The Pillars of Privilege: A decolonial framework for understanding power, positionality, and (un)belonging in higher education

Abstract

This article explores the enduring influence of colonial power structures in higher education through the development and application of the Pillars of Privilege framework. Grounded in decolonial theory and intersectional analysis, the framework identifies capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism as interlocking systems that shape who belongs in the academy and whose knowledge is legitimised. While recent calls to decolonise higher education have gained prominence, many remain confined to surface-level reforms that fail to address the deeper epistemic and structural foundations of exclusion. This article argues for a more critical, reflective, and praxis-oriented approach that foregrounds educator positionality and responsibility in challenging these intersecting hierarchies. By synthesising theoretical insights with lived realities, the Pillars of Privilege offer a tool for understanding the relational nature of power in academic spaces and for reimagining institutions as sites of collective justice, belonging, and epistemic plurality. The article concludes by identifying future directions for research and institutional transformation, with particular emphasis on the roles of digital technologies, inclusive pedagogy, and reimagined models of leadership and learning.

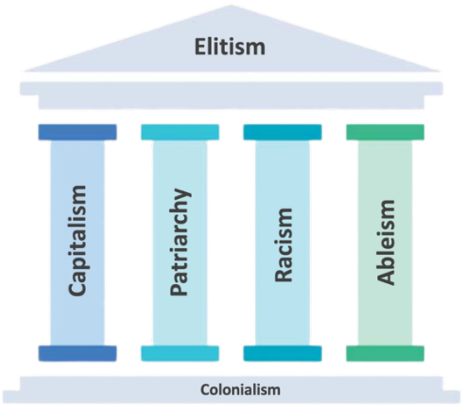
Keywords: decoloniality; intersectionality; privilege; higher education; belonging

Introduction

Higher education (HE) is currently at a transformative crossroads. Global calls to decolonise universities have gained momentum, compelling institutions to confront their enduring ties to colonialism, racial capitalism, and systemic exclusion. While student activism, sector reforms, and institutional statements have amplified the term decolonisation in educational discourse, its uptake has often been superficial—reduced to diversity and inclusion policies that fail to address the deeper epistemic and ontological legacies of empire (**Mbembe, 2016; Bhopal, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018).** These critiques highlight the necessity of moving beyond representational politics and toward meaningful structural and epistemological transformation.

This article introduces the *Pillars of Privilege* framework (Figure 1) as a conceptual and reflective tool to bridge decolonial theory with pedagogical practice. Drawing on Quijano's (**2000**) *coloniality of power* and Crenshaw's (**1989**) theory of intersectionality, the framework identifies four interlocking structures—capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism - that shape (un)belonging within HE. These pillars illuminate how exclusion is perpetuated not only through institutional policies but also through the embodied and epistemic norms that determine whose knowledge and identities are deemed legitimate. The framework offers a means for educators to engage in critical reflexivity and systemic analysis - highlighting their own positionality within these intersecting systems.

Figure 1 – The Pillars of Privilege which outline colonialism as the underlying root cause of elitism and privilege. The 4 pillars are capitalism, patriarchy, racism and ableism



Quijano's (**2000**) analysis of the colonial matrix of power reveals how colonialism continues to shape global structures through racial, gendered, and economic hierarchies. While formal colonialism may have ended, its epistemic and material legacies persist, particularly in knowledge production systems that privilege Eurocentric paradigms while marginalising Indigenous, Black, and Global South epistemologies. Eurocentrism, as Quijano argues, is more than a bias - it is a global ordering logic that deems Western ways of knowing as universal and others as deviant.

Building on this, de Sousa Santos (**2018**) critiques the cognitive empire of universities, where Northern epistemologies dominate curricula, research, and academic authority. He advocates for the recognition of epistemologies of the South, promoting a pluralist knowledge ecology. Mignolo and Walsh (**2018**) frame decoloniality as an epistemic disobedience - a refusal to accept Western modernity's claims to universality and objectivity. Decolonisation, in this context, is not simply about inclusion but a radical unsettling of knowledge hierarchies.

