

Understanding psychology's resistance to intersectionality theory using a framework of epistemic exclusion and invisibility

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Abstract

Although intersectionality has become part of the everyday lexicon, the field of psychology has demonstrated resistance to the theory, which we argue reflects epistemic exclusion. Epistemic exclusion is the devaluation of some scholarship as illegitimate and certain scholars as lacking credibility. We suggest that intersectionality has been epistemically excluded because it challenges dominant psychological norms about the scientific process and has been most readily endorsed by psychologists from marginalized groups. We provide evidence that epistemic exclusion has occurred through formal means (e.g., exclusion from mainstream journals) and informal processes (e.g., repeated misrepresentation of the theory). We use visibility theory to highlight the role of disciplinary power in this process, such that dominant psychologists act as gatekeepers. Finally, we discuss how the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is a barrier to social issues scholarship and social justice in psychology, and offer structural recommendations for intersectionality's epistemic *inclusion*.

Psychologists' awareness of intersectionality continues to grow as the tenets of the theory and the term itself form part of the everyday lexicon. Nevertheless, intersectionality scholars maintain

that there has been limited integration and use of the theory in psychology, particularly in the mainstream or center of the field (Cole, 2009; Rosenthal, 2016). As evidence, intersectionality scholars emphasize intersectionality's continued misuse and misrepresentation and relegation to specialty journals. Psychology's resistance to intersectionality is a barrier to realizing the transformative potential that intersectionality holds for the field (McCormick-Huhn, Warner, Settles, & Shields, 2019). Here, we articulate how two theories—epistemic exclusion and visibility—shed light on the resistance to intersectionality in psychology.

Epistemic exclusion occurs when individuals or institutions devalue scholarship outside of the dominant discipline (i.e., mainstream) and claim that marginalized scholars (e.g., women of color and queer scholars) fail to make contributions to the production of knowledge (Dotson, 2012, 2014). Dominant or mainstream approaches are those that are perceived to be central to the field and as such, scholars using these approaches tend to hold more power within the discipline. In psychology, dominant approaches emphasize generalizable, universal, quantitative, and parsimonious studies of basic (vs. applied) processes with little consideration of contextual factors (Magnusson & Marecek, 2017; McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). Disciplinary biases drive epistemic exclusion, specifically biases about the qualities of good scholarship, in combination with identity-related biases about who has credibility as scholars. We argue that the field of psychology epistemically excludes intersectionality theory. Further, we assert that *visibility theory*, which describes whether individuals are viewed accurately or are distorted, provides a framework for understanding how power differences between groups (i.e., dominant psychologists vs. intersectionality psychologists) enable the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality. In this article, we (1) use epistemic exclusion and visibility theories to provide a framework for explaining the devaluation and marginalization of intersectionality theory in dominant psychology, (2) discuss the implications of this exclusion to the study of social issues and social change in psychology, and (3) offer suggestions for increasing the visibility and epistemic *inclusion* of intersectionality theory within psychology.

As is always the case for any research, our positionality informs our approach to this work. Isis, NiCole, and Martinque identify as Black cisgender women, whereas Leah identifies as a white queer/lesbian cisgender woman. We all define ourselves as feminist scholars, working in the academy, who use intersectional approaches to our scholarship. Our position as marginalized scholars due to our identities (gender, race, and sexual orientation) is what brings us to the work that we do, including the populations we study, the questions we ask, and the theoretical lens we use. The challenges we face in the academy provide us with an insider perspective on the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality in psychology and the implications such exclusion has on academic careers, including our own (Buchanan, 2020; Settles, 2020). Throughout our work, we attend to the ways in which such experiences create limitations and we challenge them by reading and discussing the work of other scholars and through self-reflection.

In developing this positionality statement, we reflected together on how various power dynamics shaped our collaboration on this article: histories of prior collaboration (although Isis has worked with each author, this was our first collaboration as a group), racial dynamics (as a white person, Leah reflected on the possibility of reproducing epistemic exclusion dynamics within the context of our collaboration), differences in our institution types, and differences in our rank. In reflecting on both rank and institution type, the team collectively recognizes how conducting work on the margins has different implications for each scholar. For example, Martinque must consider the career implications of doing this type of work without tenure, whereas Leah's position at a social justice focused teaching institution grants her greater latitude to pursue work on the margins. As senior collaborators, Isis, NiCole, and Leah, carefully considered the

differential impact of their suggestions and viewpoints, while junior collaborator, Martinque, navigated how to assert ideas within the larger group. Although these factors contribute to power dynamics that must be negotiated in our collaboration, they also affect how we think about intersectionality in ways that complement and enhance our scholarship.

INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality has only recently appeared in dominant psychology journals, those most widely read and with the highest impact ratings (e.g., Cole, 2009; Rosenthal, 2016). This is despite the term *intersectionality* being coined 30 years ago (Crenshaw, 1989) and over a century of marginalized scholars advocating for intersectional approaches to social problems and political representation (e.g., Combahee River Collective, 2005; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981/2015; Truth, 1851; also see Hancock, 2016). In these recent efforts, intersectionality scholars have worked to ensure that psychologists accurately understand the theory (e.g., Cole, 2009; DeBlaere, Watson, & Langrehr, 2018; Grzanka, 2018; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Shields, 2008; Warner, Settles & Shields, 2018), apply rigorous methods to studying intersectionality (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Goff & Kahn, 2013; Warner, 2008), and appropriately apply intersectionality across a variety of activities and contexts, such as activism (Overstreet, Rosenthal, & Case, 2020; Rosenthal, 2016), counseling (Grzanka, Santos, & Moradi, 2017; Shin et al., 2017), public health (Bowleg, 2013), and teaching (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020; Case, 2017).

These scholars argue that intersectionality offers transformative potential to the field of psychology through its core tenets (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Overstreet et al., 2020): (1) structures of inequality are mutually constitutive, such that sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and other “isms” co-create and substantiate each other; (2) these interrelated power structures inform subjective experiences of social identities, such that a person’s social group membership (e.g., race) cannot be understood without also understanding the other social groups to which they belong (e.g., gender and class); and (3) theory and praxis should be combined to consider social justice actions and goals (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As such, intersectionality can facilitate psychologists’ efforts to integrate structural and social contextual factors in our understanding of the human experience, thereby advancing research, teaching, and clinical practice.

Given this transformative potential, understanding resistance to intersectionality theory in psychology is critical to the advancement of the field. This resistance compounds the structural inequalities that negatively affect intersectionality scholars, many of whom are already marginalized within the academy by virtue of their devalued social identities (e.g., women of color). Despite repeated calls for accurate interpretations and applications of the theory, intersectionality scholars encounter barriers created and sustained by dominant psychology. We propose that the norms and values of dominant psychology guide the academy as a system that excludes intersectionality.

EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION THEORY

Like intersectionality, the roots of epistemic exclusion can also be found in Black feminist thought (e.g., Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Dotson, 2012, 2014). Epistemic exclusion is the devaluation of scholarship and scholars “on the margins” (i.e., outside the disciplinary center) as not making contributions to the production of knowledge (Dotson, 2014). That is, epistemic exclusion reflects dominant discourse and assertions regarding what scholarship is “rigorous” and “legitimate” and which scholars are credible knowers within a discipline. Following this, we

detail the processes and mechanisms by which epistemic exclusion occurs and then apply the processes and mechanisms to intersectionality in psychology.

Epistemic exclusion as resulting from two types of bias

Two types of bias are theorized to create epistemic exclusion (Dotson, 2012; 2014; Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020a). First, disciplinary-biases privilege certain research endeavors and devalue others. For example, assumptions about research rigor and contributions to the field inculcate objectivity, generalizability, researcher neutrality, and quantitative methodologies as gold standards for high-quality research (Gonzales, 2018). Second, epistemic exclusion reflects biases against marginalized group members, such as Black, Latinx, and Native American people as unintelligent and lazy, Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Sue, 2010), and women as less mathematically and intellectually adept than men (Heilman, 2001). For Black, Indigenous, and other women of color, the intersection of stereotypes about both their race and gender exacerbates their exclusion (Cole, 2009; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; King, 1988; Settles & Buchanan, 2014). Such biases also extend to other marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals (Cech & Waidzunus, 2011; Sawyer, Thoroughgood, & Webster, 2016).

