

Intersectionality and the Development of Self and Identity

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Abstract

Intersectionality is a key theoretical, empirical, and applied construct in the social sciences and the humanities. In this essay, we review the origins of the construct and the foundational theory and research that served to cement its importance in these fields. We then present a brief overview of how intersectionality guides current theory, research, and social policy in education, feminist studies, politics, psychology, and sociology, concluding with a discussion of the key issues that need to be addressed for this construct to deliver in its promise to strengthen theory, research, and practice in the social sciences.

INTRODUCTION

Theory and research on intersectionality addresses differences in social locations as they create inequalities in power and resources in historical and cultural contexts. Gender, race, class, sexuality, physical ableness, and other dimensions of identity situate some individuals as more powerful than others and consequently, perpetuate differential access to resources and privileges (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Cole, 2009; Giles, 2013; McCall, 2005; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Although there is no scientific reason for why people's gender, skin color, social class, or religion affords them special power and privileges, these cultural and social locations of power and privilege are reproduced across generations through enculturation and socialization (Bourdieu, 1989; Giles, 2013). An intersectional lens challenges scholars to rethink dichotomies such as gender that essentialize differences, power, and privilege (Stewart & McDermott, 2004), and commit them to ask "The other question"—how variations in one domain of identity, for example, gender, become more complex when another identity domain, for example, race/ethnicity, is introduced into the theoretical and empirical discussion (Davis, 2008).

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Intersectionality emerged from feminist and critical race theory and became a key contribution to the humanities and the social sciences, particularly in studies of identity and power. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), a legal scholar, who proposed that theory, research, and practice consider both gender and race in women of color's, and in particular, Black women's struggles and experiences (Davis, 2008). Crenshaw's (1991) seminal piece on intersectionality built on the Combahee River Collective's (1995) manifesto written by a group of African-American feminists in which they argued that race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are inseparable, nonadditive, nonhierarchical dimensions of oppression. Feminist and critical race scholars' writings have provided a strong interdisciplinary foundation for intersectionality theory and research. For example philosopher Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble*, addressed the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity in women's lives, sociologists' Hill Collins and Anderson's (1998) *Race, class, and gender: An Anthology*, social psychologists' Stewart and Cole (2007) and Shield's (2008) work discussed the theoretical and methodological challenges of viewing gender, sexual orientation, and power through an intersectional lens, Hurtado and Cervantes's (2009) provided an overview of Latina feminist psychology, and Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, and Sirin's (2011) discussed how pluralist methods can increase our understanding of how youth develop hyphenated selves (e.g., Muslim American) in the context of global conflicts. Foreshadowing the increased interest in intersectionality in psychology, in an oft-cited overview of gender theory and research, Stewart and McDermot (2004) hailed it as one of the most promising constructs for integrating individual, social, and cultural aspects of gender and sexuality.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Intersectionality has been key to theory, research, and current practice in multicultural education; for example, Gibson (1982), Waters (1996), and Way, Santos, Niwa, and Kim-Gervey (2008) highlighted the intersections of gender, ethnicity, social class, and immigration in the educational trajectories and peer hierarchies of adolescents in St. Croix (Gibson) and New York City (Waters and Way *et al.*), and Azmitia *et al.* (2008), analyzed these intersections in the surveys and narratives of young adults transitioning to college. More recently, in one of the few quantitative, large-scale studies addressing intersectionality, Cobarrubias (2011) used census data to identify places in the educational pipeline where oppression and privilege contribute to gender and citizenship variations in educational outcomes and persistence.

In our own research, an intersectional analytic lens on adolescents' transition to college has also revealed the nuances of gender, ethnicity, and social class as they contour students' identity development and educational pathways (see also Anthias, 2013; Ostrove, Stewart, & Curtin, 2011; Way *et al.*, 2008). To our surprise, for example, white working class women's identity narratives revealed their perception that they were more disadvantaged in college and society than working class women of color because as a result of the color of their skin, they said, they were not eligible for financial support and scholarships designated for students from historically oppressed groups. Working class white women and men also viewed students of color as more advantaged because they could form ethnicity-oriented organizations without being labeled as white supremacists or racists. Nevertheless, as they moved through college, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or class, most students came to understand how their social locations afforded them privilege or challenge, and how the egalitarian ideals of the American Dream are more myth than reality (Azmitia *et al.*, 2008; Radmacher & Azmitia, 2013; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014, see also Lott & Bullock, 2007).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite its promise and prominence, intersectionality is a concept that everyone seems to acknowledge, and yet, to date has no agreed-upon definition (Davis, 2008; Nash, 2010, Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). Davis (2008) suggested that its definitional ambiguity and vagueness has paradoxically cemented its centrality in the social sciences and humanities. As with other powerful metaphors, such as Gilligan's (1982) view that men and women are socialized "in a different voice" and Deaux and Perkins' (2001) conceptualization of the situational salience of social identities as a "kaleidoscope," intersectionality resonates with contemporary views of self and identity and perhaps for this reason, scholars have been willing to overlook the fact that theories of intersectionality are not falsifiable (Davis, 2008). To date, empirical evidence for the construct has typically come from case studies or small-scale studies (but see Covarrubias, 2011), and perhaps for this reason and other conceptual and methodological challenges, intersectionality has yet to get more traction in mainstream psychological theories (Cole, 2009; Syed, 2010). Nevertheless, theory and research on self and identity, and more broadly, culture and diversity, that considers only one domain of difference, is currently viewed as outdated because it ignores the reality that people simultaneously inhabit many categories of difference.