Crenshaw's (**1989**) intersectionality framework enhances this analysis by offering a lens to examine how systems of oppression (race, gender, class, ability) intersect to produce compounded forms of marginalisation. Originally focused on the invisibility of Black women within feminist and antiracist movements, intersectionality is now central to educational theory, emphasising the relational dynamics of oppression. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (**2013**) describe this as intersectional invisibility, a condition in which those at the intersections of multiple marginalities are erased or misrecognised within dominant inclusion frameworks.

Despite rich theoretical scholarship, there remains a significant gap in tools that support educators in applying these ideas to their everyday practices. Most decolonial efforts in HE have concentrated on institutional policy or student-led reform, often neglecting the role of educators themselves as both agents and beneficiaries of institutional culture (**Sian, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018**). As Ahmed (**2012; 2017**) notes, the language of diversity is frequently mobilised to mask deeper structures of epistemic

violence, allowing universities to appear progressive while maintaining established power dynamics.

The *Pillars of Privilege* framework addresses this gap by providing a structure for interrogating privilege within the academy. Each of the four pillars - capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism - represents a system of exclusion that shapes academic life both visibly and invisibly. Their interconnection allows for a more systemic analysis of how marginalisation is reproduced.

Capitalism, the first pillar, highlights the neoliberal transformationn of HE into a market-oriented sector. Knowledge is commodified, and students are framed as consumers. Connell (**2007**) critiques the global academic economy for privileging the Global North as the source of theory while relegating the Global South to the periphery of application and data extraction. As universities increasingly prioritise metrics, performance, and competition, students from working-class, migrant, and racialised backgrounds face both financial and cultural barriers to participation (**Rizvi, 2022**).

Patriarchy, the second pillar, underscores how gendered and heteronormative norms persist in academic culture. Ahmed (**2017**) discusses the figure of the feminist killjoy—those who challenge institutional sexism and are punished for disrupting normative behaviour. Trans, queer, and non-binary scholars often face invisibility in policy and erasure in institutional life (**Phipps & Young, 2015; Savigny, 2021**). Gender equity strategies that fail to address racial or class-based disparities risk reproducing white, cisnormative feminism.

Racism remains deeply embedded in the architecture of the university. Bhopal (**2018**) and Arday, Belluigi and Thomas (**2020**) highlight how racially minoritised scholars experience epistemic invalidation and institutional exclusion despite commitments to equality. Rollock's (**2019**) research on Black female professors exposes the concrete ceiling that limits advancement while demanding disproportionate emotional and diversity labour. Colourism, as Hunter (**2007**) argues, further stratifies opportunity within minoritised communities, often privileging lighter skin tones within the academy.

The final pillar, ableism, draws attention to the normativity of able-bodied and neurotypical experiences in educational spaces. Goodley (**2014**) and Kerschbaum et al. (**2017**) argue that higher education is structured around a narrow definition of academic ability - rewarding speed, verbal fluency, and linear reasoning. Disability is treated as a problem to be accommodated rather than a system to be restructured. Inclusive pedagogy must move beyond compliance to reimagine assessment, participation, and knowledge itself.

Together, these pillars enable a more holistic analysis of structural inequality in higher education. Rather than treating issues such as race, gender, class, and disability as separate domains, the framework shows how they operate interdependently to define who belongs—and who is marginalised - in academic spaces. It also highlights the importance of educator reflexivity - not as a one-time activity but as an ongoing practice of questioning, accountability, and change.

