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Intersectionality in Psychology: Translational Science for Social Justice

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Abstract

Intersectionality is an analytic tool for studying and challenging complex social inequalities at the nexus of multiple systems of oppression and privilege, including race, gender, sexuality, social class, nation, age, religion, and ability. Although the term has become widely used in psychology, debates continue and confusion persists about what intersectionality actually is and how best to take an intersectional approach to psychological science. This special issue of *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* on intersectionality includes a range of methodological tools and theoretical perspectives that advance psychological research on intersectionality. In particular, these projects constitute psychological research that takes intersectionality's political aspirations seriously and envisions psychology as a tool for social justice. The articles model responsible use of intersectionality through citation practices that

reflect intersectionality's origins in Black feminist thought and women of color scholar-activism, as well as through analyses that reflect intersectionality's commitment to reflexivity, structural critique, and complexity. In this introduction, the editors reflect on intersectionality's challenge to psychology and consider the place of translational science amid global crises and what critical psychologist Michelle Fine calls "revolting times."

What is the significance of this article for the general public?

This paper introduces a special issue on the topic of intersectionality and situates this social justice-oriented scholarship in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice uprisings of 2020, and ongoing debates about psychologists' role in addressing social problems.

KEYWORDS:

intersectionality, critical psychology, social justice, Black feminism, applied psychology

"The virus does not discriminate."

Throughout the global crisis sparked by the novel coronavirus pandemic, a common refrain among journalists and public health officials is that the virus is opportunistic and nondiscriminatory (e.g., Prior, 2020). In other words, the virus that causes the deadly disease called COVID-19 will infect whomever it can infect without prejudice.

The virus does not discriminate. And yet the global pandemic is inextricable from the systemic inequalities it has laid bare throughout the planet and particularly in contexts of profound social and economic stratification, such as the United States. That the virus itself does not discriminate seems a moot point when in fact the virus has disproportionately affected those most vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and health inequalities. In the United States, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals are far more likely to contract the disease and to die from it than their White counterparts (Oppel et al., 2020). Emerging research suggests Black people are three times more likely to become infected and twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than White people; meanwhile, both Latinx and Black people are more than four times as likely than White people to require hospitalization after contracting the disease (Neuman, 2020).

The gendered dimensions of frontline labor (i.e., health care) and the economy more broadly mean that women and men encounter different vulnerabilities to the disease in diverse risk contexts. While large numbers of White middle- and upper-income people can work from home during the recession caused by the pandemic, the overrepresentation of Latinx women in domestic, hospitality, leisure, and service-based indoor labor has resulted in greater rates of unemployment relative to Latinx men, as well as White women and White men (Gould et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Black workers have faced greater health insecurities in frontline occupations deemed essential, sometimes with minimal strategies to mitigate viral transmission (Gould et al., 2020). U.S. President Donald J. Trump and White House officials regularly refer to the virus, SARS-CoV-2, as the "Chinese virus," the "virus from China," or more explicit racial slurs (Vazquez, 2020), while Asian Americans have reported an alarming rise in discrimination and racist interpersonal and physical violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). Sexual

and gender minorities, who already face social isolation and structural stigma—including its attendant health effects (Hatzenbuehler, 2016)—now confront the psychological consequences of social and physical distancing. Compounding these stressors are the heightened dangers of the disease for individuals living with HIV and compromised immune systems. Because the preexisting health conditions that appear to make COVID-19 more deadly are unevenly distributed across the U.S. population and are overrepresented among racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, sexual and gender minorities, and poor and working-class individuals, the epidemiological landscape of the novel coronavirus is similarly imbalanced (Oppel et al., 2020).

That the virus does not discriminate is a mundane scientific observation with almost no substantive consequence for how COVID-19 has devastated lives and reshaped our social worlds. In order to begin to adequately understand and combat the pervasive, and inevitably long-term social and psychological consequences of the global pandemic, social and behavioral scientists need frameworks and methods equipped to capture the complexity of the novel coronavirus's wrath. Prevention, mitigation, and recovery efforts must be sufficiently attuned to the intersections of inequality that existed before COVID-19 and will persist in its wake.

