Anti-oppression as praxis in the research field: Implementing emancipatory approaches for researchers and community partners

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Abstract

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and anti-oppression (AO) policies are implemented in research to address intersecting systemic barriers for marginalized populations. Grant applications now include questions about EDI to ensure researchers have considered how research designs perpetuate discriminatory practices. However, complying with these measures may not mean that researchers have engaged with AO as praxis. Three central points emerged from our work as a women's research collective committed to embedding AO practices within the research methodology of our community-based study. First, research ideas must be connected to larger pursuits of AO in and across marginalized communities. Secondly, AO as praxis in the research design is an exercise in centering cultural knowledge and pragmatic research preparation and response that honours the collective. Lastly, AO approaches are not prescriptive. They must shift, adapt, and change based on the research project and team, creating space for transformative resistance and emancipation of racialized researchers and community workers.

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Introduction

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and anti-oppression (AO) policies have been embedded in research to acknowledge and address intersecting systemic barriers for marginalized populations in Canada. Many grant applications now include questions about EDI as a mandatory section to ensure researchers have considered how research designs perpetuate discriminatory practices. Commonly, researchers 'check all boxes' on these applications, which include (i) consideration for diversity in research teams, (ii) opportunities for training and development, as well as (iii) a focus on inclusive research teams. However, what does EDI and AO look like as praxis in the research field? In this article, we identify how our research team went beyond 'checking boxes' to operationalize AO as a research process and practice in a Canadian context. Specifically, we focus on the development of the research idea, the creation of the research team, and tensions that arose throughout the recruitment and data collection phases of our study focusing on women workers within the gender-based violence (GBV) sector in Hamilton, Ontario. An analysis of these areas provide further legitimacy for a type of research that centres transformative resistance and emancipation of racialized researchers and community members as a fundamental component of AO. Moreover, non-racialized researchers and communities who recognize the 'heavy lifting' racialized researchers and workers do in the name of AO may consider implementing strategies outlined in this paper to address oppressive work practices that can arise on research teams. Our aim is not to speak about racialized and non-racialized communities as a monolith or oversimplify the complexities of work relationships that can occur within racialized or non-racialized research teams, but to acknowledge research spaces and practices that EDI and AO policies aim to address.

Background: The evolution of EDI and AO and its importance to research

'History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us'(Baldwin, 2017), thus, we acknowledge that our work and very presence is connected to past generations, current marginalized Black, Indigenous and racialized communities and their resulting perceptions as well as apprehensions about health and social sectors as workers or end users within those Canadian systems. Recognizing our role as agents of history, our work has an inbuilt responsibility to change the received tendency to engage in research about us as Black, Indigenous and racialized people, but not necessarily to ensure that the research is for us or by us (Bainbridge et al., 2015; Goodman et al., 2018; Martin and Mirraboopa, 2003; Nobles, 1976; Scharff et al., 2010). To situate our current study, it is important to review the rise of EDI and AO policies and how they became a part of the policy focus in health and social systems in our North American context. In this paper, we use the language of EDI and AO as these are the most used terms across

disciplines, however we recognize there are variations and critiques of these terms and their usefulness as concepts for racialized communities (Ahmed, 2007; Haque, 2010; Karakhan et al., 2021; Potts and Brown, 2015; Wagner and Yee, 2011; Winfield, 2021).

Calls for EDI and AO policies can be traced back to the Black Power Movement and the work of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Andaiye and Honor Ford Smith among others. They are related to the granting of civil rights provisions, affirmative action in the United States and the removal of discriminatory and oppressive laws such as those that prohibited Caribbean immigrants from working in Canada up to the 1960s due to the lack of 'Canadian experience'(Bolden, 1971). A new wave of attention to structural racism continued to gain popularity in the early 2000s in part as a result of the advancement of theories such as Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990; Delgado, 1995; Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Hill Collins, 2000).

Concurrently, Indigenous communities in Canada had long called for an inquiry into the numerous missing and murdered Indigenous women across the country, which was realized by the Federal Government in December 2015 with the beginning of a pre-inquiry process (Z, 2019). Inquiries such as these are needed to respond to the deliberate and violent governmental policies and practices that have destroyed communities since contact with settlers through the eradication of their cultural, social and spiritual practices in the name of colonization (MacDonald and Steenbeek, 2015; Paradies, 2016). Recently, the reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty as a form of decolonization, the discoveries of unmarked graves at former residential school sites across Canada and the Black Lives Matter movement recentered the issue of anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism. Several institutions in Canada, revealed anti-Black racism strategies in response to activist students and faculty (Blackett et al., n.d.; *Framework to Address Anti-Black Racism*, 2020; *Report of the University of Toronto Anti-Black Racism Task Force*, 2021) and Toronto Metropolitan University (Formerly Ryerson University) renamed their institution, recognizing that the ongoing commemoration of Egerton Ryerson did not acknowledge the trauma caused to generations of Indigenous communities by residential schools. Between the Civil Rights struggles of the 20th century to date, many policies have been drafted to bring private sector companies and government agencies in line with newly set targets for EDI and AO practice (Tamtik and Guenter, 2019).

