

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

RACIALIZED STUDENTS IN GRADUATE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: INVISIBLE
WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

BY

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Approval of Thesis

The undersigned certify that they have read the thesis entitled

**RACIALIZED STUDENTS IN GRADUATE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: INVISIBLE WORK AND
INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES**

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Dedication

To all who have felt out of place, invisible, or uncertain of where they belong.

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Abstract

This study uses institutional ethnography (IE) to examine how racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students experience and perform invisible work within the online Master of Counselling program at Athabasca University. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six racialized and minoritized students who had completed at least one year in the program and a text analysis of seven institutional documents, including admissions policies, the student handbook, and student support resources. Findings show that institutional texts and program structures shape student learning, participation, and professional identity formation. They also produce invisible work, including interpretive, relational, and emotional labour. This labour is often unevenly distributed among students with intersecting marginalized identities. The study shows how institutional commitments to equity, cultural competency, and social justice can reproduce inequities in practice and limit equitable participation. It offers insights for more equitable and accountable curriculum design, program structures, and institutional practices in counsellor education.

Keywords: social justice, counselling curriculum, decolonization, invisible work, counsellor training, institutional ethnography, Indigenous research paradigm, qualitative research

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Key Terminology

Social Justice

According to Vera and Speight (2003), social justice broadly refers to the equitable distribution of income, opportunities, and privilege. Beyond this definition, however, are modern interpretations of social justice (SJ) that discuss oppression and privilege (Vera & Speight, 2003) as well as the systemic maintenance of unequal power distribution through “violence, cultural imperialism, exploitation, and powerlessness” (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014, p. 188).

Invisible Work

The term invisible work was first used by sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels in 1987 to refer to unpaid, undervalued, and unrecognized labour. Daniels (1987) made a distinction between two types of work: public (men’s work) and private (women’s work). Traditionally, cisgender men have been more associated with paid work outside the home, while cisgender women have been expected to focus on unpaid domestic work and caregiving. The former type of work has been valued by society because it involves labour that is done in exchange for pay, while the latter has been devalued because it usually involves domestic labour.

Although the feminist movement has played a central role in driving significant progress toward gender equality, especially in the household and workplace, the gendered division of labour persists in various forms, with cisgender women often facing the *second shift* of balancing both professional and domestic responsibilities (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). This division is also reflected in gender-based occupational segregation, where certain jobs are still stereotypically viewed as *men’s work* or *women’s work*, contributing to disparities in wages and career advancement. Social norms, structural inequalities, and historical contexts continue to shape how labour is divided by gender today.

An intersectional lens, which considers the interactions between various facets of identity, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual and/or romantic orientation, ability, and social class, is absent from Daniels' definition. I offer an expanded definition of invisible work that takes identity politics into account to identify how cultural identities interact with oppressive systems that can affect a person's life. In an inquiry into what *invisibility* means and what mechanisms produce it, Hatton (2017) wrote of the sociocultural mechanisms that shape invisible work stating, "labour in this category is devalued through hegemonic cultural ideologies—of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and more—manifested in state and organizational policies and practices, as well as in cultural discourses of skill and work..." (p. 340).

Hatton's discussion of how cultural ideologies shape perceptions of work provides a useful framework for understanding invisible work in this study. For example, universities, as institutions reflecting hegemonic cultural values, play a key role in determining whose labour is recognized and valued. In PWIs, the dominant culture often aligns with white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, male identities. Consequently, those who do not fall within these dominant categories, such as racialized students in the context of this research, are devalued, and the work they perform is made invisible due to these prevailing cultural ideologies.

Racialized/Racialization

Racialization refers to the process through which social categories are constructed and attributed with meanings related to race (Fanon, 1963; 2008). Frantz Fanon, a French Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist, philosopher, and revolutionary, articulates his insights about racialization most famously in his works *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally published in 1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (originally published in 1961). Fanon's ideas about racialization involve

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the process by which individuals are classified and assigned social meaning based on their race, which is deeply entangled with the legacies of colonialism.

Furthermore, racialization involves how individuals or groups are identified or perceived based on perceived racial characteristics, often leading to the formation of stereotypes, social roles, and hierarchies (Goldberg, 1993). Additionally, racialization can influence how people experience their identity, interact with others, and are treated within society (Fanon, 1963). It also operates through institutional and everyday practices that shape how individuals are positioned, recognized, and engaged within social contexts.

Minoritized

Minoritization refers to the social, institutional, and structural processes through which groups are positioned as subordinate, marginalized, or outside of dominant norms within a given context. Unlike “minority,” which implies a numerical status, “minoritized” emphasizes that marginalization is actively produced through power relations rather than naturally occurring demographic differences (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

In this study, “minoritized” is used to capture forms of marginalization that extend beyond race alone and may include migration history, language, religion, cultural difference, or other intersecting social locations. This includes individuals who may identify as white (e.g., Caucasian) but who experience minoritization in Canadian institutional contexts due to factors such as immigrant status, accent, or cultural positioning. The term therefore highlights how belonging and exclusion are context-dependent and shaped by shifting institutional and social power relations within counselling psychology graduate programs and broader Canadian higher education contexts.

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In this study, the terms *racialized* and *minoritized* are used together to capture both race-based processes of categorization and broader structural forms of marginalization shaped by institutional and social power relations within Canadian higher education contexts.

Decolonization

In the Canadian context, decolonization refers to:

The processes of (a) deconstructing and dismantling colonization and its roots and effects wherever they appear in social, education, health, economic, and political systems and (b) reversing the effects of colonial violence and historical trauma on Indigenous persons and peoples by supporting the restoration and reconstruction of Indigenous language, culture and traditions, land, systems of governance, spirituality, knowledge and teachings, ritual and practices (Collins, 2018, p. 925).

Chapter 1. Introduction

Introducing and Situating Myself

My name is Cheyenne Johns. I was born in Tkaronto (Toronto) and grew up on the land around the Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin (The Great Lakes). When I was four years old, I moved with my mother to her birthplace of Baawaating (Sault Ste. Marie). At the age of twelve, I relocated with my family to Anemki Wequedong (Thunder Bay). I now reside in Mohkinstsis (Calgary). My mother is of mixed Indigenous (Anishinaabe) and European Canadian (French, Scottish, English) ancestry, and my father was born in King Weston, St. Andrew, Jamaica and immigrated to Canada in the 1970s. I am Anishinaabekwe (an Anishinaabe woman), a member of Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory, and a second generation Jamaican Canadian.

My blended ancestry has been a great source of pride and privilege, but it has also caused a lot of confusion for me. Many of my early memories and experiences involve feeling like I did not belong with Black, Indigenous, or white people. Understanding my racial and ethnic identity has been a complex journey due to the erasure of my mother's Indigenous culture and the absence of my father's Jamaican culture. Additionally, experiences of racism growing up in northern Ontario as one of the only racialized people in my classrooms evolved into internalized racism as I grew older.

I also identify as a currently able, neurodivergent, cisgender woman who straddles social classes. I grew up in a working-class single-parent household, and I now live as a middle-class individual due to my level of education and access to resources. Situating myself in relation to my cultural identity contextualizes how each aspect influences my current worldview and shapes how I exist within the context of this research project. By beginning my research this way, I am respecting my cultural protocols as well as respecting relational accountability within an

Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008). How I choose to identify myself shows who I am accountable to.

Mixed-Race Identity and Colonialism

The sense of not fitting in is a common experience for many mixed-race individuals, particularly those raised in predominantly white communities and attending predominantly white schools (Wright et al., 2022). In the context of who is considered Black, the *one-drop rule*, rooted in chattel slavery and later in the Jim Crow segregation era in the United States, likely played a role in how others perceive(d) me (Harris, 1991). From my perspective and feedback that I received from others as a youth, most white people perceived me as Black based on racial markers like my skin tone and hair texture (Beals & Wilson, 2020). Because white people assigned me to the Black racial category from a young age, I identified only as Black for much of my life. However, there were times when I questioned this identity, as I did not grow up with my Jamaican family and was not immersed in Black or Jamaican culture. This left me feeling culturally disconnected from Blackness.

The first time I experienced cultural diversity was during 2009-2013 when I was completing my undergraduate degree at Lakehead University in my hometown of Thunder Bay, Ontario. While Lakehead University operates within the broader context of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in Canada, it enrolls a diverse student population, including international students and students from racialized and minoritized backgrounds (Lakehead University, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2022). During my undergraduate studies, I emphatically immersed myself in Black culture by joining the African and Caribbean Students Association (AFCASA) and connecting with other students from the diaspora. For me, this was the first time I felt a sense of belonging and acceptance because there were others in the room who looked like me. Although it

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was, and continues to be, a deeply impactful experience, I still struggled with feeling like I was not “Black enough” because of my upbringing. It was confusing, especially since up until this point I had always been told that I was Black. As a result, I often felt like an outsider in both Black and white spaces.

In a similar yet distinct way, I did not grow up with my mother’s Indigenous culture because she was disconnected from her culture as well. My mother, who is of mixed Euro-Canadian and Anishinaabe ancestry, is white-passing and grew up in a predominantly white culture and society. As a result of this disconnection from our Indigenous roots, I often felt, and sometimes still feel, like I am not “Indigenous enough.” The disconnect from my Indigenous culture reflects the historical and ongoing impact of colonialism and genocide against Indigenous peoples here in so-called Canada. My stepfather is Anishinaabe, Chief of Whitesand First Nation (about 256 kilometres north of Thunder Bay), and is a residential school survivor.

From a young age, I did not grasp the immense impact of colonialism and the residential school system on Indigenous peoples. Because of this, I learned to both fear Indigenous people and feel ashamed of being Indigenous myself. This was shaped by the pervasive anti-Indigenous racism embedded in the country’s history, governing policies, institutions, and present-day realities (Indigenous Services Canada, 2024). It has only been in the past few years that I reclaimed my Indigenous ancestry as I immerse myself in cultural traditions, practices, and decolonization.

As I grow older, I am developing a deeper connection to both my Black and Indigenous roots. I am still navigating what it truly means to hold multiple racial and cultural identities and unlearn internalized racism. My racial and ethnic ambiguity has allowed me to move fluidly between Black, Indigenous, and white spaces, where I often engage in *codeswitching* to adapt to

each environment as needed. Codeswitching refers to how individuals with multicultural identities often switch from one cultural identity to another depending on the situational context they are in (Yampolsky et al., 2013).

Learning to know when to switch from one cultural identity to another dependent on the situational context, is a way that many people with racialized and minoritized identities learn to adapt, survive, and avoid conflict. Codeswitching played a crucial role in my upbringing. It was both a survival tactic and a source of strength. I learned early on that failing to fit into the dominant culture, especially whiteness, often led to bullying, discrimination, and isolation.

When negative discourses about cultural identity are internalized, many individuals with nondominant cultural identities experience internalized oppression, often leading to shame or rejection of their cultural identity (Dupuis-Rossi in Collins, 2018). Due to my experiences of racism growing up, I learned to internalize these harmful beliefs and developed negative feelings toward my skin colour, hair texture, and overall racial identity. Dupuis-Rossi expanded on the concept of internalized oppression, relating this phenomenon to an individual's identification with the colonial aggressor. By adopting the dominant culture, I believed that centring whiteness would offer me protection as a racialized and minoritized person, and my proximity to whiteness as a mixed-race person allowed me to do this with relative ease.

In my experience, my desire to align with the dominant culture felt like a fragmentation of my identity. I was torn between making sense of these feelings and figuring out how to connect with my Black and Indigenous roots, all while internalizing the weight of colonial oppression. In the context of this research project, my experience as a racialized and minoritized person with a mixed racial identity shaped my decision to focus not just on Black or Indigenous students, but on racialized and minoritized individuals from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural

backgrounds. While I recognize that the experiences of racialized and minoritized people in colonial systems are unique, many of us share the common struggle of facing racism and systemic oppression due to the distinct sociopolitical contexts that mediate these experiences (Fanon, 1963).

Black feminist sociologist Deborah K. King (1988) wrote about the experience of *multiple consciousness* that allows Black women to simultaneously be a member of a group and stand apart from it. While the impact of race-based trauma is real, my experiences of racism throughout my upbringing have likely led me to think about systemic oppression and social justice the way I do now due to my ability to hold multiple consciousnesses. These experiences also led to my decision to focus on racialized and minoritized experiences rather than attempting to narrow the experiences of only one racial or minoritized identity. I am choosing to reframe my traumatic experiences of racism as a privilege to hold. In a way, I am doing this research for my younger self.

My Problematic

For researchers engaging in institutional ethnography (IE), inquiry begins with a *problematic* (Smith, 1987). The problematic of a researcher's study is an aspect of the everyday world that the researcher aims to examine. Furthermore, the problematic is lived and experienced by people in their everyday world. Thus, the starting point of the inquiry into the problematic is through people's experiences. The problematic directs researchers to possible questions to understand the "actualities of the experienced world" (Smith, 1987, p. 91).

The researcher, whose aim is to understand the problematic, also engages in a reflexive process of understanding their position in relation to the inquiry. My understanding of the problematic for this research stemmed from my dissatisfaction with my experiences as a

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counsellor-in-training. My personal experiences as a racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate student in the Athabasca University Master of Counselling (MC) program (previously called the Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology, or GCAP) are therefore the starting place of my research topic.

The following paragraph is an excerpt from a piece I wrote in *Decolonizing Health, Healing, and Care: Embodying Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Counselling* by Collins and Jay (2025):

I started my academic journey with a strong desire to learn how to be a trauma-informed, intersectional, feminist, decolonizing, and social justice-oriented counsellor. I began my Master of Counselling Psychology program with excitement, hoping that my education would provide me with the skills and training I need to be the kind of counsellor I envision. However, I unexpectedly found myself feeling dissatisfied with my education and began seeking knowledge outside of my academic program. I explored a variety of resources, including academic articles, social media accounts, and online groups focused on advocating for social justice-oriented and liberatory counsellor training (Johns, 2025, p. 55).

In this piece, I talked about my feelings of frustration with having to spend additional time, money, and energy seeking out external resources to supplement my graduate education, as well as the emotional toll I was experiencing when engaging in online discussion forums with my non-racialized and non-minoritized peers. In this piece, I went on to note, “I began to see that I was performing invisible work to navigate my academic experience” (Johns, 2025, p. 55). I initially did not recognize that what I was doing was invisible work until my now thesis supervisor, Dr. Emily Doyle, provided me with the language to articulate my experience.

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Upon conducting my preliminary literature review in the research methods course *GCAP 691: Facilitating Inquiry*, which is now the foundation for the literature in this thesis, I found many articles that pointed toward similar experiences among graduate counselling students with racialized and minoritized identities. This experience is not unique, as many graduate counselling programs, particularly in PWIs, are often not designed with marginalized students in mind (Cohen et al., 2022). My initial intention for this research was to understand the experiences of racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students; however, I have now added inquiry into understanding how and why counselling psychology graduate programs organize and coordinate racialized and minoritized students' experiences of invisible work through institutional policies and practices.

Methodological Standpoint

In IE, the problematic of my research project is conceptualized from a *standpoint* in the everyday world in which the researcher takes on (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Malachowski et al., 2017). Beginning the inquiry from a standpoint allows the researcher to delve into how things are socially organized. Furthermore, this allows the researcher to understand “how things happen the way they do” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 16). I begin my research from the standpoint of a racialized (mixed Black, Indigenous, and settler ancestry) counselling psychology graduate student enrolled in the Athabasca University MC program. From this standpoint, I aim to examine how invisible work affects racialized and minoritized graduate students by conducting in-depth interviews to hear their stories and experiences. I will also review university documents to examine the institutional policies and practices that contribute to the challenges and invisible work these students face.

Situating the Research

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In *Research is Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) describes the process of intuition as a guiding force in our research. Wilson (2008) suggests that researchers can deepen their understanding of the research topic through self-reflective practice and engaging in conversations with others. The initial conversations about my research began in early 2023, while I was enrolled in the course *GCAP 633: Sociocultural and Systemic Influences on Counselling*. Throughout the course, I noticed that much of the content and learning activities seemed geared toward non-marginalized, white students, which left me feeling somewhat dissatisfied with my counsellor education. Additionally, I noticed that I was one of the few racialized and minoritized students in the class and one of the only students voicing alternative perspectives and advocating social justice issues in the field. As a result, I often found myself dedicating extra time in discussion forums to educate my peers, and I frequently encountered microaggressions in these interactions. Coined in the 1970s by Chester Pierce, an African American psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, the term *microaggression* was first used to describe the subtle insults or slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that he witnessed being directed toward Black people by white people (Pierce, 1970). Pierce wrote about how these everyday instances of discrimination affected the psychological well-being of Black people and reinforced negative attitudes toward members of marginalized groups. The term gained widespread use and academic attention in the 2000s, particularly through the work of psychologist Derald Wing Sue, who identifies as Chinese American, and expanded its scope to include various forms of discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identities (Sue et al., 2007).

In January 2023, I attended Athabasca MC alumni Lee Smith's master's thesis defense, where she discussed her research topic on how culture is taught and learned in the Athabasca

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University MC program from the standpoint of a racialized and minoritized student (Smith, 2023). In her thesis, Smith reflected on similar experiences in the GCAP 633 course, expressing her initial excitement to learn about cultural issues in counselling and subsequent disappointment, sharing:

This was the course I was the most excited about. I believed this course would provide the opportunity I was waiting for. It was the one course I believed intentionally provided space to discuss one of the most important topics in my future career. To my surprise, this was a course in which I identified the most disjunctures (Smith, 2023, pp. 66-67).

As a racialized and minoritized woman in counselling psychology, Smith's experience resonated deeply with me and served as both inspiration and validation. It was reassuring that I was not alone in feeling disconnected within my program as a racialized and minoritized student. After discussing my own experiences with Emily Doyle and Lee Smith, and hearing about Lee's challenges as a racialized and minoritized student, I felt a strong calling to make this topic the focus of my master's thesis. It is a subject that feels both deeply personal and incredibly important to me from my perspective as a future clinician, so that I can be equipped to provide culturally responsive care to racialized and minoritized clients with similar lived experiences.

Purpose and Relevance of the Study

Building upon Smith's master's thesis and contribution to her experiences of invisible work as a racialized and minoritized student in the MC program, this study aims to examine racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students' experiences of performing invisible work and understand the institutional organization of invisible work for these students within the MC program. Furthermore, I recognize that many of the challenges that racialized and

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minoritized students experience often arise because western and colonial ideas and practices shape counsellor education programs within PWIs, and do not always consider or meet the needs of students from diverse or marginalized backgrounds (Cohen et al., 2022).

Research Questions

This research will attempt to answer the questions:

1. How are racialized and minoritized students' experiences and invisible work organized and coordinated within graduate counselling psychology programs?
2. What institutional practices and policies contribute to these dynamics?

Decolonizing Research through Language and Relationality

In this research, I made a conscious decision to minimize further oppression and power imbalances against systemically and historically marginalized groups by being intentional about the use of language, terminology, and research practices. Words that are typically capitalized to signify proper nouns for places and people with privileged cultural identities, such as “white,” “eurocentric,” “western,” and “eurowestern,” are de-capitalized to challenge their power. Additionally, I limit the use of terms commonly used in western research practices, such as “explore” and “discover,” as a rejection of extractivist language used to justify colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples from the land, as reflected in the Doctrine of Discovery (Assembly of First Nations, 2018).

I initially used the terms People of Colour (POC) and Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) to describe persons with racialized identities. I have since moved away from these terms to avoid grouping all racialized people as one, ignoring the uniqueness of each racial, cultural, and ethnic group. It is important to note that not all racialized and minoritized people share similar identities, experiences, or privileges. Instead, I will use community-specific terms

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when broadly speaking to racial or ethnic groups such as *Black communities*, *Indigenous peoples*, *South Asian diaspora*, *Latine/x*, *South West Asian and North African (SWANA) communities*, or refer to the ethnicity or country of origin directly. I will also use terms such as *people of the global majority* to challenge eurocentric perspectives and recognize the global dominance of populations historically marginalized by colonial frameworks. Additionally, I will use “historically and systematically marginalized groups” to denote the enduring and structural nature of oppression experienced by these communities (Campbell-Stephens, 2021; Mullan, 2023, p. 130).

As a relational practice, I introduce Indigenous, racialized, minoritized scholars, activists, practitioners, and authors by denoting their tribal and/or ancestral affiliation to centre their positionality and cultural identity (Tynan & Bishop, 2023). For the sake of confidentiality, research participants will have the opportunity to share their tribal and/or ancestral affiliation if they choose. When including direct quotations from other authors, I have preserved the original wording to maintain authenticity.

As a master’s student and budding researcher, my research is conducted within the structures of a western master’s thesis process, and therefore, I use language and research practices that reflect western norms. Despite these conscious efforts, I may make mistakes, and I apologize if I misrepresent any individuals or groups through this practice. My decision to use relational language and research practices reflects my efforts toward Indigenizing and decolonizing research. Using language as an act of resistance toward dominant expectations for research practices is both an acknowledgment and rejection of colonial power, control, oppression, and the exploitation of marginalized communities that often occurs in western research practices.

Chapter 2. Review of the Literature

Decolonizing the Literature Review

In western research traditions, there is an expectation that scholars critique the work of others, typically through a literature review (Tynan & Bishop, 2023; Wilson, 2008). However, Indigenous scholars Tynan and Bishop challenge this approach, proposing a decolonized literature review that emphasizes relationality and reciprocity toward the work of other researchers. They explain that, from an Indigenous perspective, critiquing others' work and highlighting perceived deficits can feel uncomfortable, as it often involves de-contextualizing the authors' words, experiences, worldviews, and cultural identities.

Instead, Tynan and Bishop suggest that intentionally engaging with the work of other Indigenous scholars allows us to demonstrate how their knowledge has informed our own, showing that we have listened to and applied their insights within our own contexts. Drawing on the teachings of Tynan and Bishop, I recognize the importance of carefully considering the context in which the authors and their works are presented in this review. With this in mind, I made a conscious effort to centre the voices of Indigenous, racialized, and minoritized scholars throughout both the literature review and the thesis, whenever possible.

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to achieve the following objectives:

1. Provide insight into the existing literature on racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students' experiences of invisible work.
2. Identify areas of opportunity in the literature and where further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences.
3. Identify where the proposed research fits into the existing academic framework.

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4. Examine institutional practices and policies that perpetuate invisible work in academic institutions.

