

# AN EVALUATION OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION POLICIES IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

**SOPHIA MARTENSEN, PHD IN SOCIO-LEGAL STUDIES**

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## **Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

I completed a Bachelor of Arts with an Honours Specialization in Criminology and a Major in Psychology at the University of Western Ontario. Upon graduating in 2018, I was awarded the Gold Medal for Academic Achievement in the Honours Criminology program at Western. In 2019, I continued my studies at the University of Toronto, where I completed a Master's in Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies. I took a year off to focus on my professional development between 2019 and 2020, where I worked for a legal tech company in the heart of downtown Toronto as a legal research analyst. In September of 2020, I began my doctoral studies in the Socio-Legal studies program at York and I am currently in my fourth year of studies. Since September of 2020, I have also worked as a Teaching Assistant with the Department of Social Science at York University.

## **Tell us about your dissertation work and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

I have been working alongside my incredible supervisor, Dr. Laura Kwak, on the theme of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). While the project has evolved over the last few years, my focus is on investigating how anti-racist work in Canada is being done according to present understandings of racism. I ask, in what ways

are Canadian scholarly institutions engaging in race-management strategies to address concerns and complaints regarding racism and racialization in the academy?

Though race-management can take on many forms, the scope of my study is limited to an examination of EDI policies in Canadian institutions of higher learning. To date, there are several studies that examine experiences with diversity work and embodying diversity (see Ahmed, 2012), the gap between EDI on paper and EDI in action (see Peers et al., 2023), experiences with racism and racialization in the academy (see Henry et al., 2017) and how to define the EDI triad (see Gardner, Love, & Waller, 2023). To contribute to the areas of diversity and Critical Race Theory, the aim of my research is to investigate (1) how liberal strategies restrict and maintain power inequities, (2) how liberal modes of organizing can reproduce and conceal inequities, and (3) the limitations and possibilities of EDI policies and work.

I have situated my research within the Canadian context because, while EDI policies are slowly being implemented worldwide, multiculturalism plays a significant role in shaping Canada's national identity. As such, the question becomes whether EDI policies are confirming Canada's multicultural character despite evidence suggesting the inefficacy of EDI policies at producing substantial change (Henry et al., 2017).

## **What inspired you to do this work?**

The impetus for my research on EDI policies came after noticing a spike in reports of hate-motivated activity within universities across Canada during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. University faculty and students are often faced with forms of systemic racism, discrimination, and barriers to opportunities. As institutions and organizations published EDI strategies and policies in the wake of increasing racial tensions, my supervisor and I wondered if EDI emerged in response and as a solution to racial conflict. Because of my dedication to examining oppression, the way that life is organized in a hierarchy of importance, and the ways that power is merely restructured without destabilizing the racial order, I was immediately drawn to studying the relationship between EDI and systemic racism.

## **What are key takeaways you want others to come away with?**

1. Race management projects such as EDI are not new, and we can turn to affirmative action or colour-blind policies as examples of historical attempts to “manage” and “solve” the issues of racism and racialization.
2. While there is an abundance of literature examining perceptions of EDI policies, the definitions of equity, diversity, and inclusion and the EDI triad, and the experiences among faculty and students with racialization, there are few studies that have undertaken an exhaustive review of EDI policies across Canadian universities (see Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).
3. Scholars in this field agree that, although EDI policies serve to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, racialized and Indigenous faculty and students continue to experience disadvantage and racism within the academy (Henry et al., 2017). Additionally, it is argued that diversity policies do not lead to a substantial change in

the structure of the institution (Ahmed, 2012). As such, EDI policies create a “smokescreen of conformity which gives the illusion of addressing racial disadvantages” (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020, p. 531). To elaborate on this research, I will investigate the top universities across Canada to determine the possibilities and limitations of EDI policies, and how such liberal strategies maintain and reproduce power inequities.

## **Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

What excites me the most is knowing that I’m developing important work that contributes to meaningful anti-racist and EDI practices. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion as a topic of study has continued relevance in diversity studies and Critical Race Theory. Institutional commitments to EDI expose a deeper response to racial inequity and more broadly, illuminate the limitations of diversity work as an adequate ‘solution’ to the problem of racism. Therefore, my research emphasizes the need to continuously challenge and critique conversations about EDI strategies in a longer historical context of racial governmentality as a solution to racial inequity in Canada.

Further, the work I do on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion allows me to be mindful of the structures of inequality that shape my daily interactions and offers continued opportunities for self-reflection. Throughout my research process, I am constantly presented with perspectives that allow me to challenge my own thinking, ultimately fostering the possibility for lifelong learning.

## **Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

My biggest challenge is the one I am currently faced with: refining my thesis and specifying my chosen methods. It can be difficult being

submerged in the same topic day-in and day-out because you are exposed to many articles, thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and analyses. Faced with this wide array of information, it can be overwhelming to think about what original contribution you have to offer, or how to go from a broad idea to something specific and tangible. Am I simply recreating what has already been done? How am I setting myself apart? How will I approach this topic from a theoretical perspective? Which method is the most suitable for this research question?

To overcome this challenge, I check-in with my supervisor regularly to discuss my thoughts and try to narrow down my ideas. Having an outside opinion is essential because the PhD can be isolating at times when you are completing it remotely. Having the opportunity to share these ideas with someone who has a fresh perspective has been immensely helpful in advancing the project.

Above all else, I always remind myself to give myself some grace. It can be stressful thinking about producing original research and this can sometimes delay the research process because you get bogged down by minor details. My mentors here in the program have continuously reminded me that everyone has a unique perspective to offer.

### **What advice, lessons, or tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

The best piece of advice I can give is something my supervisor told me when we first joined this partnership together years ago: Your supervisor should be someone that approaches a topic in the same manner as you do. It doesn't matter if you don't study the same topic, as long as you share a similar thought process. In other words, find the supervisor that will connect with you on an intellectual level and ask questions that are in line with your thought process. This doesn't mean you won't be challenged as a researcher; it

will only mean that the challenging questions you are being asked will excite and inspire you to continue your research.

### **What are the next steps in your research?**

In March of 2023, I completed my substantive comprehensive exam and secured my committee for the proposal and dissertation. Since then, I have been working on responding to the questions posed by my committee in order to strengthen my analysis. I have recently submitted my dissertation proposal for approval and will soon begin the research process.

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