Approaches to Research on Intersectionality: Perspectives on Gender, LGBT, and Racial/Ethnic Identities

Mike C. Parent · Cirleen DeBlaere · Bonnie Moradi

Abstract Intersectionality theories, or the recognition of multiple interlocking identities, defined by relative sociocultural power and privilege, constitute a vital step forward in research across multiple domains of inquiry. This special issue, which extends Shields (2008) contribution in *Sex Roles*, provides an opportunity to reflect on past, present, and future promise in intersectionality scholarship. To provide a common ground for this work, each paper in this special issue addresses the intersections of gender; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT); and racial/ethnic identities and related experiences. In this introduction, we (1) provide an overview of definitions and conceptualizations of intersectionality, (2) discuss the various approaches utilized in this issue to conceptualize and assess gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities, (3) describe how these conceptualizations and assessments were translated into analyses of intersectionality, and (4) close with a discussion of some additional approaches and considerations intended to advance intersectionality research.

Keywords Intersectionality · Gender · Sexual orientation · Race/ethnicity

Introduction

This special issue of *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* is the second special issue of this journal to focus on the topic of intersectionality. In the first issue, Shields (2008), the guest editor, provided an insightful overview of intersectionality and the series of articles represented a groundbreaking compilation of topics and approaches in intersectionality research. Myriad issues were addressed, including methodological challenges in conducting intersectionality research (Bowleg 2008); immigrant identities (Mahalingam et al. 2008); concepts of feminism among feminist-identified Latino men (Hurtado and Sinha 2008); race, gender, and encounters with law enforcement (Dottolo and Stewart 2008); and questioning of gender and sexual identity over time (Diamond and Butterworth 2008), to name only a few. Importantly, Shields and the contributors to that special issue aimed to offer a set of "best practices" in intersectionality research.

Half a decade has now passed since that innovative issue. The present special issue of *Sex Roles* on intersectionality provides an opportunity to take stock of areas of abeyance, progress, and future promise in intersectionality scholarship. To this end, the intention of this series of articles was not so much to provide an authoritative comment on how intersectionality research "should" look, but rather to provide a snapshot of the state of such scholarship within the psychology of gender literature today. Moreover, building on the 2008 special issue, which explored intersections of identity with a focus on gender as the nexus of identity and power relationships, the present special issue called for scholarship on the intersections of gender; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT); and racial/ethnic identities and related experiences. These three identities were chosen because they represent some of the social identities afforded meaning in terms of relative sociocultural power and privilege (Black and Stone 2005). Moreover, these identities and their implications for people's experiences have been the focus of substantial scholarly attention individually, but have received relatively less empirical attention in combination (e.g., Bowleg 2008). The delineation of these particular social identities may help to provide some

M. C. Parent (✉)
Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Florida, USA
e-mail: michael.parent@ufl.edu

C. DeBlaere
Department of Education and Human Services, Lehigh University, Lehigh, Bethlehem, PA, USA
e-mail: cid209@lehigh.edu

B. Moradi
Department of Psychology, University of Florida, Florida, USA
e-mail: moradib@ufl.edu

common ground across the articles in this issue and facilitate deeper analysis with regard to conceptualization and implementation of intersectionality research involving these three specific social identities. However, we acknowledge that the selection of these identities may have excluded scholarship that addresses intersectionality involving other identity dimensions (e.g., ability status, class, religion) without specific attention to the three dimensions of focus. We encourage investigators to continue to build upon the studies published here and examine the experiences of individuals at the nexus of these and other social identities in future research.

Within the parameters of these boundaries and caveats, the articles presented in this special issue reflect a diversity of approaches to research, populations of focus, and topics of study. Specifically, these articles include qualitative studies, quantitative studies, and conceptual contributions; samples of adults and youth from the U.S. and abroad; use of intersectionality as a framework, as a theory, and as an approach to social justice; and topic domains such as prejudicial attitudes, experiences of discrimination, friendship, resilience, and activism. In this introductory article, we provide a framework for critically understanding the intersectionality scholarship presented in this special issue by (1) providing an overview of definitions and conceptualizations of intersectionality, (2) discussing the various approaches utilized in this issue to conceptualize and assess gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities, (3) describing how these conceptualizations and assessments were translated into analyses of intersectionality, and (4) closing with a discussion of some additional approaches and considerations intended to advance intersectionality research. We hope that the articles offered in this special issue help to promote further conceptual, empirical, and practical developments in intersectionality scholarship.

