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Conceptualizing the Multiple Levels of Identity and Intersectionality

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Abstract

With disciplinary roots in legal studies and Black feminist scholarship in the United States, intersectionality takes a birds-eye view of structural inequality and oppression. Yet, as the construct of intersectionality has moved across disciplines, alternate perspectives have come into view and new questions have been asked. Psychological perspectives on intersectionality have centered on questions (and tensions) about how to apply intersectionality in the study of identity—that is, whether intersectionality informs how individuals come to understand themselves and others, and how this may occur. Identity is an obvious link to intersectionality because the categories of difference/inequality that comprise intersectionality are also the identity groups that we study (e.g., racial identity, gender identity). At the same time, identity is (mostly conceived to be) a personal-level construct, which seems to stand in opposition to the structural lens that defines intersectionality. In this chapter, we use empirical data to consider what the study of identity reveals to us about intersectionality as a psychological process. We first define intersectionality and our developmental approach to identity drawing on Erikson's (1968) psychosocial identity theory. Next, we discuss core challenges that identity researchers in psychology often face when integrating intersectionality; the disciplinary emphasis on individual-level processes, discrete variables, and linear associations. We then present an analytical framework, drawn from our analysis of Black and White adolescents' race x gender identities, to conceptualize identity and intersectionality as phenomena that can be measured at multiple levels—*personal, relational, and structural*. We conclude that a multi-level perspective allows psychologists to see intersectionality in identity development.

Keywords: identity; intersectionality; race and gender; qualitative analysis

Introduction

Kimberlé Crenshaw put forth the term “intersectionality” in the 1989 Stanford Law Review to provide an accessible metaphor to describe the type of discrimination that Black women face in society. Discrimination, Crenshaw argues, is not an event that happened on a single route of oppression, such as racial *or* gender discrimination, or even along parallel routes (race *and* gender); rather, Black women experience discrimination at the *intersection* of multiple routes of oppression—race x gender x social class—creating a uniquely compounded reality. The term intersectionality is now used within U.S. scholarship to refer to the systems of power, privilege, and oppression that are built into a society’s laws, policies, values, and practices, which interlock to give meaning to social categories; namely, race, gender, social class, and sexuality (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Shields, 2008). With disciplinary roots in legal studies and Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1989), intersectionality takes a birds-eye view of society—a structural lens. Yet, as the construct of intersectionality has gained traction and moved across disciplines (Carbado et al., 2013) to encompass a much broader sociodemographic group (beyond adult Black women), new questions have been asked of the construct and additional perspectives have come into view.

Psychological perspectives on intersectionality have centered on questions (and tensions) about how to apply intersectionality in the study of identity—that is, whether and how intersectionality informs how individuals come to understand who they are (“who am I?”) and who they are in relation to others (“who are we?”) (Ruble et al., 2004; Rogers, 2018). Identity is an obvious link to intersectionality because the categories of difference/inequality that comprise intersectionality are also the identity groups that we study (e.g. racial identity, gender identity).

At the same time, identity is (mostly conceived to be) a personal-level construct, which seems to stand in opposition, or at least pose a conflict, to the structural lens that defines intersectionality.

With growing interest in intersectionality, it has been a struggle to define what “counts” as intersectionality research, especially in psychology (Bowleg, 2008; Collins, 1999). As Syed (2010a) pointed out, intersectionality “*was not, and is not*, a scientific theory used to generate predictions about human behavior or mental processes” (p. 61). However, the application of intersectionality across disciplinary lines offers an opportunity to test basic assumptions of psychological processes through an intersectional lens. In this chapter, we consider what the study of identity reveals to us about intersectionality as a psychological process. While most conversations on this topic focus on the points of disconnect between psychology and intersectionality and the resultant difficulties of integrating intersectionality into psychological research (which we discuss below), less attention has been paid to what a psychological perspective might bring to intersectionality. Identity is a useful psychological process to examine because it is universal and may reveal some of the nuances of intersectionality that are less visible from the vantage point of structures. Understanding the psychology of intersectionality may position us to imagine strategies to redress intersectional inequalities not only from the systems and structural levels but also from the more intimate levels of individuals and relationships.

We first situate our approach to identity by drawing on Erikson’s psychosocial identity theory (1968) and frame our developmental focus. Next, we discuss the core challenges that identity researchers in psychology often face when integrating intersectionality; the disciplinary emphasis on individual-level processes, discrete variables, and linear associations (Cole, 2009; Bowleg, 2008; Syed & Ajayi, 2018). We then present an analytical framework, based on our empirical analysis of the race x gender identities of Black and White adolescents in the United

States, to conceptualize identity and intersectionality as phenomena that can be measured and analyzed at multiple levels—*personal, relational, and structural*. We conclude that a multi-level perspective provides psychologists a new way to “see” intersectionality in identity development.

Conceptualization of identity

Identity is conceptualized and defined in a myriad of ways both within and across disciplines (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Hammack, 2015; Syed et al., 2020), and thus it is important to establish the conceptualization of identity in which we ground our discussion of intersectionality from the beginning. As cultural-developmental psychologists we align theoretically with Erik Erikson’s (1963, 1968) psychosocial theory of lifespan development, which characterized human development by a series of eight psychosocial tensions (or “crises”). Each of the tensions is present to varying degrees throughout ontogeny, but developmental demands due to maturation and environment (society, culture) bring different tensions to the fore at different points of the lifespan (see Syed & McLean, 2018).