In 2018, the Federal government launched the EDI Institutional Capacity Building Grant as a 7-year pilot for academic institutions in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019; OECD, 2021). The aim of the grant is to enable post-secondary institutions to identify and disable systemic barriers that impede the ability of under-represented or disadvantaged groups to tri-council funding and the research enterprise of academia (Government of Canada, 2019; OECD, 2021). Black Canadian researchers and scientists have called attention to long-standing inequities in tri-council funding and the implications for research and knowledge production centering marginalized communities (Bueckert, 2022; Scholar Strike Canada, 2020). Along with re-examining how EDI can be better integrated into academic institutions and funding agencies, there has also been increased attention and interest into transformative and anti-oppressive research (Gaudet, 2014; Luchies, 2015; Rogers, 2012).

Potts and Brown (2015) note that there is not a distinct or specific anti-oppressive methodology. They assert that, '…anti-oppressive research is not methodologically distinctive, but epistemologically distinctive' (Potts and Brown, 2015: 38). While anti-

oppressive approaches to research may be gaining more momentum in Canada, in the global South, writers and researchers in the Commonwealth Caribbean associated with the Universities of the West Indies and Guyana have engaged these approaches from the inception of those academies.[1] Their approaches and methods and the significance and distinctiveness of their efforts are understood more clearly because of their push back against positivism and Western intellectualism as superior. These realities are not only born in the Commonwealth Caribbean but are also foundational for Indigenous writers. Kovach (2015) explains that '…anti-oppressive methodologies offer a counter-approach to positivist approaches' (p. 47) and transformative and anti-oppressive research is largely defined by what it is not more than what it is. Many analyses of anti-oppressive research currently focus on the relationship between the researcher and research participants (Daniel, 2021; Glumbíková et al., 2018; Pollack, 2004), but Potts and Brown (2015) encourage us to examine the relationship between researchers as a cite of transformational and anti-oppressive possibilities.

Another important part of transformational processes is the intentional selection of research topics. While there are significant research gaps to be filled around the effectiveness of EDI and AO policies and their roll out in every sector, our choice to investigate EDI and AO in the GBV sector of Hamilton, Ontario was strategic. It is widely documented that experiencing workplace racism and discrimination adversely impacts worker mental health, job satisfaction, commitment and service quality (Antecol and Cobb-Clark, 2009; Deitch et al., 2003; Ensher et al., 2001; Godley, 2018; Hughes and Dodge, 1997; Monchalin et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2019). It has also been documented that women who have intersecting identities such as race, gender, sexuality, immigration status and class face barriers and discrimination within a Canadian system (Conroy et al., 2019; Duhaney, 2022; Mahabir et al., 2021; Preibisch and Grez, 2010; Tungohan, 2018) and the risk and exposure to GBV is further heightened for Indigenous, Black and racialized communities, particularly those who are 2SLBGTQ + and women with disabilities (Conroy et al., 2019; Government of Canada, 2021). Thus, it is important that women experiencing GBV are not exposed to further discrimination and violence while accessing women's organizations in the GBV sector. Moreover, addressing the complexity of safety for racialized women workers means understanding their workplaces within a larger structural framework of racism, GBV and continued colonization. We delve into the experiences of women workers within this structural framework elsewhere (see Rodney et al., 2023).

One of the key purposes of qualitative research 'should [be to] contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers' lives' (Creswell, 2018: 25). In going beyond checking the boxes, Smith (1999) positions eight critical questions for researchers challenging structures of oppression: 'What research do we want to do? Whom is it for? What difference will it make? Who will carry it out? How do we want the research done? How will we know it is worthwhile? Who will own the research? Who will benefit?'. Given our awareness of the injustices we are facing or have overcome as Black, Indigenous and racialized women, these eight questions were thought about throughout the development of this research project and served to interpret critical theory with a moral lens through key Indigenous principles. Further than calling attention to women's experiences, enabling visibility for racialized women aligns with modes of

resistance in Black feminist thought and anti-colonial Indigenous women (Andaiye, 2020; Archuleta, 2006; Boissoneau, 2017; Hill Collins, 2000; Patterson et al., 2016). The relationship between us as the researchers, the research itself and those participating in the research brought to the fore our subjectivity and recognition that we too were aligned in a joint mode of resistance in the 'doing' and the 'living' of this transformative research.

Resistance as inspiration for the creation of AO research in a Canadian context

Black feminist and anti-colonial Indigenous women assert that the everyday experiences of marginalized women are spaces for theorization (Andaiye, 2020; Archuleta, 2006; Crenshaw, 1990; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 2003; Patterson et al., 2016). In this sense, every woman has the right and ability to theorize in ways that are meaningful and con-crete (Archuleta, 2006; Mohanty, 2003). Our research elevates these perspectives as our everyday work within our community became the inspiration for this research. Creswell (2018) indicates that, 'the basic tenet in transformative frameworks is that knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationships within society…' (p. 25). Therefore, we illustrate the events that informed the development of our project. For us, we know that working *with* communities is connected to our own liberation and the liberation we seek for our children and future generations. Further, these events also provide a glimpse into the volatile and violent environment that we as Black, Indigenous and racialized communities live in on an everyday basis in Hamilton and elsewhere.