Although we conceptualized this issue on intersectionality in psychology almost a year before the novel coronavirus became the greatest global health crisis since the 1918 influenza pandemic, the current pandemic has underscored the urgency of intersectionality and of applied, translational science. Barely legible to most psychologists only 15 years ago, intersectionality has moved from the margins to the mainstream of psychological research on inequalities. Psychologists' enthusiasm for intersectionality is evidenced by widely cited papers (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009), special issues and collections (Parent et al., 2013; Santos & Toomey, 2018; Shields, 2008), forums and special sections (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Grzanka et al., 2017), and the appearance of intersectional discourse across the discipline (Moradi et al., 2020)—not just in feminist and multicultural psychology. And while guidelines for best practices (Lewis & Grzanka, 2016; Warner, 2008) and responsible implementation of intersectionality research (Cole, 2009; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017) have circulated since intersectionality became a buzzword in psychology (Grzanka, 2020), extensive debates about proper usage of intersectional approaches persist (e.g., Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Syed, 2010). Some have observed that the uptake of intersectionality in psychology is largely rhetorical and superficial: a way of describing multiple social identities without attending to the coconstitution of oppressive social forces or conducting research without taking seriously the social justice politics and epistemic assumptions undergirding intersectionality (Shin et al., 2017). Others have focused on issues of measurement (Lewis & Neville, 2015; Scheim & Bauer, 2019), suggesting that intersectional scales and psychometric tools are best equipped to assess intersectional empirical phenomena. And others have argued for fundamental reconceptualization of key psychological constructs and tenets by insisting that intersectionality's challenge to psychology is far greater than a methodological or statistical problem (Rosenthal, 2016; Warner et al., 2016).

These ongoing debates about intersectionality in psychology have garnered significant attention (e.g., Warner et al., 2010) and at least partially motivated the editors of *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* to devote an entire issue to the topic for the first time in the journal's history. Another equally important impetus for the special issue is the potential for intersectionality-informed

work to enhance the translational capacity of psychological science. Indeed, intersectionality is fundamentally translational—although most of intersectionality’s inaugurators in Black feminist and women of color activism in the 19th and 20th centuries would likely not have characterized it that way (May, 2015). For women such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, and Maria Stewart, the fight for justice for U.S. Black women and similarly situated groups worldwide was a necessity (Collins, 1990/2000), not an optional approach or implications section in a psychological article. The intersectional nature of Black feminist thought reflects U.S. Black women’s lived experiences at the nexus of oppressions and is inseparable from Black women’s resistance movements; Collins (1990/2000) characterized this relationship between resistance and oppression as dialectic and echoed her earlier theorization (Collins, 1986) of Black women’s standpoint as one of the “outsider within.” A key contribution of Black feminist theorizations of intersectionality is the idea that lived experiences of marginalization and violence are a powerful source of knowledge and social action. Just as knowledge can enact harm (Foucault, 1972), intersectionality’s foremothers showed how knowledge can function as a form of social justice by exposing injustice, identifying and explaining social problems, and uniting groups across differences in solidarity against oppression (May, 2015).

If the phrase “translational issues in psychological science” suggests that some science has translational value, an intersectional approach to scientific inquiry would put translation at the conceptual center. Reconfiguring scientific values in this way does not minimize the importance of validity, reliability, or reproducibility, but yokes with these priorities a commitment to knowledge that enhances well-being and equity for all, especially those affected by systemic inequalities. For example, Grzanka et al. (2017) operationalized intersectionality as “the study and critique of how multiple social systems intersect to produce and sustain complex inequalities” (p. 453) and emphasized the critical, justice focus of intersectionality as much as its analytical, empirical rigor. One of the reasons intersectionality has fascinated and perplexed so many psychologists is because it is not a scientific theory and yet has proven to be a powerful tool for conceptualizing oppression and privilege, as well as for challenging systemic inequality through research (Cole, 2009; Rosenthal, 2016), teaching (Case, 2017), practice (Adames et al., 2018), and advocacy (Hage et al., 2020).

Intersectionality *the term* appeared in academic writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s when critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000) published landmark texts that introduced intersectionality as a radical critique of institutional violence. They argued that institutions including law, politics, and education erase the experiences of women of color and produce unique forms of discrimination and harm that affect, in particular, African American women in ways that are distinct from anti-Black racism toward African American men and sexist discrimination toward White women. Further, intersectionality offered a critique of antiracist and feminist social movements that reproduce such structural violence through “single-axis” political strategies that deny the complexity of oppression for women of color who face racism, sexism, and class discrimination, for example, as well thoroughly unique forms of inequality (e.g., gendered racism) that cannot be reduced to or derived from the experiences of prototypical Black men and White women. Further, these early texts by Crenshaw and Collins introduced key concepts in intersectionality studies, including the matrix of domination and Crenshaw’s typology of the structural, political, and representational dimensions of oppression.