The two forms of bias—toward marginalized scholarship and toward marginalized scholars, work in tandem. Specifically, women and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are less likely to conduct research using dominant approaches and are more likely to study populations (e.g., marginalized groups), topics (e.g., poverty, victimization, and educational inequities), and use methods (e.g., qualitative research and participatory action research) that fall outside of disciplinary norms (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Gonzales, 2018). As a consequence, the scholarship of women faculty and Black, Indigenous, and other faculty of color is more often perceived to lack quality and rigor and is devalued as “me-search” (De la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988, p. 302). Additionally, part of the devaluation of scholarship on the margins is due to the fact that individuals from devalued social groups are more likely to engage in these types of research; that is, negative stereotypes about these groups spillover and contribute to negative views of their scholarship (e.g., if women are poor quality scholars and women use qualitative methods, then qualitative methods are poor quality scholarship). Novel scientific questions and research findings by women and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are discounted, devalued, and underutilized by dominant scholars compared to innovations by white men (Hofstra et al., 2020). Furthermore, even when marginalized individuals work within the center of the field, their work is perceived as lesser quality and as less mainstream or central because of biased beliefs about their social group (e.g., race and gender; Dotson, 2012, 2014).

How epistemic exclusion is expressed

Empirical work supports that epistemic exclusion operates through both formal and informal processes (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019; Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020a). In their interviews with faculty of color, Settles, Jones, Buchanan and Dotson (2020a) found that participants felt their scholarship was formally devalued in systems of evaluation (e.g., annual review, promotion, and tenure) when their work focused on marginalized groups, used methods outside of the disciplinary center (e.g., qualitative methods), or focused on addressing social problems. Evaluation metrics, such as journal impact

factors and grant funding (Hoppe et al., 2019; Roberts, Bareket-Shavit, Dollins, Goldie, & Mortenson, 2020), codified these assumptions and subsequently contributed to evaluation inequities (e.g., Gruber, 2014; Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020a). Informal epistemic exclusion reflected experiences outside of formal evaluation metrics that nonetheless contributed to faculty of color feeling devalued. Specifically, faculty of color described being denied recognition for their accomplishments, their role as a scholar being repeatedly questioned (i.e., lacking legitimacy), and facing claims that their work was incomprehensible—not easily understood and not important enough to learn. As intersectionality shares many of the characteristics found to contribute to epistemic exclusion generally (e.g., a focus on marginalized populations, use of nontraditional methods, and scholars from marginalized groups authoring and adopting the theory), epistemic exclusion provides a useful framework for understanding the marginalization of both intersectionality theory in psychology and the scholars using it.

THE EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION OF INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY IN PSYCHOLOGY

We suggest that the theory of intersectionality is a target of epistemic exclusion within dominant psychology through both formal and informal mechanisms. Psychology's disciplinary norms and values for what constitutes "quality" and "rigorous" scholarship are at odds with many epistemological assumptions of intersectionality theory. Further, members of marginalized groups (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and other people of color; women; and feminist scholars) are overrepresented as intersectionality scholars. As such, negative stereotypes about these groups are applied to their work and, therefore, are likely to undermine the perceived legitimacy of intersectionality. Together, these forces result in the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality theory. Following this, we detail how intersectionality challenges psychology's disciplinary norms and provide evidence for the formal and informal epistemic exclusion of intersectionality.

In order to understand its epistemic exclusion, we must make explicit what we observe as devaluing intersectionality. Intersectionality includes a diversity of interpretations and extensions, including debates over its focus, nature, and purpose (Warner et al., 2018). Intersectionality's open-endedness can enrich the theory to create more reflexively critical insights (Davis, 2008). However, we distinguish approaches that enrich the theory from approaches that devalue the theory by taking the position that the three core tenets of intersectionality described at the outset of the article are essential to the theory; any application must necessarily include all three tenets in order to fully represent the theory. Although excluding a tenet by itself is not epistemic exclusion, repeated misrepresentation across the discipline, as well as undervaluing scholarship and scholars that do include all three tenets in their work, indicates a systemic pattern of devaluation.

How intersectionality challenges psychology's disciplinary norms

In psychology, positivist or post-positivist epistemologies are the most common disciplinary norms (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Positivist epistemology (e.g., Titchener, 1916) assumes that there is a single "truth" that well-designed research can uncover, objectivity and generalizability are important features of well-designed research, and the researcher's values are not relevant to the scientific process. Post-positivist epistemology (e.g., Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1959) shares

many features of positivism but acknowledges the potential for bias in the process. Therefore, post-positivism seeks to reduce or eliminate bias in search of truth. Scholars applying critical (e.g., Sloan, 2000; Teo, 2005) and liberation psychology (e.g., Fanon, 1967; Martín-Baró, 1996) perspectives critique positivism and post-positivism for framing psychologists as neutral observers of marginalized people. Far from being neutral, positivist approaches rarely center oppressed people's voices themselves and present a decontextualized, individualized representation that obscures the influence of systemic oppression on people's lived experiences.