On 22 June 2020, the *Hamilton Students for Justice* organized a demonstration outside of Hamilton's city hall to have police removed from schools. Students shut down a main street in Hamilton, while city councillors debated and voted as to whether police would remain in schools (Van Dongen, 2020). Jessica, Director of the Sexual Assault Centre (Hamilton and Area) (SACHA) and I (Ruth) were in the crowd supporting the students as a sign of solidarity. At one point in the six hour demonstration, the students asked all Black, Indigenous and racialized people to sit on a socially distanced 'x' on Main Street to take up space and to acknowledge that our lives were important. As we sat on the street, periodically following the youth's instructions, and participating in protest chants, inspired by the energy of the youth, we spoke about our families – both mothers of Black and Black/Indigenous (to Central America) boys and about the field of GBV, which is not only our paid work but also our life's work and passion. As we looked around at the youth and community members sitting and standing along the street in soli-darity, we thought about the reasons behind the protest and what it could look like to create a sense of safety for racialized GBV women workers. It was in this act of active resistance where students achieved their goal of having police removed from schools that our study idea was realized. We conceptualized a project that would document racialized women's experiences within EDI and AO guided workspaces and support the creation of structures led by them to assist racialized women in the GBV sector.

At the time of this protest, Black communities and their allies in Hamilton were in a heightened state of resistance. Earlier in the same year a Mentorship Program for Black

Youth was paused during Black history month at a local high school (Craggs, 2020). Following this, our communities were angered and devastated by the murder of George Floyd. This public example of dehumanization remains a critical tactic for continued violence on Black and Indigenous bodies (Godley, 2018; Z, 2019). This is not to eclipse the Black and Indigenous lives lost at the hands of police in Canada, however the images and video of George Floyd's murder resulted in a global outcry that further galvanized our communities. Moreover, these events occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the city's hesitation to acknowledge and address systemic racism during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in Hamilton having one of the lowest vaccination rates in Ontario (Polewski, 2020; Taekema, 2021), even though global preliminary reports revealed racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and fatalities (Laurencin and McClinton, 2020; Ramos and Zamudeo, 2020) and the increased risk for GBV had been clearly made on a global scale (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020; Wright, 2020).

It is these realities that not only required but demanded of us to ground our theoretical analysis in a critical, anti-colonial analysis relying upon Black and Indigenous Feminisms (Crenshaw, 1990; Gearon, 2021). We did this consciously to centre ourselves within our work, to resist the colonial project of our own dehumanization and marginalization, and to illustrate that our research is embedded within the fabric of resistance in Hamilton, Ontario (Andaiye, 2020; Archuleta, 2006; Boissoneau, 2017; James et al., 2010; Lorde, 1984; Patterson et al., 2016). It is also necessary that we acknowledge that the language of 'equity, diversity and inclusion' is only legible at this point in history because it is often used as a guide to mask deeper seated issues of Indigenous disenfranchisement, anti-Black racism, systemic racial exclusion and violence and to reify a fantasy of Canadian state and society as a 'safe space' for Black, Indigenous, and racialized women while actively excluding them materially through systemic means (Ahmed, 2007; Haque, 2010).

AO as praxis: Research design and key methodological decisions in recruitment and data collection phases

Community-based qualitative research

Accounting for the multiple lived realities within the gender-based violence sector and academic research, as well as existing critiques of EDI, we utilized a community-based qualitative research design given our critical theory paradigm and the organic nature in which our research idea emerged (Caine, 2016; Johnson, 2017). Research questions utilizing a community-based design are inherently political and researchers who utilize this approach are also focused on democratizing the process of knowledge production (Caine, 2016). Central to community-based research is an authentic relationship between community and researchers (Caine, 2016; Creswell, 2018; Johnson, 2017).

Given our shared interests and motivations to support and foster greater equity within Hamilton, some connections were already made. Ruth and Jessica had an established relationship from supporting other social justice initiatives in Hamilton, although no formal working relationship had previously occurred. Ruth and Danielle had met

previously when discussing a collaboration to support an initiative led by racialized youth in the city, however that project went in a different direction and did not result in a partnership. Jessica and Danielle knew each other well as they had worked together in the same organization prior to this project. The three of us, aware of the emotionally taxing work that is AO in our city were intentional about creating a research design that protected our energy and that of our research team and could offer us support and love from our communities. We drew from the ideas and practices upheld by anti-colonial Indigenous women who seek to reclaim space and power (Archuleta, 2006; Simpson, 2016; Smith, 1999; Z, 2019). One of the ways we chose to reclaim our power was in the creation of a community advisory board of elders.

Community advisory board: 'The elders'

The community advisory board is made up of individuals who have not only dedicated their lives to advocacy and supporting equity seeking groups in Hamilton and the GBV sector in the Caribbean and Latin America but also a willingness to share their lived experiences as a reference and reflection point for operationalizing AO within the research team itself. In our study, 'elder' is not synonymous with age, rather it is connected to wisdom and community perspectives that were not captured on our research team. The elders acted as a first line of accountability to the community by providing meaningful input throughout our study. We met with the elders regularly throughout the project to obtain feedback on our recruitment materials troubleshoot issues that arose, and to also celebrate our successes. The elders input sparked deeper reflection and challenged us to pause and re-think some of our efforts. For example, one of our Indigenous elders asked us to reconsider the use of the acronym 'BIPOC', and who may not be represented in this acronym within Indigenous communities. Based on this feedback we changed all our recruitment materials and have not used that acronym throughout the rest of the project.