It is now widely recognized that intersectionality's intellectual history far predates academics' interest in the concept. Before it was called "intersectionality," the ideas represented by the term had been a foundational element of U.S. Black women and women of color political organizing and coalition building (Cole, 2008; May, 2015). Collins and Bilge (2020) characterize intersectionality as an analytic tool comprising the following core ideas: social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, relationality, social justice, and complexity (p. 31). Similarly, Collins (1990/2000, 2019) has consistently positioned intersectionality as a critical social theory—a framework for understanding injustice and promoting social justice—rather than a politically agnostic scientific or testable theory. Although one can trace a conceptual line from these early texts to enthusiastic uptake of intersectionality in psychology during the first decade of the 20th century (Moradi et al., 2020), it is likewise important to note that feminist and multicultural psychologists have been engaging intersectional themes and drawing on women of color feminisms to do so for generations (Grzanka, 2018). Path-breaking psychologists, including Oliva Espín (1993); Aída Hurtado (1989), and Michelle Fine (1992), for example, have been advancing intersectional ideas (e.g., standpoint) and methods (e.g., critical participatory action research) for decades and have inspired new generations of scholars who are imagining novel ways to harness psychological science as a tool for collective liberation and social justice.

The Contributions in the Special Issue

The articles in this issue collectively represent how intersectionality can animate translational science in psychology. Through a range of empirical and conceptual articles, including experimental, quantitative, and qualitative research from across the discipline, these articles link psychological inquiry to applied social issues by way of intersectionality. As an editorial collective, we evaluated submissions based on the extent to which they represented "strong" versus "weak" approaches to intersectionality, which Dill and Kohlman (2012) distinguished as approaches that merely examine multiple dimensions of social identity (i.e., weak) versus those that consider social systems in relation to each other. Further, we considered how each article takes social justice concerns and potential applications of findings to be more than "implications"; in this sense, we followed Shin et al.'s (2017) extension of Dill and Kohlman's framework to prioritize articles that could be characterized as "transformative" insofar as they argue for or make systems-level interventions. Notably, the articles included in this special issue are far less about debating the meaning and uses of intersectionality than they are about demonstrating its analytic contributions to psychological science. Their work represents responsible use of intersectionality (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017) through citation practices that link intersectionality's contemporary applications to its origins in women of color theorizing and activism, careful consideration of how oppression and privilege manifest simultaneously in ways that are relational and complex, and thoughtful foregrounding of the structural and political dimensions of inequality rather than a fixation on identities as the end point of intersectional analysis and critique. Finally, while several of the authors demonstrate intersectionality's potential applications in various sites of inquiry and with diverse populations, three of the seven articles (Brassel, Davis, et al., 2020; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Kilgore et al., 2020) focus on Black women specifically.

Albuja et al. (2020) extend current thinking on intersectionality by examining how belonging to multiple minority categories within a single system (e.g., race) can create unique experiences

of marginalization. The authors draw attention to the identity experiences of dual-minority biracial people, particularly the extent to which being told to identify differently or being asked about one's racial identity may be uniquely stressful for biracial individuals who cannot claim a high-status White identity. They take intersectionality's focus on interlocking systems of oppression to explore how multiple experiences of racialization may produce "intra-race intersectionality" for dual-minority biracial individuals. The results demonstrate the need for greater consideration in theory and research of the positionality, experiences, and meaning making of individuals with multiple identities within a given social category (i.e., race). Directly responding to Cole's (2009) question "Who is included in this category?", their important extension of current thinking on intersectionality has implications for how individuals are grouped and studied by their race and ethnicity, as well as what psychologists count as intersectional.

Drawing on methods traditionally underrepresented in psychology, Singh and Bullock (2020) use feminist discourse analysis to examine mainstream newspaper coverage of the 2013 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), especially with respect to race, class, and gender. Their work harkens to some of the most classic writing on intersectionality, namely, Crenshaw's (1991) landmark analysis of the limitations of domestic violence prevention and intervention to acknowledge and attend to the experiences of women of color. Singh and Bullock (2020) found that news articles represented law enforcement as the primary and preferred intervention for domestic and sexual violence, whereas systemic interventions were given more limited coverage. Additionally, they found that contextual and intersectional factors related to sexual and domestic violence (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) were given only superficial coverage. By focusing on media coverage of VAWA, Singh and Bullock highlight the prevalence of nonintersectional, single-axis framings of violence against women in public discourse, as well as the potential problematic intervention strategies that may be associated with these limited conceptualizations. Without understanding violence against women through an intersectional lens, one can run the risk of misunderstanding or even harming survivors. Although the authors focus on mainstream news coverage, their work has direct implications for more traditional psychological research and practice. Anti-intersectional or "intersectionality-lite" (Grzanka & Miles, 2016) perspectives on research within psychology or social justice issues at large limit understandings of the problem, as well as limit psychologists' ability to conceive of and implement effective prevention or intervention strategies.

