences, and urge scholars to consider positionality and reflexivity in their research. Our proposed framework includes guiding questions for researchers to analyse dimensions such as the treatment of oppression, author positionality and alignment with participant voices.

Keywords: Social Reproduction Theory, Hegemony, Epistemicide, Historical Materialism, Intersectionality, Knowledge Production, Framework

Introduction

This paper introduces an historical materialist framework for the evaluation of academic research literature on intersecting systems of oppression. It is written in the context of higher education research and seeks to ask elucidating questions of research and published literature to provide a reflective and analytical frame for literature and other types of reviews. Conceptually, the framework is grounded in both social reproduction theory (SRT) and Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

We begin by introducing key theoretical foundations, then propose an analytical approach for assessing studies through an 'intersectional' lens (c.f. Cooms et al., 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; Crimmins, 2019) attentive to race, gender, disability and class. Our goal is to equip scholars with tools to critically examine research claims, methodologies and recommendations in literature related to marginalisation in academia, while surfacing radical alternatives to dominant paradigms.

Theoretical Foundations

Our proposed framework integrates three significant extant frameworks in the historical materialist tradition. These frameworks already offer substantive analytical capability independently, analysing history and contemporary events to support authorship of radical new horizons. In drawing from these theories, our framework advances *a method*, rather than rehashing methodological territory. We turn, first, to SRT and subsequently Gramsci's illustration of hegemony, then knowledge imperialism and epistemicide.

Social Reproduction Theory

SRT emerged as a feminist intervention in Marxist thought, seeking to address orthodox Marxism's relative inattention to gendered and racialised labour outside the formal workplace (Bhattacharya, 2017b). While Marx focused primarily on wage labour and surplus value extraction in capitalist production, SRT theorists argue that unpaid domestic and care work, which has been perforce assigned to women, is equally essential to reproducing the workforce and maintaining capitalist social relations (Federici, 2020).

SRT expands extant Marxist class analysis to encompass 'the production of goods and services and the production of life' as 'one integrated process' and offers 'an explanation of the structures, relationships, and dynamics that produce those [daily] activities' (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006, pp. 36–37). It examines how institutions such as education, the family and healthcare operate to physically and socially reproduce workers and subsequent generations of workers (Bhattacharya, 2017a). This includes biological reproduction as well as the daily and intergenerational renewal of workers' capacity for

labour through food, shelter, education, healthcare, emotional support, and so on.

Importantly, for our framework, SRT illuminates how gender, race and other forms of oppression are not incidental to capitalism, but integral to its functioning – its ongoing expropriation of labour and exploitation of the working classes (c.f. Fraser, 2017). The devaluation of care work and 'women's work' enables the (in many cases dual) extraction of immense amounts of unpaid labour. Understanding racialised and gendered divisions of labour, both in the home and workplace, is essential to conceptualising how capitalism facilitates and grows due to exploitation. Moreover, with the machinery of colonial capitalism, the expropriation and manifold exploitation of Indigenous and other non-western peoples is recognised and forms a key pillar of analysis within SRT theorising (Cooms et al., 2022; Fraser, 2022). SRT, thus, provides a framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression intersect with and reinforce capitalist relations.

In the context of higher education, SRT directs our collective attention to how universities reproduce class relations and hierarchies of race, gender and ability. It prompts analysis of who performs the reproductive labour that enables academic work, from professional staff to student mentors, groundskeepers and food service workers. SRT can also be employed as a tool to elucidate how academic knowledge production itself reproduces dominant ideologies and social relations, furthering already damaging conditions for the 'other' manufactured through education, media and the cultural hegemony. To explore this further, we now turn to Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

Gramscian Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides another crucial theoretical pillar for analysing power relations in academia. Gramsci (1996) argued that the ruling class maintain power not just through coercion, but by manufacturing consent through cultural institutions which seek to naturalise this dominance. Hegemony refers to this process, by which a dominant group's worldview becomes accepted as common sense across society. Gramsci emphasised the role of civil society institutions which, include universities, the media and religious organisations, in producing and maintaining a hegemonic status quo (Gramsci, 1996). These institutions help to shape popular beliefs, values and behaviours in ways that serve ruling class interests. In this sense, hegemony is constantly reconfigured, contested and renegotiated, and is subsumptive of trends, changes, social movements and more, in order to ensure the continued rule of the ruling class.