Notwithstanding the intentions, the process of working with the advisory board has not been seamless. The elders within our communities are facing competing priorities, serving our communities with minimal financial and human resources, yet, still attempting to support us recognizing the importance of our research. Ensuring their involvement has required flexibility to organize meetings and rework conceptual frameworks. However, we believe their contributions to the project outweigh any challenges we have encountered as their involvement and commitment to our research offers another layer of rigour that is important for community trust and the transferability of our research to other EDI and AO led settings.

Ownership

Given that community-based designs are guided by principles that promote research for and by the community, it was important for us to work collaboratively on the development of the research ideas and grant application given our shared expertise and motivations for the research (Caine, 2016; Johnson, 2017). We acknowledge that to engage in this type of work often means contending with structural limitations. However, this was not our experience on this particular project because we attended to these realities from

the outset. We chose to resist the dominant practice of including an established researcher on the grant application to increase our chances of obtaining funding, and instead put our trust in the importance of our work and our own capabilities as an emerging scholar and team of community workers. Centering our ways of knowing has meant that we also defined what ownership looked like for our work (Archuleta, 2006; Mohanty, 2003). While the research idea began with three of us (Ruth, Jessica and Danielle), we believe collective ownership can be a transformative process.

We envisioned ownership shared with the community who this work is for, namely racialized women workers within the GBV sector, the research team, and the elder advisory committee. However, through the data collection phase of this research, the idea of ownership expanded beyond our vision and was realized in the everyday actions of women who were not directly connected to our research. These small but significant actions were instrumental in moving our research forward. For example, recognizing that several women's organizations within the Hamilton GBV network had not responded to our information sessions, the project coordinator for the Hamilton GBV network, who is a racialized woman, sent out reminder emails to organizations and offered to introduce Ruth to women's organizations who had not responded to recruitment efforts via email. She had no affiliation to our research team but showed a willingness to initiate different recruitment strategies with her knowledge of organizations and the culture within the GBV network. Her support of our work was instrumental in gaining access to different organizations and illustrates how taking ownership can support resistance and transformative processes that were taking place on our research team.

Forming our research team: Focused recruitment and sensing energy as a methodological tool

We were intentional about our recruitment process to ensure we provided opportunities to racialized and student researchers. Our job descriptions were advertised internally on the York University Faculty of Health research website and distributed to the Harriet Tubman Institute and the Centre for Indigenous Students Services at York University. We shared our job calls with a network of Caribbean faculty and an Indigenous faculty member, also at York University. Through these efforts we received 27 applications from highly qualified racialized students and graduates from across Canada for three research positions. In this process, we were reminded of the barriers racialized communities face in accessing professional research opportunities in academia. We had internationally trained applicants including an academic professor and social service professionals (i.e. psychologist, social workers and teachers) who were seeking opportunities to gain 'Canadian' research experience. The number of applications illustrates that there is no shortage of talented and qualified individuals within racialized communities, particularly among first generation and new immigrant demographics. Rather, if academic institutions and principal investigators are having difficulty recruiting under-represented communities on their research projects, they must question whether the research speaks to the communities they are aiming to recruit, and whether the institution and/or research environment is deemed as safe for racialized communities. Furthermore, the volume and level of qualifications of applicants we received reveals that although universities are attempting to create

space for Black and Indigenous researchers, they may still be fledgling and inadequate to fill the demand of qualified individuals.

Danielle and I (Ruth) reviewed all applications and narrowed down those who would be interviewed. Thus, the responsibility and ownership of deciding who would be hired on the research team was shared between the academy and community. We considered a combination of factors when deciding who would work with us including their substantive areas, research experience, and lived experience with GBV personally and/or working within the sector. Aside from these areas Ruth and Danielle also relied on the energy felt in the interview. This tacit knowledge, an unspoken feeling that reclaims the practice of trusting ourselves using reason and council as demonstrated within an Indigenous and Caribbean feminist, decolonial praxis, informed our decision-making process.

We know that this knowledge is always within us, it is a part of the strength within our communities who have faced and survived the most perverse and brutal human atrocities. However, Western knowledge making processes have removed validity in these approaches and replaced them with 'concrete' ways of decision making, particularly in an academic setting. Within this framing is the belief that implicit bias is embedded within the use of energy or gut instinct but does not factor into how credentials are assessed on a curriculum vitae for applicants. Operationalizing transformative research practices meant we took permission to ground our decision making in an energy that has often guided our elders and ancestors. As Timothy (2002) indicated, African spirituality was considered essential to hone the power and control necessary for repeated rebellions and revolutions in the Caribbean throughout slavery. 'Simply the consciousness of having gods other than those possessed by the enslavers was of course tremendously mentally liberating, and served to inspire the desire for revolt' (Timothy, 2002: 134). Similarly, in Indigenous cultures, the spirit is necessary for balanced well-being and connects all living things (Battiste, 2010; Legge and Robinson, 2017). Thus, building our team utilizing this knowledge liberated us to trust our spirit in the important task of building our research team for a project that would inevitably challenge macro social and health systems.