To meet these objectives, I will begin this literature review with a brief overview of Multicultural Counselling Competencies (MCC) and a discussion of social justice training in Canadian counselling psychology graduate programs, followed by a detailed analysis of four key thematic areas:

1. Racialized and Minoritized Students in Counselling Psychology Graduate Programs
2. Institutional Practices and Policies
3. Decolonizing Academia
4. The Concept of Invisible Work

I will conclude this literature review by identifying areas of opportunity in the literature related to the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in counselling psychology graduate programs and provide a justification for the need for the proposed research based on these identified opportunities.

In examining the diverse experiences of racialized and minoritized students in counselling psychology, I made a conscious decision not to exclude Indigenous students from my focus. While much of the existing literature, particularly from the U.S., tends to concentrate on the experiences of Black, Latinx, and Asian students, it is essential to recognize the unique challenges faced by Indigenous students. These challenges include racism and microaggressions (Bailey, 2016; Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2018) as well as a lack of culturally relevant mentoring (Pidgeon et al., 2014).

Due to the scope of my research and the limitations of available studies, I decided to focus my review on racialized and minoritized groups more commonly discussed in the

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literature. This choice was also shaped by the necessity of drawing from both Canadian and U.S.-based studies, which provided a broader understanding of the issue. While there are clear differences in the perspectives and experiences in each country, which are shaped by distinct histories of race and colonialism, the cultural similarities between Canada and the U.S. allowed for meaningful comparisons. Ultimately, I aim to bridge the space between these two contexts while acknowledging the broader landscape of racialized and minoritized experiences within counselling psychology.

This literature review builds on existing literature related to counselling psychology, drawing from studies conducted across Canada and the United States. Fourteen key articles were selected to reflect the broad scope of counselling psychology. These studies examined the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in counselling and school psychology graduate programs, with few directly addressing invisible work. However, the examples highlighted in this literature review point to the existence of additional, unacknowledged labour. The absence of a comprehensive discussion on invisible work underscores its significance as a phenomenon that warrants further study. Although the term may not be directly mentioned, its existence is evidenced in these studies. Thus, drawing on Daniels' (1987) definition of invisible work will aid in understanding its implications and significance in the context of racialized and minoritized students' experiences in counselling psychology graduate programs.

The decision to focus specifically on counselling psychology reflects my personal standpoint as a future racialized and minoritized counsellor and my commitment to nurturing more equitable and inclusive learning environments for racialized and minoritized counsellors-in-training. My goal is to enhance counsellor training so that counsellors are better equipped to provide effective and culturally responsive support to racialized and minoritized clients. In

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Canada, where there is a significant demand for counselling services, more than 50 accredited graduate programs are training future counsellors (Canadian Psychological Association [CPA], 2022). Despite this, racial diversity among counsellors remains low, and studies indicate that racialized and minoritized clients may benefit from counsellors who share their racial or cultural background, experiencing better therapeutic outcomes and greater trust (Ibaraki & Nagayama Hall, 2014; Kim & Kang, 2018; Smith & Trimble, 2016). The requirement for a graduate degree to practice as a counsellor in Canada further emphasizes the importance of ensuring equitable representation within the profession (College of Alberta Psychologists [CAP], 2024), as well as the potential positive impact of counsellors who are attuned to the lived experiences of racialized and minoritized individuals.

While the primary focus of this study is on counselling psychology, the insights gained from this research have broader applications beyond this field. Counselling psychology is inherently interdisciplinary, as it intersects with various aspects of mental health, healthcare, education, social work, and community services (Thornicroft et al., 2016). The experiences of racialized and minoritized students in counselling programs, for example, can offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by students in other helping professions, such as social work, education, or clinical psychology.

Additionally, the concept of invisible work, which I examine in this study, extends beyond counselling psychology and can apply to any field where marginalized individuals experience unacknowledged or undervalued labour, whether in academic settings, workplaces, or community organizations. By examining these dynamics in counselling psychology, this research can contribute to broader conversations about systemic inequities, representation, and inclusion

in education and professional fields, and potentially inform strategies for creating more equitable and supportive environments across a variety of disciplines.

History of Multicultural Counselling Competencies

Since the 1970s, there has been a call for the development of multicultural awareness, competencies, and standards in counselling psychology (Sue et al., 1992). Rationalizing the need for multicultural counselling competencies, Sue et al. (1992) stated that while many graduate counselling programs integrated multicultural training, there was a lack of information on how this training was integrated into counselling curriculum, whether courses provided a multicultural perspective, or the department's degree of commitment to multicultural issues.

The need for multicultural competence resulted from the ever-changing landscape of diversity in the U.S. In the 1990s, during the time that the MCC was developed, there was a significant rise in immigration rates of racial and ethnic minorities (Sue et al., 1992). Due to the change in racial and ethnic demographics in the U.S., psychologists saw a need to move away from a "monocultural" view of training due to its ineffectiveness with racial and ethnic minorities (Sue et al., 1992, p. 67). Psychologists' decision to move toward multicultural training reflected the sociopolitical environment of the time, acknowledging the historical and present prevalence of racism and oppression in the U.S.

The MCC, developed by Sue et al. (1992), represents a significant milestone in the field of counselling psychology. These competencies were designed to provide a framework for counsellors to work effectively with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, acknowledging the complex and multifaceted nature of culture in the counselling process. In addition, the MCC extended beyond racial and ethnic identity to include women, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and "other special populations," perhaps referring to cultural identities such as class, ability,

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religion, citizenship, and age (Sue et al., 1992, p. 66). The MCC introduced a comprehensive set of skills, attitudes, and knowledge areas that counsellors must develop to be culturally competent and to provide effective, respectful, and equitable services to clients from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

In 2014, the Association for Multicultural Counselling and Development (AMCD) established a committee to revise the MCC originally developed by Sue et al. (1992) and later operationalized by Arredondo et al. (1996). The result of this revision was the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), which were updated to reflect a more comprehensive approach to counselling that integrates both multicultural competence and social justice advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015). Current MSJCC implementation focuses on applying the MSJCC framework to position the counsellor as an advocate for human rights and social justice, challenging the dominance of white, western, and male perspectives embedded in counselling practices, and aligning with global and international efforts for change (Singh et al., 2020).

Social Justice Training in Canadian Counselling Psychology Graduate Programs

In response to the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's (2015) report, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) and Psychology Foundation of Canada (PFC) TRC task force produced a report outlining action-oriented recommendations to improve psychological services to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations in Canada (CPA & PFC, 2018). In this report, the task force acknowledged and held the field of psychology accountable for its part in the colonization and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada. As the aim of social justice practice is to “minimize oppression and injustice in favour of equality, accessibility, and optimal developmental opportunities for all members of society,” counsellors and counsellors-in-training must acknowledge how oppression

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and injustice are present in Canadian society and within the field of counselling psychology, both historically and contemporarily (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014, p. 188).

Acknowledging social justice practice in counselling psychology, Athabasca University's MC program uses the culturally responsive and socially just (CRSJ) model developed by Collins (2018) to incorporate social justice and multicultural competency training into the counselling curriculum. In addition to the CRSJ model, the MC program implements what Cohen et al. (2022b) call a "blended approach (i.e., a single course [for social justice and multicultural competency training] in addition to multicultural competence and social justice content embedded in other courses)" (p. 302). The compulsory course *GCAP 633: Sociocultural and Systemic Influences on Counselling* is typically taken in the first year of the MC program and is the primary course that teaches social justice and multicultural competency, along with the addition of multicultural competency and social justice content taught throughout other MC multicultural competency courses.

Findings from Collins et al.'s (2015) study using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to gather information from two master's-level counselling students in Alberta reported that most students' experiences of multicultural education and competence were attributed to a single graduate course. A single course offers the advantage of training students in social justice and multicultural competency and increasing their competency; however, it may make it more difficult for them to integrate social justice and multicultural competency practices and learning throughout the program and after graduation, which would support the blended approach (Cohen et al., 2022b; Collins et al., 2015).

Pedagogical practices in graduate social justice and multicultural competency training typically include a focus on cultural sensitivity, responsiveness, awareness, and self-awareness

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(Cohen et al., 2022a; Collins, 2018; Kennedy & Arthur, 2014). Self-awareness and reflexive practice comprise many components of social justice and multicultural competency training to engage students in examining their privilege, biases, assumptions, worldviews, and values (Collins, 2018; Kennedy & Arthur, 2014). In their study on social justice and multicultural competency training for counselling psychology graduate students, Seward (2014) found that students benefited from pedagogical strategies such as classroom discussions, guest speakers, and in-class presentations that helped to integrate the standpoints and worldviews of others to foster cultural awareness, responsiveness, and sensitivity. Additionally, Seward (2014) found that through class discussions in particular, students benefited from “gaining insight into their peers’ cultural identities and worldviews,” suggesting that experiential learning can be helpful for social justice and multicultural competency education (p. 72). However, this can negatively impact racialized and minoritized students as they can be viewed as the objects of learning rather than the subjects.

Racialized and Minoritized Students in Counselling Psychology Graduate Programs

In their qualitative study on enhancing social justice and multicultural competency in Canadian counsellor training in doctoral programs, Cohen et al. (2022b) found that social justice training was typically oriented toward students with dominant cultural identities, thus creating a difference in experience for marginalized students. The authors of this study found that marginalized students’ personal experiences of oppression and marginalized identity led to social justice and multicultural competency development, as these students appeared to display a deeper understanding of biases, prejudices, oppression, and privilege due to their marginalized identity. Regarding pedagogical practices, “students from non-dominant racial and ethnic backgrounds found multicultural competency course readings, discussions, and supervision

helped them become more reflexive, conscious of their own biases and prejudices, informed about subjects such as oppression and privilege, and racially aware” (Cohen et al., 2022, p. 386).

Negative Experiences within Social Justice and Multicultural Competency Training

Negative experiences within social justice and multicultural competency training highlight the emotional and psychological toll that many racialized and minoritized students experience. In Seward’s (2014) qualitative study of multicultural competence development among students of colour, participants who self-identified as Asian, Black, Latino, multiracial, or Native American reported that, despite learning from their coursework, they were generally dissatisfied with the experience. Other reports of dissatisfaction in their program these students shared included: a lack of cultural knowledge from peers and social justice competency displayed by instructors, struggling with alienation, isolation, and being misunderstood by peers, having to step in to educate peers, microaggressions, feeling the need to speak up on behalf of a racial group, lack of depth or complexity in specific cultural topics of interest, needing to further educate oneself on specific topics of interest, lack of support from the university, and self-perceived higher levels of cultural competence (Seward, 2014).

Cohen et al.’s (2022b) study echoes some of these findings, as they reported that marginalized students engaged in social justice training experienced intense emotions as they relived painful memories of racism, experienced racism in the classroom and a lack of racial awareness from peers, and experienced eurocentrism in their program. Seward’s (2014) qualitative study of 20 master’s-level students of colour enrolled in multicultural counselling courses across the northeastern U.S. concluded that “nearly all students described struggling with feelings of alienation, isolation, and being misunderstood, which is common among students of colour in predominantly white educational situations” (p. 76).

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While these studies contribute important insights, further attention to students' experiences could Enright understanding of how they engage in additional forms of work, including emotional labour, and how they negotiate the emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences. For example, while both studies acknowledge that racialized and minoritized students frequently navigate racism, microaggressions, and peer misunderstandings, they do not fully investigate the ongoing effort required to respond to, process, or cope with these incidents within academic settings. This additional work may include educating peers, managing emotional reactions in real time, and balancing personal well-being with academic expectations. As a result, the cumulative impact of these demands and how they shape students' learning experiences, sense of belonging, and professional development remains underexamined in the literature. Addressing this gap is important for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how social justice training is experienced by racialized and minoritized students in graduate counselling psychology programs.

Microaggressions in Graduate Counselling Programs

In a 2021 qualitative study, Maiden examined the experiences of minority male students in graduate-level counsellor education programs in the U.S., focusing specifically on microaggressions and their effects on these students' education and professional growth. The quantitative study assessed the experiences of Asian, Latinx, and Black male-identifying students at predominantly white institutions (Maiden, 2021). Maiden found that many of these students reported facing microaggressions, mostly rooted in assumptions of inferiority. Maiden provided two examples of microaggressions based on assumptions of inferiority, such as: "You should do med school back in Mexico because I don't think people like you can succeed here" and "Race is

not an issue in our department; students just need to take better advantage of the resources on campus” (p. 67).

These statements suggest that racialized and minoritized students are unable to succeed in academic programs outside their home country and that their experiences are irrelevant or unimportant. The study highlighted the harmful effects of these racial microaggressions, noting that they frequently resulted in feelings of isolation and lowered self-esteem for many of these students. Additionally, these racial microaggressions negatively impacted the students’ professional prospects, as both external perceptions and the internalization of negative stereotypes led to a diminished sense of competence.

Social Justice and Decolonizing Practices in Curricula

The literature above highlights striking similarities with my personal experiences as a racialized and minoritized student in the MC program. The course *GCAP 633: Sociocultural and Systemic Influences on Counselling* marked my formal entry into social justice counsellor training within the MC program during the Spring term of 2022. Much to my surprise, this course ended up sparking my interest in this research topic as I noticed that it was not meeting my expectations. I was particularly excited about taking this course as I had expectations about its learning outcomes and what I hoped to gain. I also looked forward to connecting with like-minded peers to discuss social justice issues.

While I anticipated learning more about social justice issues and decolonizing practices in counselling, I was instead met with an introductory learning of foundational concepts such as privilege, culture, cultural identity, and social location. This was somewhat disappointing, as I had already encountered these concepts years earlier in my sociology and gender studies undergraduate courses. As I noticed that I was not receiving education on social justice issues in

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counselling, I turned to external resources such as books, journal articles, social media pages, and support groups for racialized and minoritized students to supplement the gaps in my learning. On top of my dissatisfaction with the course content, I noticed that I was one of the few racialized and minoritized students in the course and often experienced having to educate many of my peers on topics related to social justice, and I frequently encountered microaggressions.

Institutional Practices and Policies

Institutional practices in higher education often reflect systemic biases that inadvertently marginalize racialized and minoritized students, contributing to their underrepresentation and diminished opportunities for academic and professional success. Despite efforts to create more inclusive learning environments, policies such as standardized testing requirements, financial aid structures, and support services frequently fail to address the unique challenges faced by these students. This section examines how such institutional practices not only hinder access to higher education for racialized and minoritized students but also perpetuate disparities in academic success and retention. It also highlights the need for targeted interventions and structural reforms to better support these students and ensure their success in higher education.

Admissions Criteria

Admissions criteria in higher education institutions often prioritize grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores, such as the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), which may not accurately reflect the potential of students from diverse backgrounds (Sarr et al., 2022). Additionally, racialized and minoritized students whose parents have not completed a postsecondary degree are less likely to finish their own degrees (Muhkerji et al., 2017). First-generation students face additional challenges in higher education, including limited access to information about financial aid, support resources, and a lack of familiarity with academic

expectations. Funding policies can also magnify barriers as racialized and minoritized students are less likely to receive scholarships and funding opportunities compared to white students due to racial bias (Chen et al., 2022). These challenges, typically relating to finances, leave racialized and minoritized students who may already face economic challenges at a disadvantage.

Access to Support Services

Furthermore, access to support services is often contingent upon institutional structures that are not designed with the needs of racialized and minoritized students in mind, resulting in a lack of resources and guidance (Gonzales, 2015). Support services, such as mentoring and academic advising, are imperative for retention and success. However, studies indicate that these services are often inadequately staffed or poorly targeted towards racialized and minoritized students (Tram et al., 2023). Institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion can significantly enhance these support systems, as shown in programs designed to engage and empower students from underrepresented communities. For example, Banks and Dohy (2019) discussed two approaches to improving opportunities for racialized and minoritized students in higher education. The first is a deficit remediation model, which aims to identify students' needs, concerns, and deficits to design targeted support programs. The second is a strengths-based model, which focuses on recognizing and nurturing students' unique talents and developing programs that build on these strengths.

Racialized and minoritized students often report feeling alienated in environments where they perceive a lack of inclusivity and support, which affects their academic performance and overall well-being. As a result, the dynamics within institutions profoundly influence the experiences of racialized and minoritized students. A study by Solorzano et al. (2000) emphasized the role of campus racial climate in shaping students' sense of belonging and

engagement. Attitudes and behaviours of faculty and staff also play a role in shaping racialized and minoritized students' experiences. Proctor and Truscott (2012) revealed that racialized and minoritized students frequently encountered implicit biases from faculty, which affected their academic success and engagement.

Faculty-Student Relationships

Positive faculty-student relationships, characterized by cultural competency and support, are linked to higher retention rates among racialized and minoritized students (Proctor et al., 2018). Faculty diversity also plays a significant role. Research indicates that having faculty from diverse backgrounds positively influences racialized and minoritized students' academic experiences and aspirations (Llamas et al., 2021; Maiden, 2021). Institutions that actively promote diversity among faculty and staff can create more inclusive environments, leading to better outcomes for racialized and minoritized students.

Effective Practices and Policies

Effective practices and policies that support racialized and minoritized students include a variety of initiatives including increasing diversity amongst students and faculty in PWIs, changing admissions requirements to attain representation for racialized and minoritized communities, integrating teachings on racial issues into curriculum to minimize the teaching that racialized and minoritized students often engage in, endorsing a social justice agenda to promote professional advocacy, engaging in collective and community organizing within the institution and in the greater community, and creating opportunities for racialized students to receive mentorship and advising from racialized and minoritized faculty members (Curtis-Boles et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2020; McDowell & Hernández, 2010; Proctor & Truscott, 2012; Sabnis et al., 2023; Sarr et al., 2022).

Sarr et al. (2022) called for admissions requirements and goals specifically outlined for marginalized students to help institutions increase diversity. However, increasing the number of marginalized students must be met with specific equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) goals to help support these students on their academic journeys. Ju et al. (2020) reported that EDI action-oriented goals such as “early exposure, responsiveness to student needs (e.g., financial needs), commitment to diversity (e.g., hiring and retaining faculty members from diverse backgrounds), community relationships, and program location have all been identified as important factors to consider” for increasing admissions for students from marginalized backgrounds (p. 582).

Decolonizing Praxis Through Caucus Groups

McDowell and Hernández (2010) made recommendations for decolonizing praxis that include creating caucus groups for racialized and minoritized students to foster communities of trust, respect, humility, care, and sacredness; facilitating institutional discussions on accountability, policy issues, and racism; conducting cultural audits to examine how funding and organizational structures may positively or negatively impact marginalized groups; and strengthening collaboration with local groups and communities.

As a first-generation student, I faced challenges adapting to university culture during my undergraduate studies and often had to navigate the institution independently. To better integrate into university life, I attended student orientation events and participated in programming offered through the university’s Student Success Centre. This centre had a meaningful impact on my transition, and I later became involved as a Student Success Ambassador, followed by employment through a work-study position.

In addition, I joined the African and Caribbean Students Association (AFCASA) to connect with peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. This

involvement functioned in ways that are consistent with the goals of caucus groups described in decolonizing praxis literature, particularly in fostering community, affirming identity, and supporting students navigating institutional spaces where they may otherwise feel isolated. At the same time, the fact that these supports were largely located within student-led or extracurricular spaces rather than embedded within core institutional structures highlights a limitation in how decolonizing praxis is operationalized within universities. While engagement with these institutional and student-led spaces contributed significantly to my undergraduate success by enhancing my sense of belonging, supporting my well-being, and strengthening my connection to the university community, it also suggests that such outcomes are often dependent on students actively seeking out or creating supportive environments rather than consistently receiving them through formal institutional practice.

Community and Belonging in Online Graduate Education

As a first-generation student, higher education can feel overwhelming, but these experiences helped me navigate my journey. Even as I began the MC program, I faced new challenges as a graduate student, and it continues to be a valuable learning experience. One aspect missing from my experience as a graduate student in the MC program at Athabasca University is a sense of belonging to a community. The online format of the university makes it more difficult to cultivate a university culture compared to a traditional campus setting. As a result, the lack of in-person interaction and community-centred connections can make it particularly challenging for racialized and minoritized students to find support and build relationships with one another. Drawing from both the literature and my personal experiences, cultivating a sense of belonging and connection among racialized and minoritized students is crucial for building a more supportive and inclusive academic environment.

Institutional Policy, Equity, and Racialized Student Success

Institutional policies play a significant role in shaping the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in higher education, often reflecting and reproducing broader settler colonial and systemic inequities (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Côté-Meek, 2014). Scholars have demonstrated how admissions criteria and evaluation processes may not adequately account for the diverse forms of knowledge, experience, and potential that racialized and Indigenous students bring to postsecondary education, thereby shaping unequal pathways into and through graduate programs (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2018). In addition, institutional supports are not always designed in ways that are responsive to the specific needs and contexts of racialized and minoritized students, which can shape their access to resources that support academic success and well-being.

While postsecondary institutions have increasingly adopted discourses of equity, diversity, and inclusion, scholarship has highlighted that these initiatives are often unevenly implemented and may not adequately address the structural conditions that produce inequitable outcomes (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Côté-Meek, 2014). For example, Indigenization efforts in Canadian universities have been conceptualized as requiring more than representational inclusion, instead calling for substantive curricular, relational, and institutional transformation grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems and governance practices (Ansloos et al., 2022; Peltier et al., 2018).

More meaningful institutional change, therefore, has been framed in the literature as moving beyond additive or surface-level approaches to inclusion toward equity-oriented and structurally responsive practices. These include strengthening strengths-based and relational approaches to student support, expanding faculty diversity in ways that shape mentorship and

curriculum, and fostering institutional environments where belonging is actively cultivated through relational accountability rather than assumed (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Côté-Meek, 2014). Across this scholarship, there is a shared emphasis on the importance of structural transformation within higher education in order to support not only access but also the sustained flourishing of racialized and Indigenous students within academic institutions.

Structural Transformation in Higher Education: Decolonial, Equity, and Institutional Perspectives

Academic institutions often reflect and reproduce the social, political, and economic values of dominant cultural groups, resulting in the privileging of eurowestern colonial knowledge, experiences, and voices (Fellner, 2018; McDowell & Hernández, 2010). Within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), this structural positioning shapes what is recognized as legitimate knowledge and whose experiences are centred, often rendering the experiences of racialized and minoritized students less visible within institutional practices and discourses, including through forms of invisible work.