Intersectionality challenges many of the dominant values of positivist and post-positivist psychology (Goff & Kahn, 2013; Kurtiş & Adams, 2016; Warner et al., 2018). Scholars using intersectionality frameworks are more likely to work from epistemological positions, such as social constructivism, which assumes that, rather than one true reality, there are multiple realities that depend on the perception and social location of the individual (Warner, Shields, & Settles, 2016). Further, as a critical theory, intersectionality challenges Popper's (1959) widely applied positivist perspective that high-quality theories are necessarily falsifiable. Psychologists trained with this perspective may dismiss intersectionality as intellectually opaque when they discover that they cannot engage in experiments to attempt to prove or disprove arguments directly derived from intersectionality theory.

Additionally, scholars often use intersectionality in an explicitly activist manner, seeking to address inequality and improve the circumstances of marginalized groups, counter to positivist notions of science as value-free (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Overstreet et al., 2020; Richter J, Farago, Swadene, Roca-Servat, & Eversman, 2020; Rosenthal, 2016). Intersectionality also counters the idea of parsimony, or the value of a simple explanation, by noting that social and historical context, group membership, and individual perceptions all complicate study outcomes. That is, a finding may be relevant for one group with a specific social location at a specific period in time, but not for other groups or at other times (Warner et al., 2016). Additionally, Marecek (2019) notes that the sociocultural focus of intersectionality can be at odds with psychology's typical individualist focus.

In addition to differing from psychology's epistemic norms, intersectionality also challenges psychology's typical methodological and analytic practices. Intersectionality questions psychology's continued valuing of measurement in terms of quantities, given that it is inconsistent with intersectionality's focus on meaning-making (Bowleg & Bauer, 2016; Marecek, 2016). Intersectionality scholars advocate for taking a both/and approach to using qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Jones & Day, 2018), so as to avoid perpetuating a false binary between the two (Grzanka, 2018). The both/and strategy permits scholars to capitalize on the strengths of different approaches. For example, quantitative research might shed light on the degree to which Black women's experiences of mistreatment (e.g., racialized sexual harassment; Buchanan & Ormerod, 2002, gendered racial microaggressions; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne, 2016) are associated with negative psychological outcomes, whereas qualitative research on the topic could provide insight on how Black women interpret and make sense of such negative experiences, and how they affect their sense of self. However, the majority of studies claiming to examine intersectionality are still quantitative in nature (Shin et al., 2017), often failing to represent the three core tenets of the theory in the process of doing so (e.g., Warner & Shields, 2013). For example, intersectionality's assertion that identities are mutually constitutive runs counter to the common practices in psychology, such as a 2 X 2 factorial design, which treats variables as independent from one another (Bowleg, 2008; Warner, 2008). Instead, person-centered approaches (e.g., cluster analysis and profile analysis; Laursen & Hoff, 2006)

that examine similarities and differences within groups of individuals better align with the basic tenets of intersectionality (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017).

Evidence for the formal epistemic exclusion of Intersectionality theory

As noted above, formal epistemic exclusion of intersectionality can be seen in how dominant psychology has resisted its integration into the field, particularly through where it is published and how it is funded. Scholars have noted that top-tier journals often reject scholarship that diverges from “master narratives” (Stanley, 2007, p. 14), or dominant disciplinary epistemologies about scholarship, thereby acting as gatekeepers of what types of scholarship gain legitimacy (Diaz & Bergman, 2013; Gruber, 2014; Stanley, 2007). For example, a review of the past 50 years and over 26,000 articles in top-tier psychology journals demonstrated that only 5% highlighted race (Roberts et al., 2020). Intersectionality further challenges dominant norms and values about rigorous scholarship, both theoretically and methodologically, making it difficult to publish intersectionality research in mainstream outlets and secure funding for this type of scholarship (Hoppe et al., 2019).

To examine this possibility, we conducted a PsycInfo database search for published articles between 2004 and the first three quarters of 2019 using “intersectionality” as a search term. This search yielded 1,642 peer-reviewed journal articles, a significant increase from 7 articles on the topic published in 2004, 122 articles by 2009, and 562 articles by 2014. Despite this increase, only 0.4% of intersectionality articles were published in the 10 psychology journals with the highest impact factors, 1.1% were published in the top 20 journals, and 2.9% in the top 30 journals. Among the 30 highest impact journals in psychology, the two journals with the greatest representation of articles on intersectionality were the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* ($n = 20$) and *American Psychologist* ($n = 10$). Peer-reviewed intersectionality scholarship is most commonly published in psychology journals focused on gender, race, sexual orientation, and social issues (e.g., *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, and *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*), interdisciplinary journals (e.g., *Sex Roles, Men and Masculinities*), and those outside of the discipline (e.g., *Gender & Society* and *European Journal of Women's Studies*).