Creating our work environment: Power dynamics and relational compensation

As the lead researcher, Ruth was aware that there were inevitable power dynamics within the research team. Team members with different levels of education and experience were hired for roles that had distinct responsibilities and we made the decision to create mentorship opportunities within the team. However, we were aware that this model could also create hierarchal working relationships that could stifle creativity and mentorship to an academic frame. With this in mind, Ruth and Jessica agreed that establishing a baseline set of working principles could be the starting point to build a respectful work environment amongst all team members, including those of us who would be seen as the research 'leads'. Given that the collaboration for this research study was with SACHA, a feminist women's organization, we chose to use their package of policies normally provided to new hires. Using these policies provided the project team with a language that was

already understood within the academy and community, allowing us to focus our attention on transforming the system. All research team members (including Jessica who is the director of SACHA) read and signed the: (1) Code of Ethics; (2) Code of Conduct for Service Provision; (3) Conflict of Interest; (4) Confidentiality; and (5) Anti-racism/Anti-oppression policies. Although power dynamics inherently exist within our team, we have strived to create a welcomed space of safety and refuge where we speak freely without having to qualify our statements. As Lorde (1984) stated, 'interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive be and the active being' (p. 2). Thus, mentorship has been reciprocal and family oriented in a way that occurs amongst racialized women in their communities, is natural, and transcends academia.

Another issue which we felt needed attention was how traditional research projects associated with universities can create exploitative work environments for racialized women. Oftentimes, the research is structured around researchers within universities being well paid while the women whose knowledge and skills are used in the process are asked to volunteer or given minimal stipends. Caribbean activists such as Andaiye, Ford Smith, and Hinds have pointed to similar challenges in multi-lateral donor organizations that operate similarly to universities with regards to payment structures between consultants and women in the community (Andaiye, 2000; Ford-Smith, 1989; Hinds, 2022). Our research project received a relatively small grant which meant that the total funds allotted to each research team member would be insufficient to employ all team members on a full-time basis. The payment options for part-time research assistants within York University are bi-weekly timesheets or monthly payments. Bi-weekly timesheets are based upon the number of hours research assistants complete each week which can fluctuate and make it difficult to plan finances to be received. Given the realities of working through COVID-19 and the way that women especially were being affected by un/underemployment we wanted to find a way to maximize the value that the team would get out of the small allocation each woman would receive (Donovan and Labonte, 2020). We were mindful of Ontario's increasingly high cost of living, the insecurity of part-time work, and the emotional and mental toll it can have on a person's well-being. Therefore, we chose to centre these realities over our need to track team members work in relation to their pay.

We decided the most sensible allocation of the funding was for each team member to receive approximately one thousand dollars per month for the first four to five months of the project. This would allow them to plan their finances in advance and receive a fairly substantial amount of the allotted money for each position per month. Some might question whether we appropriately assessed that with all the money paid upfront researchers may not complete the work. However, we were satisfied that this would not occur. The women we hired, having faced their own challenges in EDI/AO led work environments were more committed to the research process and outcomes then the financial outcomes. This research, as a part of its transformational ethos was based on a commitment by the researchers to use their skills to serve racialized women employed in the GBV sector. We opted to allow researchers to maximize the monetary possibilities of the project while simultaneously trusting the collective commitment and ownership of this work knowing that the energy we sensed from everyone was not wrong.

Participant recruitment and data collection: Code switching for organizational buy-in

Prior to entering the research field for data collection, Jessica, the director of SACHA, was concerned that participant recruitment could be hindered by the language used on our recruitment materials. Specifically, the initial title of our project was, '*Strengthening Women's Organizations in the GBV sector…*' Based on her experience in the sector, she felt the word 'strengthening' might trigger organizational defensiveness that could impact access to the field. In this sense, Jessica recognized that language does not describe reality, rather it constitutes and constructs it, because 'the availability of words, language, and discourse is constrained by the workings of power and ideology, rather than progress' (Strega, 2015: 134). Thus, Ruth, Jessica, and Danielle had several meetings about the use of language in recruitment materials, and re-worded items such as the letters to stakeholder organizations. We changed the title on all materials to, '*Understanding Women's Organizations in the GBV sector*' because we felt that to 'understand' was less intimidating than to 'strengthen'.

It is difficult to capture the emotional labour of making these decisions and the additional prudence and concern of Jessica as a partner on this project and as one of few racialized directors within the GBV network. We often asked ourselves, how do you disrupt whiteness when you need to get in the door to disrupt it? As racialized women engaging in this work, we are often challenged with policing our language, our appearance, and our ways of knowing. We wrestle with capitulatory decisions so that the research will even occur and throughout that process we constantly negotiate feeling as though we may be losing ourselves. The balancing act of these questions caused for reflection on the reality of White fragility and its occupancy in reclaiming space that our team recognized should not be negotiated but had to, to carry out the research.