At the fulcrum of childhood and adulthood is the tension of *identity vs. role confusion*, corresponding to the need for individuals to understand who they are and how they fit into society. Erikson provided many—and at times contradictory—definitions of identity (Waterman, 2015), but at the most general level he defined identity as an inner sense of *sameness and continuity*. “Sameness and continuity” does not mean “static and unchanging.” Rather, continuity pertains to the ability of individuals to make meaning of how their identities have changed over time and/or how they are different across contexts, and perhaps, by extension, across and at the intersection of multiple social identity groups (e.g., race x gender x sexuality).

The Eriksonian view of identity clearly has a strong intrapsychic component. From this perspective, identity is something that people “have;” that is, identity corresponds to cognitive

representations of the self that individuals take with them from context to context. This perspective, however, is not at odds with a sociocultural or structural view of identity. Identities are created and modified within cultures and contexts, in relation to others (McLean, 2016; Schacter & Ventura, 2008), and can be fleeting and contradictory (De Fina, 2015). This sociocultural perspective, represented for example by discursive approaches to identity (e.g., Bamberg, 2004; Korobov, 2015) and social psychological approaches focused on salience (e.g., Sellers, et al., 1998), sheds light on the moment-to-moment and day-to-day aspects of identity. Such a view has been well-integrated with more long-term aspects of identity both theoretically (McLean et al., 2007; Schachter, 2015; Thorne, 2004) and empirically (Yip, 2014).

Erikson's intrapsychic emphasis can also fit with a structural perspective of identity that attends to power, privilege, oppression, and hierarchy. Erikson's strong attention to structural constraints and opportunities is an under-recognized fact (Way & Rogers, 2015; Rogers, 2018) and was scrubbed from subsequent models of identity in developmental psychology (Syed & Fish, 2018). Indeed, Erikson (1968) argued that we cannot "separate" self from society, "because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other" (p. 23). The inextricable link between the internal and structural factors associated with identity development allow us to reject simplistic models that emphasize boundless individual agency (e.g., Waterman, 2015) as well as models that specify only top-down sociocultural influences on identity (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Rather, the Eriksonian view highlights a dynamic interaction between the two. It is this perspective that we have attempted to elaborate in our recent and ongoing work (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers & Way, 2018). This perspective of identity also give space for intersectionality and its relevance for psychosocial development.

The *developmental* focus of our approach to identity speaks to process and change, and is also relevant to the discussion of intersectionality. In general, the study of identity development has focused more on the ‘crisis’ period that most typifies adolescence/emerging adulthood than on the roots and stages that precede it (Rogers, 2018; Schachter & Ventura, 2008). However, identity is an ongoing psychological phenomenon that matures over the life course. The early adolescent years (12-14 years old) bring new and increasingly complex cognitive and social competencies that are crucial to the task of identity, and intensify the relevance of the social self across multiple groups, such as race and gender. Because identity experiences are cumulative, it makes sense to investigate how youth understand and structure their identities during these formative years. Although longitudinal analyses offer an optimal window into development, the investigation of a developmental construct, such as identity, at different developmental periods is also of great value in that it provides insight into what is known during certain time frames and how such manifestations might align or misalign with what is known of other developmental periods. In this regard, we know more about how intersectionality shows up in the identity experiences of adults but less about its presence during the adolescent years (Rogers & Nelson, 2019). Very few studies of intersectionality to date have examined intersectionality among adolescents (14 years +), and even fewer during the preadolescent years (see Ghavami & Peplau, 2018, for an exception). Listening to the perspective of early adolescents offers a novel window into identity and intersectionality.

Intersectionality in psychology

We acknowledge first that the concept of intersectionality was developed and refined within the United States, rooted in its particular histories of social group stratification, power, and hierarchies, specifically from an American Black feminist perspective. Accordingly, some of

the ideas and foci might not directly translate to other cultural contexts (Walgenbach, 2012). Indeed, in many Western European countries “race” is not explicitly discussed, and much of the social discussion and political rhetoric focuses on migration background (Moffitt et al., 2020). As a result, intersectional scholarship within such contexts would need to engage in a power-based analysis of oppression and privilege with respect to the cultural conception of “immigrants” rather than “race” as is primary in the United States. This difference in application highlights the way in which intersectionality has the potential to be broadly applicable; it is not a framework for specific groups, social identities, or experiences, but rather a framework or lens for conceptualizing and analyzing the power dynamics of societies and systems (see Moffitt et al., 2020, for more details on applications to the European context). Extended to the psychological realm, it is a framework for understanding how local (and global) power dynamics are embedded in psychological phenomena. As U.S.-based scholars, we apply intersectionality from within this cultural boundary. However, that is not to say that intersectionality as a concept, nor the ideas advanced in this chapter, are limited to the U.S. context. Within these constraints, there are a number of issues still to be examined if we are to integrate intersectionality into psychology. Here we highlight three concerns: interdisciplinarity, methodology, and theory.