Within Indigenous and decolonial scholarship, there is ongoing debate about the use of the term decolonization in settler colonial institutions. Some scholars argue that decolonization is not metaphorical and cannot be achieved through institutional reform alone, as it is fundamentally tied to land, sovereignty, and Indigenous resurgence (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017). From this perspective, decolonization extends beyond educational change to the material and political conditions of Indigenous self-determination.

At the same time, education is widely understood as historically embedded within colonial projects that normalize and centre eurowestern epistemologies (McDowell & Hernández, 2010). As McDowell and Hernández (2010) note, this system “relies on the cultural

beliefs, values, and traditions of the colonizer being centred and dominant” (p. 96). In this sense, even contemporary diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives must be understood within broader institutional structures that continue to shape knowledge production and inclusion.

Within this context, decolonial approaches in education have been used to examine how institutional structures influence knowledge, belonging, and student experience. This scholarship highlights that while equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives may support incremental change, they do not always address the deeper epistemic and structural conditions that sustain inequities in higher education (Fellner, 2018; McDowell & Hernández, 2010). As such, this literature provides a foundation for understanding how racialized and minoritized students navigate and respond to institutional environments shaped by ongoing colonial relations of power.

In the Canadian context, decolonization is also understood as both the dismantling of colonial systems and the restoration of Indigenous knowledge, governance, and cultural practices. Collins (2018) describes this as involving the deconstruction of colonial systems and their ongoing effects across social, educational, economic, and political domains, alongside the restoration of Indigenous languages, cultures, spirituality, and systems of knowledge and governance through processes of healing and resurgence. This framing positions decolonization as both structural and restorative, grounded in ongoing commitments to addressing colonial violence and its impacts.

Decolonizing Practice in Counselling Psychology

Decolonizing practice in counselling psychology is imperative to the reclamation of Indigenous and racialized and minoritized experiences for both clients and practitioners. In response to the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada’s (2015) report, the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) and Psychology Foundation of Canada

(PFC) TRC task force produced a report outlining action-oriented recommendations to improve psychological services to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations in Canada (CPA & PFC, 2018). In this report, the taskforce acknowledged and held the field of psychology accountable for its part in the colonization and cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Examining the Gap Between Social Justice Education and Racialized and Minoritized Student Experiences

As the aim of social justice practice is to “minimize oppression and injustice in favour of equality, accessibility, and optimal developmental opportunities for all members of society,” counsellors and counsellors-in-training must acknowledge how oppression and injustice are present in Canadian society and within the field of counselling psychology, both historically and contemporarily (Kennedy & Arthur, 2014, p. 188). In response to the CPA/PFC’s call to action, Canadian graduate counselling psychology programs incorporated social justice and multicultural competency training into the counselling curriculum (Collins, 2018). However, many racialized and minoritized students still report challenges and negative experiences in their counselling programs (Cohen et al., 2022b; Sabnis et al., 2023; Seward, 2014). Engaging in decolonization involves calling out harmful practices and policies implemented in white institutional spaces, which further contribute to the additional work that many racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students engage in. As such, students are taking on the weight of engaging in decolonization work rather than the institutions.

Strategies for Creating Inclusive and Equitable Academic Environments

Effective strategies and practices for creating more inclusive and equitable academic environments include centring the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous, racialized, and minoritized peoples, teaching other ways of thinking about mental health and healing that are

central to Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, and including content that teaches counsellors-in-training about counselling psychology practices from an array of cultures can help provide counselling psychology students with diverse perspectives (Seward, 2014; Collins, 2018; Cohen, 2020). Additionally, utilizing cultural and traditional pedagogical practices and embedding social justice advocacy can be of benefit to racialized and minoritized students' well-being, academic experiences, and future career prospects (Cohen, 2020). Cohen et al. (2022b) suggested that "developing students' knowledge of how the discipline of psychology has contributed and continues to marginalize and colonize Indigenous Peoples in Canada is critical to beginning their process of self-reflection and decolonizing their practices" (p. 306).

Gaps in Indigenous Counsellor Education and Meaningful Engagement

While the MC program acknowledges the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples in Canada and emphasizes cultural responsiveness in counselling Indigenous clients, I had hoped to learn more about Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, particularly in relation to Indigenous beliefs and practices in counselling and mental health. Although I did not gain much in terms of Indigenous counselling practices, I was introduced to Indigenous research methodologies in the compulsory research methodology course, *GCAP 691: Facilitating Inquiry*. In the second week of the course, I was thrilled that we would be learning about these methodologies, and as an Indigenous person, they resonated deeply with me.

When I reached out to the course instructor for support in applying these methodologies to a literature review and research assignment, which now forms the foundation of much of this literature review and part of Chapter 3, I was provided with resources from Indigenous researchers and scholars such as Margaret Kovach (Plains Cree and Saulteaux), Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō), and Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree). I was also encouraged to pursue

Indigenous research methodologies for my thesis project. However, when my current supervisor, Dr. Emily Doyle, and I agreed to work together, I was disheartened to learn that the MC program lacked faculty support for Indigenous students who wanted to use Indigenous research methodologies. I could not help but wonder, “Why did we learn about Indigenous research methodologies if we can’t even use them?” Ultimately, Emily and I reached a compromise by combining a western research methodology with an Indigenous research paradigm, as detailed in Chapter 3.

The Concept of Invisible Work

As noted in Chapter 1, the term *invisible work* was first coined by sociologist Arlene Kaplan Daniels in 1987 to describe unpaid, undervalued, and unrecognized labour. Daniels (1987) highlighted the gendered division of labour by distinguishing between two types of work: public and private. Public work, typically associated with men, was compensated and viewed as a society contribution. In contrast, private work, often associated with women and including domestic labour, was rendered invisible through the devaluation of this work because of dominant cultural ideologies toward gender norms and roles.

Invisible Work in the Context of Racialized and Minoritized Students

Within the context of this research, invisible work refers to the additional work that racialized and minoritized students do in addition to meeting program requirements like attending classes, completing assignments and coursework, and finishing a thesis and/or practicum (Sabnis et al., 2023). Additional work is often unrecognized and unrewarded, and requires extra resources from students, such as time, money, and energy. Students may also engage in emotional or psychological labour to cope with negative feelings and experiences that may arise from doing invisible work (Cohen et al., 2022b; Seward, 2014).

Invisible Work as Institutional and Systemic

Students with marginalized racial identities attending PWIs are likely to perform invisible work to navigate their academic experiences (Cohen et al., 2022b). Racialized and minoritized students are more likely to experience invisible work as counselling programs are often catered toward students with non-marginalized identities, thus not considering their unique experiences (Cohen et al., 2022b). Systemic racism that is ingrained in institutions is the root of the invisible work that many racialized and minoritized communities must perform to navigate white institutional settings.

Underneath invisible work lies the presence of power. Institutions enforce invisible work by upholding and maintaining dominant cultural ideologies. Melaku (2022) emphasized how institutions contribute to invisible work, stating that “the expectation of making others comfortable with your presence in the hopes of fitting into the existing white cultural frame is an example of how white spaces operate to Other Black people” (p. 1519). Moreover, Melaku (2022) asserted that in white institutional settings, invisible work marginalizes and minoritized peoples’ experiences while normalizing white experiences. Therefore, for racialized and minoritized people who perform invisible work, navigating institutional settings where they are not members of the dominant cultural group can be an alienating experience.

Because invisible work highlights the normalization of white experiences, people with racialized and minoritized identities in white institutional settings must negotiate “how dominant white culture functions to normalize the white experience, thereby excluding all other racial groups” (Melaku, 2022; p. 1518). Additionally, Melaku argued that invisible work is often not a choice, nor a conscious performance. This can create a barrier for racialized and minoritized

people, as a lack of awareness or reflection on their experiences of invisible work may prevent them from recognizing or discussing it, making it harder for them to seek support.

Furthermore, racialized and minoritized people may take actions to navigate their experiences and fit in, but these efforts are often constrained by institutional and systemic barriers. This aligns with Melaku's assertion that assimilating into the dominant white cultural framework may be driven more by necessity than by choice. However, this perspective can overlook the agency of racialized and minoritized people who engage in invisible work, portraying them as passive actors within white institutional settings.

Agency and Resistance in Invisible Work

Sabnis et al. (2023) used the feminist construct of agency with an emphasis on intersectionality to examine the invisible work of Black, Indigenous, Women of Colour (BIWOC) students enrolled in U.S. school psychology doctoral programs. Their study intended to understand how racism and colonialism influenced BIWOC experiences. Using agency as an analytical lens, the authors found that BIWOC students engaged in six types of actions to navigate their doctoral programs: "teaching, protecting self and others, self-advocating, organizing, searching for community, and self-editing" (p. 308). Because these actions were performed in addition to academic requirements, the authors argued that they qualified as invisible work as they negatively impacted the career prospects and well-being of BIWOC students.

Invisible Work in Counselling Psychology Literature

In a critical review of the literature that pertains to multicultural and social justice training in Canadian counselling psychology, Cohen et al. (2022a) found that marginalized counselling psychology graduate students reported experiences of having to step in to educate

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instructors and peers on social justice and diversity-related topics, experiencing microaggressions, needing to fill in learning gaps that require extra time, effort, and resources, being perceived as a disruptor, withdrawing from learning and class discussions, and taking on the responsibility to be the spokesperson for marginalized peoples point to the additional work that these students had to engage in and the subsequent emotional and psychological implications. Although not explicitly named *invisible work*, the students Cohen et al.'s study highlighted experiences of engaging in additional work to navigate their counselling psychology graduate programs.

A key conclusion of Seward's (2014) qualitative study on master's-level students of colour in multicultural counselling courses was that, to navigate their academic experiences, students engaged in a "decisional process about how much to participate in their multicultural counseling courses and how" (p. 75). Although Seward emphasized students' autonomy in how they chose to participate in multicultural counselling courses, how the students determined their level of participation is influenced by the way in which the institution maintained the dominant culture. For example, in many academic programs, participation contributes to a percentage of one's overall grade, and a lack of participation can be perceived as a lack of engagement or interest in learning.

Difficult interactions with peers and poor relationships with faculty, including a lack of mentoring, are common reasons for Black students leaving their doctoral school psychology programs (Proctor and Truscott, 2012). In this phenomenological study, leaving their programs was one way that students managed their academic experiences. While marginalized students may navigate their experiences by adjusting their level of participation or deciding to leave their programs, this decision is ultimately influenced by the institution's practices and policies,

reflecting Melaku's (2022) observation about trying to fit into the pre-existing white cultural framework. Choosing to leave their programs can negatively impact students' professional prospects if they decide not to complete their degrees due to discriminatory practices in education, a lack of social integration with white peers, and overall misalignment between perceptions of the academic program and expectations of what the program was or could be.

Limitations in Existing Research

It is important to note that the studies mentioned above were conducted at predominantly white institutions, with nearly all citing small sample sizes as a major limitation due to the underrepresentation of and minoritized students (Cohen et al., 2022b; Curtis-Boles et al., 2022; Proctor & Truscott, 2012; Sabnis et al., 2023; Sarr et al., 2022; Seward, 2014.) Other limitations of these studies include inadequate representation of diverse cultural identities, a lack of Indigenous representation (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Sabnis et al., 2023), reduced transferability and generalizability due to small sample sizes and region-specific data (Sarr et al., 2022), limited relevance for men or gender-diverse individuals in counselling psychology graduate programs (Sabnis et al., 2023), absence of perspectives from majority-minority programs (Seward, 2014), researcher insider status (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020), and potential sample bias from students only reporting negative experiences in their programs due to the reliance on self-reports (Proctor & Truscott, 2012; Seward, 2014). Additionally, only two of these studies focused on the context of Canadian counselling psychology graduate programs (Cohen et al., 2022b; Sarr et al., 2022). In these studies, Cohen et al. highlighted the small community of counselling psychology in Canada as a limitation, while Sarr et al. noted the lack of sociodemographic data on Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) representation in Canadian psychology graduate programs as a limitation of their research.

Implications for Student Outcomes

Overall, these studies provide examples of different factors that contribute to how invisible work impacts and minoritized counselling graduate students and determine students' psychological well-being, academic performance, and program satisfaction, as well as impacts enrollment and attrition rates of marginalized students. Relating my experience of engaging in invisible work to the literature, I notice many similarities. Like the racialized and minoritized students in the studies mentioned earlier, invisible work became a way for me to navigate my academic journey. Initially, it did not feel like a conscious choice, but rather something I learned to do growing up in a predominantly white community, as I shared in Chapter 1.

Reflexive Connection: Personal Experience of Invisible Work

Invisible work was, and still is, a means of survival and getting through. This mirrors the persistence Sabnis et al. (2023) highlighted in their study on BIWOC women's experiences of invisible work. Throughout the MC program, I began to reframe the invisible work I was doing as something I had agency over. When the educational experience I had hoped for did not materialize, I turned to additional resources and teachings from racialized, minoritized, and Indigenous scholars. This shift helped me shape the framework for how I want to approach my future role as a counsellor, and ultimately, contribute to supporting other racialized and minoritized counselling students as they navigate their academic experiences while advocating for change within counselling psychology graduate programs.

Learning from the Literature

In keeping with Tynan and Bishop's (2023) perspective on decolonizing the literature review, I chose to title this section *Learning from the Literature* to honour the relationality and reciprocity that occurs when we are inspired by the work of others. This decision was also

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influenced by their critique of language that perpetuates extractivist and colonial research practices, such as “surveying the field” or “finding a gap” (p. 504). In this section, I will highlight the areas of opportunity based on the insights gained from the literature reviewed above.

The literature reviewed offers valuable insights into the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in counselling psychology graduate programs and has informed my understanding of challenges, strategies, and forms of labour involved in navigating these spaces. Building on these contributions, my study examines how racialized and minoritized students experience invisible work and how institutional policies and practices shape and coordinate this work, extending existing scholarship through a more focused examination of these interconnected experiences.

Emergent research in this area of study includes racialized and minoritized students’ experiences with social justice and multicultural competency training in graduate counselling psychology programs (Cohen et al., 2022b; Maiden, 2021; Seward, 2014), doctorate psychology program students of colour’s experiences of racism in the classroom (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020), and BIWOC doctorate school psychology students’ experiences of invisible work (Sabnis et al., 2023). Further research on this topic is necessary, as demonstrated by these examples of current literature. Additionally, the existing literature indicates a need for further research on the institutional practices and policies within counselling psychology graduate programs that highlight the organization of invisible work.

The literature reviewed highlights the significance of understanding the experiences of racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students within the broader institutional contexts in which they study and train. In engaging with this scholarship, I came to understand invisible

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work as an important lens for examining how students navigate academic environments and respond to institutional expectations. Building on these insights, this study examines how invisible work is experienced and shaped through institutional policies and practices, contributing to ongoing conversations about creating more responsive and inclusive academic environments.

By examining the aforementioned dimensions in this study, we can offer valuable insights that not only inform institutional frameworks to promote equity and improve the graduate student experience but also benefit a broader range of stakeholders. These improvements will support not just racialized and minoritized students but also enhance the training of future counsellors, ultimately benefiting clients who will receive more culturally competent care. Additionally, nurturing a more inclusive academic environment contributes to a more equitable society by preparing graduates who are better equipped to address the diverse needs of their communities.

Summary of Key Themes

The literature on racialized and minoritized students in higher education, particularly within graduate counselling psychology programs, highlights four key themes that shed light on the unique experiences and challenges these students encounter. These themes examine the impact of pedagogical practices, institutional policies, the need for decolonization, and the additional, often unrecognized labour that racialized and minoritized students must navigate, all of which contribute to the barriers they face in pursuing higher education.

Racialized and Minoritized Students in Counselling Psychology Graduate Programs

The first theme highlights how pedagogical practices in social justice and multicultural competency training emphasize cultural sensitivity and self-awareness, yet often marginalize

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students from culturally non-dominant backgrounds. As a result, racialized and minoritized students frequently experience emotional and psychological burdens, compounded by a lack of support from the educational institution and cultural understanding from peers and faculty. This absence often leads to feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction for students within these programs.

Institutional Practices and Policies

The second theme emphasizes how institutional practices and policies often marginalize racialized and minoritized students, creating systemic barriers in higher education. These students often encounter racial bias in areas such as admissions, financial aid, and access to resources and support services. Moreover, the campus climate and the attitudes of faculty play a crucial role in shaping their overall experiences. To address these challenges, effective strategies include diversifying both the student body and faculty, revising admissions policies, incorporating racial issues into the curriculum, and establishing clear, actionable EDI goals. Additionally, initiatives such as creating support groups and affinity spaces for racialized and minoritized students and promoting community collaboration can nurture greater inclusivity and better support their academic success.

Structural Transformation in Higher Education: Decolonial, Equity, and Institutional Perspectives

The third theme highlights scholarship on structural transformation in higher education through decolonial, equity, and institutional perspectives. Collectively, this literature emphasizes approaches that move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and toward more substantive engagement with the experiences and knowledges of Indigenous, and minoritized, and minoritized communities. Across these perspectives, scholars highlight the value of centring

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Indigenous, racialized, and minoritized experiences, incorporating culturally relevant pedagogies, and fostering critical self-reflection among students regarding the historical and ongoing marginalization of these groups within academic disciplines. These contributions offer important insights into how institutions and educational practices can be reimagined to support more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

The Concept of Invisible Work

The fourth and final key theme addresses the additional, unacknowledged labour that racialized students are often required to perform. This invisible work takes many forms, such as educating peers, navigating racism and microaggressions, and managing emotional labour within PWIs. This extra burden not only detracts from these students' academic performance but also affects their overall well-being and satisfaction with their programs. Institutional practices and policies often perpetuate these challenges by reinforcing a dominant cultural framework that marginalizes the diverse experiences of racialized and minoritized students.

Connection to the Study

The literature informs and contextualizes the research questions by providing insight into racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students' experiences of invisible work, while addressing the need for more understanding of the institutional practices and policies that organize these students' experiences.

Considerations when seeking to understand how academic institutions organize and coordinate the invisible work performed by racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students include a critical and in-depth analysis of the historical and contemporary contexts of social justice in counsellor training, highlighting the unique stories and experiences of racialized and minoritized students and how these students engage in invisible work to

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manage their experiences, and lastly examining how eurowestern and colonial worldviews are privileged in counselling psychology graduate program curriculum and pedagogy at the macro-level.

Chapter 3. Methodology

I begin this chapter with an introduction to my theoretical underpinnings and positionality. To inform my theoretical framework, I combine an Indigenous research paradigm with a blend of critical race theory (CRT) and decolonizing theory as an interpretive framework. This framework guides my documentation of and minoritized students' experiences, supports my critical analysis of institutional and systemic barriers, and highlights decolonial possibilities.

Next, I provide an in-depth discussion of institutional ethnography (IE), the methodology I draw from in this study. I define key terms in IE, including epistemology, ontology, social relations, ruling relations, the connection between texts and ruling relations, and problematic, to clarify the analytic approach. Within this framework, I discuss how I integrate an Indigenous research paradigm with IE and provide an overview of the political activist lens.

Furthermore, I discuss the research methods, including participants, sampling strategies, and ethical considerations, as well as my procedures for data collection, storage, and analysis. I then present a discussion of rigour and reflexivity and conclude the chapter with limitations.

Introduction

The invisible work that many racialized and minoritized students in counselling psychology graduate programs perform remains understudied, despite growing awareness of the challenges these students face in higher education. In this study, I investigate how racialized and minoritized students navigate their academic environments, focusing specifically on the invisible work they undertake to manage their academic experiences. Additionally, I examine how institutional structures organize and coordinate these experiences within their counselling psychology graduate program.

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Orienting to the embodied experiences of racialized and minoritized students, I uncover how graduate programs, as organizational systems, create and sustain invisible work. Using IE, I examine how institutional policies, practices, and norms shape students' lived experiences. This methodology allows me to examine how students encounter and respond to racism, microaggressions, exclusionary practices, and systemic barriers, while also analyzing the invisible work they perform to counteract or manage these challenges.

By foregrounding the experiences of racialized and minoritized students, I aim to illuminate the structural and institutional forces that sustain racial inequities in counselling psychology graduate programs and contributes to a deeper understanding of persistent educational inequities.

Theoretical Underpinnings: My Positionality

I situate my research within a postcolonial CRT paradigm. I draw on a combination of an Indigenous research paradigm, CRT, and decolonizing theory to guide both my approach and my engagement with participants. An Indigenous research paradigm emphasizes community-centred, relational, and culturally grounded methodologies, prioritizing the lived experiences, traditions, and knowledge of Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2001). CRT focuses on understanding how race, racism, and power intersect, highlighting the narratives and lived experiences of marginalized groups to challenge dominant structures of inequality. Decolonizing theory aims to dismantle colonial systems of knowledge, power, and oppression, advocating for a research process that is collaborative, ethical, and rooted in the values and needs of the communities being studied.

Together, these frameworks shape a research approach that is ethically responsible, culturally relevant, and committed to social justice. They provide a lens through which I examine

how racialized and minoritized students navigate their academic environments and perform invisible work, ensuring that their voices and experiences remain central to the study.

Indigenous Research Paradigm

As a researcher with Black, Indigenous, and settler ancestry, it feels most authentic to draw upon both Indigenous and western research paradigms. This approach aligns with the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing (Etuaptmumk), articulated by Mi'kmaq Elders Murdena Marshall and Dr. Albert Marshall (Bartlett et al., 2012). Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, while using both eyes together for the benefit of all (Bartlett et al., 2012). Rather than blending or assimilating one worldview into another, Two-Eyed Seeing emphasizes the coexistence and mutual respect of distinct knowledge systems.

Two-Eyed Seeing emerged within Mi'kmaq contexts as a framework for fostering respectful relationships between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. Since its introduction, scholars have applied it across health, education, and research settings to guide methodological approaches that honour multiple forms of knowledge while remaining attentive to power relations and historical contexts. For example, Peltier (2018), drawing on Anishinaabe perspectives, demonstrated how Two-Eyed Seeing can be operationalized through the integration of Indigenous research methods and participatory action research. In this approach, Indigenous principles such as relationality, reciprocity, and community accountability remain central while selected Western research practices are employed in ways that support, rather than supersede, Indigenous priorities and knowledge systems.

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The principles of Two-Eyed Seeing resonate with my own positionality and with the goals of this study. While the framework was developed to support dialogue between Indigenous and Western paradigms, it also offers a way of thinking about how multiple ways of knowing can coexist without hierarchy. This is particularly relevant to research exploring the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized and minoritized students whose ways of knowing, experiences, and forms of knowledge are often marginalized within academic institutions. Through a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, I seek to remain grounded in Indigenous principles while drawing upon selected Western research practices that support the research process. In doing so, I aim to create space for participants' experiences to be understood within the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape them.