In this sense, we agree with Strega (2015) that our choices as researchers can be somewhat limited by the conditions in which we work. There is power in words, but the realization and understanding of these options guide the consciousness of our choices and how we chose to position ourselves (Strega, 2015). When all may harm, choosing the least harmful is a strategy of resistance (Strega, 2015). Nevertheless, the self-regulation and linguistic gymnastics are emotional labour above the regular labour of knowledge making. That emotional labour taxes racialized researcher's wellness throughout any one research process and is one of the many reasons why our community-based research design was intentional in creating an advisory board to surround ourselves in the safety, wisdom, and support of our communities.

The emotional labour of this work was also present in data collection. In a reflexive journal note, Aaliya, a research assistant on our team, reflected on her experiences as a racialized woman interviewing racialized and white women.

> I think that there was a sense of 'professional distance' between myself and the white participants, but I was able to connect at a deeper level with the racialized participants, especially when they looked and dressed like me. I remember responding to some of her microaggressions very knowingly, and I have a sense that it was probably the same for them too – for example with [another respondent] I think she felt more comfortable speaking to me because I shared her ethnic background even though I don't know that we had the same politics… It definitely felt less performative with the racialized participants.

In this quote, she recognized how relatable the racialized participants' responses were to her own experiences and the emotion it evoked. Importantly, she realized the possible difference in their perspectives and experiences through her statement, 'I don't know that we had the same politics…', but beyond this difference was a feeling of familiarity. Her quote captures a type of 'code switching' that racialized researchers often navigate in research spaces.

Transformative resistance and emancipation of research team

'For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power I rediscovered.' (Lorde, 1984)

We began this work to support racialized women in the GBV sector who experience racism despite their workplaces having developed EDI and AO policies and their employment environments being predominantly women led spaces. A premise of the research was that the lived experiences of many racialized women go unrecognized – their stories silenced. Resurrecting their voices ignited fire in our bellies and resolve to work through some of the tensions that arose in this project. We know that a universal energy has recognized our intention and supported this project in everyday ways that have been important (such as the project coordinator within the GBV network mentioned above). This project has also given more to us than we could have imagined. We created a network of women, a supportive and safe space that has sustained several of us through difficult life moments and created moments of authentic, non-performative comradery and joy. We have realized that this work has offered us a mirror in which to examine ourselves and interactions with each other even as we also seek to support women in the GBV sector. Through deep introspection we know that our efforts to unearth the stories of women who have been silenced must also mean that we stand in our own truth and tell our stories for our own liberation. Because we requested vulnerability of our participants we also participated in this process with vulnerability. As a further act of resistance, we present parts of our own reflexive journals.

Emancipatory experiences in research

Danielle's reflection. Reclaiming ourselves as praxis means that when I accepted an opportunity to develop an Indigenous Workforce Strategy at Mohawk College, which would change my role on this project, the team celebrated my win. We continue to develop our relationship recognizing how our individual skills contribute to the collective team and research. Our relationship is ongoing and reflexive which, as a practice, makes room for transformative liberations. My perspectives, ideas and energy are grounded in my identity as Anishinaabek and as such, were instrumental to the development of the research grant, ongoing discussions, as well as contributing to problem-solving in the early days of the research project. While we are on our own journeys, we recognize our agency in creating our own futures, so that collectively we can thrive. Although my position changed, I continue to contribute to the project through consultation and

co-authorship of research. I value the community building aspect of this research and believe that Indigenous sovereignty and Black liberation are deeply intertwined. We are multi-dimensional and exceed beyond the limitations of colonial praxis. We build emancipatory relationships by upholding each other and honouring each other's gifts. Through this celebration, we reclaim freedom.

There is power in pain

Marsha's reflection. I saw the call for the research project to explore the perceptions and experiences of women working in the domestic violence sector with EDI/AO policies after a life-shattering experience. I returned to Canada in 2021 as a single mother of four children. As badly as I had wanted to be back in Canada, I needed to find a job so I could continue to meet the financial obligations of my family. I got a job to manage the EDI strategy at one of the most prestigious institutions in Canada but short weeks after, after facing severe micro-aggression, overt racism and discrimination, I was fired. I was panic filled and very close to desolate when I saw the call for this research project. I was applying for the job and at the same time mortally scared of working for another woman researcher because of my recent experience. This fear was relieved when I completed the interview with Ruth and Danielle. Although we covered the usual expectations in an interview, we also started to bond as three women who were at various stages of the academic endeavour. We each had a deep personal commitment to the women's movement and to allowing space for participation in the movement in ways that honoured our heritage and traditions. Ruth and I started to converse by email at first and then slowly by telephone calls. The lines in our relationship quickly became blurred because I started working with the research project around the same time I was trying to move to Ontario from another province to find more permanent work. I could not keep the lease on the apartment I had because I knew that I would run out of money and fall into trouble paying. Even as I started to construct GANTT charts for our research project and welcomed our research assistants on board, I became homeless. I had moved into a hotel anticipating that I would find another apartment and discovered that since I had just moved back to Canada less than 6 months ago and my credit score was not established, no one wanted to rent to me. Ruth threw open the doors of her home for my youngest son and I as my other children had not yet returned to Canada. For an entire week I feel as though our lives revolved around finding me a place to stay. This is what it looks like when Black people engage in research and intellectual endeavour. We hire each other because if we do not people become homeless. We hire each other because some of us have been arrested and may even have records in the name of the work we have done. We hire each other because we have children, and we know that a research project provides a lifeline for an entire family. Receiving the compensation for the project as lumpsum stabilized me and allowed me to pay my rent for 2 months until more permanent employment emerged. There is no doubt in my mind that the work Ruth is doing with this research project is transformative – the project threw me a critical lifeline. More importantly though, I know the researcher leading this research to live by the principles she has embedded in her research. She embodies what (Perlow et al., 2018) refers to as tapping into our collective humanity as Black women through a process of affirmation. The intention is not to hero praise