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality perspectives, which share as a common thread the recognition of multiple interlocking identities that are defined in terms of relative sociocultural power and privilege and shape people's individual and collective identities and experiences (Shields 2008), constitute a vital step forward in research across multiple domains of inquiry. The promise of intersectionality theory was emphasized by McCall (2005), who suggested that "intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that woman's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made thus far" (p. 1771). Manifestations of and approaches to examining intersectionality have varied across time, disciplines, and perspectives on the process of research. For example, Stewart and McDermott (2004) identified three aspects of intersectionality research as critical to gender studies in

psychology: nonhomogeneity of groups, location of persons within power structures and acknowledgement of the relations between those structures, and the unique effects of identifying within more than one group. Other authors (e.g., Choo and Ferree 2010; Shields 2008; Walby et al. 2012) have emphasized the importance of the underlying framework of examining interrelations of identities, with some suggesting that intersectionality scholars have "left the specifics of what [intersectional analysis] means indistinct" (Choo and Ferree 2010, p. 129). In the context of these broad conceptual frames, several concrete approaches have been offered and employed to capture how multiple minority statuses may shape people's experiences; these include the additive, multiplicative or interactionist, and intersectionality perspectives (Cole 2009; Moradi and Subich 2003; Szymanski and Moffitt 2012). Notably, African American/Black women's experiences and Black feminist scholarship have played an important role in the roots and evolution of these perspectives (e.g., Beal 1970; Collins 2000; King 1988).

Drawing from the experiences of racial/ethnic minority women, and particularly African American/Black women, additive perspectives reflect the notion that minority identity statuses (e.g., race and gender) act independently and combine additively to shape people's experiences; early permutations of this perspective also used the term "double jeopardy" to reflect this additive effect (e.g., Beal 1970). Building on additive conceptualizations, multiplicative or interactionist perspectives suggest that, beyond their independent effects, minority statuses and related experience may interact to shape people's experiences, with the typical implied nature of interaction being that one minority status or experience may exacerbate the effect of another (Greene 1994; King 1988; Landrine et al. 1995). Like the additive perspectives, such multiplicative or interactionist perspectives reflect an assumption that the various identity statuses and experiences can be conceptualized and operationalized as separate dimensions that can then function additively or multiplicatively. By contrast, the intersectionality perspective maintains that multiple identities construct novel experiences that are distinctive and not necessarily divisible into their component identities or experiences (e.g., Collins 1998). Importantly, each of these perspectives has been argued to offer plausible explanations for the ways in which multiple identities may be experienced (Cole 2009). Indeed, in the previous special issue, Shields (2008) suggested that future studies should adopt a "both/and strategy…comparing individual identities to each other as well as considering intersections and their emergent properties" (p. 307)

Despite the noted importance of intersectionality and the growing calls for its integration into psychological research (e.g., Cole 2009; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach 2008; Shields 2008), challenges remain in the translation of intersectionality

frameworks or theories to research questions, methods, and analyses. As the overview of additive, multiplicative or interactionist, and intersectionality perspectives suggests, approaches to understanding component identities and statuses reflect various assumptions about what constitutes each identity and how those identities function together. For example, focusing on participants' self-reported gender category versus gender presentation versus secondary sex characteristics each suggest something about the meaning of gender and how it can function with other identities. Approaches to conceptualizing and measuring component identities also establish the boundaries for how the resultant intersections can be observed and analyzed. For example, separate assessment of gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities facilitates additive or multiplicative/interactionist analyses but may preclude understanding of the fused intersection of these component identities. Thus, the approaches to conceptualizing, assessing, and analyzing gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities in the present special issue illustrate some of the challenges of intersectionality research and point to areas of promise as well.

How are Gender, LGBT, and Racial/Ethnic Identities Conceptualized and Operationalized?