Interdisciplinary Concerns. The uptake of intersectionality perspectives in identity scholarship, specifically, has led to a number of reviews and commentaries concerning why intersectionality matters and recommendations for how to use it (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009), as well as cautions about how to *not* use it (Syed & McLean, 2016) in identity research. In particular, scholars have underscored the need for appropriate definitions of intersectionality within an identity framework. For example, Syed and McLean (2016) distinguish between different forms or configurations of ‘multiple identities’ as a useful structure for identity scholars

to classify their research. A focus on alignment or congruence between identities, for example, is one approach but rather distinct from a focus on the relative importance of multiple identity groups (e.g., race compared to gender compared to religion; Kiang et al., 2008). Syed and McLean underscore that while there are various approaches to the study of multiple identities not all necessarily align with an intersectionality perspective.

A major lingering question is how much of the original conceptualization of intersectionality must be preserved as it moves into different disciplines. Is “conceptual purity” necessary or even desirable? There is no doubt that the concept of intersectionality will have to change in some way for it to be integrated with psychology. As an empirical science, psychology asks different questions and has different expectations for what concepts and theories provide compared to the humanistic origins of intersectionality (Syed, 2010; Syed & Ajayi, 2018). The question is how intersectionality can be successfully integrated into the psychology of identity without losing its essential meaning. Indeed, there are better and worse changes vis-à-vis the original concept. As noted, a sole focus on multiple identities—how individuals configure and manage their many potential competing identities—is not sufficient to be labeled an intersectional inquiry. From the original lens of critical Black feminist intersectionality, any intersectional inquiry must recognize and attend to the structural context. To be “doing intersectionality,” in other words, there must be attention to complexities of privilege and oppression and how they intersect to contour the lives of multiply-marginalized individuals. But how does an individually-focused field such as psychology successfully incorporate this kind of structural perspective in its theoretical and empirical work? We describe one potential approach later in this chapter.

Methodological Concerns. A second issue involves methodological and analytical approaches. The assumptions of many psychological methods and statistical techniques are simply incongruent with the assumptions of intersectionality. For example, the very notion of variables as discrete entities contrasts with the notion of complex, overlapping social categories. All of the intersections matter, but how then do we measure everything without measuring nothing at all? Analytical models similarly rely on specification of which variable predicts another in a linear fashion. However, intersectionality is cyclical and contextually-embedded. As a result, some scholars fall on the side of arguing for strictly qualitative methods, arguing that in-depth interviewing is the only accurate approach to measure intersectionality. Yet, even in qualitative approaches, the question of definition (raised above) comes into play. As Bowleg (2008) illustrated, how one poses the interview question matters for the type of data and answers we receive. Asking about being “Black and female” is not the same as asking about “being lesbian, as a Black female”, which differs still from the “experience of Black lesbians.”

Moreover, asking individuals directly about intersectionality may not always yield accurate insights into how intersectionality has structured the contexts that influence their lives. For example, Azmitia, Syed, and Radmacher (2008) found that asking college students directly about the intersections of race, class, and gender often led to unelaborated responses. Rather, it was when discussing contexts of their lives—family, peers, school, work—that they would unwittingly describe intersectional experiences. This methodological issue raises an important conceptual issue for the integration of intersectionality into the psychological study of identity, namely that intersectionality may operate outside of individuals’ conscious experience and that inquiries must be grounded in the contexts of individuals’ lives.

Theoretical Concerns. There are multiple possible theoretical concerns that could be raised regarding the integration of intersectionality in psychology. Here we draw attention to two that we believe are particularly relevant for the study of identity: 1) integration with development, and 2) employing multiple levels of analysis.

One issue unearthed in the psychological commentary on intersectionality concerns issues of moving across social groups and developmental stages (Ghavami et al., 2016; Hershberg & Johnson, 2019; Syed & Ajayi, 2018). Intersectionality is a concept and construct developed from legal studies and focused on explaining discrimination among adult Black women. What does it mean to shift this construction into the field of psychology, and more specifically developmental psychology, which focuses on stability and change over time, and often studies diverse and younger populations? Indeed, much of the developmental research that draws from intersectionality has examined emerging adults (Azmitia et al., 2008; Kuper et al., 2018), but what about younger kids? Developmental considerations include cognitive capacities, abstract thinking, and early formations of identity (e.g., Ghavami et al., 2016). We know that youth have social identities and experience discrimination with regard to what it means to be girl or boy (Brown, 2017; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). What is less clear is when and how youth perceive these processes at the intersection of social categories: race x gender, or sexuality x gender, or race x social class. Ghavami and colleagues (Ghavami & Peplau, 2017; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019) are leading the way into this territory with person perception research on the stereotypes that early adolescents ascribe to their peers at the intersection of identities: What stereotypes apply to Black gay boys versus White gay boys? Recognizing that intersectionality surfaces in young people's identity processes is an important step for pursuing developmental questions about how such processes emerge and change over time.