Wilson (2001) described an Indigenous research paradigm as “a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that goes together to guide people’s actions as to how they are going to go about doing their research” (p. 175). Central to Indigenous research paradigms are the principles of relationality and relational accountability. Relationality is grounded in an Indigenous worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of people, communities, knowledge, and the land (Wilson, 2008). Knowledge is not viewed as separate from relationships; rather, it is generated, shared, and understood through them.

Relational accountability extends this understanding by emphasizing the responsibilities researchers hold toward participants, communities, and the knowledge entrusted to them. Wilson (2008) argues that researchers are accountable for conducting research in ways that embody respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. These principles align closely with my commitment to conducting research that honours participants' stories and contributes meaningfully to the communities represented in this study. In undertaking this research, I seek to

ensure that it is of benefit to my Black and Indigenous kin as well as to other and minoritized communities whose experiences are centred within this work.

From an Indigenous perspective, data are understood as gifts rather than objects to be extracted or owned (Kovach, 2021). This understanding carries responsibilities regarding how knowledge is gathered, interpreted, and shared. As Wilson (2008) noted, the researcher's role is not to impose conclusions or claim authority over others' experiences, but rather to facilitate connections and share understandings in ways that honour participants' perspectives. This orientation informs my approach to analysis and representation throughout this study, encouraging humility, reflexivity, and accountability in how participants' stories are interpreted and presented.

Critical Race Theory

I use CRT to analyze the experiences of and minoritized students in counselling psychology graduate programs. Developed in the late 1970s and 1980s by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Cheryl Harris, CRT examines how race and racism are deeply embedded in social, legal, and educational systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT challenges the notion of neutrality in these structures and centres the lived experiences of racialized p and minoritized eoples. By emphasizing the intersection of race with other forms of identity and highlighting personal standpoints and counternarratives, I use CRT to critically examine how racialized and minoritized counselling students navigate systemic barriers in their academic journeys. This perspective helped me explicate how race, racism, and power intersect to shape students' lived experiences within the institution, highlighting marginalization, systemic oppression, and the invisible work students perform.

Decolonizing Theory

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This study is informed by a decolonizing lens that examines how colonial relations continue to shape knowledge production, institutional practices, and educational experiences. Decolonization is not a singular theoretical tradition; rather, it encompasses diverse bodies of thought that emerge from distinct historical and political contexts, including Indigenous scholarship on settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty, anti-colonial liberation movements, and postcolonial critiques of power, representation, and knowledge. While these traditions share a concern with challenging colonial structures and their ongoing effects, they differ in their goals, assumptions, and understandings of what decolonization entails.¹

In this study, I primarily draw upon Indigenous and anti-colonial perspectives that examine how colonial systems continue to organize educational institutions and shape whose knowledge is valued within them. This orientation aligns with Indigenous scholars who emphasize the importance of Indigenous self-determination, relationality, and the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems, as well as with anti-colonial and postcolonial scholars who critique the enduring impacts of colonial power on culture, identity, and knowledge production.

Decolonizing scholarship in education has been informed by a range of thinkers, including Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, who examined the psychological, cultural, and social consequences of colonialism, alongside Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou), Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq), and Debbie Reese (Navajo), whose work has challenged the marginalization of Indigenous knowledges within educational systems and advanced approaches that honour Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013; Reese, 2018; Smith, 2023).

Through this lens, I examine how counselling psychology graduate programs are shaped by institutional practices, dominant knowledge systems, and historical legacies that reflect

colonial relations of power. A decolonizing perspective also provides a framework for understanding how racialized and minoritized students navigate, challenge, negotiate, and reframe these structures through their everyday experiences and practices. Consistent with the principles of Two-Eyed Seeing discussed earlier, this approach seeks to create space for multiple ways of knowing while critically examining the institutional conditions that privilege some forms of knowledge over others.

Combining an Indigenous Research Paradigm with CRT and Decolonizing Theory as Interpretive Frameworks

By integrating an Indigenous research paradigm with CRT and decolonizing theories, I positioned the research to support racialized and minoritized students in re-storying their experiences, critically analyzing institutional and systemic barriers, and generating recommendations for change. This approach deepened understanding of the structural inequalities these students face while advocating for transformative change within the educational institution, promoting an environment that recognizes and values diverse perspectives and lived experiences. The combined frameworks provided a comprehensive lens to examine and address the complexities of race, power, and institutional dynamics in counselling psychology graduate programs, ensuring that participants' voices and knowledge remained central throughout the research process.

Introduction to Institutional Ethnography

In this study, I drew on IE to investigate the experiences of and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students within academia. Developed by Marxist feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, IE focuses on understanding how social institutions shape everyday lives and interactions within institutional contexts (Smith, 2005). IE frames specific aspects of people's

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everyday experiences as the *problematic* of the research (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). For this study, the problematic was that racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students perform additional work that remains invisible within structures, policies, and practices of their academic programs.

Ruling Relations and Institutional Power

IE examines how institutions organize and regulate social life, and how these structures influence individuals' experiences and interactions. This organization occurs through what Smith terms *ruling relations*: the formal and informal institutional structures, norms, practices, and policies that shape and regulate individuals' actions, relationships, and experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Ruling relations extend beyond formal rules or policies to include underlying power dynamics, routines, and expectations that often operate subtly or invisibly (Smith, 2005). In short, ruling relations are the institutional routines and expectations that create and maintain power dynamics across institutions, communities, and societies.

Lived Experience as the Starting Point of Analysis

IE emphasizes starting from the standpoint of individuals' lived experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). By centring the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in the MC program, I sought to understand how invisible work both is performed by students and organized by the academic institution. I focused on how this work remains unseen while being embedded in institutional practices and policies, including curriculum, faculty expectations, and student responsibilities.

Methods of Institutional Ethnography

Data collection methods commonly used in IE include interviews, observations, and text analysis to uncover the connections between personal experiences and institutional processes

(Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Through careful examination of everyday experiences, IE reveals how power dynamics, policies, and practices shape peoples' lives and identifies areas for potential social change. This methodology was particularly suited to examining the complexities of institutional practices and their impacts on racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students. By integrating IE with CRT and decolonizing theory, I analyzed how systemic oppression manifests in academic structures and explored possibilities for reimagining counsellor education and institutional practices to better support students from historically and systemically marginalized communities.

Epistemological Shift

IE reflects a profound critique of objective knowledge and challenges the traditional view that truth is universal and fixed (Kearney et al., 2019). Through this epistemological lens, I approached knowledge not as an objective reality, but as socially organized and shaped by institutional practices and everyday experiences. This perspective emphasizes the connection between the *local* and *translocal*. In IE, the *local* refers to the immediate, everyday settings in which people live their lives (Smith, 2005). In this study, the MC program served as the *local* context under study. The *translocal* encompasses broader contexts beyond people's everyday experiences that still influence them. Translocal settings can include institutional, social, economic, and political structures. By examining how local experiences intersect with translocal systems, this study highlights how invisible work is both produced and shaped by broader institutional forces.

Social Relations

Another key term within IE's epistemology is *social relations*, which refer to the ways people's actions and interactions are coordinated and organized within broader social systems.

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Social relations often impose roles, categories, and expectations on people and are embedded in the everyday practices and routines of institutions (Smith, 2005). They provide a lens to understand how larger social systems manifest in daily life, often without people's explicit awareness.

Social relations differ from *ruling relations*. Social relations encompass the everyday interactions that structure social life, while ruling relations represent the more powerful, institutionalized forms of control and coordination that govern those interactions, emphasizing authority, regulation, and power (Smith, 2005). This distinction highlights the social organization of knowledge, recognizing that knowledge is shaped by the complex institutional contexts in which it emerges.

Feminist perspectives have been critical in advancing this epistemological shift, challenging the rigid theoretical frameworks that can obscure lived experiences. As Smith (1990) noted, "When sociologists impose an overly predetermined theoretical framework for interpreting people's lives, they restrict their inquiry and the knowledge they produce from how actual lives are experienced" (p. 5).

In applying this epistemological shift, I centred the experiences of racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students, recognizing them as experts in their own lives. Their perspectives provided crucial insight into how invisible work is organized and coordinated within the academic institution, creating a nuanced, contextual understanding of social reality grounded in lived experience.

Ontological Shift

The ontological shift in IE represents a departure from theoretical and conceptual explanations, moving toward a grounded focus on people's actual experiences (Smith, 1990).

This shift emerged from the recognition that traditional theoretical models often failed to capture how the world operates in practice. Rather than theorizing why or how something occurs, institutional ethnographers examine how social processes are enacted in everyday life. As Smith (1990) stated, “This move from idealist theorizing and speculation to investigating the everyday world as it is put together in the practices and activities of actual individuals is what is meant by the ‘ontological shift’” (p. 635).

Rooted in a Marxist, materialist understanding of the world, this perspective emphasizes that social reality is constructed through material practices and activities rather than abstract ideas or theoretical constructs. By focusing on how institutions and social structures are experienced and reproduced in the daily routines of individuals, IE provides an empirical understanding of how the world actually functions, moving beyond abstract explanations of lived experiences.

Applying this shift to my study, I examined how the social structure of the MC program organizes and coordinates invisible work for racialized and minoritized students through its practices and policies. This approach allowed me to understand how the program actively constructs the social reality of these students, highlighting both the processes and consequences of institutional organization.

Texts and Ruling Relations

In IE, *texts* are forms of media that people read, watch, or listen to, and they play a central role in organizing social life (Smith, 2005). Social relations within institutions transform people’s everyday experiences into translocal processes, connecting local actions to broader systems of organization (Smith, 2005). Texts serve as key instruments in this process, linking

people's everyday, local experiences to ruling relations that coordinate and regulate institutional practices.

In this study, I examined texts in the form of institutional documents, such as policies, procedures, and program materials, to understand how the MC program creates, organizes, and maintains relationships and expectations within the institution. Since I focused on racialized and minoritized students' experiences of invisible work, analyzing these texts allowed me to see how the program structures and shapes students' everyday experiences, revealing the broader systemic forces that organize and sustain this work.

Combining IE with Indigenous Research Methodologies

In addition to drawing on IE, I integrated Indigenous research methodologies grounded in an Anishinaabe epistemology for gathering knowledge and interpretation. Storytelling played an integral role in the data collection process, allowing participants to share their experiences in ways that reflected relational and culturally grounded ways of knowing (Graveline, 1998; Kovach, 2021).

This research incorporated a decolonizing lens, inspired by Indigenous activists and scholars, to examine why invisible work exists and its impact on both individual experiences and broader societal structures. Since IE begins with the standpoint of people's everyday experiences, centring and uplifting the stories of racialized and minoritized students through an Indigenous perspective of relationality and relational accountability aligns naturally with this methodology.

IE and Indigenous research paradigms complemented each other in this study. Adapting IE to centre Indigenous ways of knowing allowed me to highlight the lived experiences of Indigenous, racialized, and minoritized participants while using IE to critically uncover the

effects of institutional power on historically and systemically marginalized communities. An Indigenous research paradigm provided the relational and ethical framework necessary to conduct this work respectfully and in a community-centred way. By combining these approaches, I can contribute to a more just and inclusive understanding of how institutions shape racialized and minoritized students' experiences, while advocating for institutional change that respects and supports Indigenous and racialized and minoritized knowledge, traditions, and ways of being.

Political Activist Lens

IE has gained appeal among practitioners, particularly frontline workers, because of its potential to facilitate change within organizational settings (Kearney et al., 2019). By focusing on how social relations are organized at the institutional level, IE offers a practical tool for understanding and addressing systemic issues.

Political activist ethnography (PAE) emerged from George Smith's research and activism, including his study of the policing of gay men in Toronto, where he examined how "politico-ideological ruling regimes socially organized the policing of sexual activities in public bathhouses" (Smith, 1990, p. 8). Building on the foundations of IE, PAE takes a more activist-oriented approach by producing knowledge that directly supports activists in their struggles, focusing on generating insights that can inform and empower political action.

Reflexivity is central to both IE and PAE. Smith (1990) emphasized the role of the researcher's position and perspective in shaping knowledge. Unlike subjectivity, reflexivity involves critically considering how the researcher is embedded within the social world being studied and how they are influenced by the structures and relationships under investigation.

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I applied a political activist lens in this study to centre social justice, advocacy, and change. As someone committed to advancing equity for racialized and minoritized individuals in PWIs, this approach naturally aligned with my positionality and professional commitments. My connection to this research topic is informed by my standpoint and by the relational accountability and ethic of responsiveness I hold toward the communities I advocate for (Doyle, 2017; Wilson, 2008). This perspective guided the research process and shaped how I engaged with participants, data, and institutional texts, ensuring that the study remained both ethically responsible and socially transformative.

Research Setting

The research was conducted within the Master of Counselling (MC) program at Athabasca University. This setting provided a rich context for exploring how institutional policies and practices affect the lives of racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their interactions with the institution.

Participants

Participants consisted of six individuals who self-identified as racialized, minoritized, or as members of systemically and historically excluded racial or ethnic groups and who were enrolled in the MC program. All participants had completed at least one year of the program, which enabled them to speak from their lived experiences as and minoritized counselling psychology students in this context. In addition to self-identifying as racialized or minoritized, some participants also held one or more intersecting identities that have been systemically and historically excluded or marginalized, such as gender, sexuality, immigration status, language, ability, social class, and/or religion.

Sampling

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Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants with relevant lived experiences as racialized and minoritized counselling students, ensuring that the data collected was directly informed by those experiences. This approach enhanced the quality of data by engaging individuals who could provide valuable insights into the impact of institutional policies and practices in the MC program (Kalu, 2019). Snowball sampling was also used, allowing participants to refer others with similar attributes, which helped expand the sample and achieve sufficient participant diversity for data saturation (Noy, 2008). Criterion sampling ensured that all participants met the predefined criteria (Kovach, 2021) of self-identifying as racialized, minoritized, or belonging to a racial or ethnic minority and being currently enrolled in the MC program.

The participants' experiences as racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate students served as the primary criterion; however, individual cultural identities and lived experiences varied. A total of six participants were recruited, which provided rich, detailed data that allowed for a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences while also identifying broader patterns within the MC program.

A relational approach guided the recruitment process. I invited students from the MC program to take part in my study through online postings on Brightspace, Discord, and the Athabasca University Graduate Student Union (AUGSA) newsletter. Some of these individuals were people with whom I had pre-existing relationships, which directly connected with the relational aspect of trustworthiness in research (Kovach, 2021), and reflected my relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). By inviting individuals I already knew, I have had an opportunity to develop a connection and trust and can extend my relational accountability through reciprocity, sharing their stories in a good way (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

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While several students initially expressed interest in participating, many did not follow through until I personally reached out or until we had interacted in other contexts, such as virtual meetings or courses. I observed that individuals appeared more comfortable committing to the study once some rapport and familiarity had already been established. This highlighted how relationality shaped recruitment and reflected the importance of building trust before engaging in research conversations.

Interview Dynamics

The nature of the interviews also reflected these relational aspects. The first two interviews I conducted felt more formal in tone, whereas the last four became more relaxed, informal, and conversational. With participants I already knew, the interviews often felt casual and natural, supported by the trust and connection that we developed prior to the study. In reflecting on this shift, I recognized that relational accountability and trust not only shaped the recruitment process but also influenced the quality of the data, as participants appeared more open and forthcoming in less formal contexts (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Athabasca University following approval of the written and oral thesis proposal examinations (AUREB # 25923). Ethical considerations addressed included the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, confidentiality, the potential for harm, and the communication of research results.

Prior to beginning the research interviews, participants received an information letter via email detailing the study's objectives, potential risks and benefits, and what participation entailed. They were also assured of the confidentiality of their identities. This was achieved by

assigning pseudonyms to all data and reporting, securely storing all data, and removing identifying information.

During the informed consent process, participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They also had the option to participate in member checking, which allowed them to review their contributions for accuracy before the findings were finalized. A virtual consent form was created using Microsoft Word for ease of completion, and all signed consent forms are password-protected, accessible only to me as the primary researcher.

Relationality also became an important part of how I upheld ethics in practice. Many participants chose to engage after some rapport was established, either through pre-existing relationships or prior interactions in academic or community spaces. I recognized that this comfort and trust contributed to ethical recruitment, as participants appeared to feel more secure in sharing their stories. Similarly, the conversational and relational tone of several interviews reflected my ethical commitment to reciprocity and accountability: to share and honour participants' stories in a good way (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Although no participants expressed or showed signs of significant distress during their interviews, all were informed at the beginning of the interview that they could pause or reschedule at any point. In addition, all participants were provided with contact details for local mental health resources as a precautionary measure and to ensure care beyond the interview process.

Data Collection

Institutional ethnographers who have a thorough conceptualization of their research topic engage in data collection by “looking to see how the social relations of the setting work [and]

how different actors constitute the setting” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 96). With the aim of understanding how the social relations of the MC program organize and coordinate racialized and minoritized students’ experiences of invisible work, I collected data from both participants and texts.

In IE, interviews and text analysis are two core methods used to uncover how institutional practices, policies, and power dynamics shape people’s everyday lives (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Both methods played crucial roles in mapping the connections between individuals’ experiences and the broader institutional systems in which they are embedded. In this study, participants were viewed as experts of their everyday experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Interviews uncovered participants’ accounts of their lived experiences within institutional systems, while text analysis illuminated the formal policies and practices that shaped those experiences. Together, these approaches provided insight into the gap between institutional practices and everyday realities.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth narratives about participants’ experiences of invisible work within their graduate counselling programs. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams, a secure video-conferencing program. Interviews took place over the course of three months, which provided sufficient time for recruitment, as well as meeting with each participant and listening to their stories as they unfolded.

All interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams’ built-in transcription tool. Although the transcription tool was used, I carefully reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy, anonymized the data by assigning pseudonyms, and added annotations for preliminary analysis.

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These annotations included identification of significant themes, notes related to document and text analysis, and key participant quotes. Participants were also invited to review their transcripts for accuracy and to clarify or expand on their responses as they felt necessary. Semi-structured questions and prompts were used to help guide participants to share their stories. I created my interview guide based on an adaptation of *Qualitative Interview Questions: Guidance for Novice Researchers* (Roberts, 2020).

Consistent with the work of Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), I incorporated elements of yarning within the semi-structured format. Yarning is an Indigenous research methodology developed within Australian Aboriginal contexts that emphasizes relationship-building, reciprocity, and storytelling as a means of sharing knowledge. While recognizing its specific cultural and methodological origins, I drew upon the relational principles of yarning because they align with the Indigenous research paradigm guiding this study, particularly its emphasis on relationality, relational accountability, and creating conversational spaces in which participants can share their experiences in ways that feel meaningful to them. In practice, this approach allowed participants and me as the researcher to “journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study” in a relaxed and informal manner (p. 38).

Storytelling. The use of dialogue and oral tradition has roots in many African, Caribbean, and Indigenous cultures, where knowledge is often transferred via storytelling (Collins, 1989; Wilson, 2008). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1989) emphasized that “the narrative method requires that the story be told, not torn apart in analysis, and trusted as core belief, not admired as science” (p. 760). Collins’ critique of the observational and analytical nature of western research highlights the value of stories as sources of knowledge. From a social justice standpoint, storytelling can amplify marginalized voices, stories, and experiences.

Storytelling is also a collaborative process. According to Kovach (2019), storytelling aligns with an Indigenous worldview that upholds relationality and collectivism. Within an Indigenous research paradigm, this method can strengthen the evolving relationship between the speaker and the listener (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2001). Storytelling offers flexibility for both participants and researchers to co-create knowledge (Kovach, 2019). As Wilson (2001) asserted, the researcher's contribution to sharing is equally important as the stories received from participants. In this study, sharing my own story helped establish trust and build relationships with participants, reflecting the ethnographic aspect of data collection and supporting relational accountability.

Reflexive Observations. As I reflected on the interview process, I noticed shifts in tone and formality. The first two interviews felt more structured and formal, whereas the subsequent four interviews developed into relaxed, conversational exchanges. Interviews with participants I had pre-existing relationships with felt particularly natural and casual, supported by trust and familiarity. These observations highlighted the importance of relationality and storytelling in enabling participants to share rich, authentic narratives and emphasized the co-constructed nature of knowledge in this study (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008).

Text Analysis

Text analysis was also completed as a key data collection method. Texts provided insight into the social relations of the MC program, making visible the organization of institutional practices and policies, as well as the roles of the actors involved (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The selection of texts was informed by the interviews. Participants' narratives highlighted specific policies, documents, or institutional practices that were most relevant to their

experiences, guiding which materials I analyzed. This analysis complemented participants' accounts by situating their lived experiences within the broader institutional context.

In reflecting on this process, I recognized that my positionality shaped how I engaged with the texts. As a racialized and minoritized student in the MC program myself, I approached texts not as neutral artifacts but as active instruments of institutional power. This awareness influenced how I read and interpreted policies and practices. I was attentive to how formal institutional texts might obscure, minimize, or fail to address the invisible work experienced by racialized and minoritized students. By reading with this critical lens, text analysis became not just an examination of policies, but also a way to identify disjunctures between what was written and what was lived.

Text analysis in this study also emphasized the importance of reader interpretation. As Murray (2020) noted, both researchers and users of documents play an active role in constructing meaning from texts. My interpretations were shaped by my positionality and the insights shared by participants, while the findings are intended to be meaningful and usable to others engaged in the MC program context. By reading with this critical lens, document analysis became not just an examination of policies but also a way to identify disjunctures between what was written and what was lived, highlighting how institutional texts both reflect and shape the experiences of racialized and minoritized students.

Text Selection. I examined seven texts at the program and university levels that directly shape the experiences of MC students. These texts were chosen to highlight the ruling relations that coordinate key aspects of the program, including admissions, professional and ethical conduct, and access to student supports.

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The scope was intentionally narrowed to three categories to keep the project manageable at the master's level and to align closely with student interviews. While financial aid and institutional governance texts were considered, they were excluded because participants did not raise these areas as significant in their stories.