Intersectionality has been at the center of heated theoretical and empirical debates, with some wondering whether, given that it can generate endless lists of differences, the concept can be used productively in theory and

research (Cole, 2009, Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2010). Some scholars have also wondered whether it is possible to understand how each domain of difference operates within hierarchies of power given that if one disaggregates them, one is violating the key assumption of intersectionality, that these domains of identity are inextricably intertwined (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005).

Many recent publications in the humanities and social sciences have addressed theoretical and methodological refinements that can salvage the concept and help scholars advance theory and research. Levine-Rasky (2011), for example, proposed a conceptual model to explain how the context influences the situational salience of particular identity domains but still leaves active other intersecting identity domains, even if individuals are not immediately aware of them. Although her model provides a possible blueprint for research that addresses the problem of endless lists of intersecting identities, it begs the question about whether these intersections exist in the minds and everyday lives of children, adolescents, and adults or whether they are simply fodder for academic and political debates—that is, do ordinary folks articulate their multiple identities as intersecting in the structural and more local contexts of their lives? Moreover, does an intersectional approach to theory, research, and practice increase our ability to predict developmental, educational, and more broadly, life trajectories, and outcomes?

Feminist scholars Grabe and Else-Quest (2012) emphasize intersectionality's importance in contributing to social change, and suggest the term *transnational intersectionality*, which shifts the focus from individual differences onto the structural roots of inequality, namely, the social, economic, and political forces that perpetuate interlocking systems of discrimination. In an increasingly globalized world, research findings from a macro-level perspective that involves multiple communities and nations not only enhances our understanding of how, for example, gender oppression varies depending on its intersection with particular cultural contexts, but can also serve local social movements that draw on these data to create social change.

Bowleg (2008), Cobarrubias (2011), Cole (2009), Hancock (2007), and Syed (2010) have also proposed conceptual and methodological solutions that may advance intersectionality theory and research beyond qualitative case studies to potentially more generalizable, large-scale investigations. Cole (2009), for example, proposed three useful questions to guide psychological research on intersectionality:

1. Who is included within a social category? This question focuses attention on within-group variability and diversity, which has often been treated as error variance obscuring between group differences, as

important in its own right. Cole suggests that attention to within-group differences enriches theory and research by including groups that have not received much attention, such as children, adolescents, and adults who experience multiple categories of subordination and are potentially at risk for adverse developmental outcomes.

2. What role does inequality play? Cultural, historical, and social inequalities and their associated structural differences in access to power and resources profoundly affect individuals' lives. White and Black working class men and women have long viewed each other with distrust and animosity concerning access to jobs and interracial romantic relationships (Fine, Weiss, Addelston, & Marursza, 1997), and immigrant Latinos (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006) and Asian Americans (Kitano & Nakaoka, 2000; Ngo & Lee, 2007) have historically experienced discrimination in education and employment as a function of country of origin, receiving community, citizenship, and phenotypic characteristics.
3. Where are the similarities? Historically, intersectionality has focused attention on differences within and between social categories. Cole suggests that asking whether there are any similarities in experiences that cut across categories may be essential for moving beyond individual experiences to considering how institutions and cultures contextualize individuals' experiences to create the much-needed common ground so subordinated groups can come together for social change. Cole (2009) supports her proposal with theory and research on disability, welfare reform, and the heterosexual transmission of HIV. In our own research, we have analyzed the experiences of first- and non-first generation of college students transitioning to college to identify similarities in how gender, race, and social class identities predict their adjustment over their first year of college and in the class identity development narratives of upper class and working class college sophomores (Thomas & Azmitia, 2014).

From the US suffragist movement that empowered Sojourner Truth to spontaneously deliver her "Ain't I a woman?" speech to the Civil, Women, and Gay rights movements to the recent Occupy Movement in the United States and the revolutions in Egypt, other African nations, and Asia, diverse people have come together to work for social change. While applauding Cole's proposals for including intersectionality in psychological theory and research, Syed (2010) raises methodological concerns about Cole's conceptualization of intersectionality as statistical interactions, an approach also taken by Waters, 1996), because it deemphasizes the important role of

qualitative approaches to intersectionality and is likely to alienate the feminist and critical race theorists that carried out the foundational theory and research on intersectionality. While “mixed methods” has become another buzzword with many meanings in psychology and more broadly, the social sciences, we concur with Syed’s (2010) and Hancock’s (2007) proposals for an integrative, pluralist theoretical approach to intersectionality, its research paradigms, and social policies designed to improve the everyday lives of children, adolescents, and adults.

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