A second theoretical tension centers on the unit of analysis, which refers to where researchers implicitly (or explicitly) locate the issue or problem of study. In psychology, the unit of analysis is most often the individual, and in identity scholarship (theory and research) we most often measure individuals to describe the human experience as a feature of the individual psyche. Intersectionality views the structure as the unit of analysis, the site where discrimination and inequality operate. Herein lies the crux of the disconnect. Psychologists typically enter (and remain) at the personal level, whereas intersectionality theory enters and (often remains) at the structural level. What both perspectives often lack is a multi-level view—a recognition that both individuals and systems are active agents and contributors, each with a valuable vantage point. From a single level perspective, these visual fields are unlikely to ever converge; but with a multi-level view, one can ask and begin to see how and where these perspectives intersect.

We consider that intersectionality and identity operate at multiple levels simultaneously—*personal, relational, structural*—and individuals may enter (or exit) these conversations at these various access points. For example, being a ‘White girl’ may not matter *personally* but the individual may still recognize that being a White girl matters *relationally* with others and within the larger *structural* realities of society. From a psychological perspective, this ‘White girl’ may differ in consequential ways from a ‘White girl’ who also does not place any importance on this identity, but moreover does not recognize that race and gender positions matter in society broadly, and perhaps differ still from a ‘White girl’ who claims a strong personal significance of her intersectional identity, but views it as *only* relevant to herself and inconsequential for how others perceive and interact with her (relational), or how society affords her privileges based on her intersectional identity location (structural). In this way, the levels of identity and intersectionality are both experiential and empirical; they capture the range of ways

that individuals might engage with relevant social categories and a research tool, or level of analysis, for the empirical study of such processes. Moreover, these levels are nested, or related to each other. A multi-level framework, as we illustrate with empirical examples below, allows us to see the complexity of identity and intersectionality across levels of the human experience.

We recognize the general tendency of psychology to privilege individuals and individual-level variables over systems and structures of oppression as a notable limitation for conducting research from an intersectionality frame. However, psychology also brings the psyche and subjective experience into the structural conversation. Rather than choosing sides, we adopt a *transactional approach* in which self and society are mutually constituted, recognizing that systems indeed structure the experiences of individuals *and* that individuals have agency to respond, and by virtue of doing so, to alter those structures (Hammack, 2008; Rogers, 2018). In this way, we hold space for multiple perspectives to coexist as we consider what the psychological perspective of identity might reveal to us about intersectionality.

Intersectionality and identity at multiple levels: Personal, relational, structural

Our multi-level view of identity and intersectionality emerged through listening to the ways in which young people described the meaning and significance of their race x gender identities—what it means to be a Black girl or a White boy. The data we present here are drawn from a larger longitudinal, mixed-method study of children’s self-perceptions and social relationships (see Rogers, 2020; Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). The analysis is based on interview data from a sub-sample of Black and White adolescents, ages 9-14 years old ($N = 63$; $M_{\text{age}} = 12.51$ years; $SD = 1.55$). There were 17 Black girls, 10 Black boys, 16 White girls, and 20 White boys. Each adolescent was individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol designed to capture how young people reason about their race x gender identities.

Our intent in probing how young people make sense of intersectionality in this way is not to ‘test’ whether or not intersectionality exists; the structural reality of intersectional inequality is robustly evident in societal stratifications along multiple dimensions (Collins, 1991; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, & Tseng, 2015). Our curiosity here concerns how intersectionality is *experienced, perceived, and rationalized* by young people who are in the process of learning what it means to occupy these intersectional identity locations. What does it mean to be a Black girl or a White boy? How do youth make sense of their memberships within these social groups?

Exploring the psychology of intersectionality during early adolescence is new for the field. Nearly all of the extant empirical work on intersectional identities focuses on emerging adult and adult populations (Azmitia et al., 2008; Kiang et al., 2008; Rogers & Nelson, 2019). However, examining intersectionality from the perspective of young people offers a window into the *process* (Ghavami et al., 2016; Syed & Ajayi, 2018). Early adolescence marks the beginning of the period of the “identity crisis,” a time when youth are actively exploring their identities, interpreting and integrating past experiences with current social roles and expectations, and imagining future possibilities. Early adolescents are very aware of their multiple social group memberships, such as race and gender, forming a clear sense of “we-ness” with members of their social groups, “we” boys, for example (Frable, 1997; Ruble et al., 2004). But, do youth have a sense of “we-ness” with their intersectional group identities, such as “we” Black girls or “we” White boys? Moreover, early adolescents are aware of the social structures and stereotypes that define multiple social groups (Brown et al., 2011; Way, Hernandez et al., 2013); they know how others are perceived by society and among their peer groups, and can recognize how they themselves fit into (or deviate from) the social expectations.

Our data analysis is based on verbatim transcripts from adolescent interviews. We employed an axial coding procedure (Wolcott, 1994) with two organizing factors that emerged from the open-coding analysis: *Significance* and *Reasoning* (see Table 1).