In academia, Gramscian hegemony manifests in multiple ways that reinforce dominant power structures and ideologies (Bell & Cornelius-Bell, 2024). This includes the promotion of hegemonic forms of knowledge and methodologies as 'objective' and 'neutral', obscuring their inherently political nature, and the marginalisation of critical, non-western and Indigenous knowledge systems (Bennett, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2015).

Moreover, academic hierarchies continue to privilege certain identities and backgrounds in hiring, promotion and publishing processes, while curricula and pedagogies often reproduce dominant ideologies (Blanch, 2010; Castell et al., 2018; Denzin & Giardina, 2016), and research agendas and funding priorities frequently align with state and corporate interests, further entrenching hegemonic power (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2025).

Anderson's interpretation, reinvigoration and Marxian understanding of Gramsci's work enables us to apply further insights in how hegemony operates in academic settings. Anderson (1976) emphasised Gramsci's distinction between domination (coercion) and hegemony (consent), arguing that in advanced capitalist societies, hegemony is primarily maintained through civil society institutions, such as universities. He also highlighted Gramsci's concept of the 'integral state', where civil society and political society are intertwined, suggesting that academic knowledge production is not separate from but deeply implicated in broader power structures and their reproduction. Anderson's reading of Gramsci underscores the importance of analysing how academic practices and structures contribute to manufacturing consent for dominant ideologies, even as they present themselves as neutral or objective pursuits of knowledge.

Gramsci's work also highlights possibilities for counter-hegemonic resistance within academia. Organic intellectuals emerging from marginalised groups can challenge dominant paradigms. From a concerted decolonial, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-ableist, class-conscious movement in higher education, an alternative 'institution' and social movement *can* emerge through nurturing oppositional consciousness through historical materialist methods. One such deployment is critical pedagogies, which, in non-bourgeois forms, may denaturalise hegemonic assumptions – negotiating a better collective institution and epistemic position (Barrineau et al., 2021; Bat et al., 2014; Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2025; Henry & Leroy-Dyer, 2024).

Integrating Gramscian insights with intersectional analysis reveals how academic hegemony operates through interlocking systems of oppression. Race, gender, disability and class hierarchies in academia mutually reinforce each other and uphold capitalist relations. At the same time, coalitions across identity groups can build counter-hegemonic power and assert better ways forward.

Knowledge Imperialism and Epistemicide

Building on Gramsci's analysis of cultural hegemony, and through non-Marxian modes of thought, contemporary scholars have further theorised how dominant knowledge systems marginalise and erase other ways of knowing. Key amongst these is Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015), who describes this process as 'epistemicide': the destruction of Indigenous, non-western and subaltern knowledges. The process of epistemicide has been integral to colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy, and is illustrated in the academy's

bourgeois and empty gestures towards decolonising and inclusion, rather than rethinking.

In academia, knowledge imperialism manifests through a complex web of practices and structures that privilege western, particularly eurocentric (Biel, 2015), epistemologies, while marginalising or erasing other knowledge systems. This violent process shows itself in the implicit dominance of eurocentric canons and theorists across disciplines, where the works of western thinkers are often treated as universal or foundational, while non-western contributions are relegated to the periphery. Indigenous, African, Asian and other non-western knowledge traditions are frequently dismissed as unscientific, irrelevant or merely 'cultural', rather than scholarly, reflecting a deeply ingrained bias in what constitutes valid academic knowledge (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Paraskeva, 2016; Smith, 2021).