The final categories I analyzed include:

1. Admissions and Recruitment
2. Student Handbook and Policies
3. Student Support and Resources

Analytical Framework. I used Smith's (2001) concept of text as coordinating devices that regulate everyday experiences. Texts are treated as active instruments rather than neutral descriptions. Both the content of texts (what is said) and their silences or omissions (what is not said) were analyzed. For instance, the MC program website emphasizes accessibility and professionalism but does not mention equity or racialized and minoritized student experiences.

Analysis Approach. I developed a matrix of guiding questions to analyze all texts. These questions shaped how each text was read and annotated. Questions focused on issues of access, representation, and regulation. Examples include:

- How racialized and minoritized students are represented (if at all)
- How texts enact, regulate, or omit equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI)
- Which supports are visible, and which are missing
- What responsibilities are placed on students versus the institution

Annotations, including observations, key findings, and emerging patterns, were recorded in the analysis matrix. These were then placed into dialogue with student interview data, allowing comparison between formal institutional texts and the lived experiences of students navigating

them. When integrating interview data, I looked for ways participants' experiences aligned with or diverged from what the texts prescribed. This helped reveal how ruling texts shape everyday student experiences.

Limitations of the Text Analysis. While conducting my text analysis, some limitations emerged. First, texts are created for specific audiences. They may emphasize formal policies rather than everyday practice. Second, texts are periodically updated, therefore my analysis represents a snapshot in time. Third, texts may not explicitly address the needs of racialized and minoritized students. The absence of information is meaningful; however, it does not show whether practices exist in reality. Last, texts alone cannot capture lived experience. Interview data are essential to understand how students, faculty, instructors, and administrative staff experience institutional priorities.

Data Storage

Transcripts are securely stored on Athabasca University's OneDrive and on the primary researcher's password-protected computer, secured in a locked office. Both video recordings and transcripts are kept as password-protected files. Access to the passwords is restricted to the primary researcher and supervisor. Information related to the pseudonym system are maintained on a paper master list, stored in a locked filing cabinet in the primary researcher's office. No personal identifying information are linked to the video or paper research files. Both physical and electronic research data will be double locked for additional security. All data will be retained for a period of five years, after which it will be permanently and securely destroyed. Paper records will be shredded and burned, while electronic audio files will be permanently deleted.

Data Analysis

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From an IE standpoint, the goal of analysis is to understand how everyday experiences are organized by ruling practices (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). This mode of inquiry and analysis seeks to answer the question: *Why are things the way they are?*

The process of analysis in IE is iterative and grounded in the stories of the informants, or participants, as well as the texts and documents that are part of the institutional context under study (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The goal of analysis in IE is to map how social relations and institutional processes organize people's experiences. Therefore, analysis is about identifying connections and tracing social relations that stretch across space and time. In IE, analysis is not about testing pre-existing hypotheses or fitting data to established categories. Instead, the focus of the analysis will be to "explicate the ruling relations that organize and coordinate the local experiences of informants" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 89).

Campbell and Gregor (2002) encouraged researchers engaging in IE to approach data analytically, asking, "What does it tell me about how this setting or event happens as it does?" (p. 85). By applying an analytical lens that focuses on recurring themes, language, and experiences, researchers can uncover patterns that link lived experiences with institutional practices, providing deeper insights into the underlying social and ruling relations.

In this study, my analysis aimed to explicate the social relations within the MC program to understand:

1. How racialized and minoritized students managed their academic experiences through invisible work.
2. How institutional processes organized and coordinated the invisible work that racialized and minoritized students performed.

3. How these experiences were organized outside of local environments within the larger society.

To examine how social relations were organized and coordinated, I identified recurring threads that emerge from the data gathered in both interviews and documents, noting which aspects of the data help to highlight the stories I want to tell with my research (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Participant data revealed how racialized and minoritized students interpreted, navigated, and enacted institutional texts and structures in their everyday practices within the academic setting. This allowed me to understand the nature of the invisible work many racialized and minoritized students performed and to identify gaps between institutional policies and lived experiences. The diversity of participants' stories contributed to a broader understanding of how invisible work was organized and coordinated in institutional settings.

Consistent with IE principles, analysis occurred through writing and reflection (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). I engaged in discussions with my supervisor and peers about the research, made analytical notes, identified links, and continually asked whether the data were relevant to the problematic under study. This informal storytelling and iterative reflection supported the development of analytical insights and strengthened the study's rigour.

Rigour

Rigour in qualitative research refers to the methodological and ethical standards that ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and overall quality of the research process and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Rigour encompasses various strategies to enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative data. Key components of rigour in qualitative research include considerations of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility ensures that the findings accurately represent the participants' perspectives and was enhanced through member checking, reflexivity, establishing rapport, and prolonged engagement (Johnson et al., 2020). Transferability involved providing sufficient context and detail about the research setting and participants so that readers could assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts (Bradshaw et al., 2017). This was achieved through thick description, offering rich, detailed accounts of the research environment and participants.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail, documenting all phases of the research process, including data collection and analysis decisions (Johnson et al., 2020). Confirmability demonstrated that the findings were shaped by participants rather than the researcher's biases or preconceptions (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2020). This was supported through member-checking and keeping a reflexive journal, which documented my thoughts, decisions, and potential biases throughout the study.

Because relationality and relational accountability are key components of an Indigenous research paradigm (Kovach, 2021), participants were invited to review their stories to ensure that they were accurately represented. They were given the opportunity to clarify, edit, add, or remove any information shared during the interview process, further enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the study.

Reflexive Journaling

I was introduced to reflexive journaling in the course *GCAP 693: Advanced Qualitative Research*. Maintaining a reflexive research journal proved to be an invaluable practice throughout this study. It served as a reflective space where I could capture my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the ongoing work, providing insight into my journey as a researcher (Creswell &

Poth, 2024). This documentation was crucial for tracking the formative trajectory of the research, allowing me to observe the evolution of ideas, methods, and decisions over time.

By regularly writing in the journal, I was able to generate new ideas, analyze my process, facilitate decision-making, and enhance my writing skills (Thorpe, 2004). The act of recording and reflecting helped me make sense of complex information and document the entire research process, contributing to transparency and providing a point of reference for future work.

My reflexive journaling process consisted of allowing my thoughts to flow naturally, capturing immediate reactions, thoughts, and concerns, as well as more contemplative reflections on my personal journey as a researcher. The journal also included considerations of my identity, positionality, and the role of social justice in my research, which was central to the study. Overall, my reflexive journal functioned as a sacred space in which I could be vulnerable, open, and honest about all aspects of the research process, supporting both the rigour and ethical integrity of the study.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were acknowledged in this study. The small sample size allowed for in-depth insights into the experiences of racialized and minoritized students in the MC program; however, the findings may not be transferable to all racialized and minoritized students enrolled in graduate counselling programs across Canada. Additionally, the use of self-reported data means that the findings reflect participants' interpretations and recollections of their experiences, which may be influenced by memory, context, and individual perspectives.

A further limitation relates to the use of storytelling-informed approaches within an academic research context. While storytelling aligns with the Indigenous research paradigm guiding this study, institutional research conventions and thesis requirements necessitated the

organization, interpretation, and presentation of participants' stories within a more structured academic format. As a result, the richness, relationality, and holistic nature of participants' narratives may not have been fully represented in the final written account. This reflects a broader tension between Indigenous approaches to knowledge sharing and the conventions of western academic research (Kovach, 2019, 2021).

Similarly, the relational approach adopted in this study may have influenced the research process. Within Indigenous paradigms, relationality and relationship-building are viewed as strengths that support trust, reciprocity, and meaningful engagement. However, from some western research perspectives, the close involvement of the researcher may be understood as introducing potential bias or influencing participant responses (Kovach, 2019). While reflexive practices were used throughout the study, the relational nature of the research may have shaped the data that were generated and interpreted.

The storytelling approach also generated extensive and highly contextualized narratives. Given the scope of a master's thesis, it was not possible to include the full depth and detail of participants' stories in the final presentation of findings. Decisions regarding what to include, summarize, or omit were therefore necessary, creating the possibility that some nuances of participants' experiences were not fully captured in the written thesis.

Finally, because participants' stories were deeply contextualized and drawn from a relatively small academic program, maintaining confidentiality required careful attention. Although measures were taken to protect participants' identities, the specificity of some experiences increased the potential risk of identification, requiring the removal or modification of certain contextual details (Kovach, 2019). Consequently, some aspects of participants' stories may have been presented with less contextual detail than originally shared.

Chapter Conclusion

This methodology provided a robust framework for examining the interplay between individual experiences and institutional processes. By drawing from institutional ethnography, this research uncovered the ways in which institutional structures shaped the lives of racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students, contributing to a deeper understanding of invisible work.

Key considerations in exploring how racialized and minoritized counselling graduate students' experiences of invisible work were created and maintained included amplifying the diverse stories and experiences of participants, understanding the historical and contemporary contexts of social justice and culturally responsive counsellor training, providing an institutional analysis of how invisible work was upheld and maintained by higher education institutions, and examining systemic and institutional factors that privilege western and colonial worldviews in higher education.

This research has the potential to inform recommendations for supporting racialized and minoritized students, making visible the invisible work, and guiding changes in practice and procedure within counsellor education. It can also assist with counselling curriculum and course development, the creation of workshops and professional training, and inform institutional policies and practices beyond graduate-level counselling programs and academia, with applicability to a range of institutional contexts.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis

Drawing primarily from interview data, in this chapter, I centre the lived experiences of six racialized and minoritized students in the online Master of Counselling (MC) program offered through Athabasca University (AU). Guided by Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography (IE), I started the analysis from the participants' standpoints to understand how institutional structures organize and coordinate their everyday realities (Smith, 2005). By utilizing storytelling as a research method and as a means of developing knowledge, I was able to actively listen to student voices and highlight perspectives that are often absent in institutional accounts.

While some participants' stories connected directly to institutional texts such as the program admission requirements, website, and handbook, many revealed experiences that extended beyond what these documents captured. These narratives uncover the emotional and mental labour demanded of racialized and minoritized students and the ways institutional priorities shape everyday learning and engagement. Their narratives brought to light the gaps, silences, and unanticipated effects of ruling relations on racialized and minoritized students' learning, support, and professional development.

From these interviews, I identified three emergent themes:

1. Cultural Competency as Institutionalized Authority
2. The Invisible Work of Racialized and Minoritized Students
3. Navigating the Online Learning Environment

Introducing the Participants

In this study, I draw on in-depth interviews with six racialized and minoritized students enrolled in the online Master of Counselling program at Athabasca University. In keeping with

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Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography, I begin from participants' standpoints, understanding their everyday experiences as entry points into examining how institutional processes are coordinated (Smith, 2005). The participants are not presented as representative of all racialized and minoritized students, nor as a homogeneous group. Rather, each brings a distinct social location, migration history, family context, and professional trajectory that shape how they navigate the program.

Participant 1 identified as a mixed-race African American and Eastern European woman. Although she described her ethnicity as Canadian, she located her racial identity within her African American and Eastern European heritage. Raised by a single mother, she reflected on how family structure and racialized identity shaped her educational and professional aspirations.

Participant 2 is an Indigenous cisgender woman. She shared that she lives with an invisible disability and has lived experience with intergenerational trauma, noting that both of her grandparents attended residential school. She described how her family has experienced systemic oppression, poverty, institutionalization, and racism. In addition to being a student, she is a mother of two and works as an Indigenous Wellness Helper in provincially run treatment centres supporting individuals living with concurrent mental health and substance use challenges. Her experiences as a practitioner, parent, and community member deeply informed how she engaged with course material and conversations about cultural competency and safety.

Participant 3 identified as a queer man of Indian ethnicity, born and raised in Canada. As a master's student, he spoke about navigating racialization within Canadian contexts as shaping his experiences within counselling education.

Participant 4 identified as a Black, cisgender woman from Nigeria. Having lived in Nigeria for the first twelve years of her life, she later emigrated with her family to Europe, where

she lived for approximately eight years. She subsequently pursued further studies in the Caribbean and the United States before immigrating to Canada. She described her cross-continental migration history and exposure to multiple cultural and educational systems as central to how she interpreted curriculum, institutional authority, and cultural discourse within the MC program.

Participant 5 identified as a South Asian Canadian cisgender heterosexual woman. She reflected on navigating counselling education as a racialized woman and described how social location and cultural expectations shaped her academic engagement and professional aspirations.

Participant 6 identified as an immigrant, Caucasian, cisgender woman who is trilingual and able-bodied, while also living with an invisible disability. Her account highlighted how immigration status, cultural positioning, language, and disability intersect in shaping experiences of belonging and evaluation within the program.

Although participants differed in racial, cultural, generational, and migration histories, several shared experiences of navigating institutional expectations around cultural competency, identity disclosure, and professional legitimacy. Some participants disclosed detailed family histories and lived experiences of systemic oppression, while others chose to share more limited demographic information. Rather than treating these disclosures as static descriptors, I understand them as elements of standpoint, shaping how each participant encounters and interprets institutional processes.

Beginning from these situated standpoints allows institutional relations to become visible. In the sections that follow, I centre participants' narratives while tracing how their everyday experiences are connected to broader institutional texts, assessment practices, and technological structures. Introducing participants here as embodied individuals foregrounds their embodied

identities and experiences and maintains their presence as people throughout the analytic discussion that follows.

Institutional Context: Athabasca University and the Master of Counselling Program

The participants in this study are enrolled in the online Master of Counselling (MC) program offered through Athabasca University (AU), a Canadian distance education institution delivering programs primarily through asynchronous and online platforms. The MC program prepares students for professional counselling practice and is structured around competency-based learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, and practicum requirements aligned with professional standards.

Program materials, including course outlines, assignment rubrics, website descriptions, and student handbooks, articulate commitments to cultural competency, ethical practice, and social responsibility. These texts not only describe program values but also coordinate how students are evaluated, how assignments are structured, and how participation is organized within the online classroom environment.

From an IE perspective, the MC program operates as a site where institutional priorities, professional discourses, and technological platforms intersect. The online delivery format, competency-based assessments, and standardized evaluation criteria function as ruling texts that organize students' everyday academic work. By situating participants' experiences within this institutional context, I trace how their standpoints are coordinated through these broader structures.

Standpoint and Institutional Coordination: The Small Hero

To orient the analytic movement of this chapter, I draw on Dorothy Smith's (2006) *small hero* diagram (see Figure 1). The diagram illustrates how inquiry begins from the standpoint of

individuals in their everyday settings and traces outward to the translocal ruling relations that coordinate their work. In this study, the small heroes are the racialized and minoritized students enrolled in the MC program. Their everyday academic activities, such as writing assignments, participating in discussions, interpreting rubrics, and engaging with peers, form the local site of investigation. Rather than treating these activities as isolated experiences, I look upward from their standpoints to examine how institutional texts, competency frameworks, assessment practices, and online learning structures organize and coordinate their actions.

The diagram visually represents this methodological movement, beginning from embodied experience and mapping how that experience is shaped by institutional processes operating beyond any single classroom interaction. In the sections that follow, I follow this movement by tracing how participants' narratives make visible the ruling relations embedded within the MC program.

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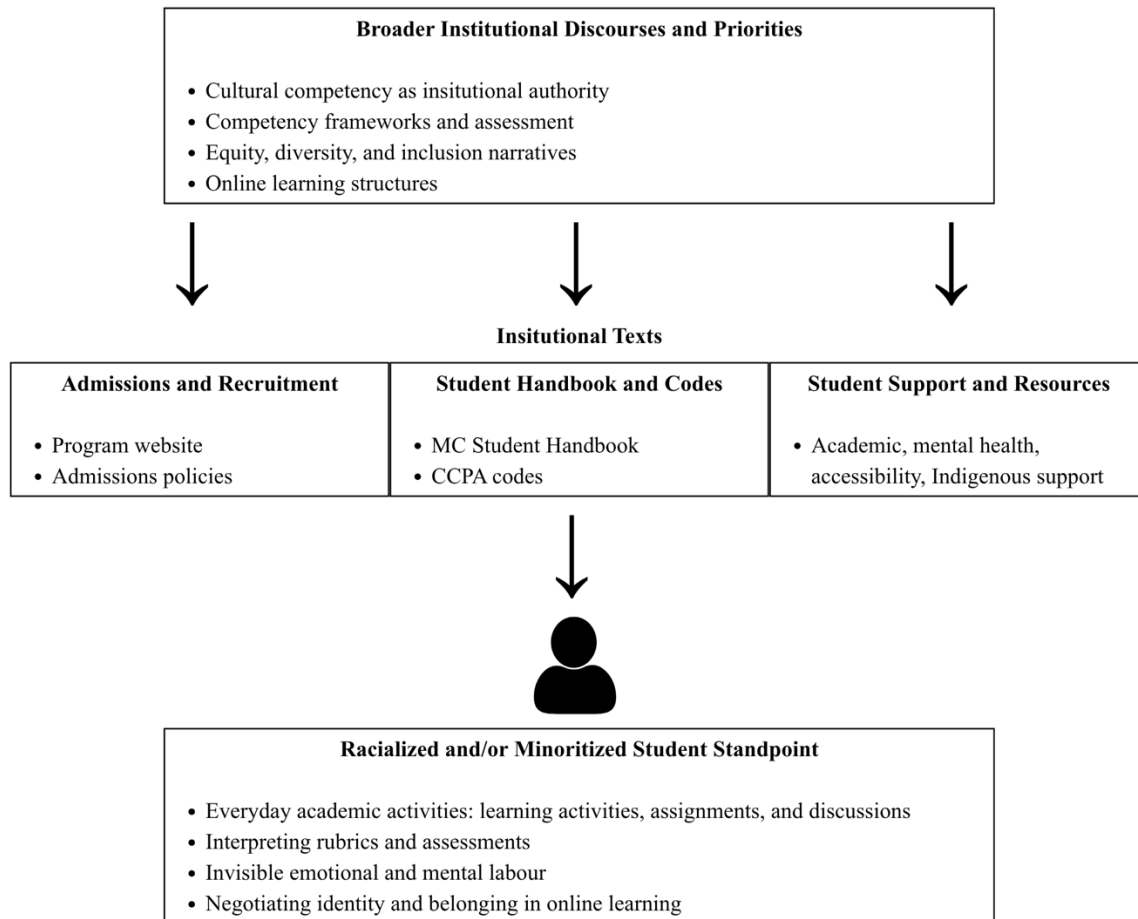


Figure 1. Adapted Small Hero Diagram (Smith, 2006).

With this adapted small hero diagram, I draw on Smith's (2006) IE framework to illustrate how multiple institutional texts and discourses coordinate and shape the everyday academic and emotional experiences of racialized and minoritized students in the MC program. The diagram positions the participants as the small hero at the centre of these intersecting institutional relations, highlighting how admissions policies, program handbooks, professional codes, and student support resources collectively influence their navigation of cultural competency, invisible work, and identity negotiation within the online learning environment.

Text Analysis

Text analysis is a central part of my methodology and aligns with Dorothy Smith's (2005) IE methodology. IE emphasizes that texts function as ruling relations, coordinating expectations, authority, and practices across institutions while embedding dominant ideologies, including those related to race and culture (Smith, 2005). By analyzing texts alongside the student experiences outlined in this chapter, I will examine how institutional priorities influence daily student life and participation. My approach also incorporates critical race theory (CRT) and decolonizing perspectives to interrogate how these texts seem to reproduce hierarchies and potentially marginalize racialized and minoritized peoples' identities, knowledge, worldviews, practices, and experiences.

In IE, texts are treated as active instruments rather than neutral descriptions of reality (Smith & Griffith, 2022). They organize and standardize social relations and only become activated when people engage with the discourses or expectations they produce. In this study, program handbooks, rubrics, professional code of ethics guiding counselling psychology practitioners (CCPA, 2020), and university policies structure students' roles, responsibilities, and participation in ways that reflect institutional assumptions about knowledge, culture, and authority. Text analysis examines both what texts explicitly communicate and what they omit, highlighting how institutional processes intersect with race, privilege, and systemic inequities, as emphasized in CRT and decolonizing theory.

Scope and Rationale for Text Selection

I focused on seven texts across three categories. These texts represent the most relevant institutional influences on MC students, as identified through participant interviews, while keeping the analysis manageable. Broader documents, such as all course syllabi or institution-wide documents, were excluded to avoid redundancy with Lee Smith's (2023) prior thesis work

that examined the social and institutional organization of culture within the AU MC program and because they were less directly tied to student experiences identified in interviews.

Most texts are program-level, including the MC website, admission requirements, and the student handbook. University-wide texts include academic, mental health and wellness, accessibility, and Indigenous support services, as these coordinate student experiences and set broader institutional priorities that possibly affect the MC program.

The three categories of institutional texts are:

1. **Admissions and Recruitment:** Program website, application information, admission requirements, and English language proficiency policies.
2. **Student Handbook and Policies:** MC Student Handbook and the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA)'s professional codes.
3. **Student Support and Resources:** University-wide Student Support portal, including academic, mental health, accessibility, and Indigenous supports.

In the following sections, I examine each theme through participants' narratives, highlighting their expertise through their own words. After presenting these stories, I offer IE-informed reflections that trace how individual experiences connect to broader institutional processes and expectations. Throughout, I highlight both the practical and emotional work students do, showing how this work is coordinated through institutional structures.

Theme 1: Cultural Competency as Institutionalized Authority

As I analyzed participants' interviews, I noticed cultural competency appearing repeatedly, not only as a learning objective, but as an organizing framework that shaped how students moved through the MC program. It surfaced across stories, assignments, and interactions in ways that suggested it carried weight beyond a single course outcome. As I

listened in the interviews, I began to understand cultural competency as functioning as more than a skill to be acquired. Instead, I came to interpret it as an institutionalized authority that shaped how students approached their academic work, influenced their interactions with faculty and instructors, and affected which forms of cultural knowledge were recognized and valued.

Drawing on institutional ethnography (IE), I interpreted participants' experiences as coordinated through institutional expectations that organized student activity and regulated how the program's faculty and instructors assessed students' knowledge (Smith, 2005). This theme presents my interpretation of participants' experiences, grounded in their narratives and informed by existing literature. I do not present these findings as universal claims about counselling programs. Rather, I offer them as an analysis of how participants in the study experienced and made sense of cultural competency in this particular context.

To guide the reader, I begin by examining how the program constructs cultural competency through institutional texts. I then describe how instructors enact those texts, how students navigate tensions between lived cultural knowledge and institutional expectations, and how the program applies competency standards unevenly. I conclude by explaining how I arrived at these interpretations developed through the analytic process.