Table 1

Levels of Intersectionality: Significance and Reasoning about Intersectional Identities

<u>SIGNIFICANCE</u>			
	Consequential	Inconsequential	
<u>REASONING</u>	Personal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who <i>I</i> am • <i>I</i> don't care • Pride 	White girl, 8 th grade: I: Like how important is it to you, being a white girl? R: {clears throat} It's weird because these are like my most proud of and least proud of paired up together. Um, I don't think it's that important.	Black girl, 7 th grade: R: It doesn't matter at all! I: How do you think things might be different if you were um, a white girl? R: Well then obviously my hair would be different. It'd be way easier..."
	Relational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family, peers, teachers • Differential treatment 	Black girl, 4 th grade: "Well then I wouldn't have the same family and I probably wouldn't have the same feeling at home probably not the same friends or school and stuff and my church because I really like my church and stuff."	White girl, 8 th grade: "Not at all important, but like, at my lunch table, there's like, cause all my friends are White. But that's cause, they're just – that's just who I met. So that's just cause of their personalities. Like, I couldn't care less if they were all Black, if I was Black. I couldn't care less. But at our lunch table, though, it's just a bunch of White girls and one White guy."
	Structural <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrimination • General stereotypes 	Black boy, 7 th grade: "Yeah dealing with all these people that don't like Black people. ... Uh some of the cops I thought were okay, but some of these other cops don't have to kill people. But some of them kill them for no reason just like because they don't like Black people."	White boy, 8 th grade: "Um, Not much.... Like maybe a few decades ago with the civil rights stuff it would of mattered, but now a days it doesn't matter that much."

Significance refers to how much importance individuals place on their intersectional identities (e.g., “How important is being a Black girl?”) and whether they believed anything would change as a result of being in a different identity position (e.g., “How would things change if you were a White girl?”). The second factor, *Reasoning*, concerned the explanation or rationalization provided. This is where the multi-level perspective surfaced as adolescents spontaneously reasoned about these intersectional identity positions from the “Personal,” “Relational,” and “Structural” levels. These were not mutually exclusive in our conceptualizing or coding of the data.

The multi-level framing of the analysis emerged from listening to the data. Certainly, multi-level or systems perspectives are not themselves novel to developmental research. However, in thinking about how to make sense of intersectionality, this lens was especially useful. The initial coding of the interview data focused primarily on *content* – what themes, ideas, concepts young people raised when discussing their intersectional identities. Beyond the content however we noticed patterns in *how* young people reasoned about the relevance of intersectional identities and more specifically that there were distinct ways of engaging this conversation. These distinctions were made visible by incorporating the terminology of ecological systems theory – which we termed the individual, relational, and structural levels of the ecosystem. Within this frame, our analysis shifted from which adolescents said what to *how* and at *which level* of the system young people were having the discussion. For some, it was a personal, individual level conversation and for others intersectionality was inextricable from social and relational realities. Acknowledging ‘where’ young people entered this conversation allowed for deeper interpretation beyond ‘how much’ or ‘how often’ a theme was mentioned; it allowed for both the structural and psychological realities of intersectionality to coexist.

A primary motivation for including a data-based perspective in this chapter is to shift the conversation from only theorizing about how intersectionality fits into psychology to examining what we might learn about the psychology of intersectionality empirically. In our experiences of discussing intersectionality with our colleagues, we find that the ideas resonate but they are unsure of what incorporating intersectionality would look like in their empirical work. We hope this empirically-based approach responds to the call for guidance, and believe it is useful for other researchers – it can inform one’s research design, questions, analysis. Here we provide some qualitative excerpts to help illustrate the broader theoretical points (A more detailed discussion of the data analysis and findings can be found in Rogers and Syed, under revision).

Personal-Level Intersectionality. On a personal level, intersectionality centers the individual but often only the individual—how the individual describes and feels about identity, how phenotypic and micro-level experiences figure into the (in)significance of identity for the self. As psychologists, the personal level is the most familiar. Identity constructs such as ‘centrality,’ which measures how important a given social group is to the self, or rating scales that assess how positively or negatively one feels about their identity (Sellers et al., 1998), are examples of a personal-level view that centers the individual as the unit of analysis. When moving into the realm of intersectionality, psychologists have largely maintained the same lens, measuring how individuals rate their *multiple* identities and the extent to which those ratings differ across identity categories (e.g., Kiang et al., 2008). For example, labeling the self as a “Black female” or “White male” or ranking the importance of one’s “Lesbian” identity relative to “Black” and “Female” identities.

This level of analysis is valuable. It provides a subjective view of a structural process, honing into how an individual understands or makes sense of themselves within a

stratified society. Our own empirical example drew from very similar questions:

Question (Q): All right so we put Black and boy together, how important is being a Black boy to you, not much, a little or a lot?

Answer (A): Not much because everybody is like – every boy is kind of the same, I mean it doesn't really – I don't really go off my skin color; I don't care about skin color.

Q: Okay and why don't you care about skin color?

A: Because a boy, if he is White or if he is Black, if he's Black I mean he's still a boy, you've got just different skin color. (Black Boy, 8th grade)

Q: How would things change if you were a Black girl?

A: I would still be the same person I am today, so I just - I don't really see how it matters that much; it's just that you're a boy or you're a girl. (White Girl, 8th grade)

From a psychological perspective, these responses are interesting and identity-relevant.