This imperialism is further reinforced through the appropriation and decontextualisation of marginalised knowledge, where Indigenous or non-western concepts are extracted from their cultural and historical contexts and repurposed within western frameworks, often without proper attribution or understanding (Andreotti et al., 2011; Arbon, 2004; Smith, 2021). The exclusion of scholars from the Global South from prestigious journals and conferences, coupled with the hegemony of the English language in academic publishing, creates significant barriers to the global circulation of diverse knowledge. Moreover, narrow definitions of valid evidence and methodology, often rooted in western 'scientific' traditions, serve to delegitimise alternative approaches to knowledge production and validation. These practices collectively contribute to a system of epistemic injustice that not only limits the diversity of academic discourse but also perpetuates global inequalities in knowledge production and dissemination.

Knowledge imperialism in academia reproduces global inequalities and limits human understanding. It constrains the questions that can be asked and the solutions that can be imagined. Dismantling academic knowledge imperialism requires actively centring marginalised epistemologies and supporting Indigenous research methodologies.

Disability, Racism and Knowledge Sanitisation in the Academy

Academia's role in reproducing oppression extends beyond knowledge imperialism to more direct forms of exclusion and discrimination. Despite rhetorical commitments to diversity and inclusion, higher education institutions continue to marginalise scholars with disability and scholars of colour through both overt and subtle means (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Braddock, 2001). Ableism in academia manifests through inaccessible spaces, inflexible policies, and normative, intersectional assumptions embedded in teaching and assessment practices (Dolmage, 2017; Menzel & Bennett, 2024; Merchant et al., 2019). The competitive, capitalist-infused, productivity-driven nature of academic work creates additional barriers for scholars with disability. Meanwhile,

medicalised approaches to disability in research often objectify disabled people rather than recognising lived experience and expertise (Haegele, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Rocca & Anjum, 2020; Soldatic, 2017).

Racism and ableism persists in hiring, promotion and publishing, as well as in curriculum and pedagogy (Henry & Leroy-Dyer, 2024; Leroy-Dyer & Menzel, 2023; Parsons, 2017). Moreover, scholars of colour and with disability face isolation, tokenisation and disproportionate service burdens. Work is often devalued or accused of bias when it addresses forms of systemic injustice, while critical race scholarship faces political backlash and attempts at suppression. These exclusions reflect academia's ongoing complicity with systems of white supremacy, ableism and sexism, amongst others. However, they also stem from neoliberal logics that have reshaped higher education (Connell, 2013). As universities increasingly operate as corporations, they also sanitise and commodify knowledge production (Giroux, 2014; Marginson, 1999). Critical perspectives that challenge institutional power or dominant paradigms are deliberately marginalised and metrics-based evaluation systems privilege certain forms of scholarship over others. The result is a fundamental limit on academic critique. While liberal multiculturalism may create space for limited representation of marginalised groups, more radical challenges to academic structures and knowledge systems face containment. Research that does not align with corporate objectives or fit easily quantifiable metrics is squeezed out.

Class Reproduction and Intersectional Analysis in Higher Education

Universities have long played a role in reproducing class hierarchies, credentialing elites and socialising students into dominant ideologies (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2024). In recent decades, as access to higher education has become increasingly re-stratified after the brief open period of the 1970s-2000s, this class reproduction function has intensified (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Kumar, 2012). Particularly in the US and UK contexts, elite institutions concentrate wealth and prestige, while 'lower-tier' institutions struggle with underfunding. Alongside this, rising tuition costs and excessive student debt further exacerbate inequality. Even in the Australian context, where the government supplied 'Higher Education Contribution Scheme – Higher Education Loan Program' purportedly covers costs, students are indentured to indexation rates sometimes far above private loan interest rates (Croucher, 2022; Davison, 2024; Payne, 2020).

However, class dynamics in academia intersect in complex ways with hierarchies of race, gender and disability. An intersectional analysis reveals how multiple systems of oppression operate simultaneously to shape educational experiences and outcomes. For instance, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female students at university were more likely to be sexually harassed than other students (Heywood et al., 2022; Leroy-Dyer & Heckenberg, 2021), and education outcomes (at all levels) remain low, fuelled by racism

and discrimination (Leroy-Dyer, 2018). In addition, working-class students of colour face compounded barriers in accessing and succeeding in higher education, the adjunctification and precarisation (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021) of academic labour has disproportionately impacted women and scholars of colour, students with disability from low-income backgrounds have fewer resources to secure accommodations, and first-generation scholars navigate cultural capital differences alongside other forms of marginalisation.