Construction of Cultural Competency in Program Texts

This subtheme illustrates how institutional texts standardize learning by establishing expectations that students must interpret and navigate. Cultural competency is commonly defined as the ability to work effectively across cultural differences through the development of awareness, knowledge, and skills related to diversity and power (Hoffman & Verdooren, 2019). At the same time, critical scholarship has cautioned that institutions often reduce cultural competency to standardized components that prioritize assessment over relational engagement.

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Reading this literature alongside participants' stories helped me contextualize what they described.

When participants spoke about cultural competency, they often began by describing how early they recognized its presence across the program. As I listened to these accounts, I noticed how frequently participants referenced assignments, rubrics, and course expectations that required them to demonstrate cultural competency. This repetition led me to understand how the program constructs cultural competency through its texts as a measurable and assessable skill. What students described resonated with the idea of cultural competency as a symbolic gesture rather than a relational process.

As I analyzed participants' accounts, I began to see how racialized and minoritized students experienced cultural competency as ideologically weighted. Participants described drawing on their cultural repertoires and experiential knowledge in ways the program appeared to expect but did not always explicitly acknowledge. Cultural repertoires include traditions, values, practices, and ways of knowing shaped through lived sociocultural contexts (Hoffman & Verdooren, 2019). Existing scholarship, including Athabasca University alumnus Lee Smith's (2023) thesis work, has shown how institutions often position racialized and minoritized students as carriers of diversity-related labour. Reading participants' accounts alongside this literature led me to interpret their experiences as consistent with those findings.

Participant 3 described noticing cultural competency requirements in assignments and learning activities early in the program:

Almost every assignment needs a cultural competency component, and it feels like the university is just checking boxes. Counselling has historically been dominated by

the ethnic majority, and while the program is trying to be inclusive, focusing on competency this way doesn't always feel meaningful.

As they reflected on this pattern, they described it as procedural rather than meaningful.

Although they recognized the program's intention to address the historical dominance of the ethnic majority in counselling, they experienced the repeated emphasis on cultural competency as "checking boxes."

Participant 1 deepened my understanding of this pattern when they described counselling vignettes that appeared to include racialized and minoritized characters primarily to satisfy assignment expectations. They stated:

It does kind of come across as a performative piece of like, 'Oh, we have to do some vignettes. We better make sure that there's some racialized people in there.' ... It feels like that pendulum swing of 'let's make sure we do this' until it becomes normal and it's just there.

As I listened, I pictured assignments accumulating across semesters, each one requiring students to name or perform cultural knowledge in similar ways. I read these accounts alongside Ahmed's (2012) work on performativity, which helped me interpret these moments as institutional gestures toward equity that did not always foster deeper engagement with power or relationality.

I do not interpret these experiences as evidence of malicious intent. Instead, I understood participants' frustration and fatigue as responses to emotional labour that emerged as they worked to balance authenticity with institutional expectations. These experiences shaped how students engaged with assignments and how they understood their place within the program.

Instructor Enactment of Cultural Competency Through Ruling Texts

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As participants continued their stories, they often shifted from describing assignments to discussing grading and evaluation. Instructors entered these narratives not only as individuals, but as representatives of institutional authority. As I listened to these accounts, I began to understand these interactions as shaped by institutional texts and expectations rather than as neutral exchanges.

Participant 3 described writing assignments with the rubric in mind and treating cultural competency as a checklist item:

I know through assignments there's a cultural competence component added to the rubric. But I think it's just chasing after that checklist. Like, 'Oh, did I include something about cultural differences in this part of my essay?'

They explained that they focused on whether they had included references to cultural differences in the appropriate sections of their work. As I reflected on this account, I recognized how rubric-driven assessment encouraged compliance-oriented writing practices that prioritized meeting institutional criteria over expressing relational or experiential understandings.

Participant 4 expanded on this point by questioning whose knowledge informed the assignment guidelines:

Everything is sort of structured here and it's like everything has been put in a certain way that everybody must follow. If you want to do well, follow this guideline. So, then you can ask the question, okay—whose guidelines are they really? Who are they targeting themselves to? Have they considered the different dynamics, the different races, the different cultures that are coming together to write this?

I interpreted their account as questioning whether those who designed assignments had considered the diverse cultural, racial, and epistemological positions of the students completing

them. Their reflection helped me see how institutional texts can privilege dominant ways of knowing while limiting space for alternative epistemologies.

Participant 6 added an emotional dimension to this analysis. They described choosing not to challenge a grade they experienced as unfair because they just wanted to pass the class:

For me it was like, ‘You know what? I just want to pass the class,’ which is kind of leaving the part of myself that felt unfairness...even if I didn’t deal with it, I just told myself, ‘You passed the class, right? It doesn’t matter if it wasn’t the perfect grade.

As I listened, I recognized how this decision reflected an internal negotiation between self-advocacy and academic survival. This account helped me understand how institutional authority shapes not only what students produce academically but also how they learn to position themselves within the program.

Through an IE lens, I interpreted these moments as examples of how ruling texts become active in everyday pedagogical interactions (Smith, 2005). I do not attribute these dynamics to individual instructor intent. Instead, I focus on how institutional texts coordinate action in ways that organize students’ intellectual and emotional labour.

Navigating Tensions Between Lived Knowledge and Institutional Structure

Participants’ stories made the tension between lived cultural knowledge and institutional expectations especially visible when they described attempts to incorporate authentic cultural practices into their coursework. These moments stood out to me as points where institutional structures appeared less flexible.

Participant 2 described developing a group therapy plan grounded in Indigenous teachings that emphasized relationality, circularity, and interconnectedness:

It was the worst mark that I ever got. It's hard to structure Indigenous teachings because everything overlaps. It was really hard to fit an Indigenous way of sharing and presenting into that really structured western format. I just felt like there's so much depth, and you could continue to go on about all of the different sections. I guess it was kind of good for me to outline exactly what I'd be saying, but it took away from the natural flow and some of the heart.

As I listened to this account, I noticed how the participant directed their frustration not only inward, but toward the assignment structure itself. This moment prompted me to question, alongside the participant, whether the program, in its current version and context, could accommodate Indigenous ways of knowing that resist standardization. I ground this interpretation in this participant's experience and in similar reflections shared by other participants, rather than presenting it as a definitive conclusion about the program.

Uneven Application of Cultural Competency Standards

Participant 3 posed a question that marked a shift in the narratives I heard. They asked: "Who determines whether the instructor is culturally competent? Yet they're grading on this culturally competent rubric... How are they able to assess my cultural competency?" As I reflected on this question, I recognized how this participant moved beyond describing personal experiences to identifying a structural imbalance. Through an IE lens, I interpreted this concern as highlighting how the program distributed cultural competency expectations unevenly across roles. Students needed to demonstrate cultural competency, while the program did not require instructors to meet equivalent evaluative standards. I ground this interpretation in participant accounts and in IE's attention to ruling relations, which explains how institutional texts govern some roles more rigorously than others.

Critiques of Competency Language

Participants also engaged critically with the language of cultural competency itself. Participant 2 reflected that the term “competency” implied a measurable endpoint, suggesting that individuals could master cultural knowledge rather than ongoing relational responsibility:

Cultural competency makes it sound like there’s a measure, and once you’re there you don’t need to go any further. I think cultural safety is a better term because it’s defined by the people we’re providing service for.

They contrasted this framing with cultural safety, which they understood as relational and defined by those receiving mental health and counselling services. As I considered this critique, I recognized how closely it aligned with literature on cultural safety, which emphasizes that safety cannot be determined solely through practitioner skill acquisition but must be assessed by clients and communities (Brascoupé & Waters, 2009; Curtis et al., 2019). Participants’ reflections reinforced my interpretation that cultural knowledge is ongoing, contextual, and relational, and that competency-based frameworks can obscure this complexity. Their stories helped me move beyond describing the program’s expectations to questioning the ideological assumptions built into its language.

Analytic Process

I developed the interpretations in this theme through repeated cycles of listening to interviews, reading transcripts, writing analytic memos, and returning to participants’ stories. I did not begin this analysis with a fixed argument about cultural competency. Instead, I followed moments of hesitation, frustration, humour, and emotional weight as participants shared their experiences. As patterns emerged, I returned to IE and relevant literature to understand how institutional texts and practices coordinated these experiences (Smith, 2005). The narrative

structure of this theme reflects the process of uncovering that occurred in the analytic process. Through this approach, I came to understand cultural competency not simply as a program requirement but as an institutionalized authority that shaped how participants navigated their academic work, their relationships with faculty, and their sense of belonging within the MC program.

Theme 2: The Invisible Work of Racialized and Minoritized Students

Theme 1 examined how cultural competency operated as an institutionalized authority, coordinated through program texts, assessment practices, and instructor enactment. Participants' stories revealed how expectations for cultural competency shaped what counted as legitimate knowledge and how students learned to position themselves within institutional structures. As I analyzed these accounts, I became aware that the authority of cultural competency did not operate alone. Instead, it relied on students' ongoing participation, interpretation, and labour to remain functional within everyday classroom interactions.

This realization led me to focus more closely on what participants were doing in response to these expectations. While Theme 1 focused on how cultural competency was constructed and enforced, participants' narratives also pointed to the often-unrecognized work required to sustain those constructions in practice. In the next theme, I turn my attention to this labour, examining how racialized and minoritized students described educating peers, advocating for social justice, and navigating everyday racism within the program. Theme 2 builds on the analysis of institutional authority by foregrounding how students' agency became central to enacting the very equity commitments the program promoted.

As I continued my analysis, I noticed a second pattern that emerged across participants' stories. Racialized and minoritized students repeatedly described performing forms of labour that

the program did not formally recognize, but that appeared essential to sustaining discussions of cultural competency and social justice. Participants spoke about this work as ongoing and often exhausting, taking place both inside and outside of the virtual classroom. Listening across interviews, I began to understand this labour as invisible work that the program implicitly relied on but rarely named.

From an IE perspective, I interpreted this invisible work as evidence of how ruling relations depend on students' agency to uphold institutional commitments to equity (Ahmed, 2012; Smith, 2005). Although institutional texts and procedures outlined expectations for cultural competency, participants' stories suggested that racialized and minoritized students often carried the responsibility for enacting those expectations in practice. In this theme, I examine how participants described educating peers, advocating for social justice, and navigating everyday racism, and how this labour shaped their emotional and academic experiences within the MC program.

Educating Peers and Cultural Sharing

Participants frequently described situations in which peers implicitly expected them to act as cultural informants or educators. As I listened to these accounts, I noticed how institutional expectations appeared to rely on racialized and minoritized students' cultural repertoires and experiential knowledge to fill gaps in peer learning, often without formal acknowledgment or support. Participants described explaining cultural practices, responding to questions about identity, and offering context during discussions or group work. While some participants expressed pride in sharing their knowledge, others described this role as burdensome.

Participant 2 described how this dynamic emerged even during routine course introductions:

It'll often come up at the beginning of courses where you do a self-introduction. I find that often, when I'll share a part of myself, it feels like there's a need to then take on educating some of my peers. I'll post my introduction and then sometimes there will be questions about it where I'm like, 'you could just Google this.' I understand you ask questions, but I guess parts of my identity, like my religion, I don't feel like I want to go and type a Wikipedia page up for them. But it also feels rude to be like, 'Maybe you can look it up.' I think when navigating coursework with peers who are not people of colour, especially if there is culturally sensitive material, sometimes there is a bit of tension navigating that. Being met with ignorance sometimes from my peers and then having to fill them in.

They explained that when they shared aspects of their identity, peers often responded with questions that positioned them as responsible for further explanation. They described feeling caught between wanting to remain polite and not wanting to educate peers on information they felt was readily available elsewhere. As I listened, I heard how this expectation created tension, particularly when peers approached culturally sensitive material with what Participant 2 described as "ignorance." Their account helped me see how even seemingly benign classroom practices could create emotional labour for racialized and minoritized students.

Participant 6 reflected on the limits of this work, noting that their willingness to educate peers shifted depending on context and capacity:

There's definitely times where I'm okay with doing that education, but there's definitely times where I'm like, 'Actually, I don't want to, go do it somewhere else.'

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They described moments when they felt open to sharing and other moments when they felt exhausted and resistant to taking on that role. Their account highlighted how this labour required constant self-assessment and boundary setting.

Other participants described motivations rooted in family teachings and community responsibility. Participant 4 shared how their Elders taught them to take pride in their cultural identity and to carry forward teachings connected to advocacy and cultural memory. As I listened, I understood how their participation in the program connected to a sense of responsibility to their community rather than to institutional expectations alone.

Participant 3 described intentionally bringing their lived experiences with racism into their coursework so that peers might learn from them:

I try to put my experiences in writing so that maybe somebody can learn from it.

Because I have had experiences with racism, even when I was younger, and I try to bring those experiences to light and how I dealt with it.

As I listened, I interpreted Participant 3's sharing as purposeful and grounded in a desire to raise awareness. At the same time, their account illustrated how this educational labour often occurred without recognition or relief from its emotional cost.

Reading these accounts together, I came to understand how racialized and minoritized students became positioned as cultural educators within the program. From an IE perspective, this positioning reflects how ruling relations draw on students' agency to sustain the program's discourse of cultural competency without explicitly assigning responsibility to the institution. This invisible work required sustained mental and emotional effort and often involved navigating obligation, restraint, and self-surveillance.

Advocating for Social Justice and Racialized and Minoritized Experiences

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Beyond educating peers, participants also described feeling responsible for advocating for social justice and addressing issues of equity and inclusion within the program. As I listened to these stories, I noticed how participants described stepping into advocacy roles even when peers disengaged or remained silent. This advocacy included raising concerns during discussions, seeking out additional research, and naming gaps in how courses addressed diversity.

Participant 4 described feeling obligated to do extra work and consistently bring attention to social justice considerations:

I felt the obligation to do that extra research and always be that person looking at the social justice piece...trying to protect myself while also sharing. Trying to find that balance...I was frustrated that it wasn't really considered by more of my classmates. They spoke about the challenge of protecting themselves emotionally while also sharing their perspectives. Their frustration emerged as they reflected on how few classmates appeared to take on similar responsibility. As I listened, I understood this experience as both an act of agency and a source of emotional strain.

Through an IE lens, I interpreted these accounts as illustrating how the program delegated responsibility for equity to students rather than embedding it structurally. Participants' advocacy work reflected how ruling relations rely on the unpaid and often unacknowledged labour of racialized and minoritized students to enact institutional priorities. Over time, this continuous work contributed to fatigue, stress, and a sense of over-responsibility that shaped participants' overall experiences in the program.

Everyday Racism and Microinvalidations

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Although participants did not describe overt acts of racism within the program, they spoke about more subtle experiences of exclusion, ignorance, and dismissal. Many participants described these encounters as microinvalidations, which Sue et al. (2007) define as remarks or actions that negate or dismiss the lived experiences of marginalized groups. As I listened to these accounts, I came to understand how these moments accumulated over time, even when participants framed the program environment as generally supportive.

Participant 1 reflected that while they did not experience overt racism, they noticed patterns of unconscious bias and a tendency to frame marginalized communities through deficit or victimization lenses:

I can say there were no overt expressions of racism in any way that I experienced. I think it goes back to what we were saying earlier about microaggressions or unconscious bias that happens. Instead of focusing on a strengths-based approach, it comes across more from a victimization approach. I think focusing more on the strengths of marginalized communities or learning about counsellors and research from marginalized backgrounds could be more beneficial.

They expressed a desire for the program to emphasize strengths-based perspectives and to engage more deeply with scholarship produced by marginalized researchers. Their account helped me see how curricular choices shape whose knowledge becomes visible and valued.

Participant 3 described experiencing peer naivety rather than hostility:

During my courses, my peers have been supportive, and I haven't had a sense of anyone attacking me racially...but I've had a sense of naivety or maybe ignorance. I tried to comment in a respectful way to make them aware of what was happening and what they were doing.

They emphasized that classmates generally acted supportively, yet they still encountered moments of ignorance that required correction. They described responding carefully and respectfully in these situations, often taking on the work of raising awareness. As I listened, I noticed how this approach required emotional regulation and strategic communication.

From an IE perspective, I interpreted these microinvalidations as examples of structural invisibility (Herzog, 2018). Institutional expectations promoted equity at a formal level, but they did not always account for the everyday realities of racialized and minoritized students' experiences. These subtle encounters required ongoing interpretive and emotional labour from participants, further contributing to the invisible work they carried.

Summary of Theme 2

As I analyzed these accounts, I came to understand how the persistent and largely unacknowledged labour of racialized and minoritized students sustained cultural competency and advanced social justice conversations within the MC program. Although institutional texts and structures assumed alignment with equity standards, participants' stories suggested that the program often relied on students to carry much of the responsibility for enacting those values in practice. This theme highlights a tension between student agency and institutional accountability. Racialized and minoritized students contributed time, emotional energy, and cultural knowledge to uphold the very practices of equity and cultural competency that the program claimed to promote. At the same time, participants described developing personal strategies to navigate, manage, and at times resist these demands. While this invisible work reveals how responsibility remains unevenly distributed, it also illustrates students' resilience and intentional engagement with the program. In the following theme, I examine how these acts of agency and resistance

unfold within the online learning environment, which both constrains and enables students' participation and identity expression.

Theme 3: Navigating the Online Learning Environment

In Theme 2, I highlighted the invisible work that racialized and minoritized students performed to uphold cultural competency and social justice conversations within the MC program. Participants described emotional, mental, and relational labour that extended beyond formal academic expectations and often went unrecognized. As I reflected on these accounts, I noticed that much of this labour unfolded within specific institutional conditions that shaped how students could participate, connect, and protect themselves.

This observation prompted me to consider the role of the online learning environment more directly. Participants' stories suggested that the format of the program did not simply provide a neutral backdrop for this labour. Instead, it actively organized how invisible work was carried out, constrained, or resisted. In the following theme, I examine how the online learning environment coordinated visibility, identity expression, and belonging, and how students navigated these conditions through everyday acts of agency and resistance.

As I continued my analysis, I noticed a third pattern that emerged across participants' accounts. Participants repeatedly described the online format of the MC program as shaping how they participated in learning, expressed identity, and formed relationships with peers. Listening across interviews, I began to understand the online learning environment as both enabling and constraining. While the format offered flexibility and protection from exposing aspects of one's racialized and minoritized identity, it also appeared to limit opportunities for connection, recognition, and belonging with other racialized and minoritized students.

From an IE perspective, I interpreted the online learning platform as a coordinating device that organized students' everyday actions, including how and when they spoke, what they shared, and how visible they became to others (Smith, 2005). Rather than viewing these experiences as individual preferences, I came to understand them as shaped by institutional texts, technological structures, and expectations embedded in online learning. In this theme, I examine how participants navigated identity expression, visibility, and belonging within the online classroom, and how they exercised agency through everyday acts of negotiation and resistance.

The Online Classroom and Identity Expression

Participants frequently described how course learning activities, such as written introductions and discussion posts, shaped the way identity could be expressed online. As I listened to these accounts, I noticed how participants described feeling pressured to condense complex personal and cultural experiences into brief, highly visible written responses. I began to understand this as a form of identity flattening (Walker & DeVito, 2020), where the structure of online participation limited nuance and relational context relating to the expression of identity.

Participant 1's reflection illustrates this experience:

You have to tell your story a lot quicker. There's no easing into it. There's no time to spend to get comfortable with people before you open up a lot of things. You just have to be comfortable with being able to share or talk about your experience right away. In other settings, you wouldn't just log on and then write a 200-word piece about your racialized experience then log off right away.

As I listened, I interpreted Participant 1's discomfort as emerging from the way online course design organized disclosure rather than from reluctance to participate. From an IE perspective, introductory posts and discussion prompts functioned as ruling texts that coordinated how

students were expected to present themselves early in the program. These texts positioned identity as something to be quickly shared, often before trust or a sense of relational safety had been established.

Participants also described how anonymity within the online classroom shaped identity expression. Some noted that reduced visual presence limited exposure to racism or microaggressions. At the same time, I heard how this anonymity constrained recognition and solidarity among racialized and minoritized peers. Reading these accounts together, I came to understand visibility as unevenly distributed and institutionally organized, shaping which identities became clear and which remained flattened.

Flexibility, Isolation, and Belonging

While participants described challenges in forming relationships, they also emphasized the benefits of the online format, particularly flexibility and control over their visibility. As I listened to these accounts, I noticed a recurring tension between autonomy and isolation. The same structures that allowed students to manage their participation also limited informal interactions that often support belonging. Participant 2's reflection captures this tension:

I don't have my picture on my class profile. I only see people when I know I have to attend a joint meeting...I kind of like that. I don't want people to constantly see me. Obviously, they can generally tell by just my name that I belong to a different culture. Whereas in person, I went to a university that was predominantly white, and sometimes I'd be the only person of colour in a class. I guess it was more of just a feeling of not belonging in those spaces, which has been nice to not experience here.

As I listened, I interpreted Participant 2's account as an intentional response to past experiences of exclusion rather than disengagement. From an IE lens, the online learning

environment reorganized racial visibility in ways that allowed students greater control over how they were seen. At the same time, this reduced visibility limited opportunities for spontaneous connection and shared identity-building. I began to understand this navigation as a form of emotional and mental labour, where students continuously assessed how much of themselves to reveal in institutional spaces. Importantly, participants did not frame this navigation as purely negative. Instead, they described making intentional choices that supported their well-being. This balance between protection and participation highlighted how students exercised agency while remaining constrained by the limits of the online learning environment.

Acts of Agency and Resistance in Online Participation

As I continued analyzing participants' narratives, I became attentive to the ways students resisted institutional expectations around constant engagement and disclosure. Participants described everyday strategies for protecting themselves emotionally and culturally while navigating their academic experiences.

Participant 2's brief statement illustrates this form of resistance through selective engagement. In describing their approach to course participation, particularly in relation to asynchronous discussion forum requirements that emphasized regular logins, timely responses, and visible engagement with peers, they remarked, "I'll just close my laptop." Participant 2's brief statement illustrates this form of resistance through selective engagement. This comment emerged in relation to asynchronous discussion forum requirements that emphasized ongoing engagement, such as frequent logins, timely responses, and sustained interaction with peers despite the absence of a fixed class schedule. I interpreted this action as an intentional withdrawal that disrupted expectations of continuous availability and self-directed participation. From an IE perspective, such moments represent everyday resistance, where students interrupt

coordinated institutional practices, in this case, the expectation of perpetual engagement in an unscheduled learning environment, without explicitly framing their actions as oppositional (Smith, 2005).