The limitation, however, is that the question, interpretation, and conclusion focus only on the individual without situating the individual within a sociocultural context. That is, for these young people, intersectional identities are *not* important. But, other adolescents view intersectionality as a highly significant aspect of their sense of self: "I like [being a Black girl] it a lot! I love that I have really thick hair {laughter} ...and I love when my hair's curly cuz I just feel really great" (Black Girl 8th grade). Emphasizing a uniquely racialized and gendered feature of her Black girl identity, hair style/texture (Ceilto & Rogers, 2019), this young girl perceives and integrates race and gender holistically and positively into her sense of self. And still for others, this explicit intersectional identity is quite a mixed bag:

Well, being a girl is a lot and I guess being a white girl—I guess it would be in-between them... A little. (White Girl, 6th grade)

Because I said it was a little bit important that I was girl but um, and I said it was a lot about being black, the fact that I'm a Black girl really just circles back to being black, not really being a girl. (Black Girl, 6th grade)

Q: How about being a White boy, how important is that to you?

A: Um a boy, a lot; White, not. ... So, not much. (White Boy, 8th grade)

These are interesting micro- or personal-level explanations of intersectional identities that reveal the subjectivity of intersectionality as part of an identity process. And, as represented in these example quotes, one could conduct group comparisons to evaluate which intersectional groups, Black girls compared to White girls, for example, rate their intersectional identities, on average, as more or less important (Rogers & Syed, under revision).

Where the personal-level analysis often falls short, however, that it is often taken to be the lone level of analysis. This is not to say that psychology, particularly social psychology, is unaware that racial and gender categories are *social* constructs that organize social groups, rather that the unit of analysis is individuals rather than structures. Recognizing this tendency, two prominent social psychologists recently urged the field to don “hierarchy-shaped glasses” (Ktiely & Richeson, 2017, p. 327) in order to see how phenomena observed at the personal and group-level are indeed reflections of the broader societal hierarchy. Acknowledging the level of analysis has important implications for interpretation. That is, what do these findings about identity importance mean for interpreting the significance of intersectionality? Does it mean that intersectionality is not relevant to all early adolescents, or to certain groups (White adolescents), or that adolescents are unaware of intersectionality? It would neither be appropriate nor useful to conclude from these findings that intersectionality is meaningless—or to question whether

intersectionality exists. Rather, we ought to use the findings as a springboard to ask what psychological motivations may drive this personal interpretation of intersectionality?

Acknowledging that the personal level is only *one* level of intersectionality reframes our interpretation and helps bridge the disciplinary and theoretical gap. Our axial coding approach allows us to see how personal-level intersectionality is often employed to explain why intersectional identities are inconsequential, to downplay significance. And that this strategy can be an intentional one—one that is inextricably tied to relational and structural realities beyond the individual (Rogers & Syed, under revision). Holding these other levels in view while examining the personal allows us to draw conclusions that are more congruent with the original aims of intersectionality. It also allows for the incongruence that often defines the human psyche; that is that humans can, and often do, hold contradicting beliefs. As we illustrate below, sometimes the same individuals who disclaim the importance of intersectionality *personally*, also acknowledge the relational and structural implications of these identities.

Relational-Level Intersectionality. We also observe identity and intersectionality at the level of relationships and social interactions. From this view, intersectionality exists not as a feature or construct for the self, but as one that can be used to interpret processes between people and among groups: within relationships and interactions with peers, teachers, family, and colleagues. From this level of analysis and interpretation, we hear how intersectionality and identity are intimately tied to the perceptions of and interactions with others, making the unit of analysis the relationship rather than the individual. From this lens, the meaning of identity and intersectionality is socially constructed, maintained, and disrupted in the context of relationships. In our data, adolescents sometimes could only make sense of or explain their own intersectional identities—why they mattered or did not matter—by describing their relational worlds.

Friendships and one's social circle were sometimes referenced as evidence for the *insignificance* of these identities. For example:

Q: Okay. How about being a White boy, if we put those two together, how important is that to you, not much, a little or a lot?

A: Hum no, not much

Q: Not much? Do you think things would be different if you were a Black boy?

A: Not really. I mean because a couple of my friends from [elementary school] were Black and I still hung out with them and they were good, so. (White Boy, 7th grade)

The idea of having a diverse social group—attending a diverse school, church or community events, having friends or family members of varying racial/gender backgrounds, living in a diverse neighborhood—as evidence for or explanation of the insignificance of intersectional identities is an interesting psychological process, and it offers a means for understanding how and why individuals rationalize the structural intersectional inequality.

At the relational level, individuals might find the perspective they need to speak about intersectionality beyond the self. In our data, more often than not, the adolescents engaged the relational sphere to state the obvious relevance of intersectionality, but in a way that shifted the responsibility from the individual to the shared interaction; these were not personal beliefs but artifacts of the relational or social context. For example, when adolescents were explicitly asked whether anything else would change if their race/gender changed, they most frequently discussed to how their relationships would change:

Well then I wouldn't have the same family and I probably wouldn't have the same feeling at home, probably not the same friends or school. (Black Girl, 4th grade)

Um it would be like how you act and your group of friends and all that stuff.
(White Boy, 8th grade)

What is telling from these narratives is how “master narratives” – widely shared and culturally sanctioned stories and stereotypes—are invoked in the meaning-making (McLean & Syed, 2015). Whereas the reasoning at the individual level rarely elicits the cultural context, when individuals reason about intersectionality through relationships, the sociocultural realities come to the surface. Adolescents said things like: being a girl (instead of a boy) would make you “nicer” and being Black (instead of White) would change “how you act 100%” at school and types of “movies” you watch and the types of “sports” you play. The evidence of this relational or shared story also comes through when listening to youth speak about the “other.” The following quotes are from two girls who illustrate the shared reality of intersectionality:

Q: Why would you get in less trouble if you were a White girl?