Some of the exclusion of intersectionality among mainstream journals is due to the use of qualitative methodology. Scholars (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Shields, 2008) have suggested that qualitative methods are well aligned with the tenets of intersectionality; however, studies grounded in the sole use of qualitative research methods rarely enter mainstream psychology journals (Kidd, 2002). Eagly and Riger (2014) reported that between 2004 and 2012, only 8.7% of empirical articles used solely qualitative methods, and among “high-impact” journals (i.e., 30 journals with the highest 5-year impact factor scores), this figure dropped to 1.8%. Our search using “intersectionality” suggests that qualitative research is more common among intersectionality articles ($n = 441$, 27%) than for research generally, and of qualitative intersectionality articles, only 1.6% were placed in the 30 highest impact psychology journals. Thus, the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is, in part, based on both the topic and the method often used to study it.

There is also emerging evidence that marginalized scholarship may be less likely to receive federal research funding. For example, studies have found racial and gender bias such that African-American/Black scientists (Ginther et al., 2011), and African-American and Asian-American women scientists (Ginther, Kahn, & Schaffer, 2016), were less likely to receive R01 awards from the National Institutes of Health. Importantly, research by Hoppe et al. (2019)

found that compared to white scholars, African-American/Black scholars were more likely to submit R01 applications on topics related to health disparities, specifically disease prevention and intervention, or focused on marginalized groups (including keywords like socioeconomic, adolescent, risk, and fertility), and these topics were significantly less likely to receive funding. These findings highlight how biases related to research foci combine with biases about social groups to create epistemic exclusion, in this case with consequences for research funding.

Evidence for the informal epistemic exclusion of Intersectionality theory

May (2015) discusses the obstacles that come with communicating ideas that question the fundamental assumptions of a field; specifically, such theories, like intersectionality, are perceived as “unrecognizable, unhearable, and illogical” (p. 111) from the perspective of those who have internalized dominant ideologies. This idea is consistent with informal processes related to epistemic exclusion, which can be seen in its lack of recognition, perceived illegitimacy, and stated incomprehensibility by dominant psychologists.

One manifestation of epistemic exclusion is a scholar’s experience of repeatedly conveying information that is systematically ignored in the field (Fricker, 2007). This *lack of recognition* is also seen with intersectionality, wherein scholars’ must repeatedly explain the accurate application of intersectionality in psychology. Despite intersectionality becoming a more familiar term within dominant psychology, emerging empirical evidence suggests that psychological applications are often inaccurate (e.g., Warner et al., 2018), failing to incorporate all three core components of the theory (Cole, 2009). For example, Shin and colleagues (2017) found that intersectionality articles in counseling psychology journals typically utilized intersectionality to examine intersecting identities but failed to use it to analyze interlocking forms of power and privilege or call for social justice activism to dismantle systems of oppression. As a result, intersectionality scholars often challenge these surface-level and potentially damaging applications in an attempt to preserve intersectionality’s radical potential to transform psychology as a field (Collins, 2000; Grzanka, 2018; Overstreet et al., 2020; Warner, 2016).

Intersectionality is also epistemically excluded due to perceptions of its *illegitimacy*, which appears in the form of critiquing intersectionality as not applicable or ignoring its relevance to psychological processes. A longstanding practice in dominant psychology is to focus on internal cognitive processes within the individual as the primary subject of theory, research, and intervention (Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003), with the assumption that the individual is separable from society (Marecek, 2016). Intersectionality counters this belief, arguing that understanding individuals requires focusing on macro interlocking structures of inequality rather than just internal processes (e.g., Bowleg, 2017; Goff & Kahn, 2013; Grzanka & Miles, 2016; Marecek, 2016). For example, rather than focusing solely on the tendency to categorize individuals into ingroups and outgroups, intersectionality demands that researchers examine the social structures that encourage categorization in the first place (Bowleg, 2017). Pushes to focus on structural factors are met with claims that such research is “not really psychology, is it?” thereby communicating its illegitimacy (Dotson, 2013). In order for psychologists to sufficiently integrate macro structures of inequality into research, many elements of the research process would have to change, such as the focus on individual-level variables and conceptualizing research participants as being independent from social and structural contexts (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019).