Participant 1 further reflected on the internal negotiation involved in participation: discussion forums:

How do I bring up certain things without being seen as self-victimizing or bringing awareness only to the marginalization aspect of it? I think about how to approach certain topics when discussions bring up my experience, but at the same time, I don't want it to seem like my only focus is my marginalized background. I want to be able to share in ways that aren't seen by others as repetitive. So, it's still kind of catering to the needs of others and thinking, 'When am I taking up too much space here?' and just being aware.

As I reflected on their question, I came to understand it as evidence of ongoing self-surveillance shaped by institutional discourses of professionalism, neutrality, and appropriate participation. Drawing on hooks (1994) and Giroux (2001), I interpreted these negotiations as situations where students balanced contribution with self-protection. Rather than disengaging, participants carefully adjusted their participation by considering audience, risk, and potential consequences. These acts of agency did not eliminate constraint, but they allowed students to maintain a sense of control and integrity within institutional limits. I understood these strategies as extensions of the invisible work described in Theme 2, now unfolding within the specific conditions of online learning.

Summary of Theme 3

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As I analyzed participants' accounts, I came to understand the online learning environment as simultaneously enabling and constraining racialized and minoritized students' experiences of learning, identity expression, and belonging. While reduced visibility offered relief from overt racism and hypervisibility, it also limited opportunities for recognition, solidarity, and relational connection with other racialized and minoritized students. From an IE perspective, participation and visibility were coordinated through institutional texts and technological structures rather than determined solely by individual choice.

In response, students developed strategies of negotiation and resistance, including selective disclosure, intentional engagement, and the protection of cultural knowledge. These strategies required ongoing emotional and mental labour and reflected students' active engagement with the program, rather than withdrawal from it. This theme highlights how online learning environments can reproduce systemic inequities even as they offer flexibility and access. At the same time, participants' stories reveal how racialized and minoritized students exercised agency and intentionality in navigating these spaces. Together with Theme 2, these findings illustrate how students continually negotiated institutional demands while working to preserve their identities, well-being, and commitments to community.

Chapter Conclusion: Integrating the Three Themes

Across the three themes, I offered an interpretive analysis of how racialized and minoritized students experienced and navigated the MC program. These findings are grounded in participants' accounts, informed by institutional ethnography, critical race, and decolonizing scholarship, and specific to this program and context. They are not intended as universal claims about counsellor education or online learning more broadly. Overall, the themes illustrate how institutional priorities around cultural competency were enacted, sustained, and negotiated

through students' everyday experiences. Theme 1 demonstrated how cultural competency functioned as an institutionalized authority, coordinated through texts, assessments, and instructor practices that shaped what knowledge was valued and how students learned to perform legitimacy. Theme 2 revealed how racialized and minoritized students carried significant invisible labour to uphold these institutional commitments, often educating peers, advocating for equity, and managing the emotional impact of everyday racism. Theme 3 extended this analysis by showing how the online learning environment organized these dynamics, simultaneously offering flexibility and protection while limiting connection, recognition, and belonging.

From an IE perspective, these themes highlight how ruling relations operate through seemingly routine practices, such as rubrics, discussion posts, and online participation requirements (Smith, 2005). Rather than attributing intent or blame to individuals, this analysis shows how institutional texts and structures coordinated students' actions and distributed responsibility unevenly. Racialized and minoritized students were not passive to these conditions. Across all three themes, participants demonstrated agency through intentional participation, selective disclosure, resistance, and ongoing meaning-making.

Throughout the analytic process, I remained attentive to moments of tension, hesitation, and emotional weight in participants' stories. These moments guided my interpretations and shaped how I connected individual experiences to broader institutional processes. By centring participants' voices while making my interpretive stance explicit, I aimed to show how institutional structures became visible through everyday experiences of learning, identity, and belonging. Together, these findings contribute to an understanding of how equity-oriented programs can simultaneously challenge and reproduce systemic inequities. They also point to the need for institutions to critically examine how responsibility for cultural competency, relational

learning, and emotional labour is distributed. In the final chapter, I build on these insights to discuss implications for counsellor education, online program design, and future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study by bringing participants' accounts into conversation with institutional ethnography (IE), critical race theory (CRT), and decolonizing scholarship. The interpretations presented here are grounded in participants' experiences within the Master of Counselling (MC) program offered by Athabasca University and are not intended as universal claims about counsellor education or online learning environments. Rather, I use these findings to examine how institutional priorities, texts, and structures coordinated racialized and minoritized students' everyday experiences of learning, participation, and belonging.

Across the three analysis themes, I came to understand cultural competency as operating not only as a pedagogical goal but as an institutionalized authority that organized how students were assessed, how knowledge was recognized, and how responsibility for equity was distributed. Participants' stories revealed how this authority depended on racialized and minoritized students' invisible work to remain functional in practice. At the same time, the online learning environment emerged as a key institutional factor that shaped how this labour was carried out, constrained, or resisted.

Guided by IE, I approach this discussion by tracing how ruling relations became visible through participants' everyday experiences rather than by evaluating individual intent or program effectiveness (Smith, 2005). This orientation allows me to shift the focus of the analysis from individual attitudes to institutional coordination. In doing so, I highlight how institutional texts, technological platforms, and assessment practices organized students' actions in ways that often-reproduced inequities, even within a program explicitly committed to cultural competency and social justice.

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I structure this chapter around three interrelated areas of discussion. First, I examine how competency-based frameworks can function as regulatory mechanisms that privilege standardized and dominant ways of knowing while marginalizing relational, community-based, and culturally grounded knowledge. Second, I discuss the implications of relying on racialized and minoritized students' invisible work to enact institutional commitments to equity and cultural responsiveness. Third, I consider how online learning environments reorganize visibility, participation, and belonging, creating both protective and isolating conditions for racialized and minoritized students. Throughout this chapter, I remain attentive to participants' agency and resistance. Rather than framing students' experiences through deficit or disengagement, I interpret their strategies of navigation, selective disclosure, and boundary-setting as responses to conditions within the institution. By centring these experiences, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about equity, accountability, and structural responsibility in counsellor education and online professional programs.

Two interrelated research questions guide this discussion:

1. How are racialized and minoritized students' experiences and invisible work organized and coordinated within graduate counselling psychology programs?
2. What institutional practices and policies contribute to these dynamics?

To address these questions, I approach them by tracing how participants' everyday experiences reveal institutional coordination. Consistent with IE, I examine how ruling relations become visible through students' actions, negotiations, and labour, rather than through formal policy statements alone (Smith, 2005).

Addressing Research Question 1

How are racialized and minoritized students' experiences and invisible work organized and coordinated within graduate counselling psychology programs?

The first research question examines how racialized and minoritized students' experiences and invisible work are organized and coordinated within the MC program. Drawing on participants' accounts, I interpret these experiences as shaped by institutional expectations surrounding cultural competency, classroom participation, and professional identity. Rather than viewing these dynamics as isolated interpersonal interactions, IE encourages attention to how everyday academic practices coordinate students' actions and responsibilities (Smith, 2005).

Across the three themes presented in the findings, participants described navigating expectations related to cultural competency, responding to peer interactions, and participating in online learning environments. Through these experiences, racialized and minoritized students frequently engaged in forms of labour that extended beyond formal coursework, including educating peers, managing microinvalidations, and deciding how and when to share personal experiences. I interpret these actions as forms of invisible work that became embedded within everyday participation in the program.

The following sections examine three ways these experiences were organized within the institutional context of the program: cultural competency as a regulatory framework, invisible work as a condition of participation, and the role of the online learning environment in shaping these dynamics.

Cultural Competency as a Regulatory Framework

Counselling education frames cultural competency as a professional and ethical commitment to understanding diversity, recognizing power and privilege, and developing the skills to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds. Within the MC program,

cultural competency appeared prominently in course materials, learning outcomes, and classroom discussions. Participants frequently described engaging with concepts related to cultural awareness, reflexivity, and social justice as part of their coursework. Through an IE lens, I interpreted cultural competency as a regulatory framework that organized how students learned to demonstrated legitimacy within the program.

Rather than existing solely as a set of values or learning objectives, cultural competency seemed to operate through institutional practices that shaped how knowledge was evaluated and how students were expected to participate in academic work. Assignment guidelines, reflective exercises, and assessment rubrics appeared to coordinate expectations for how students should articulate their understanding of culture, identity, and positionality. These institutional texts and practices shaped how students performed cultural competency, requiring them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that aligned with professional counselling discourse. From my perspective as the researcher, these expectations suggest that cultural competency was not only a skill that students developed internally. It was a skill that must be demonstrated through recognizable academic practices.

Participants' experiences indicate that this process was not always straightforward. Several students described moments where their lived cultural knowledge did not easily align with the language or frameworks emphasized in course materials. In these instances, participants appeared to engage in a form of translation work, reframing personal experiences in ways that fit institutional expectations for academic reflection. I interpret this dynamic as illustrating how institutional frameworks can shape which forms of knowledge are recognized as legitimate within counselling education contexts. While cultural competency frameworks aim to broaden

awareness of diversity, they may simultaneously privilege particular ways of speaking about culture that are grounded in dominant academic and professional discourses (Curtis et al., 2019).

Participants' accounts align with CRT and decolonial critiques that institutions often regulate knowledge through standards that appear neutral while privileging dominant epistemologies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Although the MC program emphasizes cultural awareness and reflexivity, students sometimes experienced uncertainty about how their lived experiences would be interpreted or evaluated within the institutional framework of cultural competency. As a result, demonstrating competency appeared to involve not only reflecting on identity but also learning how to present those reflections in ways that aligned with institutional expectations.

From an IE perspective, this dynamic highlights how ruling relations operate through everyday academic practices. The texts that structured assignments and evaluations did not explicitly dictate how students should understand their cultural identities, yet they coordinated the forms of expression that appeared acceptable within the program. Cultural competency, therefore appears to function as both an educational aspiration and an institutional mechanism that shaped how knowledge circulated within the learning environment.

Importantly, participants were not passive within this process. Students described making deliberate decisions about how to frame their experiences, how much personal disclosure felt appropriate, and how to balance authenticity with perceived academic expectations. These strategies suggest that students were actively navigating the institutional terrain of cultural competency rather than simply internalizing its frameworks. At the same time, the need to continually negotiate how their experiences were interpreted within the program illustrates how

cultural competency discourse can place additional interpretive labour on racialized and minoritized students.

Understanding cultural competency as a regulatory framework does not negate its importance within counselling education. Rather, it invites closer examination of how institutional practices shape the ways cultural knowledge is recognized, evaluated, and performed. Participants' experiences suggest that while cultural competency is intended to promote reflexivity and social justice awareness, its institutional implementation may also produce new forms of regulation that influence how students present their identities and experiences within counselling education contexts.

Invisible Work as a Condition of Participation

Building on the understanding of cultural competency as a regulatory framework, I interpret participants' experiences of invisible work as a key mechanism through which the program's equity and social justice commitments were enacted in practice. Students described educating peers, advocating for inclusion, and managing the emotional weight of microinvalidations, often without formal recognition or support. From my perspective as the researcher, these practices can be understood as coordinated forms of work within the everyday organization of academic participation. Rather than framing invisible work as voluntary or incidental, I interpret it as an integral component of sustaining cultural competency. This may reveal how institutional priorities operate through the interpretive and relational work of racialized and minoritized students.

Participants frequently assumed the role of informal educators within online classroom interactions. They described clarifying concepts of cultural awareness, correcting misconceptions, and initiating discussions about equity and inclusion. I interpret these actions as

forms of invisible work that sustain the program's stated commitments, despite the absence of formal expectations or accountability. From an IE perspective, this invisible work is coordinated through everyday participation. Students respond to the program's competency frameworks and course requirements while simultaneously enacting equity practices that are unrecognized in official texts or rubrics. Critical race and decolonial scholarship support this interpretation, emphasizing that racialized and minoritized students are often positioned as the informal carriers of institutional diversity and inclusion ideals, absorbing responsibilities that are structurally delegated to them (Ahmed, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Beyond educating peers, participants described managing emotional and cognitive labour that accompanied navigating microinvalidations, selective disclosure, and the evaluation of personal experiences. I interpret this work as an essential yet largely invisible aspect of participation, requiring students to anticipate and respond to relational expectations. From an IE perspective, these experiences illustrate how ruling relations shape the distribution of responsibility. The institution's texts and assessment structures coordinate engagement in ways that foreground certain forms of knowledge and leave racialized and minoritized students to negotiate the interpretive and emotional consequences. This labour appeared to not only be relational as students translated their lived experiences into forms recognized as legitimate by academic and professional standards.

Participants also exercised deliberate agency in managing how they engaged with the program. Some described selectively sharing personal experiences, strategically choosing when to intervene in discussions, or setting boundaries around emotionally draining participation. I interpret these strategies as forms of resistance and self-protection, illuminating how students navigate the institutional terrain of cultural competency while retaining control over their

visibility and labour. From a CRT and decolonial lens, these practices reflect the ongoing negotiation of structural inequities, where racialized and minoritized students must balance institutional expectations with personal and community well-being. Far from passively complying, participants actively shaped the conditions under which their invisible work occurred, asserting their autonomy within spaces where it is often unrecognized.

Overall, these forms of invisible work demonstrate how cultural competency frameworks rely on students' interpretive, relational, and emotional work to function in practice. From my perspective as a researcher, this invisible work reveals how institutional structures distribute responsibility unevenly, positioning racialized and minoritized students as central to the enactment of equity and social justice commitments. While participants exercised agency through selective engagement, boundary-setting, and strategic resistance, these dynamics also highlight the tension between the program's aspirational goals and the unacknowledged labour required to realize them. Understanding these practices as being coordinated highlights how institutional priorities, texts, and assessment frameworks shape the everyday experiences of learning, participation, and belonging.

The online learning environment further influenced how this invisible work was enacted, reorganizing visibility, participation, and relational work in ways that I explore in the following section. By tracing how students navigated these conditions, I aim to show how institutional frameworks and program design intersect with racialized and minoritized labour to shape experiences of academic legitimacy, inclusion, and professional identity.

Online Learning and the Reorganization of Invisible Work

Building on the previous discussion of cultural competency and invisible work, I interpret the online learning environment as a central factor shaping how students' invisible work was

enacted, negotiated, and experienced. Participants described both benefits and constraints of the online MC program. While online learning offered flexibility, protection from some forms of microaggressions, and the ability to manage disclosure strategically, it also reorganized participation, visibility, and relational engagement in ways that created new forms of invisible work. From my perspective as the researcher, the online environment functioned as a mediator, coordinating when, how, and to what extent students could engage, and influencing the interpretive and emotional work required to navigate the program.

Participants highlighted that asynchronous discussion forums and self-guided learning activities allowed them to manage their engagement, often enabling selective disclosure and boundary-setting. I interpret this as both a protective mechanism and a form of labour. Students continuously monitored how their contributions might be interpreted, balancing authenticity with institutional expectations for academic legitimacy. From an IE lens, the technological platform itself acts as a ruling text, coordinating participation and shaping which forms of knowledge and interaction are visible to instructors and peers. While students gained agency in managing their presence, this visibility was constrained by technological norms, deadlines, and learning expectations, creating additional interpretive and emotional work.

The online learning environment reshaped relational dynamics, requiring students to engage in new forms of emotional and cognitive labour. Participants described feeling responsible for supporting peers, clarifying misunderstandings, and managing cross-cultural dynamics through discussion boards or virtual meetings. I interpret these practices as an extension of the invisible work described in the previous section. While the online learning environment reduced some immediate interpersonal stressors, it introduced new temporal and relational demands, such as constant responsiveness, careful wording in written communication,

and attention to asynchronous cues. From a CRT perspective, these dynamics highlight how racialized and minoritized students continue to bear disproportionate responsibility for sustaining equity, even when physical presence and synchronous interaction are limited.

Participants noted that online learning allowed them to control the pace and exposure of their participation, which often reduced immediate threats of bias or marginalization. However, I interpret this flexibility as paradoxical. While it offered protection, it also reinforced isolation, limited opportunities for recognition, and constrained community-building. From a decolonial perspective, these conditions demonstrate how institutional structures can simultaneously provide agency and reproduce inequities. The same design features that protect students also obscure labour, reduce visibility, and limit relational affirmation. In this sense, the online environment reorganizes, rather than eliminates, the invisible work that racialized and minoritized students undertake.

Overall, these experiences suggest that online learning is not a neutral context but a coordinator of labour, participation, and visibility. I interpret students' strategies of selective engagement, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation as responses to technological and pedagogical structures that mediate access, recognition, and relational work. From an IE standpoint, online platforms and program design become texts through which ruling relations operate, influencing what forms of labour are visible, valued, and supported. The reorganization of invisible work in online contexts highlights the need to consider how program design intersects with equity commitments and the everyday experiences of racialized and minoritized students, highlighting both the opportunities and limitations inherent in online education.

Addressing Research Question 2

What institutional practices and policies contribute to these dynamics?

The second research question examines the institutional practices and policies that contribute to the dynamics described in participants' experiences. While students' accounts focused primarily on everyday classroom interactions, IE encourages tracing these experiences outward to the texts, practices, and policy environments that coordinate academic life (Smith, 2005). In interpreting participants' narratives, I came to understand these dynamics as shaped by several institutional means. Assessment structures, assignment guidelines, and competency frameworks appeared to function as ruling texts that organized expectations for how students should demonstrate cultural competency and professional knowledge. At the same time, classroom interactions often positioned racialized and minoritized students as responsible for sustaining equity-oriented conversations, suggesting that responsibility for cultural competency was informally delegated within the learning environment.

Participants' experiences also unfolded within a broader provincial context in which equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives in Alberta post-secondary institutions are undergoing shifts in language, structure, and resourcing. While participants did not explicitly reference these policy changes, interpreting their experiences alongside this context highlights how institutional priorities can shape the visibility and distribution of equity work within academic programs.

The following sections examine three institutional dimensions that contribute to these dynamics: ruling texts and assessment practices, the delegation of equity work within classroom interactions, and broader shifts in EDI frameworks in Alberta's post-secondary context.

Ruling Texts and the Coordination of Assessment Practices

Assessment criteria, rubrics, assignment templates, and learning outcomes emerged as key instruments through which institutional authority was enacted. I interpret these texts as

coordinating students' actions, shaping how cultural competency was demonstrated and how knowledge was legitimized within the program. While the texts did not explicitly dictate students' cultural identities or experiences, they organized the forms of reflection, expression, and engagement that were recognized as acceptable. From an IE perspective, these texts function as ruling mechanisms, embedding institutional priorities into routine academic practices and distributing responsibility for demonstrating competency in ways that are observable and assessable. Participants' navigation of these texts, including translating personal experiences into institutional language, illustrates how assessment structures simultaneously regulate academic performance and generate interpretive work for students, particularly racialized and minoritized students whose knowledge and experiences may not align neatly with dominant academic discourses.

Institutional Delegation of Equity Work

Participants' experiences also suggest that responsibility for equity and inclusion was often delegated to students in informal ways. I interpret the expectation that racialized and minoritized students educate peers, advocate for inclusive practices, and manage relational and emotional dynamics as a form of institutional delegation, where labour associated with social justice is coordinated but not formally recognized. This delegation is reinforced through institutional silence, which may indicate a lack of formal accountability structures or recognition mechanisms for equity work, which appears to sustain uneven distributions of responsibility. From a CRT perspective, this dynamic demonstrates how racialized and minoritized students are positioned as cultural advisors and equity workers, shouldering work that the institution appears to promote but may not structurally support. By tracing these practices through participants'

everyday experiences, I make visible how informal coordination functions as a mechanism of institutional power.

Shifting EDI Frameworks in Alberta Post-Secondary Contexts

In discussing the institutional practices that shape racialized and minoritized students' experiences, it is important to situate this study within the broader post-secondary policy context in Alberta. Although this research focuses on one Alberta-based MC program, provincial funding priorities, governance structures, and shifting approaches to EDI shape the institutional conditions in which the program operates. In recent years, institutions have rebranded or restructured EDI offices, replacing explicit equity language with broader terms such as *access*, *community*, and *belonging* (University of Alberta, 2024). While these changes are often presented as efforts to foster inclusivity, critics argue that such rebranding may dilute accountability for addressing systemic inequities.

From an IE perspective, these policy shifts are not merely symbolic. They coordinate responsibility and legitimize equity work within institutional hierarchies while intersecting with ongoing funding pressures and obligations that constrain staffing, program priorities, and student support. Reading participants' accounts alongside this context, I interpret the invisible work described in themes 1 and 2 as occurring within a landscape of diminished structural clarity around equity responsibility, where sustaining cultural competency and social justice often shifts informally onto students and individual instructors. From this lens, these provincial and institutional shifts operate as ruling relations at a distance, shaping program design, assessment practices, and pedagogical norms, even when not explicitly referenced in classroom interactions. Situating participants' invisible work within Alberta's evolving EDI landscape allows me to

interpret their actions not as isolated responses, but as coordinated within institutional conditions that increasingly emphasize individual responsibility over structural accountability.

Integration and Implications

Overall, these institutional practices and policy contexts illustrate how the MC program's aspirations for cultural competency and equity were actively coordinated through texts, assessment structures, and broader governance frameworks. From my perspective as a researcher, understanding these practices and policies clarifies how responsibility for implementing equity is distributed unevenly, often relying on the labour of racialized and minoritized students while formal recognition and support remain limited. These insights extend the analysis of my first research question by showing that students' experiences and invisible work are not only shaped by program culture or peer interactions but are embedded within coordinated institutional systems that operate both locally and at a broader policy level. By tracing these relations, I make visible the systemic conditions that organize students' participation, emotional and cognitive labour, and navigation of cultural competency expectations.

Integrating Agency, Resistance, and Constraint

Across the three themes I examined in response to Research Question 1 and the institutional practices I investigated in Research Question 2, I interpret participants' experiences as reflecting a constant negotiation between agency and constraint. While institutional texts, assessment frameworks, and program design coordinate students' participation and invisible work, participants actively shaped how these structures affected them, employing strategies of selective engagement, boundary-setting, and interpretive work. From my perspective as the researcher, this highlights that students are not passive recipients of institutional expectations.

Rather, they are meaning-makers and navigators, constantly interpreting and responding to the conditions under which their labour, knowledge, and identities are evaluated.