Gender is an important facet of each article in this special issue (consistent with the mission of *Sex Roles,* http://www.springer.com/11199). Gender is a set of socially constructed standards of community, identity, and covert and overt behaviors, ascribed to persons by virtue of their apparent biological sex (often through a lens of inaccurately viewing biological sex as strictly dichotomous; American Psychological Association Task Force on Gender Identity and Gender Variance 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender intersects with other social identities and categories, including but not limited to ability status, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and social class. Gender has been viewed as a critical means by which societal structures of power, privilege, and oppression are shaped (Moradi and Yoder 2011; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Yoder 2013) and the operationalization of gender-related constructs has yielded a rich body of research (e.g., Moradi and Parent 2013).

Most of the articles in this special issue conceptualized gender as sociodemographic categories of women and/or men, sometimes described with the language of biological sex (e.g., male, female; Veenstra 2012) or fused with sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian women, gay men; Swank and Fahs 2012). Notably, gender was conceptualized with a focus on transgender people in two of the studies (Sevelius 2012; Singh 2012) and one of the conceptual articles (Worthen 2012). Moreover, attitudes toward transgender people or gender non-conformity were examined in two of the studies (Collier et al. 2012; Norton and Herek 2012). Thus, while

gender was largely conceptualized to include women and men, transgender identities and issues were also included in conceptualizations of gender. These approaches to conceptualizing gender drove how gender was assessed. Specifically, across studies, gender was assessed using self-reported sociodemographic categories (e.g., woman, man; female, male; transgender), although some studies solicited more descriptive information from participants in this regard (e.g., Singh 2012).

LGBT identities are another of the identity intersections examined in this special issue. In the present issue we use the term "LGBT identities" to reflect the common use of this acronym to group together various sexual minority populations. Indeed, LGBT identities have been gaining attention in the public sphere in the U.S. in recent years with rapid alterations in public opinion regarding LGBT rights (e.g., Loftus 2001). However, we acknowledge the complexities of using this acronym. On the one hand, as described by Herek (2010), the expansion of the acronym reflects an attempt to move away from archaic conceptualizations of (often implicitly, male) homosexuality and pathology to broader and more inclusive conceptualizations that include lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual minority populations. On the other hand, the LGBT acronym still excludes some sexual minority identities (e.g., queer, questioning, pansexual). The acronym also has the potential to obfuscate within group variability and the complexities represented in the acronym itself, such as the separation of L and G by gender, the conflation of people of various gender identities within B, the simultaneous inclusion and otherness of T as persons with a separate letter in the acronym who may also be located within the L, G, and B parts of the acronym (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007; Moradi et al. 2009). We also acknowledge that T clearly has a place in conceptualizations of gender, and thus there is some inherent redundancy (or conceptually inconsistent separation) in our domains of gender and LGBT identities.

Some of these complexities are reflected in the conceptualizations and operationalizations offered across the studies in this special issue. Like gender, LGBT identities were often conceptualized as sociodemographic categories, but there was some variability in the details. For instance, some studies assessed self-identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other identity descriptors (e.g., Bowleg 2012; Riggs 2012; Singh 2012). In one notable example, level of same-sex attraction was assessed on a continuum (Collier et al. 2012). But, in this study and some of the others, sexual orientation was ultimately coded dichotomously into a heterosexual and non-heterosexual group (e.g., Collier et al. 2012; Veenstra 2012). In another instance, Riggs (2012) assessed sexual orientation by considering a sample's identification within a social internet community as well as the sample's characterization of other men. These various

approaches to assessing and coding LGBT identities then had implications for how these identities were analyzed and could be understood. For example, the coding of LGBT identities into heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups shaped a focus of analysis on sexual minority versus non-minority status. Such a focus is certainly appropriate when research questions are about minority versus nonminority sexual identities. However, it is important to acknowledge that approaching LGBT identities in this way (minority versus nonminority) provides a different lens and offers different information relative to approaching LGBT identities with a focus on the nuances across and within L, G, B, and T identities or statuses. Worthen (2012) provided a thoughtful commentary about some of the challenges facing researchers with respect to examining phenomena within and between LGBT groups in this issue.

