Females in Post-Secondary Institutions: A Stepping Stone with Hidden Hurdles

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Over the last few years we, as a society, have had the opportunity to witness an increasing amount of women part ways from the traditional domestic sphere and enter both fields of higher education and employment. This has been a great step-forward for women. However, to argue that the growing female population in these sectors, especially within post-secondary institutions, signifies a decrease in the sexism present in society would be to completely ignore the extensive amount of literature that argues otherwise. Thus, this paper proposes that we must critically examine this simplistic notion which fails to take into consideration the complex intersections of race and gender (Ng, 1993), overlooks internal hierarchical (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984), (Levinson, 1976) as well as external societal structures (Kravetz, 1976). This, of course, is not to undermine the importance of having a larger number of females enter post-secondary education but to recognize that such a phenomenon is only one of several steppingstones to come in the realm of gender equality. Furthermore this paper aims to acknowledge that these steppingstones are likely to come with multiple hurdles for which much preparation must be done.

To begin, in analyzing the points at which race and gender intersect we complicate the idea that a simple increase in the number of women entering post-secondary institutions can be symbolic of reduced sexist behaviours, attitudes, practices and policies in society. It calls into question and asks us to re-examine the complex entanglement of gendered and racialized identities where some women exercise more power and privilege and thus occupy a higher
position in society’s hierarchical structures. Already categorized and treated as a minority group, when women face further barriers due to aspects of their identity such as race, they experience higher levels of marginalization (Ng, 1993). For instance, in her article, *A Woman Out of Control: Deconstructing Sexism and Racism in the University*, the author Roxana Ng, a woman of colour, speaks about the difficulties she experienced as she sought to teach and educate her students in a manner that explicitly challenged the existing status quo. In explaining these challenges, she speaks of an incident where the content of a particular discussion on anti-racist education did not sit well with a particular student who identified himself as a “white-immigrant male” (Ng, 1993, p.191), and eventually complained to the university administration about the presentation of the course content. During a meeting with the administration in which both she and the student were present, the student complained that she had “marginalized” him as a white male, was trying to advance a particular political agenda and repeatedly referred to her as, “a woman out of control” (Ng, 1993, p.198).” In this situation, she argues that not only did her course material fall under attack but she, as a gendered and racialized individual was also attacked.

Teaching “against the grain” (Ng, 1993, p.198) as she calls it, requires that students re-examine their own values and confront their relationship with power and privilege. This tends to be quite an uncomfortable process as it requires that we challenge the hegemonic, “common sense” (Ng, 1993, p.193), taken for granted, way of thinking. Ng also speaks of incidents where her authority and knowledge only seemed to be validated when supplemented with the knowledge and agreement of other faculty who were of Caucasian descent. However, rather than
looking at these as individualized incidents, I would like to argue that incidents like these are frequent in nature but often go unacknowledged. Thus I would like to look at Roxana Ng’s experience as part of a larger collective experience where discrimination based on gender and race is institutionalized and embedded within a larger political economic system (Ng, 1993). Although the intersectional perspective taken in this section primarily focuses on aspects of identity related to race and gender, it is important to acknowledge how such identities could be further complicated by aspects such as class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality and much more. Discrimination can occur on multiple levels and is rarely limited to one or two aspects of an individual’s identity, which only points to the need for further in-depth investigation in the area of gender and intersectionality. In highlighting the ways in which certain women are more likely than others to be subject to unequal treatment, I hope to bring attention to the intricacies of increased female entrance into post-secondary institutions.

