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Methods of intersectional research

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality is a powerful concept within sociology, urging scholars to consider how an array of socially constructed dimensions of difference intersect to shape each person's experiences and actions. This paper provides a number of different blueprints for designing intersectional research, which can be adapted for different purposes. The key methodological tenets of intersectional research are oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction. This paper defines these tenets, addresses misunderstandings of their implications, and applies these tenets to existing intersectional research. Multiple qualitative, comparative, and quantitative strategies can be used to carry out intersectional research; there is not just one way to do intersectional empirical research. While intersectional methods require thought in designing the research, they are doable. What is more, they provide much more nuanced understandings of social relations and inequality. If race, class, gender and other socially constructed dimensions of difference are understood not as static but as dynamic, researchers can employ a wide variety of methodological tools to analyze power relations via their intersections.

Introduction

Intersectionality is a powerful concept within sociology; intersectional scholars consider how an array of social systems intersect to shape each person's experiences. Incorporating an intersectional lens enriches a researchers' understanding of the social world. For example, a police officer confronting a citizen acts not only based on their occupation, but also their race, gender, sexuality, class background, as well as those social locations for the citizen, other officers who are present, and the community they police (Preito-Hodge 2019). Intersectional researchers consider how race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and other socially constructed dimensions of difference are always interacting (Anthias 2013; Choo and Ferree 2010; Collins and Bilge 2016; Glenn 2009; Ken 2008; McCall 2005); yet this intricacy can make *doing* intersectional research seem challenging.

We provide a number of blueprints for designing intersectional research, arguing that within sociology, much intersectional research shares key methodological attributes, including the researcher's recognition of *oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction*. Researchers' incorporation of power and oppression are key to understanding intersectional inequalities. Taking a relational lens, allows researchers to directly link privilege and disadvantage. Recognizing complexity means that researchers recognize that many different socially constructed dimensions of difference shape a person's experiences. Focusing on context

allows a researcher to explore how these experiences are also further shaped by spatial and temporal contexts. When a researcher uses the logic of comparison, they consider differences by socially constructed statuses. Using deconstruction further allows a researcher to break down socially constructed dimensions of difference, which can always be deconstructed further. These key tenets help identify how intersectional research is carried out. By attending to these tenets in designing their research, researchers are more likely to develop intersectional insights.

Intersections have been researched, modeled, and analyzed in a variety of ways; there is not just *one way* to do intersectional empirical research. Some intersectional scholars actively identify their work as intersectional, others do not use the term, and still others label their work as intersectional when it is not (Jones, Misra, and McCurley 2013). We identify key empirical approaches to intersectionality, even though the politics of research and publishing mean that some intersectional work may not be identified as such. Our goal is to clarify how intersectional research is done, while highlighting different methodological approaches that allow for developing intersectional insights.

Our focus on intersectional methods is a call for researchers to be more explicit about the important relationship between intersectional theorizing, epistemology and the methodological choices we make in our research. As sociologists, our methodological *practices* are conduits or “vehicles” for intersectional theorizing (Collins 2019:142). Further, the reasoning and logic that characterize intersectionality as an analytical framework inform how we conduct our research. All too often methodology is hidden behind the cloak of neutrality; we argue for thinking explicitly about how methodological choices allow us to develop intersectional insights.

The production of knowledge is itself shaped by a researcher’s positionality, as well as status hierarchies in the discipline (Jaggar 2015; Sprague 2016). As Bowleg (2008) reminds us, how questions are worded can limit intersectional insight, for example when asking participants to describe how sexism impacts their lives. Inviting participants instead to reflect on which positionality holds particular importance in certain contexts allows unmarked categories to emerge. In addition, the researcher’s interpretation is an important tool for producing intersectional insights, such as through situating phenomena under study in specific historical, social and cultural contexts, what Bowleg refers to as a “contextualized scientific method” (Bowleg 2008:320; Choo and Ferree 2010; Winker and Degele 2011).

In this article, we begin by describing the key tenets of intersectional methodologies, building on substantial existing research in sociology and feminist studies. As we do so, we also respond to common misunderstandings of intersectionality. Next we consider how these concepts apply to specific qualitative, comparative historical, and qualitative case studies. These studies demonstrate how to carry out intersectional research with varied methodological strategies to develop more nuanced and complex understandings of the world. As Choo and Ferree (2010:130) point out, although intersectionality has had a substantial impact on feminist work in the field of sociology, it has been “underutilized” in sociology more broadly. We aim to make intersectional methods clearer to a broad array of sociologists in hopes that intersectional methodological approaches will be adopted more widely.

