

Demarginalizing women of color in intersectionality scholarship in psychology: A Black feminist critique

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Abstract

Psychology's disciplinary interests and methodological norms lead psychologists to look for intersectionality at the level of individuals and variables, with an attendant focus on identities rather than social structures of inequality. Accordingly, many social science approaches reframe intersectionality as a tool to understand complexity, rather than oppression and liberation. At the same time, social science scholars deploying intersectionality frameworks have moved the focus of the analytic framework away from the particular subject position and social location of Black women and the vulnerabilities they face. In these ways, even at a moment when intersectionality is exceedingly visible in social science, including psychology, women of color are not visible in that success. These trends represent not only an injustice but also a threat to the radical potential of intersectionality to transform scholarship and practice. This article aims to recenter women of color in this special issue by discussing what the collected papers can tell us about the lives of women of color, their status as creators of knowledge, and useful approaches for deploying intersectionality frameworks within psychology.

It has become a truism that critical legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw originated the term intersectionality in 1989. Her framing drew on and extended writing and activism by generations of

African American women to theorize “the idea that systems of oppression—namely, racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism—worked together to create a set of social conditions under which Black women and other women of color lived and labored, always in a kind of invisible but ever-present social jeopardy” (Cooper, 2015, p. 385). Nearly 20 years later, in 2008, the concept arguably made its debut in academic psychology in a special issue of *Sex Roles* (Shields, 2008). In the wake of that volume, publications in psychology invoking the term have proliferated. A recent search of PsycInfo identified 1277 peer-reviewed articles appearing since 2008 which included “intersectionality” in their abstracts. During the same time, there has been a continued effort to identify best practices for research within these frameworks (e.g., Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016a,b; Grzanka, 2020; McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). Yet questions of how to deploy this framework within social science, particularly psychology, persist.

SOCIAL IDENTITIES VERSUS SOCIAL STRUCTURES

One often implicit, but occasionally overt (e.g., Warner et al., 2016), tension in this literature is whether intersectionality primarily describes social identities or whether it is properly an analytic framework explaining structural inequality and power. Theorists are clear that to the extent that intersectionality addresses categories of identity it is in the service of understanding social, political, and economic power (Cho et al., 2013):

The recasting of intersectionality as a theory primarily fascinated with the infinite combinations and implications of overlapping identities from an analytic initially concerned with the structures of power and exclusions is curious given the explicit references to the structures that appear in much of the early work. Within academic as well as political discourse Black feminism emphasizes the role of structures in constituting the conditions of life in which racially and economically marginalized women were situated. (p. 797)

Nevertheless, psychology’s disciplinary interests and methodological norms create an “epistemic riptide” (Grzanka, 2017, p. 250), leading psychologists to look for intersectionality at the level of individuals and variables again and again (Grzanka, 2020).

Despite this focus on identities, as intersectionality traveled from feminist and critical race theory to psychology and other social sciences, many scholars in these disciplines have moved its focus away from the particular social identity that was the original motivation for the concept: the subject position and social location of Black women and the vulnerabilities they face at this intersection. In her foundational paper, from which I borrow the title of this article, Crenshaw (1989) famously drew a comparison between Black women’s jeopardy to both racism and sexism and traffic coming simultaneously from multiple directions. She argued Black women could not find legal remedies because the law is constructed as if traffic flows from only one direction at a time. As had generations of women of color scholar-activists before her, Crenshaw generated theory not for its own sake, but to acknowledge the contexts of Black women’s lives so that injustice could be corrected. In the act of theorizing the conditions of their lives, Black women scholar-activists centered themselves as knowers and as the subjects of their knowledge, toward the goal of what May called *antisubordination* (2015, p. 229). Yet despite the persistent focus on social identity in psychological research claiming to deploy intersectionality frameworks, relatively little attention in psychology has been paid to the identities of those who create knowledge and those whose lives provided the impetus for the development of intersectionality.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF WOMEN OF COLOR FROM INTERSECTIONALITY STUDIES