Ruth. My intention is to validate a type of research that creates room for homeless people to be good enough to be hired and for fired people to be given another chance at work. It is these actions that operationalize AO. When we contemplate the systemic structures that we are trying to rework with AO policies these biases and barriers are what must be challenged. In speaking with racialized women during the interviews we conducted, I got the sense that many of them did not feel the collective support and understanding that my work environment afforded me. I got the sense that many felt that there was vast distance between the polices that were espoused by their workplaces and the support they were getting. My case may have been an extreme one, but then again maybe not because many racialized people live one pay day between themselves and food, housing and personal insecurity. AO in that circumstance is not academic. It will be as messy and textured as survival is for racialized women.

Ruth's reflection. I could not have imagined that when we began this project, I would lose my sister to breast cancer during the research period. Although my family experienced a tremendous amount of death in my younger years, losing my sister is the most significant loss of my adult life. My sister's death disrupted my usual response to trauma and death. My almost 20-year nursing career coupled with personal traumatic experiences left me somewhat numb. My usual response to anything traumatic is to take care of what needs to be done and just keep going. However, with my sister's death I couldn't. Months after she was buried, I had many days where I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't express how I was feeling, and I realized that I didn't know how to grieve. I was somewhat annoyed with myself that I was still in pain months after her death because I felt that I could not fall behind with my work as a nursing professor. I was offered help by my school when she initially passed, but I didn't feel comfortable taking it. As a Black woman in an academic institution constructed by and for people who do not look like me, I was not prepared to expose the depths of my pain trusting that level of vulnerability to the school. Instead, I confided in a few close colleagues. Moreover, I was also in charge of this research project where we had new hires, had begun recruitment, and were troubleshooting slower than expected recruitment of participants. I had not told the team what I was going through, but I was struggling. At one virtual meeting in July 2021, I told the team what happened, and I saw Marsha's facial reaction as she was logging off the call. She knew I was carrying something heavier than what I was saying but waited for me to say it. At that time, we were looking for housing for her and she texted me, 'Ruth, I feel bad. All this time you are helping me look for housing and I didn't know you were grieving your sister'. To which I replied, 'Marsha, she has her final resting place, but you need housing'. Marsha responded with a prayer hands emoji indicating that she appreciated my help and understood what I was saying because she would do the same for another woman. In these moments we support each other through our own pain, because we can still recognize the dire situations of other women. Once the team knew what was going on, I decided to take some time to be with my family. Stepping away from this research project to grieve my sister was truly emancipatory. In the world of research and academia as an untenured professor who feels the pressures of efficiency and productivity, I released myself from maintaining a strict timeline and allowed myself to feel. Yet, I know that this self-care, which required a level of vulnerability that I am not used to, would not have been possible without the women on this project and the trust I felt

with them. AO in this sense was the wrap around support the research team provided me to step away and take the time I needed to breathe.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to illustrate how a team of racialized women researchers and community members embodied AO as praxis throughout the research process. There are three overarching points that have been made clearer through reflection of our work.

First, we affirm that AO as praxis in the creation of research ideas must be connected to larger pursuits of AO in and across marginalized communities. Our commitment to AO means that we will stand or in the case of this research project, sit with youth or any other community as they resist unjust treatment and practices. Beginning our research in community and with community has also ensured that we never lose sight of the implications of our research and the impact it can have on improving the everyday experiences of racialized women workers in the GBV sector. In this sense, we utilize research as a political tool to make visible what is invisible. But research is not the beginning or ending of AO for us as researchers. While our research team engaged in a formal working relationship on this project, many of our team members continue to work on various projects and initiatives locally and transnationally to resist anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in the GBV sector and beyond.

Secondly, AO as praxis in the research design is an exercise of centering ourselves and our cultural knowledge as well as pragmatic research preparation and response. A part of the work of Black, Indigenous, and marginalized researchers who operate within Western academic spaces is to ensure that we stay connected to our paradigms and to fight for the intellectual space. A central way we achieved this was by embracing the use of energy as a decolonial practice and methodological tool. Our project is accountable to the community participating in our research, and it is also accountable to the intuition of every researcher and community member involved in the meaning making. This may seem a chaotic ideal but forefronts the collective dependence on intuition deeply embedded in the survival of African descended and Indigenous peoples. Moreover, for Black, Indigenous and racialized women to engage in transformational and anti-oppressive research, the research project as an employment space must also be considered in the overall project design. As outlined in our experience with this research it was important that we considered how the established ways of paying research assistants can keep them as low waged workers not able to secure housing leases or fully benefit from the power of the value of the money they earn.