Some manifestations of resistance to intersectionality theory take the form of critiquing its *incomprehensibility*, describing it as unclear or difficult to apply. Experimental social psychologists, for example, use testable theories to design a program of empirical studies, in which each

study builds upon another to experimentally test each element of the theory. However, as a critical theory, intersectionality is not the type of testable theory around which subdisciplines of psychology organize (Syed, 2010). For example, experimental social psychological studies of racial discrimination tend to involve varying race in a series of studies while holding other relevant factors, such as gender, constant (Goff & Kahn, 2013). Intersectionality, in contrast, does not provide a roadmap for such a linear representation of structures of inequality. Because scholars cannot use intersectionality in this same way, experimental social psychologists have discarded intersectionality, claiming it to be confusing or intellectually opaque (Bowleg, 2017; Goff & Kahn, 2013).

It is important to note that failing to recognize intersectionality and casting it as illegitimate and incomprehensible is not only due to individual- or micro-level factors; instead, macro-level factors and reward structures within psychology and academia may be more substantial barriers to its epistemic inclusion. Publication and grant mechanisms, and by proxy, tenure, and promotion practices, preference and reward those whose research centers dominant topics and methods in the field (e.g., with increased venues and opportunities to publish their work and improved chances for securing grant funding) and punishes those who stray from the disciplinary center (Ginther et al., 2016; Hoppe et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2020). Given that the vast majority of psychologists maintain the status quo and are rewarded for doing so, there is little incentive for them to incorporate intersectionality into their own work. Moreover, pushing the field toward intersectionality may work against their own interests given that such a change would shift the reward structures that benefit them. Stated differently, informal epistemic exclusion, by way of perceiving intersectionality as unrecognizable, illegitimate, or incomprehensible, serves as a barrier to publication, tenure, and promotion reward structures for those who use the theory.

VISIBILITY THEORY AND THE EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Visibility theory has typically been used to understand the experiences of marginalized individuals, such as women and people of color (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Simpson & Lewis, 2005); we argue that this framework can also be applied to marginalized epistemological stances within a field, such as the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality theory within psychology. Visibility conditions—visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility—represent both how something is perceived and the relative power of the person or object and those perceiving it (Brighenti, 2007) such that “for marginalized individuals, hypervisibility and invisibility . . . represent different manifestations of the same oppressive forces – subjugation and devaluation” (Buchanan & Settles, 2019, p. 2). Visibility refers to the extent to which something is recognized and regarded accurately and contrasts with being rendered invisible or hypervisible. Invisibility is a lack of recognition, the relative absence of being centered, and it reflects the devaluing of a person, group, or object (Brighenti, 2007; Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Lewis & Simpson, 2010). Hypervisibility, or being overly visible, reflects that, when marginalized groups are seen, they are perceived as deviant (Ryland, 2013), scrutinized, monitored for potential wrong-doing, and viewed only in terms of stereotypes about their group. Buchanan and Settles (2019) identified several visibility processes related to power and hierarchies that can be used to understand whether marginalized groups are rendered invisible or hypervisible in order to constrain them to the periphery and maintain the status quo. We suggest that like marginalized individuals, intersectionality theory (as a marginalized theory that often focuses

on marginalized people) is also subjugated and devalued within psychology via three visibility processes.

First, intersectionality's exclusion is rooted in the differential power and status between dominant psychologists and intersectionality psychologists, where dominant psychologists use their power to enforce the invisibility and marginalization of intersectionality theory. Specifically, the marginalization and misuse of intersectionality is only possible because of the gatekeeping of psychologists working in the center of the field, who prevent intersectionality scholarship from reaching the highest echelons (e.g., journals, grants, and academic institutions). Second, dominant psychologists distort intersectionality in ways that make it difficult for intersectionality psychologists to make the theory accurately visible. A pattern has emerged where, in specialty journals and conferences, intersectionality psychologists repeat, to the point of exhaustion, how to appropriately apply the theory to psychology. In contrast, in the few contexts where dominant psychologists reference the theory in top-tier journals and conferences, they continue to present a persistent misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and misuse of intersectionality (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Often, when dominant psychologists use intersectionality theory, they use it as a buzzword (Davis, 2008), capitalizing on its novelty (representing hypervisibility) but only superficially, without accurately representing the theory and its contribution to the field (demonstrating invisibility). This pattern stonewalls intersectionality psychologists' attempts to make the theory truly visible to psychologists across the field.