Huffman et al. (2020) highlight the importance of examining lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity, gender identity, and religious-spiritual identity in understanding emotional well-being and life satisfaction. In their article, Huffman and colleagues (2020) demonstrate the limitations of a single-axis framework to capture identity development and mental health in the context of religion and spirituality among sexual minorities. They found that although religiosity and spirituality were associated with a negative view of one's LGB identity, and a negative view of one's LGB identity was associated with lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction, higher levels of religiosity and spirituality in and of themselves were not associated with negative self-esteem or negative life satisfaction for LGB individuals. These findings suggest individuals may experience heterosexism and sexism not only within society in general but also within some religious communities. Huffman et al. document the importance of studying both the individual and sociocultural contexts of identity development when conceptualizing mental health and designing appropriate interventions.

Accordingly, they conclude with intervention strategies at both individual and cultural levels, providing a helpful framework for taking an intersectional approach to mental health.

Coles and Pasek (2020) revisit the classic psychological concept of intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) in their experimental work on dominant stereotypes and the social-cognitive erasure of Black women. This study used a stereotypical attribute awareness task and in turn found that prototypes of Black and White racial groups were constructed in gendered ways that leave Black women unrecognized as women and underdifferentiated from Black men. Dual exclusion and underdifferentiation help explain Black women's simultaneous victimization by the legal system and neglect when social movements take a single-axis approach to advocacy (e.g., failing to account for other social identities when advocating for racial justice). The findings from this study buttress activists' arguments that the legal system and social justice movements must examine how the social group prototypes guiding their policies and advocacy might victimize Black women by failing to recognize their unique gendered racial experiences. By attending to the degree of differentiation between social groups, Coles and Pasek also point to a new tool for researchers to use when exploring intersectional issues.

Brassel, Davis, et al. (2020) are not the first to make the case for intersectionality in the study of sexual harassment (e.g., Kohlman, 2004), but their conceptual piece suggests ways to better understand the harassment experiences of Black queer women at work. Brassel and colleagues begin from the premise that workplace sexual harassment is not race- and sexuality-neutral. They then propose that taking an intersectional approach to the application of "selective incivility" in research can contribute to a deeper and more expansive understanding of the mechanisms that influence workplace sexual harassment. This move has the potential to help researchers better estimate the prevalence and outcomes of workplace sexual harassment by assessing the ways multiple, interlocking systems of power and oppression influence workplace sexual harassment. They conclude by reminding researchers that while the incorporation of race and gender into research designs is a key step in potentially uncovering the complexity of workplace sexual harassment, these are hardly the only dimensions of difference on which sexual harassment is constituted and asymmetrically experienced at work.

What does hegemonic masculinity look like in intersectional relief? Brassel, Settles, et al.'s (2020) contribution to the special issue offers an answer to this question via qualitative examination of how racial power and privilege shape both Black and White men's perceptions and experiences of manhood in the contemporary United States. Brassel and colleagues found that the intersection of race and gender actually produced different and similar experiences of manhood, once again reminding psychologists of Cole's (2009) emphasis on continuities as well as divergences in the study of intersectional phenomena. For example, they found both Black and White men shared responsibility to others as a defining aspect of manhood, yet Black and White men were differentiated in the scope of this responsibility. Black men perceived their responsibility as encompassing their nuclear and extended family, their neighborhood, and the Black community writ large, whereas White men perceived their responsibility as limited only to their nuclear families. Both Black and White men acknowledged male privilege. However, Black men attributed their male privilege to structural forces, while White men attributed their advantages to individual characteristics of men and women. Further,

White men deflected from acknowledging the structural origins of male privilege by asserting that their privilege resulted from women's deficiencies in terms of values and/or abilities. Brassel and colleagues' study exemplifies the power of intersectionality as a heuristic to explore systems of power and privilege within unmarked and socially dominant groups. Their research design and subsequent findings unsettled the default assumption of White men's masculinity as normative and prototypical. This process allowed the researchers to name and interrogate how race broadly and Whiteness in particular shaped participants' perception and experience of manhood.