Additionally, research team members can be exposed to vicarious trauma when interviewing participants and racialized researchers and community members often engage in additional emotional labour that is not always readily visible. One way that we provided support on our project was through our elder advisory board. Notwithstanding the use of community advisory boards, lead researchers should make time to check in with team members regularly throughout the research process. These check-ins should not only be about the research project, but time should be incorporated to allow for informal discussion. Consistency and taking the time to know your team will be important to build trust, allowing for more meaningful and vulnerable conversations to occur. We encourage researchers to question whether the working space they have created within their research

projects are considered safe enough for research team members, such as Marsha, who experienced homelessness, to disclose what is happening in their personal lives. How many lead researchers are aware of the living conditions for those on their research teams – particularly for some funded students who live close to or below the poverty line? Researchers must agitate for this work to be counted as more than care work and recognized as creating institutional support for the ways that anti-oppressive and trans-formational research are different as a process. However, this can only occur within an academic and funding space that intentionally actions the calls by other Black Canadian scholars (Bueckert, 2022).

Lastly, AO as praxis is about emotion as method. We reiterate this as necessary to sustain and replenish the capacity of researchers to conduct transformational and anti-oppressive research (Bondi, 2006; Sharp, 2009). When we reflect on how and where our research idea was developed, it was birthed in a period of intense emotion and bold action which may challenge normative assumptions about what type of emotion is acceptable in research (Sharp, 2009). As Black, Indigenous, and women of colour researchers and community members, emotion as method means acknowledging and reminding each other about the importance of our positionalities in the co-creation of knowledge. As Thien (2005) indicates, 'an emotional subject offers an intersubjective means to negotiating our place in the world, co-produced in cultural discourses of emotion as well as through psycho-social narratives' (p. 453). This has meant that we had to work through our own fatigue, annoyance, and pain in naming the sources of our oppression while also drawing on a collective energy, that incorporates our ancestors, elders, and each other, to be strong and defiant and push back against practices that would disregard the goals of our research.

Reflexivity or creating space for one's emotions and intuitions in the research process is also a part of embedding emotion as method. We could not have foreseen that in our quest to strengthen the GBV sector for racialized women, that this project would offer us an opportunity to critically examine the work environment we had created through this research – even though we designed the study knowing that as racialized women researchers and workers we needed ways of protecting ourselves and nourishing our spirit given the environment we live in and the focus of our research. However, it was in the process of our struggle and resistance within this Canadian system that our research team became a transformative space that continues to reveal the possibilities that the actions we can take collectively as Black, Indigenous, and racialized women have for our own emancipation.

Conclusion

EDI and AO funding requirements can offer researchers a starting point to begin engaging with the messiness, discomfort, and uneasiness of AO work. However, 'check-ing the boxes' cannot be considered a marker of meaningful engagement with AO. Rather we encourage researchers to be open to the ways in which AO work must shift, adapt, and change based on the research project and team. In our work, it meant a commitment to centre the collective instead of individualized and non-contextual research. Centering the collective meant the needs of our communities were paramount, which required acts of resistance and relational compensation that centred the socio-economic conditions

of research team members while living through a pandemic. It also meant being flexible to the competing interests of our community advisory board and the changing roles of team members as life events occurred. Most importantly, anti-oppressive approaches are not prescriptive. Instead, they rest within a decolonial frame that offer researchers the confidence to explore and/or reclaim and operate from their own ways of knowing that can offer guidance, support, and comfort. Therefore, our communities must remain vigilant about the projects they engage with and what kind of environments are created for other racialized researchers and participants.

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Note

1. The major contributions of the University of the West Indies to international knowledge have been scholarship that refutes the idea that post-colonial societies were aberrant or exceptional. In several disciplines including linguistics, history and economics, intellectuals have offered alternative theories, such as the plantation model of economy and native speaker case study in linguistics that have changed the epistemological approaches to research in minority groups and locations.

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Jessica Bonilla-Damptey, is a Latinx/Indigenous woman from El Salvador, living and raised in Hamilton. She is involved in community-based projects and believes that it is important to include children in those projects. She is committed to and works towards creating a world without violence and oppression. Jessica is the director of the Sexual Assault Centre (Hamilton Area).

Danielle Boissoneau is Anishinaabek from the shorelines of the Great Lakes. Her lineages connect her thoroughly to the land and water through generations of living in kinship and then telling stories about it around fires. Danielle roots her practice in her identity as a two-spirit femme who has no qualms about the beauty in unapologetic reclamation. She moves through space and time with determination and lyrical ability that defies the impacts of intergenerational trauma and colonization.

Aaliya Khan is a PhD student in Social and Political Thought at York University. She studies gendered Islamophobia in relation to (Canadian) space. As a researcher, she is interested in the spatial politics of racial and gendered inclusion, access and place-making, and as a teacher, she is passionate about political education and pedagogy.

Anika Forde, BA (Hons), MSc in Social & Spatial Inequalities, is a researcher and program manager for the Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora. Her research interests centre on the intersectionalities of race, gender, class and space as they shape the identity/identification of racialized women and students.