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria for theoretical frameworks

In developing the *Pillars of Privilege* framework, this article draws on specific strands of decolonial and intersectional theory that focus on relational systems of oppression within higher education. Foundational thinkers such as Quijano (**2000**), de Sousa Santos (**2018**), and Crenshaw (**1989**) were selected for their influence on global discussions around coloniality, epistemic violence, and intersecting power structures. However, the scope of this article necessitated selective engagement. For instance, Wallerstein's world-systems theory (**2004**) offers an important macro-economic analysis of global inequality but was not directly incorporated as the framework emphasises micro-level institutional and pedagogical reflexivity. Similarly, the exclusion of hooks (**1984; 1994**) and Freire was not due to their lack of relevance - in fact, hooks' intersectional feminist critiques and Freire's radical pedagogy deeply inform the spirit of this work. Given the focus on structural pillars of power rather than pedagogical method alone, these scholars were referenced implicitly rather than explicitly. Future work may build on this foundation by integrating their praxis-focused approaches into operational models for classroom and curriculum transformation.

Table 1 – Inclusion and exclusion criteria of key theories and authors

Theory/Author	Relevance	Reason for Inclusion/Exclusion
Aníbal Quijano	Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism	Central to identifying colonial structures in HE
Kimberlé Crenshaw	Intersectionality, structural marginalisation	Core to analysing co-constitutive systems of exclusion
Boaventura de Sousa Santos	Epistemologies of the South, knowledge pluralism	Supports epistemic transformation within HE
Immanuel Wallerstein	World-systems theory, global capitalist hierarchies	Important macro-level frame, excluded due to institutional-level focus
bell hooks	Intersectional feminism, pedagogy of care and resistance	Relevant to praxis; omitted for space but acknowledged as foundational
Paulo Freire	Critical pedagogy, conscientisation	Deeply influential; future work can integrate Freirean approaches

Capitalism: Knowledge, commodification, and global inequality in Higher Education

As the first pillar of the *Pillars of Privilege* framework, capitalism is not merely an economic system but a historical structure of power, deeply entwined with colonial conquest and contemporary neoliberalism. The modern university, particularly in the Global North, has been shaped and sustained by the exploitative logics of colonial capitalism, which extracted resources, labour, and knowledge from the Global South while centralising prestige and authority in Western institutions.

Historically, the emergence of modern universities in Europe coincided with the expansion of colonial empires and capitalist economies. The extraction of wealth from colonised nations -through slavery, resource exploitation, and land dispossession - financed the intellectual and infrastructural growth of elite institutions. Bhambra et al. (**2018**) argue that this economic foundation is not merely historical; it continues to define global academic hierarchies today. Universities in the Global North command

disproportionate access to research funding, publication outlets, and knowledge production networks, reinforcing a global division of labour in which institutions from the Global South are often relegated to the role of data suppliers rather than theory producers (**Connell, 2007; Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016**).

The entanglement of capitalism and coloniality also becomes evident in the commodification of education itself. The neoliberal turn in higher education has transformed universities into market-driven enterprises, wherein knowledge is framed as a private good rather than a public one. This shift has resulted in rising tuition fees, the expansion of student debt, increased managerialism, and a competitive emphasis on rankings and 'impact.' For many students, particularly those from working-class, racially minoritised, or migrant backgrounds, access to higher education is not only economically burdensome but also culturally alienating, as the values of individualism, competition, and instrumentalism dominate institutional logics.

Decolonial theorists have warned against the alignment of decolonial agendas with neoliberal policy goals (**Mignolo and Walsh 2018**). When decolonisation is reduced to metrics (e.g., targets for "diverse" recruitment or superficial curriculum reform), it risks being co-opted by the same market logics it seeks to dismantle. This is especially evident in the rise of corporate diversity strategies and the use of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as a form of reputational management rather than substantive institutional change (**Ahmed, 2012; Arday & Mirza, 2018**). Within such contexts, knowledge from the Global South may be included in curricula, but only in ways that are legible, consumable, and unthreatening to dominant paradigms.