A: Uh because they always be like – they always think that Black people will be doing everything and I’m like yeah, sometimes we are bad-ish and they think we always be doing stuff, so that’s why. (Black Girl, 7th grade)

It’s kind of like racist but, I feel like they’re [teachers are] more trusting of like the White girls than they are of like a Black girl or something. (White Girl, 8th grade)

From their respective social locations in the U.S. racial hierarchy, these early adolescent girls speak the same “truth” and experience of intersectional positionality.

The relational level of intersectionality also seems to offer, and perhaps reveal, the contradictions embedded in the psychological processing of intersectionality, and particularly with regard to oppression and privilege. The notion of intersectionality existing as a transaction between people rather than within individuals, differs from the structural level (discussed below) in that the focus is on specific people and relationships rather than cultural systems. But, the tensions of the self, the other, and society are salient through relational lens:

Q: Do you think things would change if you were Black?

A: Um probably in some ways. Like I, I'd like to think like in my mind it shouldn't matter, but a lot of- to a lot of people it does matter. So, like, if I'm – when I would be around those people they would—yeah, it would be different than it is now.

Q.: Even if it didn't matter...?

A: Yeah, it didn't matter to me but it still matters to some other people. So...

(White Boy, 8th grade)

Making explicit the division and contradiction at the personal (“in my mind”) and the relational (“but to a lot of people”) levels, he suggests that the relational trumps the personal, because if it matters to everyone else, then “it still matters.” Another example is a White girl who explained:

I don't think anything would be different [if race or gender changed] but that would be up to like my friends and family and stuff. [...] I don't think my friends would change but I would love to see how they would react! And my family, I'd really doubt they would, but like I said, I'd see how they'd react.

(White Girl, 8th grade)

Both of these examples make visible the relational level of analysis on identity—and intersectionality. The relational level acknowledges that “others” (and even society) structure and give meaning to identity. Indeed, if society did not stratify and assign value to individuals on the basis of social groups, then it really would matter much less—or differently than it does. At the same time, offloading responsibility *only* to “others” may have the effect of undermining ones' sense of agency and motivation to create change. In order to move forward we must recognize that personal identity narratives often function to maintain the societal master narrative and the inequalities it supports (McLean & Syed, 2015). In other words, both the personal and the social (and structural) are necessary for change. Recognizing that it is “up to” us—our families, our

schools, our communities—whether and how these social positions matter is an important perspective for imagining how identity can function as a lever for social change (Rogers, 2018).

Structural-Level Intersectionality. The structural level is the quintessential or original level at which intersectionality operates—built into societal structures and systems (Crenshaw, 1991). This is also the level psychological research most frequently ignores. The absence of structural level analyses is both theoretical and methodological—psychological theories and measures of identity have not, traditionally, been designed to explain structural processes. However, in the past decade we see a concerted effort to address this limitation through theory and empirical research that centers structures and inequalities in identity scholarship (Galliher et al., 2018; McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers, 2018; Rogers & Way, 2016). With these frameworks we are better positioned to engage with intersectionality at the structural level.

The importance of the structural level cannot be understated. If we are to understand the conditions under which humans develop and form relationships with themselves and others, we must take seriously the sociocultural oppressions and inequalities that regulate everyday human interactions and experiences. At the same time, to only privilege the structure without attending to the ways that individuals experience and make-meaning of and negotiate these cultural rhythms, is to miss the psychology of it (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Rogers & Way, 2018). Listening for structure in the narratives, we can hear adolescents’ awareness of the ways that societal stereotypes, discrimination, and inequalities systematically organize these identity locations and filter into their relational and personal levels of experience. In these data, we capture this structural awareness by asking young people to *imagine* their experiences through the identity-lens of another. For example, a White girl (8th grade) reflects on how things would change if she were a Black girl: “Probably would have less privilege because a lot of

White people are racist so I'd probably have less privilege and I think that's the only thing that would really change." Asked to reflect on a change to her gender identity, she replied: "Um I'd have a ton of privilege; I'd be like the top of the food chain; I'd have so much privilege and I'd be like – yeah." Recognizing the privilege afforded to (White) males in a patriarchal society, as a White girl she can see the notch above her own race/gender positionality. Through these two perspectives, we can hear that she has a conception of both racial and gender inequality, and her own (race) privilege and (gender) oppression within this hierarchy. A Black girl (8th grade) reflected on the same questions:

Um, I think if I was a White a girl, like {pause} how it would be different. Um, I think people wouldn't like judge me on certain things like because people say like when they met me I look rude, so probably if I was White, they would probably be like – uh, excuse me – not, um, dang. I think I wouldn't get judged as much as if I was White.