Racial/ethnic identities are the third identity intersection included as a focal point of this special issue. Like gender and LGBT identities, race and ethnicity have often been defined in research as a selection from multiple discreet categories (White, African American, Asian American, etc.). However, an important critique is that few scholars operationally define race or ethnicity or justify their choices in measurement (Helms et al. 2005). The measurement of race and ethnicity is complicated by the fact that definitions of race and ethnicity have shifted over time, trending toward greater acknowledgment of these as socially constructed and evolving concepts, and toward more critical evaluations of how these constructs are operationalized, used, and reified in research (e.g., Helms et al. 2005; Quintana 2007). An additional dimension of complexity is the often "fuzzy" line between race and ethnicity. Indeed, the American Anthropological Association (AAA 1997) described the historical evolution of these concepts with the statement that "today's ethnicities are yesterday's races." The AAA noted, for example, that people of Italian, Irish, and Jewish descent used to be considered non-White racial groups within the U.S., and that racial categories are socially constructed and positioned as more distal than ethnic categories in relation to the majority White category.

In the context of this complexity, like gender and LGBT identities, racial/ethnic identities were conceptualized as sociodemographic categories across the studies in this special issue, although the specific categories used and the ultimate coding of these categories varied. For example, some studies coded race/ethnicity into White and non-White categories (e.g., Galupo and Gonzalez 2012; Swank and Fahs 2012; Veenstra 2012). Similar to the assessment of sexual orientation, Collier et al. (2012) represented a departure in assessment procedure for race/ethnicity, and participants were asked to report their parents' country of birth. This information was then used to categorize participants as Western if both parents were born in Europe or North America, and as non-Western if either parent was born

outside of Europe or North America. Collier et al. described this approach as consistent with how race/ethnicity is conceptualized in the Netherlands, where the study took place, highlighting the culturally-dependent definitions of race/ethnicity. Overall, like the treatment of LGBT identities, the treatment of race/ethnicity across many of the studies in this issue reflected and resulted in a focus on minority versus majority status, rather than on race/ethnicity per se.

How is Intersectionality Analyzed?

Across the studies in this special issue, the conceptualizations and operationalizations of gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities described thus far were translated largely into one of two approaches to analyzing intersectionality: (1) the identity domains as additive or multiplicative predictors; or (2) phenomenological experience of a specific group with intersecting identities. The most typical approach across studies was to employ gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic categories as categorical predictor variables with the focus being on their explanatory power in relation to various multifaceted, continuous criterion variables. Often, these predictors were examined in additive or multiplicative combinations, testing main effects as well as two- and sometimes (though not always) three-way interactions involving gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic categories. For example, in the present issue, Norton and Herek (2012) assessed the impact of race, gender, and other sociopolitical variables on attitudes toward transgender persons, including the main effects and two-way interaction effects of gender with other variables. It is notable that three-way interactions were not examined across many studies in this issue. Boundaries or limitations in theoretical underpinnings for three-way interactions or challenges in achieving the sample size and statistical power needed to test such interactions may be among the barriers to fully exploring data in this way; indeed, such limitations were addressed by Babbitt (2011).

While the additive and multiplicative predictors approach was typified in the quantitative studies, the phenomenological experience of the specific group approach was reflected largely in the qualitative studies. For example, Singh (2012) applied this approach to understanding resilience in transgender youth of color, Sevelius (2012) applied it to understanding stigma and health among transgender women of color, and Bowleg (2012) applied it to understanding challenges and benefits of intersecting minority identities among gay and bisexual Black men. As these examples suggest, to the extent that a more complete picture of intersectionality is obtained with attention to the phenomenological experiences associated with intersectionality, it is not surprising that qualitative research has often been held to be central to an intersectionality approach (e.g., Syed 2010).

However, recommendations also have been made for employing quantitative approaches in helping to advance understanding of the unique experiences associated with intersecting identities (Cole 2009; DeBlaere et al. 2010; Shields 2008). A common thread across such recommendations is to take a within-group perspective that attends to the phenomenological experiences of the population of focus throughout the research process—for example, generating hypotheses or research questions that attend to the needs of the population, operationalizing constructs in ways that reflect and capture the unique experiences of the population, and analyzing data with attention to within group diversity (rather than a sole focus on between group comparisons, typically defining a majority group as a normative "control"). Indeed, Galupo and Gonzalez (2012) inclusion of different forms of friendship as individual difference characteristics provides an example of such attention to unique experiences and within group variability. Such recommendations help to shape directions for additional approaches to studying and analyzing intersectionality.