This omission is consistent with Alexander-Floyd's bold argument that "post-black feminist definitions of intersectionality in the social sciences have 'disappeared' black women as knowledge producers and subjects of investigation" (2012, p. 1). Alexander-Floyd observed that social science approaches reframe intersectionality as a tool to understand complexity, rather than oppression (and by extension, liberation). This move, which she calls a bait-and-switch, depoliticizes intersectionality: "Elevating a description of identity and its lived realities to intersectionality's *raison d'être* decenters [B]lack women and women of color as the subjects of investigation" (p. 11). She also critiqued approaches that attempt to universalize intersectionality by treating it as a research paradigm that can be applied to any group using disciplinary research methods. This reframing reinforces the hegemony of conventional positivist and quantitative approaches, while denigrating research grounded in more phenomenological approaches or liberatory values (e.g., ethnography, participatory-action research, etc.). She noted as well that normative disciplinary citational practices often silence women of color scholars (see also Signorella, 2020). Ultimately, by distancing intersectionality from the lives and concerns of women of color, practices within the social sciences often obscure the contributions and intentions of Black women, "de-authoriz[ing] them as knowledge producers who are able to discern their own epistemological priorities and utilize their own choice of methods" (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 16).

In these ways, even at a moment when intersectionality is exceedingly visible in social science, women of color have to some extent been "disappeared" (Alexander-Floyd, 2012) from that success. Perhaps this should come as no surprise in an academic system that continues to be marked by racism and sexism (Ahmed, 2012; Stewart & Valian, 2018). These dynamics are also implied in Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach's (2008) concept of *intersectional invisibility*, which holds that individuals holding two marginalized statuses (e.g., women of color) are not viewed as representative of either group, and thus are overlooked by dominant group members. Indeed, this was exactly Crenshaw's point in her original 1989 article about antidiscrimination law. This phenomenon is typically discussed as a function of the human tendency to use prototypes, but is nevertheless grounded in power. They argued:

In a pluralistic society, the socially dominant group will often have the power to define its ingroup norms as the standard for society as a whole. Since white people have been the socially dominant ethnic group in the modern Western context, whiteness tends to define the societal norm in most Western nations (Bonilla-Silva, 2000; Sue, 1999). In the U.S., the ethnocentric definition of white people as prototypical citizens and non-white people as non-prototypical citizens is revealed in the tendency to automatically associate symbols of American identity more strongly with white Americans and symbols of foreignness more strongly with black Americans and Asian-Americans. (Devos & Banaji, 2005, p. 381)

In academic contexts in which the experiences and attitudes of powerful groups are defined as the norm, women of color, subordinated by (at least) racism and sexism, are additionally vulnerable to having their presence and contributions overlooked, erased, and even appropriated. Put another way, women of color producing scholarship on intersectionality are themselves at risk of intersectional invisibility (Settles et al., 2020, describe the mechanisms through which this may take place).

This dynamic is by no means limited to academic contexts. For example, in the introduction to this volume, Overstreet et al. (2020) discuss the important work of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, founded by three Black women organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—to draw attention to Black victims of police violence. Yet the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) noted that Black men’s victimization is more often represented as emblematic of systematic police brutality against African Americans than is violence perpetrated against Black women and girls, and accordingly there has been more media coverage and public response to state violence against Black men (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). In response, the AAPF organized the Say Her Name campaign to bring attention to the experiences of Black women and girls who have been the targets of police violence “in an effort to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally” (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015, p. 4). They noted that although Black women often experience violence at the hands of police that takes similar forms to that experienced by men, Black women also are victimized based on gender and sexuality, and the lack of representation of these cases obscures a full picture of systematic state violence. To illustrate, Black women experience high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) compared to women of other races, and calls to police can result in additional and more extreme victimization. Crenshaw and Ritchie presented multiple cases in which police responding to reports of IPV shot and killed Black women victims. But because Black women are not visible in this conversation, these experiences are outside the national discourse on police violence.

The need for the Say Her Name campaign alongside the work of the BLM movement is a conspicuous example of how the intersectional invisibility of Black women and women of color is a significant and persistent drag on antistatist efforts, even in progressive social movements, just as it is in critical academic spaces.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The intellectual tradition that led to the development of intersectionality was established by African American and other women of color in an effort to highlight the circumstances of their lives, to challenge their subordination, and to bring attention to their strengths, resistance, and their work for liberation. However, as the idea has traveled across academia, women of color have become less visible in this literature both as knowers and as subjects. This tendency represents not only an injustice, but also a threat to the radical potential of intersectionality to transform scholarship and practice in psychology and beyond. In the rest of this article, I aim to center women of color in this special issue by briefly discussing six themes emerging in the papers in this volume and what they can tell us about the lives of women of color, their status as creators of knowledge, and novel approaches for deploying intersectionality frameworks within psychology.