These quotes exemplify the structural level because (a) they state that judgment and bias are tied to these social groups and (b) these judgments are part of society. As one White girl (8th grade) explained, as a boy "you probably get treated more fairly, honestly. By everyone." It is "everyone" rather than the select individuals in one's immediate environment (parents, peers). We can also visualize the nuances of intersectional oppression from the subjective perspective. The quotes by the White girls recognize the gender privilege afforded to (White) boys whereas the second quote from a Black girl underscores the racial privilege afforded to Whiteness more comprehensively. Although asking young people to imagine what it is like to be part of another racial and gender group may pull for generalities that align with stereotypes, which is evident in some of the answers young people provide, their responses are nonetheless interesting and reveal, in a way, how the personal and master narrative interweave to forge identity.

Furthermore, these responses reveal a critical awareness of the societal structures that come into view when two identity categories are brought into relationship with each other—the unique opportunities of being White *and* male, and challenges of being Black *and* female in this society.

It is also important to note that the structural level is not distal, but intimately experienced at the personal level of experiences and expectations. This again underscores the value of a multi-level lens for analyzing and interpreting intersectionality within psychology:

If I was a White girl, I would probably get treated – I probably wouldn't get treated any way [be]cause they only say anything bad about Black – I mean I don't know what they say about White girls [be]cause I'm not White. But um, I would feel – probably I would probably like being White more than Black because I always like their hair and their body shapes and um, since they're White, they get more jobs, so they have more money and so I would enjoy having more money. Or at least my mom might have more money. So, I'd be fine with it, if I was White. (Black Girl, 8th grade)

This Black girl's description of White privilege is both about structures that privilege Whiteness and wealth and beauty standards of White femininity but also about access to employment and familial wealth and the personal/phenotypic features of hair texture and skin tone. At each of these levels, we hear how her awareness of and engagement with an intersectionality influences how she sees herself and others.

If the structural is the only level of analysis, the individual is merely a passive recipient of these realities of discrimination and inequality. A multi-level view affords us the perspective to simultaneously listen to and interpret how individuals also respond to and engage with these structures. That is, we can hear how the psychology of intersectionality plays out in their identity formation. One way individuals may engage with the structural level of intersectionality is through accommodation, or aligning themselves with the master narrative and viewing their

identities in accordance with it. For example, when a Black boy (7th grade) imagined what it would be like if he were a White boy, he responded: “Not being good at sports.” Likewise, when a Black girl (7th grade) imagined being a Black boy (a change to gender), she replied: “I’d probably be like an athlete or something or I’d probably be into football.”

Another way that individuals respond to the structures of intersectionality is through resistance—constructing their identities in ways that challenge, disrupt, or deviate from society’s expectations (McLean et al., 2018; Rogers & Way, 2016). For example, when Black girls claim their intersectional identity as highly important because they “get to prove people wrong” and affirm that they are worthy of “respect” and value, they are responding to and resisting the master narrative that positions them as inferior on the basis of their identities: “Like, being a girl and being Black, those are kind of two precious things because they [other people] kind of expect more from you and like they kind of expect less at the same time...” (Black Girl, 7th grade). Embedded in the realities of oppression and low expectations, these young Black girls understand their identities and positionalities from a stance of resistance, embracing *both* the good and the bad as “precious.” Their response to the intersecting oppression of society is to challenge the structure that threatens to undermine their identities and find wholeness at intersection: “If you can’t love yourself in one section, how are you supposed to love yourself in other?” (Black Girl, 8th grade). Our empirical or theoretical considerations of intersectional identity need to make space for such wholeness, or our conclusions are woefully incomplete.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to consider what the study of identity reveals to us about intersectionality as a psychological process. Our conceptualization of identity, rooted within Erikson’s (1968) lifespan developmental theory, shows how “traditional” psychological notions

of identity can be merged with structural considerations, which is not often the provenance of psychological research. The concept of intersectionality provides a powerful tool for analyzing and understanding the nature and consequences of interlocking oppression and privilege.

Intersectionality offers a lens for understanding systemic oppression and inequality, and identity is a psychosocial process that unfolds within the sociocultural context. Bringing these together allows for much deeper and more complex theorizing about both identity and social structures.

In this chapter, we considered intersectionality in identity from an empirical lens. Rather than urge our discipline to shift the entire focus to the structural level of systemic inequality at the loss of phenomenology and subjectivity, psychology can leverage its disciplinary strength of prioritizing individual experience to interlace the personal and relational with the structural. Assuming that identity and intersectionality function at multiple levels of experience allows for more meaningful questions, analyses, and interpretations of identity processes. It creates a prism of realities, where structures, relationships, and individuals coexist and interact and, from different angles, shine a different light on the complexities of identity and intersectionality. A prism is not neatly divided into equal parts or pieces, and no single piece or angle of prism could ever meaningfully capture the light to reflect a rainbow as a full prism does. Psychology is drawn to intersectionality because it more accurately describes the phenomena related to justice and equality that our field cares about deeply (Killen et al., 2016). As a field, we cannot reap the benefits of an intersectionality perspective without embracing a more nuanced and contextually-embedded set of prism lenses.

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