Additional Considerations and Approaches to Analyzing Intersectionality

In considering additional approaches and areas for advancing intersectionality research, a useful place to start is the limitations of the frame offered in this special issue. As we described previously, delineating the three specific identity statuses (and not other statuses) clearly shapes a set of boundary limitations. A less obvious frame inherent in the call for this special issue is that by specifying gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic *identities* as the foci, we may have implicitly shaped and/or reflected a conceptualization of these variables as intrapersonal, self-defined identity categories, largely viewed as independent or predictor variables.

A number of scholars have offered thoughtful critiques of focusing on comparisons of race or gender categories (see Helms et al. 2005; Yoder and Kahn 2003). This position avers that race and gender categories often serve as proxies for more nuanced underlying constructs that are not explicated and remain hidden in researchers' implicit theoretical perspectives or assumptions. As such, race or gender category comparisons that result in no differences can be ignored or go unreported, and comparisons that result in differences can be interpreted in ways that reflect researchers' implicit theoretical assumptions or constructs. These cautions also apply to intersectionality research. Thus, the question of how to incorporate gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities—and incumbently the constructs associated with the underlying structures of power and oppression—into theory and research should be considered by researchers interested in intersectionality. We wonder for example, what kinds of research questions, hypotheses,

methodologies, and analyses would be elicited by a call for research on the intersections of sexism, heterosexism, and racism (rather than a call for research on gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities).

A related perspective is the need to add to the typical conceptualization of gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities as "predictors" by considering these variables as contextual or criterion factors needing explanation in their own right. For example, gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic categories each may be proxies for level of exposure to stigma, experiences of discrimination, and potential for internalization of prejudice. Indeed, the previously described dichotomization of sexual orientation and racial/ethnic groups and subsequent comparison of majority and minority groups in some of the articles in this special issue may reflect this implied connection between the self-reported categories and the relative sociocultural statuses that shape and are shaped by such experiences of stigma and discrimination. These underlying dimensions of gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic statuses warrant attention and intersectional analysis. For example, how might experiences of racism shape the link between experiences of heterosexism and their internalization? And, what contextual factors make distinctions between various forms of "isms" more or less clear or salient? Moving from conceptualizations of gender, LGBT, and racial/ethnic identities solely as categorical sociodemographic predictors to conceptualizations of the experiential and contextual manifestations of these constructs as nuanced and continuous variables worthy of examination presents a potentially fruitful direction for further intersectionality research. Qualitative studies that delineate the phenomenological experiences of populations with intersecting identities can be a critical guide for such research, but studying such experiences is not the exclusive purview of qualitative methods. For example, the research presented by Veenstra (2012) and Swank and Fahs (2012) connected intersecting identities with experiences of discrimination and social activism. Situating the focus of intersectionality research on the context of intersecting oppressions is an important complement to the focus on intersecting identities.

As Warner and Shields (2013) comment in the final article in this special issue, no approach to intersectionality accounts for all manifestations of all identities present in all research participants. Each of the articles in this special issue offers a particular approach to understanding intersectionality embedded in a particular set of conceptual assumptions and operationalizations of component identities that warrant critical analysis, refinement, and advancement. Nevertheless, with all of its current caveats and limitations, intersectionality research represents a stepping-up for scholars to commit to undertaking challenging research—to actually conducting the intricate and multifaceted studies one more typically finds relegated to thought experiments in the "future directions" paragraph at the end of an article (a

practice we ourselves have engaged in). Intersectionality research is challenging conceptually (how can one merge the complex and sometimes seemingly contradictory threads in conceptual writing on intersectionality?), methodologically (how can one undertake a project from the ground up, in a way that incorporates intersectionality as framework, theory, and social advocacy?), and practically (how can one extend the current limits of theory, sampling, analysis, and pragmatics of "selling" the vitality of intersectionality to funding agencies?). The contributors to this special issue have made headway into these challenges of intersectionality research, and in so doing, we hope that each contribution to this issue serves to move intersectionality more and more into the mainstream of psychology and other fields, as Shields advocated in 2008.

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