Moreover, capitalism shapes the epistemological boundaries of academic disciplines. As Connell (**2007**) notes, mainstream social theory is largely built on European intellectual traditions while systematically ignoring or marginalising knowledge emerging from colonised or Indigenous contexts. The result is a Eurocentric canon that not only excludes but often devalues alternative epistemologies. This epistemic hierarchy reproduces a form of intellectual colonialism, wherein Western modes of

knowing—often framed as rational, objective, and scientific—are treated as universal, while others are deemed particular, subjective, or anecdotal (**de Sousa Santos, 2018**). The consequences of this dynamic are felt most acutely by students and academics from the Global South. Their contributions are often undervalued, their knowledge systems misrecognised, and their labour exploited through precarious contracts, international tuition fees, and expectations to internationalise the curriculum without meaningful power or voice. As Stein (**2020**) argues, the decolonial challenge must go beyond inclusion to question the very terms of participation—who defines what knowledge counts, how it is validated, and to what ends it is mobilised.

Patriarchy: Gender, coloniality, and the politics of belonging in the academy

Patriarchy, understood not merely as the dominance of men over women, but as a broader structure of gendered, sexualised, and embodied hierarchy, shapes who feels welcome, safe, and seen in academic spaces. Decoloniality invites us to interrogate how colonial modernity not only imposed racial hierarchies but also inscribed Western gender binaries, heteronormativity, and misogynistic ideologies into institutional life (**Lugones, 2010; Oyěwùmí, 1997**). Within this context, the university emerges not as a neutral space of knowledge, but as a gendered and racialised structure that privileges certain bodies, voices, and ways of knowing over others.

Lugones (**2010**), in her theory of the coloniality of gender, asserts that colonial projects violently imposed a Western, binary gender system onto colonised peoples, erasing Indigenous understandings of gender as fluid and communal. This restructuring of gender relations through colonialism created new hierarchies that privileged white, cisgender, heterosexual men as normative, rational, and authoritative subjects. These logics endure in today's universities, where patriarchal norms still govern ideas of academic excellence, authority, and leadership.

In higher education, patriarchal structures manifest through gender disparities in pay, progression, and representation, particularly at senior levels. Although women now comprise the majority of undergraduate students in many countries, academic leadership remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. According to Advance HE (**2024**),

women account for just over 30% of UK professors, and Black women make up 1%—a statistic that exemplifies the intersection of racism and sexism. Gender inequality in academia cannot therefore be understood in isolation from race, class, or coloniality. As Mirza (**2015**) notes, Black and minoritised women are often placed in positions of hyper-visibility - expected to serve as representatives of diversity - while simultaneously being excluded from decision-making spaces.

Furthermore, the lived experience of women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and non-binary people in academia is shaped by institutional cultures of sexism, heteronormativity, and gendered violence. Ahmed (**2017**) draws attention to the ways universities absorb complaints of sexual harassment or discrimination without addressing the root causes, often framing complainants as 'troublemakers' or 'killjoys'. These institutional mechanisms preserve patriarchal order by neutralising dissent and enabling harm. Similarly, Phipps (**2021**) highlights the gendered affective labour required of marginalised staff—especially queer and trans academics—who are expected to 'perform inclusion' while navigating cultures of silence and surveillance.

Patriarchy also shapes the construction of knowledge itself. Feminist scholars have long critiqued the masculinisation of objectivity and the devaluation of relational, embodied, or affective forms of knowing (**Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991**). Within Eurocentric epistemologies, reason and rationality are often coded as masculine and white, while emotion and subjectivity are feminised and dismissed. This epistemic hierarchy has colonial roots and continues to marginalise feminist, Indigenous, queer, and embodied knowledges within the academy.

The implications for students and educators are profound. Curricula that exclude feminist, queer, or Indigenous perspectives deny students access to alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. For minoritised students, particularly those who do not conform to heteronormative or binary gender roles, this absence can contribute to deep feelings of unbelonging. A decolonial feminist pedagogy therefore demands not only the inclusion of diverse content, but the transformation of how knowledge is taught, who teaches it, and how authority is negotiated in the classroom.