Third, epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is reinforced by and solidifies the social boundaries and hierarchies already in place between dominant and intersectionality psychologists (Buchanan & Settles, 2019). Disciplinary gatekeepers have become successful by working within the disciplinary center, and as a result, they may see little benefit to the inclusion of intersectionality. This is particularly the case because intersectionality adds complications—new considerations, new assumptions, and new methods—to the practice of psychology research. Thus, by discounting intersectionality, dominant psychologists are able to maintain the disciplinary status quo and their position at the top of the scholarly hierarchy.

THE EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION OF INTERSECTIONALITY IS A BARRIER TO SOCIAL ISSUES SCHOLARSHIP

We argue that the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is consequential, particularly because it creates a barrier to the critical consideration of social issues and the inclusion of underrepresented voices in the discipline. Visibility theory highlights the role of power in these exclusions. Here, we discuss the unique implications of the epistemic exclusion and invisibility of intersectionality for the study of social issues and social justice in the discipline itself.

Intersectionality promotes thinking about inequality at the structural level

A strength of an intersectional approach to psychology is that it shifts thinking about people's lives from solely an individual level to one in which structural factors are also considered (Maracek, 2019). From a social justice perspective, an intersectionality approach pushes psychologists to think about how sociocultural forces shape inequality and correspondingly, how changes in those forces might lead to changes in individuals' lives. This is in contrast to common psychological

practices that identify ways in which individuals can have optimal outcomes *despite* inequality (e.g., coping with mistreatment). Thus, intersectionality can help psychologists identify the sources of disparities rather than the observable manifestations of it. For example, much of the psychological research on mental health inequity focuses on how people of color are less likely to seek formal help for psychological problems and as a result, experience more significant and lasting poor outcomes (Breslau, Kendler, Su, Gaxiola-Aguilar, & Kessler, 2005; Snowden, 2012). An intersectional approach would consider social factors that contribute to mental health problems as well as the ways in which inequities contribute to differential access to, experiences with, and trust in, formal mental health services. Policy recommendations emerging from an intersectionality approach would similarly focus on changing the structures that support inequity in addition to changing individual behaviors.

The epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is a structural matter

In a similar manner, the theories of epistemic exclusion and visibility highlight ways in which the rejection of intersectionality in psychology results from structural forces, rather than individual ones, and is rooted in disciplinary hierarchies of power. They make the processes around disciplinary gatekeeping transparent, demonstrating that although the exclusion of intersectionality theory and the scholars who use it may not be consciously rooted in prejudice, it operates to maintain existing structures of disciplinary power and authority while simultaneously contributing to the underrepresentation of scholars from marginalized groups. Further, epistemic exclusion and visibility theories suggest that the loosening of disciplinary boundaries to include intersectionality (and those who study it) can be accomplished by making structural changes; we offer suggestions for structural change in the following section.

Disciplinary norms and values often become invisible and taken-for-granted once they have been adopted (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Kuhn, 1962). As a result, it may be difficult for disciplinary gatekeepers to see that their definitions of scholarly rigor and quality are, in fact, subjective and reflect historical and sociocultural decisions about the direction of psychology. For example, Wertz (2014) describes how the field shifted away from its roots in qualitative methods in the mid-1900s as hypothesis testing and positivism were emphasized by behaviorism. As intersectionality gains traction in the popular lexicon (Davis, 2008), the field of psychology is provided with an opportunity to think explicitly about our disciplinary paradigms and imagine the possibilities for boundary-broadening. In particular, greater integration of intersectionality could shift psychology away from the status quo toward a more expansive vision for the field.

Epistemic exclusion of Intersectionality harms scholars from marginalized groups

As noted previously, the earliest adopters of intersectionality within psychology were women of color and white women working from a feminist psychology perspective. Given its origins as both a traveling theory (Said, 1983) and one rooted in Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), it is not surprising that feminist psychologists would find intersectionality relevant to understanding differences among women, and how structural privilege and oppression shape women's experiences. Further, as the personal is political, scholars from marginalized groups may see intersectionality as better accounting for their experiences than other theories and thus more

easily see its value than do scholars from privileged groups. For whatever the reasons, scholars from marginalized groups most readily use intersectionality, and notably, scholars tend to use intersectionality to understand phenomena relevant to marginalized communities, such as intergroup relations (Ellison & Langhout, 2020; Nair & Vollhardt, 2020), sexual violence (Harris, 2017; McCauley et al., 2019), minority stress and resilience (Duran, 2019; Williams, Job, Todd, & Braun, 2020), and physical and mental health concerns among individuals from marginalized groups (Torres, Mata-Greve, Bird, & Herrera Hernandez, 2018; Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003; Young, 2020). Thus, the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality limits scholarship on marginalized groups, and correspondingly, the social issues relevant to such communities.