First, rather than being primarily a descriptor for multiple identities, intersectionality is an analytic framework exquisitely suited for *evaluation of the adequacy of social policies* to meet the needs of multiply marginalized populations, as demonstrated in Crenshaw’s early papers (1989, 1991). Articles in this volume by (Heberle et al., 2020) and Bullock et al. (2020) demonstrate the power of intersectionality to reveal populations who are not served by policy, the many ways in which policies may in fact perpetuate harm, and how disadvantages aggregate and amplify each other across lives and generations for people from multiply marginalized groups. These dynamics are raced and gendered. The authors use the intersectionality frameworks deployed in these articles to generate useful recommendations for policy alternatives.

Second, even as intersectionality cannot be reduced to the study of identity, Luft and Ward (2009) noted that “Identities [are] the lines along which power is structured and distributed” (p. 33), and an intersectionality framework can be deployed to reveal the nuances of *how identity structures power*. In this volume, Hagai et al. (2020) identify generation as a marker of social and political change as they explore differences in the identities of sexual minorities who came of age before and after the AIDS/HIV crisis. Rosenthal et al. (2020) asked Black and Latinx Americans how they understand and resist the gendered sexual stereotypes applied to their groups. In both cases, these authors create opportunities for minoritized groups to explain their understanding and experience of identities associated with “the group processes that define systems of social inequality” (Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003, p. 190) and shape individuals’ life chances and choices. Rather than conceptualizing social identity as an individual-level, categorical variable describing different kinds of people, these studies take participants’ narration of their own experience of lived social structure as the object of study.

Third, elsewhere (Cole, 2009) I have urged psychologists aiming to address intersectional questions in their research not to limit themselves to the study of difference (which is privileged by the practice of null hypothesis testing), but also to pay *attention to similarities*. “Looking for commonality across difference entails viewing social categories as reflecting what individuals, institutions, and cultures do, rather than simply as characteristics of individuals. This shift opens up the possibility to recognize common ground between groups, even those deemed fundamentally different by conventional categories” (p. 175). This approach is informed by the work of activists to create coalitions across difference (Cole, 2009). In this volume, articles by Ellison and Langhout (2020), Richter et al. (2020), and Nair and Vollhardt (2020) do just that. In particular, Ellison and Langhout and Richter et al., provide detailed accounts of the on-the-ground relationship building demanded in coalitional and solidarity work, work that has long been central to organizing by women of color (Cole & Luna, 2010). Case et al.’s study of ally behavior (2020) represents an important counterpoint, identifying obstacles to the development of such alliances.

Fourth, just as it has traveled across disciplines, *intersectionality has transcended US borders*, moving “internationally both as a means to frame dynamics that have been historically distinct within other domestic spheres and also as a way to contest material and political realities that are, by some measures, part of global and transhistorical relations of power” (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 309). The usefulness of this movement is evidenced in articles by Nair and Vollhardt (2020), who foreground the importance of religion and caste in India, and in Young’s (2020) article exploring the effects of continuing legacies of colonialism and nationalism in healthcare discrimination and disparities faced by African Australians. Obviously, such inquiries are key if psychology is to deepen our understanding of women of color’s experience internationally and transnationally.

Fifth, recognizing that all knowledge is situated, the articles in this volume insist on the *importance of critical reflexivity* concerning researchers’ own identities and standpoints. Most of the articles in this special issue include details about the authors’ identities and background. In the best cases, this information moves beyond demographic description to discuss not only how the authors’ social locations, identifications, and the power associated with them may have affected their interpretations, but also the methodological decisions they made to address gaps and biases. The importance of such reflection has long been recognized in feminist research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012), but this information is rarely included in psychology journals. Toward this end, I’ll note here that I identify as a Generation X Black feminist, a heterosexual, cisgender woman from a biracial family. My training coincided with the flowering of academic Black feminism in the late 80s and early 90s, and these writings guided the development of my academic interests and provided frameworks that continue to appear in my work (see Cole, 2020, for a fuller

discussion). Clearly, this background informs the way I have framed this article; importantly my choices are as much due to my intellectual commitments as to my group memberships (or perhaps more). Careful attention to this nuance is crucial if such reflexivity is to serve to illuminate authors' standpoints rather than to re-inscribe essentialist beliefs about group homogeneity in experience, attitudes, and values.