Furthermore the notion of reduced sexism as a result of increased female integration into post-secondary institutions can be problematized by examining and shedding light on the internal structural dynamics within those institutions. Key issues which often go unexamined are opportunities such as career mobility and the positions occupied by different gendered individuals. The natural tendency for males rather than females to hold positions in middle-management or top-management within the education system is a perfect portrayal of the inequality that exists within the system. In fact research shows that there exists a very clear patriarchal structure within the school hierarchy where ninety-nine percent of school
superintendents and ninety-seven percent of high school principals are male, while eight-four percent of teachers are female (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984). Patricia O’Reilly and Kathryn Borman explain this phenomenon as, “Men rule women and women rule children” (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984, p.110). In other words, there is an inherent tendency in schools to socialize girls for roles such as motherhood, and boys for roles involving work and leadership (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984). Similarly, within the field of medicine, women who express an interest in health are encouraged to pursue a career in nursing while males with equal skills and scores are encouraged to pursue the M.D degree (Levinson, 1976). These processes of socialization are often grounded in the ideology that women have a natural tendency to be more patient, “have more passivity in the inborn core of their personality” (Levinson, 1976, p.431), and achieve the most satisfaction when they are not aggressive. Women who choose to challenge these ideological norms are often characterized as “unhealthy” or “masculine” (Levinson, 1976, p.431) Furthermore, even within the field of nursing, it is not uncommon to see the positions of higher management and administration predominantly occupied by males (Levinson, 1976). A similar pattern can be uncovered in the area of social work (Kravetz, 1976). Thus, it is important to recognize that even within fields traditionally characterized as female, gender inequality continues to persist as males occupy the upper echelons of power and privilege. In the realm of post-secondary education, research shows that women pursuing higher education only make up twenty-five percent of full time faculty with classrooms primarily managed by male faculty (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984). This clearly points to the difficulties experienced by women to advance to positions where they may have a greater voice to influence and enact change within
the system. This brings us to the importance of examining the ways in which knowledge is constructed within these institutions and the process of gendered socialization that takes place on a daily basis. If those who occupy positions of power and greater privilege are predominantly male, it is worth questioning whether knowledge production and reproduction is, to a large extent, male-dominated. Even within teachers’ education programs graduate students are often exposed to a curriculum that reinforces sexist ideologies and encourages sex-role conformity. Thus, graduates from such programs enter the education system ready to perpetuate rather than challenge existing inequalities. By examining how gender inequality operates within the education system, we come to realize the various ways women are marginalized within these institutions and the impediments that prevent their advancement into the upper levels of administration and management (O’Reilly & Borman, 1984).

Lastly, it is important to recognize that even though women are entering sectors of post-secondary education in increasing numbers, they are often likely to enter the system as unequal participants. This is largely due to external societal structures which fail to provide the accommodations needed for them to experience a quality of education equal to that experienced by men. Some of these would include changes such as affordable child care and equal pay for equal work value. However, the tendency to look at issues affecting women as personal problems rather than collective social issues for which systematic solutions can be put forward, tends to be a key impediment to achieving sustainable gender equality (Kravetz, 1976). For instance, O’Reilly and Borman also note that “women who are unfettered by family responsibilities and are fully committed to a career have the best chance to rise to the top” (O’reilly & Borman, 1984,
The fact that women who occupy positions in administration and management tend to have male counterparts who are ten years younger points to the unfair but very likely truth that women must work harder and longer to achieve the same status as their male counterparts. For instance, a woman entering a post-secondary institution may have to work two jobs while her male counterpart may only need to work one job in order to make ends meet. As a result males are often more likely to get the most out of their post-secondary education experience as compared to their female counterparts, who may not be able to invest as much time and energy into the educational experience (O’reilly & Borman, 1984) (Kravetz, 1976). To highlight the extreme inequality, recent research conducted by Oxfam Canada’s Even It Up Campaign states that, “at the current rate, it will take 75 years to make the principle of equal pay for equal work a reality” (Oxfam Canada, 2014). Furthermore, even in Western nations such as Canada, we are constantly witnessing a lack of affordable childcare options leading to circumstances where women often have to take time off work or higher education in order to balance familial roles and responsibilities. Rather than having societies adapt to, and accommodate, the needs of women, what we are witnessing is the reverse. Women who are already subject to marginal treatment are being forced to re-adjust and adapt their lifestyles in order to circumvent systemic social barriers (Kravetz, 1976). Despite the fact that women may be entering post-secondary institutions in increasing numbers, until larger socioeconomic structures are adapted to meet the needs of these diverse individuals, women are likely to experience a quality of education that is lower than that of their male counterparts (O’reilly & Borman, 1984) (Kravetz, 1976).
In conclusion, I would like to recognize and acknowledge that not only are post-secondary institutions only one segment of a much larger society but that entrance into a post-secondary institution is only the beginning of a long journey in learning how to navigate the gendered barriers within such institutions. An analysis of the intersection of race and gender in identity formation emphasizes the ways in which gendered identities can be further complicated by other aspects of one’s identity. This is likely to lead to circumstances where some women experience higher levels of unequal treatment than others (Ng, 1993). Following this analysis was the deconstruction of structures internal to the education system where one comes to understand the ways in which gender inequality operates to impede career mobility and a production of knowledge void of sexist ideologies (O’reilly & Borman, 1984). Finally, in examining the larger external societal structures, light was shed on how the oppressed are being forced to lift themselves out of state of marginalization while those in positions of power continue to have their privilege go unchallenged (Kravetz, 1976). In order to achieve long-lasting sustainable gender equality in post-secondary institutions increased enrollment of females is not enough. Seeing such a phenomenon as the end all and be all of achieving gender equality and eliminating sexism can actually be quite dangerous. Thus this paper advocates that the phenomenon must instead be regarded as a stepping stone with many puddles to jump over along the way rather than the end of the bridge where all barriers have been overcome.
Works Cited