Decolonising higher education must thus confront not only Eurocentrism but also androcentrism - the privileging of male experiences and voices as the default. Patriarchy is not peripheral to the colonial university; it is foundational. If educators are to challenge the epistemic and structural violence of the academy, they must engage with the gendered legacies of colonialism that continue to shape institutional norms and practices. This includes creating spaces where gender-diverse students and staff are not merely included but affirmed, where feminist and queer knowledges are valued, and where pedagogies centre relationality, care, and collectivity as radical acts of resistance.

Racism: Colonial hierarchies, whiteness, and the racialised academy

Racism constitutes a foundational structure in the formation of higher education and its operation within academic institutions is not an aberration, but a continuation of the racial logics embedded in colonial modernity. Through Eurocentric epistemologies, the architecture of whiteness, and the structural marginalisation of racially minoritised scholars and students, racism continues to shape who is seen as legitimate within knowledge systems and whose presence is considered anomalous or excessive.

Decoloniality demands not only an interrogation of overt racism but a systemic analysis of how race and racialisation underpin the very foundations of the modern university. Colonialism relied on the codification of racial hierarchies to justify conquest, enslavement, and the subjugation of peoples. These hierarchies were later embedded in scientific, cultural, and intellectual frameworks, positioning whiteness as superior and others as subordinate or deficient. As Quijano (**2000**) argues, the coloniality of power persists through a racialised division of labour and knowledge in which the Global North monopolises the production of universal truths, while the Global South and racially minoritised communities are relegated to the margins. Universities in the West, therefore, are not only shaped by colonial wealth and structures but also serve as custodians of these racialised knowledge regimes.

Whiteness in the academy functions not only as a demographic reality - reflected in the overrepresentation of white scholars in senior leadership and professorial roles - but also as an epistemic norm. Ahmed (**2012**) describes whiteness as an institutional habit, reproduced through policies, traditions, and curricula that privilege white ways of knowing. This normativity is rarely named but is constantly maintained through what Fanon (**1952**) described as the colonisation of the mind, wherein whiteness becomes the unmarked standard by which all else is measured. As Arday and Mirza (**2018**) argue, the university reproduces itself through racialised logics that maintain white epistemic authority and cultural dominance.

Empirical research continues to document the exclusionary dynamics of racism in higher education. Rollock's (**2019**) *Staying Power* report reveals the deep isolation, racial microaggressions, and strategic navigation required by Black female professors in the UK. Despite years of advocacy and institutional commitments to equality, Black academics remain significantly underrepresented in professorial roles and often encounter hostile or indifferent environments. Mirza (**2015**) further illustrates how Black and Asian women are positioned as both hyper-visible and invisible: called upon to represent diversity yet excluded from the centres of academic power. Their intellectual contributions are often undervalued, policed, or appropriated, reflecting a broader pattern of epistemic violence within the university.

Racism also operates through the content and delivery of curricula. Eurocentric canons dominate most disciplines, with limited engagement with Indigenous, Black, or Global South scholarship. Where non-Western perspectives are included, they are often relegated to optional modules or tokenised. Sian (**2019**) critiques this performative inclusion, arguing that superficial changes to reading lists do little to challenge the deeper racial hierarchies within knowledge production. The decolonial imperative, therefore, is not just to diversify content but to restructure the epistemic assumptions of disciplines - to unlearn what has been naturalised as neutral, objective, or foundational.

In addition, racism intersects with other structures (such as capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism) to create compounded exclusions. Colourism, for example, functions as a colonial residue that privileges lighter skin tones within and across racially marginalised groups, reinforcing proximity to whiteness as a determinant of academic credibility and access (**Hunter**, **2007**). Racial capitalism, as theorised by Robinson (**2020**), exposes how economic systems and racial hierarchies are co-constitutive, determining who benefits from the neoliberal university and who is exploited within it.