Other types of critical reflexivity are seen in articles by Williams et al. (2020) and Richter et al. (2020). Williams et al. (2020) described a study they conducted using conventional disciplinary methods and reflect on how they might have approached it differently if it were prospectively framed using intersectionality. Richter and colleagues performed what might be called in another discipline an autoethnography to probe their own experience of alliance building as scholar-activists in a university facing radical restructuring. Both articles are notable for their frank self-evaluation and their departure from the types of academic writing seen in psychology journals. In their own ways, both are models for the type of work we might hope to see as scholars attempt to understand participants whose identities differ from their own, and for evaluating their own intersectional praxis, particularly ally behavior.

The sixth and final theme is *absence and invisibility*. Kimberlé Crenshaw and other women of color theorized intersectionality and developed its praxis because the contexts of their lives were not visible within terms of the social categories as they had been framed by dominant groups. Nevertheless, articles within this issue demonstrate how this kind of invisibility persists and is both a cause and a consequence of inequality. Heberle et al.'s (2020) systematic review showed that almost no research exists examining the intergenerational impacts of U.S. state-perpetrated violence on families with young children despite the pervasiveness of such violence and its disproportionate impact on families whose intersectional identities render them vulnerable. This absence represents a failure to acknowledge the existence and prevalence of this violence, both precursors to addressing this social problem with structural (rather than individual level, and potentially victim-blaming) solutions. Settles et al. (2020) have developed a detailed model of the multiple routes through which intersectionality itself, and by extension women of color scholars, are marginalized, minimized, and erased from the mainstream of scholarship in psychology. They offer solutions at a structural level, including that disciplinary gatekeepers should "loosen their hold" on defining what content counts as mainstream and what qualities of research constitute rigor. Both papers describe the cost of disciplinary resistance to acknowledging the insights of intersectionality.

CONCLUSION

In an essay about the misuses of the concept, Luft and Ward (2009) reminded readers of intersectionality's social justice imperative and noted that without clear guidelines for intersectional praxis there cannot be accountability for its responsible use. Under these circumstances, intersectionality remains stubbornly on the intellectual horizon, and this is in fact desirable:

we have also tried to communicate the value of keeping intersectionality on our growing edge, a politics of "not yet," or just out of reach. To suggest that we have already achieved intersectional consciousness, or to imagine that it is sweeping the nation, would be to mistake its intellectual and rhetorical uses for the social justice outcomes for which it strives. It is premature to hail intersectionality's popularity (which goes hand in hand with noting that it is soon to be "old news") . . . [because] we have yet to

do the work of interrogating our investments in identities themselves. (Luft & Ward, 2009, p. 33)

The papers in this special issue work toward such an interrogation, carefully contextualizing their explorations of identity within systems of racism, sexism, and other structures of inequality. They “conceive of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). They seek to understand solidarity across difference and the barriers to such alliances. They demonstrate new ways to practice critical reflexivity. They work to identify the mechanisms that make injustice, and the people who experience it, invisible. And yet the question remains of what role women of color—as knowers and as subjects—ought to play in psychology’s scholarship on intersectionality.

As a solution to the disappearance of Black women in intersectionality scholarship, as well as the distortion and even appropriation she identified, Alexander-Floyd proposed that intersectionality “must be properly understood as the purview of researchers investigating women of color” (2012, p. 19), and she called for a recentering of the voices of women of color in intersectionality scholarship. Although in this neoliberal age, one might easily understand intersectionality in terms of intellectual property (Hancock, 2016), that framing implies a logic of scholars and activists as consumers (Cole, 2015). Instead, I propose we think about our engagement with intersectionality in terms of stewardship, which implies service and care (see Moradi & Grzanka, 2017 and Hancock, 2016). Intersectionality is a conceptual tool developed by scholars and activists to understand inequality and bring about social justice, particularly for women of color, marginalized as they are by race and gender. Stewardship of intersectionality means that those claiming to work within this framework are responsible to move beyond the “buzzword” or the meme (Hancock, 2016) in order to familiarize themselves with the key literatures and its commitments. Among these commitments is social justice for women of color, intersectionality’s original authors and subjects. Although not all the papers in this special issue directly address the contexts of the lives of women of color, these authors act as responsible stewards, advancing intersectionality’s critical edge as they contribute to a toolkit for transforming our discipline and creating social change.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

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