Epistemic exclusion argues that bias toward certain types of scholarship and bias toward marginalized scholars are intertwined in two ways. First, individuals from marginalized groups are more likely to be working on the margins and thus epistemic exclusion disparately harms them. Second, prejudice toward those in marginalized groups can be indirectly or covertly expressed through the devaluation of their scholarship. As such, it is critical to notice that the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality within psychology is especially harmful for scholars from marginalized groups—women, people of color, sexual minorities, feminist psychologists, etc. Moreover, epistemic exclusion theory suggests that the rejection of intersectionality may be due, in part, to the fact that scholars from marginalized groups are engaging in this work. That is, negative stereotypes and perceptions of illegitimacy of scholars from these groups spill over to produce negative attitudes about the legitimacy of intersectionality.

Together, bias toward marginalized scholars and bias toward intersectionality lead to critiques of the work as self-serving and self-motivated, which negatively affects intersectionality scholars' careers, particularly those scholars from marginalized groups. Consistent with other research on epistemic exclusion generally, the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality scholars may reduce their sense of belonging in the field, result in less positive evaluations of their work (because intersectionality scholarship is placed in lower impact journals), or create pressure for them to reject intersectionality in favor of dominant theoretical and empirical approaches (Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020a; Settles, Jones, Buchanan & Brassel, 2020b).

WAYS THAT PSYCHOLOGY CAN PROMOTE THE EPISTEMIC INCLUSION OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Given the significant ways in which the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality is a barrier to social issues scholarship, we offer some practical suggestions for ways that the field of psychology could make changes that promote epistemic *inclusion* instead. We note that because intersectionality brings our attention to structural factors in inequality, our suggestions also call for structural changes. Further, these structural changes are aligned with strategies to alter the visibility conditions we highlighted earlier: reducing the power and status differentials between intersectionality scholars and dominant scholars, increasing the accurate representation of intersectionality, and the dissolution of social hierarchies and boundaries. For example, mainstream journals could actively seek out scholars with expertise in intersectionality to serve as editors and editorial board members. This would allow articles related to intersectionality to be evaluated by scholars knowledgeable about the theory and its appropriate application. Changes in who has editorial power should be coupled with changes to journal policies and practices, for example, being more open to work not traditionally considered by the journal (e.g., mixed methods, participatory action research, and critical ethnography). Similarly, a shift in disciplinary values is also required.

This may involve explicit discussion of disciplinary norms and values as well as changes in graduate and undergraduate training in psychology to include epistemologies that include social constructivism and methods that include qualitative approaches. We are suggesting parallel approaches—increasing the value of intersectionality scholarship in the field (e.g., valuing journals where it is currently published) and integrating intersectionality scholarship into the center of the discipline. Together, these changes could result in more inclusion and positive career outcomes for scholars from marginalized groups.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we argue that intersectionality theory is being epistemically excluded in psychology due to disciplinary biases about legitimate scholarship and identity-based biases about credible scholars. This can be seen formally in its exclusion from top journals and topic-based challenges to grant funding, and informally in claims by dominant psychologists that reflect a lack of recognition, or accurate representation of the theory; lack of legitimacy, or stated irrelevance of the theory to the field; and lack of comprehension, or an inability to understand the theory. By providing a novel application of epistemic exclusion and visibility theories, we have highlighted the roles of structural power, disciplinary norms, and prejudice in the marginalization of intersectionality in psychology, and note the harms this theoretical exclusion has both on marginalized scholars and on the promotion of social justice in the field. We call on other scholars to consider structural solutions—changes in disciplinary values, policies, and practices, to remedy the epistemic exclusion of intersectionality theory. Key to this change is for disciplinary gatekeepers to loosen their hold on the center, with the recognition that the field will gain for their having done so. We also note that research on social issues and social policy is itself marginalized in psychology and relegated to lower impact journals. Social issues research shares many characteristics with intersectionality, including an activist agenda and a focus on marginalized populations. Thus, we hope that greater inclusion of intersectionality would necessarily increase the valuation of social justice research as well.

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