For students, the effects of institutional racism are often acute. Numerous studies have reported racial attainment gaps, lack of culturally responsive teaching, and experiences of everyday racism on campus (**NUS/UUK, 2019; Bhopal, 2018**). These forms of exclusion are not isolated incidents but structural features of institutions that remain grounded in colonial histories. Decolonising education requires not only addressing the symptoms of racism but dismantling the infrastructures - curricular, cultural, and administrative - that sustain it.

Racism in higher education is not a remnant of a past era but a contemporary reality that continues to structure access, legitimacy, and power. Recognising this pillar demands a confrontation with whiteness , not only as identity but as a system of dominance, and a commitment to transforming the racialised logics of the university. This transformation is central to any meaningful decolonial project.

Ableism: Normativity, neurodivergence, and the invisibility of disability in Higher Education

Ableism - systemic discrimination against disabled people and the privileging of able-bodied, neurotypical norms - in the context of higher education often operates silently, woven into institutional assumptions about productivity, intelligence, independence, and professionalism. Its colonial roots, like those of racism and patriarchy, remain embedded in the ways universities are structured, whom they are designed for, and whose ways of knowing are valued. Decoloniality demands that we not only recognise the marginalisation of disabled people in academia but also interrogate the ableist assumptions that underpin Eurocentric knowledge systems and institutional design.

Historically, colonial regimes categorised bodies according to their perceived utility and value to the colonial project, with able-bodiedness linked to rationality, strength, and superiority. Disabled, neurodivergent, and ill bodies were viewed through the lens of deficiency, degeneracy, and unfitness - concepts that were racialised, gendered, and used to justify eugenics, confinement, and exclusion (**Grech & Soldatic, 2016**). These logics persist in the contemporary academy, where students and staff who do not conform to normative expectations of communication, cognition, physical movement, or temporal organisation are frequently marginalised.

Goodley (**2014**) and Campbell (**2009**) argue that ableism is not simply a matter of discriminatory attitudes but an entire system of cultural values and institutional practices that construct disability as a deviation from the norm. This norm, of the rational, autonomous, efficient, and productive academic, is a deeply colonial and capitalist ideal, one that equates success with individualism and bodily control. The neoliberal university, with its emphasis on metrics, performance, and speed, reinforces these ideals by measuring success through outputs (publications, teaching evaluations, funding) that often disregard the different temporalities and needs of disabled and neurodivergent academics and students (**Brown & Leigh, 2020).**

Ableism also manifests through the physical and digital infrastructures of HE. University buildings may remain inaccessible, and online systems might be designed without attention to sensory or cognitive diversity. While legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 in the UK mandates 'reasonable adjustments', these are often framed as reactive accommodations rather than proactive, structural redesigns. This model places the burden on disabled individuals to disclose their needs and request modifications, often navigating bureaucracy, stigma, and scepticism in the process (**Kerschbaum et al., 2017**). Disclosure, moreover, is not a neutral act - it requires weighing the risks of exposure against the potential benefits of access.

The epistemic dimensions of ableism are equally significant. Mainstream academic cultures prize particular forms of engagement (verbal fluency, written coherence, rational debate) while sidelining or dismissing other modes of expression, such as

sensory learning, silence, visual communication, or repetition. Neurodivergent ways of knowing, including those associated with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or dyspraxia, are often seen as barriers rather than as valuable epistemologies in their own right (**Yergeau, 2017**). A decolonial approach to disability would not only expand access but challenge the very assumptions about what counts as knowledge, how it is produced, and by whom.

Moreover, the intersections of ableism with other pillars (particularly racism and capitalism) further compound exclusion. Disabled people of colour are more likely to face structural poverty, misdiagnosis, and neglect in education systems, and are underrepresented in academic leadership and policy-making. These experiences cannot be disentangled from the legacies of colonialism, which constructed racialised and disabled bodies as sites of control, containment, and disposability (**Davis, 2016**). Inclusive education must therefore be grounded in anti-ableist, anti-colonial praxis that refuses normative standards of ability and centres disability justice. This requires more than inclusion; it demands transformation: of pedagogy, infrastructure, curricula, and institutional culture. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), participatory pedagogy, and relational approaches to access are steps toward this transformation, but they must be accompanied by a deeper re-evaluation of the values embedded in academic life. Ableism, like the other pillars of privilege, sustains the illusion of a neutral, meritocratic university. Challenging it compels us to reimagine what education is for and who it is truly designed to serve. If decolonising the university means disrupting all systems of hierarchy and exclusion, then ableism must be recognised as not peripheral, but central, to that project.