Participants' engagement with cultural competency demonstrates this dynamic. On one hand, competency frameworks organize what counts as legitimate knowledge, coordinate academic participation, and produce expectations for demonstrating awareness and professional identity. On the other hand, students exercised agency by translating their lived experiences into institutional language, deciding how much personal disclosure to offer, and negotiating the boundaries of their emotional and cognitive labour. I interpret these strategies as forms of resistance and self-determination, allowing students to preserve their autonomy even within regulatory structures that may privilege dominant ways of knowing.

The invisible work performed by racialized and minoritized students further demonstrates the interaction between constraint and agency. Educating peers, advocating for inclusion, and managing relational and emotional dynamics were coordinated through everyday academic interactions and online participation norms, yet participants made deliberate choices about how, when, and to what extent to engage. From an IE perspective, these actions reveal that invisible work is simultaneously shaped by ruling relations and actively navigated by students. Critical race and decolonial scholarship help illuminate this tension by highlighting how racialized and minoritized individuals often assume disproportionate responsibility for sustaining equity initiatives while exercising forms of resistance that challenge structural inequities (Ahmed, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

The online learning environment demonstrates how institutional structures reorganize both constraints and opportunities for agency. Asynchronous platforms, participation expectations, and online visibility norms allowed students to manage disclosure, protect

themselves from bias, and strategically navigate relational work. At the same time, these same structures imposed new forms of interpretive and emotional labour, required careful monitoring of visibility, and limited community-building. I interpret these dynamics as demonstrating that agency is always relational and contextually mediated. Students' ability to resist, set boundaries, and assert authority depends on how institutional structures shape the conditions of participation.

Overall, this discussion shows that racialized and minoritized students' experiences of learning, labour, and identity formation are deeply intertwined with institutional coordination, yet are not determined solely by it. Agency, resistance, and constraint are equally important. Institutional structures create conditions that require interpretive and relational labour, while students actively navigate, negotiate, and sometimes subvert these conditions. From my perspective as a researcher, centring these experiences highlights the complex ways that equity commitments, program design, and pedagogical frameworks operate in practice. It also emphasizes the responsibility of institutions to recognize and redistribute the labour involved in enacting cultural competency, ensuring that equity initiatives do not rely disproportionately on the unacknowledged work of racialized and minoritized students.

Chapter Conclusion

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter highlight how racialized and minoritized students' experiences, labour, and agency are intricately coordinated through institutional structures, assessment practices, and online program design. From my perspective as the researcher, centring participants' voices reveals the complex interaction of constraint, resistance, and meaning-making that shapes everyday learning, participation, and identity formation within the MC program. By tracing these dynamics through an IE lens and situating them within critical race and decolonial scholarship, I have shown how equity-oriented frameworks, while

aspirational, are enacted unevenly, often relying on the interpretive, relational, and emotional labour of racialized and minoritized students. This discussion emphasizes the importance of understanding institutional texts, policies, and program design not as neutral frameworks for learning, but as coordinated means that structure opportunities, responsibilities, and recognition in ways that can both support and burden racialized and minoritized students.

The concluding chapter builds on these insights to articulate the strengths and contributions of this study, discuss implications for counselling education and online professional programs, and identify directions for future research, while maintaining attention to how institutional arrangements shape the distribution of labour and the conditions under which agency and resistance emerge.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Overview of the Study

In this study, I examined how racialized and minoritized graduate students' experiences and invisible work are organized and coordinated within the online Master of Counselling (MC) program at Athabasca University. Guided by institutional ethnography (IE), I traced how institutional texts, policies, and program structures shape student learning, participation, and professional identity formation while attending to how racialized and minoritized students navigate, negotiate, and sometimes resist these structures. I approached the inquiry from my standpoint as a racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate student of mixed Black, Indigenous, and settler ancestry, which allowed me to critically engage with participants' experiences and the institutional arrangements that shape them.

The following research questions guided my inquiry:

1. How are racialized and minoritized students' experiences and invisible work organized and coordinated within graduate counselling psychology programs?
2. What institutional practices and policies contribute to these dynamics?

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants who self-identified as racialized and/or minoritized and had completed at least one year in the program. In addition to racialized and minoritized identities, some participants held intersecting identities that have been systemically and historically excluded or marginalized, such as gender, sexuality, immigration status, language, ability, social class, and/or religion. These intersections allowed for a nuanced understanding of how multiple forms of marginalization shape student experiences.

I also conducted a text analysis of seven institutional documents, selected based on participants' narratives, to examine how admissions policies, the student handbook, and student support resources coordinate the expectations, responsibilities, and experiences of students. This dual focus on lived experiences and institutional texts allowed me to make visible the ruling relations that structure participation and equity in the MC program. By centring the standpoint of racialized and minoritized students in this study, I highlight how institutional aspirations for cultural competency, equity, and inclusion are enacted in practice, and how these processes can inadvertently place interpretive, relational, and emotional labour on students. Overall, in this study, I provide unique insights into the intersection of IE, online graduate counsellor education, and the experiences of systemically and historically excluded students, emphasizing the relational and structural conditions that shape learning, agency, and professional development.

Key Contributions

This study makes several key contributions to counsellor education, online professional programs, and institutional ethnography research. First, by centring the standpoint of racialized and minoritized students, I provide a perspective that is often overlooked in program evaluation and policy analysis. Focusing on the voices of those directly affected by institutional texts and practices allows for a deeper understanding of how equity, cultural competency, and social justice commitments are enacted and sometimes unevenly distributed in practice.

Second, I highlight the intersectional and diverse experiences of students, showing how multiple systemically and historically excluded identities shape the ways in which students navigate program expectations, participate in online learning environments, and engage with relational and professional development. This intersectional lens emphasizes the nuanced ways

that institutional coordination produces both opportunities and burdens for students with multifaceted social identities.

Third, by integrating institutional ethnography with the context of online counsellor education, I extend methodological and theoretical insights into how institutional texts, program structures, and technological platforms coordinate student experiences. The combination of in-depth interviews and text analysis demonstrates how invisible work, interpretive work, and relational navigation are embedded in everyday program practices, making visible the ruling relations that are often hidden in formal policies.

Finally, I contribute to critical conversations about equity and accountability in professional programs. By identifying how institutional aspirations for cultural competency and inclusion are operationalized in ways that inadvertently place additional labour on racialized and minoritized students, I offer actionable insights for program design, pedagogy, and policy reform. In doing so, I provide both theoretical and practical frameworks for understanding how agency, resistance, and structural coordination intersect in online graduate education.

Implications

Through the study findings, I demonstrate that institutional structures, texts, and program designs coordinate racialized and minoritized students' learning, participation, and professional identity in ways that can unintentionally rely on their interpretive, relational, and emotional labour. These insights suggest that programs and institutions must critically examine how curricular, pedagogical, and technological practices shape participation and the distribution of equity work.

Counselling Education

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In counselling education, cultural competency frameworks and curricular expectations can inadvertently require racialized and minoritized students to translate lived experiences into institutional language and navigate assessment structures that regulate knowledge and reflexivity. I recommend that programs embed reflexivity across the curriculum, critically examine how cultural competency is framed and assessed, and broaden the forms of knowledge that are recognized. Doing so can reduce reliance on students' emotional labour and clarify the distribution of responsibility for equity-related work. Programs can also identify where institutional texts and assessment practices unintentionally shift responsibility to students and take steps to redistribute this labour within the program's structures.

Online Program Design

In online program design, technological platforms and virtual learning environments reorganize participation, visibility, and relational dynamics. While online learning offers opportunities for selective engagement and self-protection, it also introduces new forms of interpretive and emotional work. I recommend that programs intentionally design online courses to nurture belonging, make relational and participation expectations explicit, and embed accountability mechanisms that ensure equity commitments are coordinated across instructors, courses, and institutional structures. These steps can reduce invisible work, make equity practices visible, and support meaningful engagement without overburdening students.

Institutional Practice

At the institutional level, policies, assessment structures, and program governance can inadvertently shift equity-related responsibilities onto students. I recommend that institutions critically examine how equity work is distributed across students, faculty, and administrative structures, formally recognize relational and emotional labour as part of institutional

responsibilities, and align policies and practices with stated equity goals. Such an approach ensures that cultural competency, social justice, and inclusion are operationalized in ways that do not disproportionately burden racialized and minoritized students, while embedding accountability and structural support within the institution. Overall, these implications highlight that institutional coordination is both relational and structural. Programs and institutions can act on these insights to redistribute responsibility, recognize previously invisible work, and nurture conditions in which all students can meaningfully participate, learn, and develop professional identities without bearing inequitable burdens.

Strengths of the Study

This study has several notable strengths. First, it centres the standpoint of racialized and minoritized students, the individuals most directly implicated in institutional practices, allowing their experiences, strategies, and perspectives to guide the analysis. Second, it captures a diversity of experiences, highlighting the intersectional identities of participants and the multiple ways in which institutional coordination shapes student learning, participation, and professional identity formation. Finally, the study integrates IE with the context of online learning, offering novel insights into how institutional texts, program structures, and technological platforms collectively coordinate student experiences, making visible the complex interplay between formal policies and everyday student labour.

Limitations

The study also has several limitations. The scope of data collection was intentionally narrowed to selected program and institutional texts, such as admissions policies, the student handbook, and student support resources, while other potentially relevant texts, such as financial aid or governance documents were not analyzed. Additionally, the focus on a single online

graduate counselling program in Canada may not reflect experiences in other institutions or program formats.

Although more historical and dominant ways of knowing and conducting research may consider this sample size a limitation, from a decolonizing and Indigenous research perspective, the focus on a small number of participants and deeply contextualized institutional texts can be seen as a strength, providing rich, nuanced insights into participants' lived experiences and the relational dynamics of institutional coordination (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008). By centring the standpoint of racialized and minoritized students and their interactions with specific institutional practices, this study privileges depth, context, and relational understanding over generalized claims.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could examine experiences of systemically and historically excluded students across multiple counselling programs, including both online and in-person formats, to explore how institutional coordination varies by context. Expanding the sample size and including additional institutional texts, such as governance, funding, and broader equity policies, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that shape students' invisible work. Longitudinal studies may also illuminate how students' engagement, agency, and navigation strategies evolve, particularly as online program design and institutional equity initiatives change.

Closing Reflection

In this study, I approached the research from my standpoint as a racialized and minoritized counselling psychology graduate student, which allowed me to engage critically with participants' experiences and the institutional structures that shape them. By centring their voices

and integrating IE, CRT, and decolonial frameworks, I highlighted the relational, interpretive, and emotional labour embedded in everyday program participation. This work demonstrates that while students exercise agency and resistance, institutional coordination significantly shapes the conditions under which learning, participation, and identity formation occur. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the responsibility of programs and institutions to recognize and redistribute labour, embed accountability, and align policies and practices with equity and social justice goals.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Cheyenne Johns, and I would like to talk to you about your experiences as a racialized student in the Master of Counselling program at Athabasca University. Specifically, I am interested in exploring “invisible work,” which refers to the unrecognized work that many racialized students may do in addition to program requirements such as coursework, assignments, practicum, and/or thesis. Invisible work may refer to the additional tasks, responsibilities, or emotional labour that racialized students experience that others might not recognize as part of their academic workload. I am also interested in what institutional practices and policies contribute to creating and maintaining this invisible work.

I recognize that sharing your experience may bring up a range of emotions, and some topics may feel difficult to discuss. Please know that you are in control of your participation. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to take a break, skip a question, or end the interview at any time. There are no right or wrong answers, and I encourage you to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable.

The interview will take approximately one to one and a half hours. I will be recording the interview so that I don’t miss any of your comments, and I will also be taking some notes during the interview.

Your responses will remain confidential, and all identifying information will be kept private.

Before we begin, do you have any questions about what I have just explained?

Do I have your consent to record now?

* * *

General Experiences

1. Tell me about your experience as a racialized student in the Master of Counselling program.
2. Did you encounter any challenges or obstacles in the program? If so, can you describe them?

Invisible Work

3. Can you describe any additional tasks or emotional labour you take on as a racialized student that may not be formally recognized as part of your academic workload?
4. Some examples might include educating others about race, social justice, diversity, or managing experiences of racism or microaggressions. Does anything come to mind from your own experience?
5. Tell me more about...

Institutional Practices and Policies

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6. How would you describe the support you've received from the university as a racialized student?
7. Can you share any examples of how university policies or practices (such as admissions, financial aid, curriculum design, or faculty interactions) have helped or hindered you as a racialized student?
8. To what extent does the program's curriculum or teaching methods address or incorporate issues related to race, identity, and social justice?

Community and Relationships

9. What have your relationships or interactions been like with faculty, instructors, administrative staff, and other students in the program?
10. In what ways, if any, does community, faculty, or peer support play a role in your experience as a racialized student?

Reflections and Suggestions for Change

11. Do you have any suggestions for improving the program for future racialized students? If so, what would they be?
12. Is there anything more you would like to add?

* * *

Closing

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me today. Your insights will help improve understanding of the challenges racialized students face in graduate counselling programs. If you have any final thoughts or anything else you'd like to add, please feel free to share.

I also recognize that discussing these topics may bring up a range of emotions. If you feel you need support, there are several resources available in Canada:

- **In the event of an emergency, call 911**
- **Canada Suicide & Prevention Hotline** (988) – Chat and Text service available 24/7 for anyone in distress or in need of immediate support.
- **Hope for Wellness Help Line** (1-855-242-3310) – Offers support to Indigenous people across Canada, available 24/7 by phone or online chat at www.hopeforwellness.ca.
- **Carepath** (1-855-491-5744) – Mental health services for Athabasca University students, available 7 a.m. – 11 p.m. (Eastern) by phone. Resources available 24/7 online at www.carepathdigitalhealth.ca.
- **Wellness Together Canada** (www.wellnesstogether.ca) – Provides free mental health and substance use support, including text and phone-based counselling.

If you would like help finding additional support resources, I would be happy to provide more information.

If you are interested, I would also be happy to share the findings of this study with you once my thesis is complete. Thank you again for your time and valuable contributions.

Interview guide. Adapted from “Qualitative interview questions: Guidance for novice researchers”, by R. Roberts, 2020. *The Qualitative Report*.

Appendix B: Letter of Information and Informed Consent Form

Letter of Information

Project Title: Racialized Students in Graduate Counselling Psychology: Invisible Work and Institutional Challenges

Research Institution: Athabasca University

Researcher:

Cheyenne Johns

Email: cjohns1@learn.athabascau.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Emily Doyle

Email: edoyle@athabascau.ca

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Racialized students in graduate counselling psychology: Invisible work and institutional challenges*. This form is part of the process of informed consent. The information presented should give you a basic idea of what this research is about and what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. It also describes your right to withdraw from the project. To decide whether you wish to participate in this research project, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits and what it requires of you to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully, as it is important that you understand the information given to you. Please contact the principal investigator, Cheyenne Johns, if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate.

It is entirely up to you whether you take part in this research. If you choose not to participate or if you decide to withdraw from the study once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you now or in the future.

Introduction

My name is Cheyenne Johns, and I am a Master of Counselling student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about racialized students' experiences of invisible work in the Athabasca University Master of Counselling program. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Emily Doyle.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research project?

You are being invited to participate in this project because you are a racialized student in the Master of Counselling program at Athabasca University and have completed at least one year of the program.

What is the purpose of this research project?

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This research aims to gain a thorough understanding of the experience of racialized graduate counselling psychology students, focusing on invisible work and its organization within the Master of Counselling program. In this research, invisible work refers to the unrecognized work that many racialized students may do in addition to program requirements such as coursework, assignments, practicum, and/or thesis. Invisible work may refer to the additional tasks, responsibilities, or emotional labour that racialized students experience that others might not recognize as part of their academic workload. This study aims to understand racialized students' lived experiences, explore program dynamics, and identify ways to better support racialized students.

What will you be asked to do?

If you choose to participate in this study, a one to one and a half-hour, video-based interview that will be recorded for transcription purposes will be scheduled between April 1, 2025, and May 1, 2025, at a time that is convenient to your schedule. You may choose to keep your camera off during the interview/recording to further protect your confidentiality. If you do not consent to video recording, alternative arrangements can be made, such as audio recording only or note-taking during the interview.

A second brief meeting will be scheduled once the interview has been transcribed for you to review the information to ensure the information you provided is accurate. During this time, there will be an opportunity to clarify your responses if necessary.

What are the risks and benefits?

Participation in this research may pose the possibility of some psychological or emotional distress. Throughout the interview, you will be closely monitored for any signs of emotional distress. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you will be encouraged to skip any questions or discontinue the interview altogether. You will also be reminded that you can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Additionally, you will be provided information on support resources, such as counselling services and mental health support, should you need further assistance following the interview. Benefits include improving the future education of counsellors to improve client outcomes. You will receive a \$20 Amazon.ca eGift Card following the interview to thank you for participating.

Do you have to take part in this project?

As stated earlier in this letter, involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You can stop participating at any time during the research study. If you choose to withdraw from the study before the interview is completed, you will not be awarded the \$20 Amazon.ca eGift Card and all data will be confidentially disposed of. If you decide to withdraw after the data has been transcribed and verified for accuracy you will receive the \$20 Amazon.ca eGift Card, but the data cannot be removed because the data will have been anonymized. Once the final data is collected, you may request the removal of your data up to one week after the final interview. After this period, the data will be integrated, and individual removal will no longer be possible.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure.

Your privacy and confidentiality will always be maintained and your participation in the study will remain confidential. Hard data, such as video recordings, will be kept secured, and all transcripts will be encrypted with password protection.

How will my anonymity be protected?

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

To maintain anonymity, data codes will be used instead of participant names, and no personal identifiers such as personal descriptions or demographic details will be included in the study. Direct quotes may be used in the study with your explicit permission, but any potentially identifying details within quotes will be removed or altered to protect your identity while maintaining the original meaning. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity, and you will not be identified in any publications without your explicit consent.

How will the data collected be stored and protected?

Video and audio recordings will be stored on Athabasca University's OneDrive, which complies with the university's data security protocols. Additionally, the data will be stored on the principal investigator's password-protected computer. All transcribed interviews will be encrypted and password protected. To ensure data security, a backup will be stored on a USB stick using AES-256 encryption, which will be secured with lock and key.

All data will be retained for five years following the completion of the Master of Counselling thesis, after which all digital files will be permanently deleted using secure data-wiping software, and any physical copies will be shredded.

Data codes will be used instead of participants' names to protect their privacy. No personal identifiers such as personal descriptions or demographic information will be included in this study.

Access to the data will be restricted to the principal investigator and her supervisor, Dr. Emily Doyle. The final report will be available to Athabasca University.

Who will receive the results of the research project?

There is no anticipated future secondary use of the data. Publication of findings from the final thesis in at least two peer-reviewed professional journals will be pursued. The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital

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Thesis and Project Room. Participants will be sent an electronic version of the final thesis upon request.

Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?

Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me, the principal investigator, by e-mail at cjohns1@learn.athabascau.ca or my supervisor at edoyle@athabascau.ca. If you are ready to participate in this project, please proceed to review the following consent.

Thank you,

Cheyenne Johns

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board has reviewed and approved this project. Should you have any comments or concerns regarding your treatment as a participant in this project, please contact the Research Ethics Office by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 780-213-2033.

Informed Consent

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research project.
- You have been able to ask questions about this project.
- You are satisfied with the answers to any questions you may have had.
- You understand what the research project is about and what you will be asked to do.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw your participation in the research project without giving a reason and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end your participation during data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be destroyed.
- You understand that once data is anonymized and the transcript is verified, data cannot be removed from the study.

	YES	NO
I agree to be video recorded.		
I agree to be audio recorded.		
I agree to the use of direct quotations.		
I am willing to be contacted following the interview to verify that my comments are accurately reflected in the transcript.		

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Your signature confirms:

- You have read what this research project is about and understood the risks and benefits. You have had time to think about participating in the project and had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered to your satisfaction.
- You understand that participating in the project is entirely voluntary and that you may end your participation at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.
- You have been given a copy of this Informed Consent form for your records, and
- You agree to participate in this research project.

Signature of Participant

Date

Principal Investigator's Signature:

I have explained this project to the best of my ability. I invited questions and responded to any that were asked. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in participating in the research project and any potential risks and that they have freely chosen to participate.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix C: Recruitment Poster



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

RACIALIZED STUDENTS IN GRADUATE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: INVISIBLE WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

This study examines the experiences of racialized counselling psychology graduate students at Athabasca University, highlighting invisible work and institutional challenges. Invisible work includes the unrecognized extra labour students invest beyond academics, often requiring more time, money, energy, and emotional effort. Your participation will help improve inclusive educational practices, policies, and support systems.

Are You Eligible?

- Self-identify as racialized or as having a non-dominant racial or ethnic identity
- Master of Counselling student at Athabasca University
- Completed at least one year of the Master of Counselling program

What to Expect

- If eligible, you will be invited to participate in an interview
- The session will last between 60-90 minutes and will be completed virtually via Microsoft Teams

Compensation

You will receive a \$20 Amazon.ca eGift Card for participating

Contact

Cheyenne Johns, Master of Counselling Student
Principal Investigator
cjohns1@learn.athabascau.ca

Participation is voluntary and all information you share will be kept confidential

This study has been approved by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board [AUREB # 25923]

Appendix D: Certification of Ethical Approval



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 25923

Principal Investigator:

Ms. Cheyenne Johns, Graduate Student
Faculty of Health Disciplines/Master of Counselling

Supervisor/Project Team:

Dr. Emily Doyle (Supervisor)

Project Title:

RACIALIZED STUDENTS IN GRADUATE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY: INVISIBLE WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Effective Date: March 10, 2025

Expiry Date: March 09, 2026

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding. Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid **for a period of one year**. A request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: March 10, 2025

Venise Bryan, Chair
Faculty of Health Disciplines, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
1 University Drive, Athabasca AB Canada T9S 3A3
E-mail: rebsec@athabascau.ca Telephone: 780.213.2033

Appendix E: Certification of Ethical Approval – Renewal



Certification of Ethical Approval

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics PURE ID: 14950673

Principal Investigator/Faculty: Cheyenne Johns, Faculty of Health Disciplines

Supervisor: Emily Doyle, Faculty of Health Disciplines

Project Title: RACIALIZED STUDENTS IN GRADUATE COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY:
INVISIBLE WORK AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

Effective Date: 2/24/2026

Expiry Date: 2/24/2027

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding. Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid **for a period of one year**. A request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: 2/24/2026

Katie MacDonald, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

Appendix F: TCPS 2 CORE-2022 Certificate of Completion