Examining these intersections requires moving beyond single-axis analyses focused solely on class or race or gender (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017b; Biel, 2015). It demands attention to how different forms of oppression interact, creating distinct experiences at their intersections. To conduct such intersectional analyses, scholars can draw on critical methodological tools including:

Positionality: Reflecting on and naming one's own social location and its impact on research. This includes interrogating how one's identities and experiences shape what questions are asked, what is noticed and how data are interpreted.

Reflexivity: Ongoing critical reflection on research choices, relationships with participants, and the broader implications and effects of one's work. This involves questioning assumptions and examining gaps throughout the research process.

Decolonial approaches: Centring Indigenous worldviews and methods, questioning Eurocentric assumptions, and examining how research may reproduce or challenge colonial relations.

Anti-racist and anti-sexist practices: Actively working to identify and challenge racism and sexism in research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. This includes examining whose voices and perspectives are centred or marginalised (de-othering).

These tools support more ethically grounded and epistemologically diverse scholarship. They ask researchers to grapple with power dynamics inherent in knowledge production. When applied to studies of marginalisation in academia, they may be helpful in surfacing dynamics that otherwise remain hidden.

A Framework for Evaluating Research on Intersectional Oppression in Academia

Building on the theoretical foundations and methodological approaches outlined above, in this section we propose a framework for critically evaluating academic literature on Indigeneity, race, gender, disability and class in higher education. This framework is intended to support scholars in assessing existing research and conducting their own investigations into intersectional oppression in academia. The proposed framework examines studies across four key dimensions. For each dimension, a set of guiding questions supports critical analysis.

1. Treatment of race, gender, disability and class
    - How are Indigeneity, race, gender, disability and class conceptualised? Are they as fixed categories or social constructs?
    - Are intersections between these systems of oppression examined, or are they treated in isolation?
    - Whose experiences and perspectives are centred, and whose are marginalised or ignored?
    - How are power dynamics related to Indigeneity, race, gender, disability and class addressed?
    - What assumptions about these categories are embedded in the research design and analysis?

2. Author positionality and reflexivity
    - Does the author name their own social location and its potential impacts on the research?
    - Is there evidence of ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process?
    - How does the author's positionality align with or differ from research participants?
    - Are potential limitations stemming from the author's social location acknowledged?
    - How are power dynamics between researcher and participants addressed?

3. Alignment between research participant voices and author claims
    - Are participant voices prominently featured? Through what means?
    - How closely do the author's interpretations align with participants' stated views?
    - Are there evident disparities between participant experiences and author claims?
    - Does the author acknowledge and grapple with data that contradicts their arguments?
    - How are participant quotes contextualised and framed?

4. Engagement with hegemonic structures and radical alternatives
    - How does the study situate itself in relation to dominant academic paradigms?
    - Are institutional and structural factors in producing oppression examined?
    - What recommendations are made? Do they challenge or reinforce existing power structures?
    - Are radical alternatives to current academic systems explored?
    - How does the research support or constrain liberatory possibilities?

    Applying these questions to academic literature may enable a systematic

assessment of how studies conceptualise and investigate intersectional oppression. We hope that these guiding questions, distilled from principles and priorities across Marxist and progressive-radical literature, support identifying both the valuable contributions and limitations of extant research. This framework highlights how author positionality and methodological choices shape research outcomes. It prompts critical examination of whose knowledge and experiences are centred in studies of marginalisation, and how. The framework also emphasises the importance of research that moves beyond description to challenge oppressive structures and imagine liberatory alternatives.