Intersectional Psychology in "Revolting Times"

Our issue arrives in a moment of unanticipated, unprecedented crisis. Just as the coronavirus pandemic is impossible to divorce from the profound social inequalities it has exacerbated, it is similarly impossible to separate the racial justice uprisings of 2020 from any serious consideration of intersectionality in the time of COVID-19. Spring 2020 was not the beginning of the Movement for Black Lives or #BlackLivesMatter, but the intersectional movement for racial justice in the United States reached an apex in the midst of a global pandemic as police officers across the country continued to kill unarmed African Americans, including (but hardly limited to) George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks. Protests against White supremacy and systemic racism are ongoing (as of this writing) around the nation—and across the world—and activists have emphasized the necessity of intersectional perspectives to recognize the gendered and sexual dimensions of state violence toward Black women (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). Although the central concerns of intersectionality's proponents are not new—social movements built on coalitions, systematic dismantling of oppressive institutional and organizational structures, recognizing the harm single-axis policies and politics do to nonprototypical group members, centering the perspectives of multiply marginalized groups—they now command significant attention in politics, popular culture, and academic research. Just as Collins (1990/2000) described Black feminist thought as characterized by a dialectic of oppression and resistance, the injustices and stark social inequalities of the 21st century are met today by sustained, organized resistance, much of which is being led by young Black women and other women of color (e.g., Renkl, 2020).

Over the past decade, critical psychologist Michelle Fine (2012, 2016, 2018) has been writing and speaking about the perils and opportunities of our contemporary moment and the potential roles of psychologists in what she calls "revolting times." Using double entendre to denote the realities of "voracious dispossession" and "virulent white nationalisms" that are both revolting and spark revolt (p. 429), Fine (2018) confronts psychologists and strikes at the core of the discipline's stated commitment to the public good (American Psychological Association, 2017): Contribute to justice movements and social transformation or be complicit in producing science that reproduces inequities. Critically, Fine frames the question of social justice in psychology not strictly in ethical terms (see also Hammack, 2018). She argues psychologists must be engaged in the rigorous documentation of injustice in the world, especially "*within the psychological canon*" (p. 431, emphasis added). This work involves developing and circulating new frameworks and key constructs alongside activist allies and organizers whose knowledge is created within the actual diverse communities we claim to serve. Methodological innovation, ontological critique of tacit disciplinary knowledge, a normative commitment to justice,

and an outward-facing, deeply public science are intertwined principles of Fine's vision of a psychology fit for these revolting times.

The articles in this issue reflect an aspiration toward that kind of psychological science that rejects business as usual and envisions research as a critical, collaborative justice project. The methodological diversity reflected in these projects is striking. Kilgore et al. (2020); Brassel, Settles, et al. (2020); and Singh and Bullock (2020) use critical qualitative methods to explore intersectionality in individual lives and cultural representation. Coles and Pasek (2020), Albuja et al. (2020), and Huffman et al. (2020) use more traditional psychological tools, including experimentation, to ask intersectionality-informed questions that advance knowledge of stereotyping, discrimination, and well-being, particularly for nonprototypical and multiply marginalized populations. Finally, Brassel, Davis, and colleagues (2020) productively critique a canon of psychological research on sexual harassment in the interest of centering an often-overlooked population—Black queer women—whose experiences of workplace harassment are not merely derivative of those of their heterosexual and White counterparts. Although intersectionality is sometimes lampooned, caricatured, and mischaracterized as “grievance studies” or possessing a dangerous, nihilistic politics of victimhood (Coaston, 2019), the work in this issue exemplifies intersectionality's promise to animate research that is deeply critical, pragmatic, and constructive. Surely, incorporating intersectionality into psychological science raises disquieting and sometimes uncomfortable questions about how psychologists do their work, what values and perspectives the discipline prioritizes, and whom psychologists include and exclude in the knowledge production process. But as the work featured here evinces, intersectionality is not antipsychological or antiscientific. To the contrary, intersectionality remains an indispensable tool for crafting innovative science that seeks, as Hammack (2018) phrased it, “to be of use” in these revolting times. From that vantage point, the knowledge offered by these articles is actually profoundly optimistic. In the middle of pandemic, in a time of racial crises, and in an era of political polarization and overwhelming uncertainty about the future, intersectionality offers psychology a way of thinking otherwise and imagining justice beyond the limits of the present. It has been our privilege to shepherd this important work forward.

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