Conclusion: From recognition to praxis – reimagining the decolonial university

This article has advanced a critical interrogation of privilege and (un)belonging in higher education through a decolonial lens, using the Pillars of Privilege framework to expose the intersecting systems of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ableism. These pillars are not isolated but foundational to the modern university, structuring access, knowledge, and institutional culture.

Capitalism commodifies education, privileges productivity, and maintains North–South hierarchies (**Connell, 2007**). Patriarchy embeds masculinist norms, marginalising feminist and queer epistemologies (**Ahmed, 2017; Phipps & Young, 2015**). Racism sustains Eurocentrism and whiteness in curricula and leadership, sidelining Global South and racially minoritised knowledges (**Bhopal, 2018; Rollock, 2019**). Ableism, often under-theorised in decolonial discourse, normalises able-bodied, neurotypical standards and excludes alternative embodiments of knowledge (**Goodley, 2014**).

Table 2 – Summary Matrix: The four Pillars of Privilege in higher education

Pillar	**Key Theorists**	**Problematics in HE**	**Recommendations**
Capitalism	Quijano, Connell, Bhambra et al., Stein & Andreotti	Neoliberalism, commodification, marketisation, Global North dominance	Revalue public knowledge, decommodify curricula, include Southern epistemologies
Patriarchy	Lugones, Ahmed, Mirza, hooks (noted), Oyěwùmí	Gendered leadership, heteronormativity, epistemic masculinism	Feminist pedagogy, representation of queer/trans/non-binary scholars, relational knowledge practices
Racism	Quijano, Bhopal, Rollock, Arday & Mirza, Fanon	Whiteness, Eurocentrism, underrepresentation of Global South and racially minoritised	Anti-racist curriculum reform, institutional power redistribution, culturally responsive pedagogy
Ableism	Goodley, Campbell, Brown & Leigh, Davis, Yergeau	Neurotypical norms, access barriers, epistemic exclusion of disability	Universal Design for Learning, anti-ableist teaching, disability justice in policy and pedagogy

As Quijano (**2000**), de Sousa Santos (**2018**), and Mignolo and Walsh (**2018**) argue, universities remain embedded in the colonial matrix of power. Simply diversifying content or staff without challenging these epistemological foundations risks reproducing colonial harm. The Pillars of Privilege framework offers educators a scaffold for critical reflection - making power visible and inviting ethical responsibility. Decolonisation must move beyond performative inclusion toward institutional and

pedagogical transformation: embedding non-Western epistemologies, designing inclusive assessment, valuing neurodivergent knowledges, and resisting neoliberal logics of speed and competition (**Stein, 2020; Ahmed, 2012**). It is a process marked by discomfort, resistance, and relational labour (**de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015**). Future research should explore how intersecting structures of privilege operate across contexts, especially in the Global South. Greater attention must be paid to ableism's intersection with race and class, and to the role of digital platforms in reproducing or challenging colonial dynamics. We must also reimagine the university's purpose: centring relationality over competition, plurality over hierarchy, care over compliance. Alternative models from Indigenous, feminist, and abolitionist traditions offer pathways to a more just academy.

Educators have a critical role in this work. Decolonial praxis must begin with our syllabi, research, practices, and relationships. The Pillars of Privilege framework provides a foundation, but transformation depends on ongoing commitment and collective vision. To decolonise is to humanise higher education—to challenge exclusionary norms and co-create institutions grounded in justice, multiplicity, and belonging.

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