We see multiple possibilities for application and use of the above questions, including both as loose guidance for critical reflection or as more systematic using a coding system. However, we do not suggest that literature analysis, which reflects on intersectional oppression meaningfully as we suggest, ought to use each of the above questions, for each paper, as a strict tool of assessment or criticism. Indeed, we recognise that excelling in each area is not always possible, and therefore discrete aspects of researchers' work should, in many cases, be considered in isolation when using the above questions. For example, Merchant et al. (2019) use a deficit discourse in their data analysis of experiences of disabled staff members in UK universities; however, their method reflects their effort and ability to see themselves in the research, and their personal experiences have undoubtedly supported a deeper understanding of participant experiences, which they privilege over their own in their paper. Ahlstrand's (2024) study of social mobility discourse and Indonesian women artists challenges hegemonic class structures and extant literature (e.g., that working class women necessarily want to shed their class roots through social mobility) and empowers participant voices through the methodology and presentation of data (use of women's narratives, use of Bahasa Indonesian language ahead of English translation), as well as in the careful analysis which both critiques the cultural and economic power relations inhibiting women (inc., neoliberalism and Islam), yet understands, through engagement with their voices, how women are challenging the status quo and from within these structures. For exemplars in positionality in methodology and method, see Henry and Leroy-Dyer (2024) and Phelan et al. (2024), who provide open and conscious personal reflections, which enables researchers (readers) to understand diversity, equity, inclusion, gender and queerness, through the researchers' perspectives, using Indigenous knowledges paradigms and yarning methods.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have outlined theoretical and methodological tools for critically examining research on intersectional oppression in academia. Drawing on SRT and Gramscian concepts of hegemony, we situated the marginalisation of certain groups in higher education within broader systems of capitalist exploitation and ideological

domination. The proposed evaluative framework supports rigorous assessment of how academic literature addresses Indigeneity, race, gender, disability and class dynamics in universities. Engaging these critical perspectives is crucial given academia's continued complicity in reproducing intersecting systems of oppression. Moreover, we raised the risk within a neoliberal university system which is increasingly hostile to such 'radical critique' such that scholars deploying these approaches may face institutional resistance or professional consequences.

Despite these challenges, developing more nuanced analyses of power in academia remains vital. Understanding how multiple forms of oppression operate in tandem can inform more effective challenges to exclusionary systems. Cultivating academic counter-publics attentive to marginalised voices and radical possibilities may open space for reimagining higher education. While the barriers are formidable, the stakes of this work – more equitable and liberatory knowledge production – are high.

Author Positionality:

Piper Bell is a working-class woman, from humble economic beginnings. Piper's work is deeply informed by her own journey navigating academia as a working-class woman with disability. Piper acknowledges her position as a settler-coloniser descendant and guest on unceded Kaurna Country, which fundamentally shapes her understanding of privilege, power and responsibility in academia. As an academic activist and lecturer in philosophy, her practice aims to illuminate and challenge the institutional structures that perpetuate inequity, while working to enhance democratic agency and student power within universities. Her doctoral research examines women's academic labour through historical materialist and social reproduction frameworks, particularly focusing on the intersections of class, gender and race that enable multiple forms of exploitation, and strives to contribute to transforming higher education into a more equitable and liberatory space that works better for the 99%.

Dr Aidan Cornelius-Bell is a social scientist, activist and educator whose work is rooted in values of compassion, justice, equity, and activist transformation. Aidan's research and teaching spans cultural studies, sociology, higher education, and Marxism, with a focus on decolonial and transformative approaches. As a descendant of working-class families, whose familial connection to Country has been displaced by British colonisation of Australia, Aidan brings a critical perspective to his work in academia. Aidan is committed to reimagining higher education systems to foster collective liberation. Aidan acknowledges his position as a respectful guest on Kaurna Country and strives to incorporate Aboriginal knowledges, decolonial practices and transformative thinking to his

academic work and curriculum development.

Associate Professor Sharlene Leroy-Dyer is a saltwater woman with family ties to Garigal, Awabakal, Darug & Wiradyuri peoples. Sharlene is Director of the UQ Indigenous Business Hub at the University of Queensland and an Associate Professor of Indigenous Knowledges in Business. Sharlene's expertise centres around Closing the Gap on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage in education and employment, focusing on empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in education and employment. Sharlene lives and works on the sovereign unceded lands of the Gubbi Gubbi, Turrbal and Jugera peoples.

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