Conceptual background

The key methodological tenets of intersectionality

Focusing on the theoretical tenets of intersectionality, Collins and Bilge (2016) argue that intersectionality centers on six core ideas: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice. In analyzing the methods of research, we integrate some of these categories, and add others. We combine Collins and Bilge’s (2016) concepts of inequality, power, and social justice in our concept of *oppression*—which recognizes the relationship between power and

inequality; inequality exists through the more powerful oppressing the less powerful. A social justice orientation that shapes intersectional theorizing may inform methodological choices, as when researchers engage in participatory action methodologies (Kong 2010). Feminist scholars stress the importance of connecting intersectional theorizing with critical praxis for social justice (Collins 2019). Intersectional knowledge through empirical research can be mobilized to shape policy, incite collective action, and dismantle the multiple intersecting hierarchies that shape our everyday lives. We further connect oppression to the concept of *relationality*, showing how oppression links privilege to disadvantage.

The concepts of *complexity and context* require researchers to show how experiences reflect the complexity of a person's socially constructed positionalities, and how these experiences are grounded in particular historical and spatial contexts. Sociologists carry out intersectional research through *comparison*, while also identifying the inherently instability of categories, or *deconstruction* (Choo and Ferree 2010; McCall 2005; Misra 2018). Thus, our key methodological tenets focus upon *oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction*. These interconnected key tenets of intersectionality can help guide intersectional methodological approaches. In the following sections, we define each tenet and address key misunderstandings of these principles.

Oppression

The recognition of *oppression and power* are central to the insights of women of color, particularly Black women, who first theorized intersectionality through analyzing how their experiences were circumscribed by race, gender, and class (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983; Anzaldúa 1987; Beale 1970; Collins 1986, 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Glenn 1992; King 1988; Morgan and Anzaldúa 1981; Smith, Hull, and Scott 1982; Zinn et al. 1986). King (1988:49) illustrates how wages differ by race, gender, and educational background, arguing, "the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of black women's lives is neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, is dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration." Thus, race, class, and gender further intersect with socially constructed dimensions of difference such as sexuality, nationality, ability, and socio-historical contexts to create what Deborah King (1988) refers to as "multiple jeopardy." From its earliest inception, intersectional scholars like King provided models for how to carry out intersectional research.

Recognizing *oppression* is thus *core* to intersectional methodology. Jennifer Chun and colleagues (Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin, 2013:922), critique misunderstandings that suggest that intersectionality allows "for crafting a kind of personal designer identity based on the complexities and contradictions of individual biographies," rather than its true goal: "revealing that power works in uneven and differentiated ways." Intersectional scholars are deeply focused on recognizing how oppression shapes the human experience. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) argues, every person fits into a complex "matrix of domination," or the overall organization of hierarchical power relations in a given society including: structural practices and policies; disciplinary processes that rely on bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance; hegemonic ideologies; and the interpersonal, discriminatory practices of everyday lived experiences. The matrix of domination is not, therefore neutral—but reflects oppression.

Researchers are also located within a matrix of domination, impacting how they produce knowledge (Jaggar 2015; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Sprague 2016). Sprague (2016) discusses understanding one's power and authority as a researcher, and encourages researchers to adopt marginalized standpoints to develop questions that empower the disadvantaged. Intersectional scholars must analyze how the mutual construction of complex socially constructed dimensions of difference such as race, class and gender operate across all levels of this domain of power.

Relationality

The relational underpinnings of intersectionality reflect that oppression for some groups is interconnected with opportunity for others (Branch 2011; Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill 1996; Carbado 2013; Glenn 1992, 2009). Intersectional scholars show how categories of difference are interconnected and also how forms of privilege function to make other categories invisible (Roberts and Jesudason 2013). This enables us to understand, for example, how a universal category of womanhood made Black women's oppressions invisible within the White feminist movement (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983; Davis 2011).

One misunderstanding of intersectionality is that socially constructed dimensions of difference determines a person's experience, but that they are not interlinked. Thus, White straight women may be understood to have *different* experiences from White lesbians, due to their different sexualities. Yet, intersectional researchers emphasize how these two sets of experiences are linked. The privileges and advantages that accrue to White straight women are directly tied to White lesbians' disadvantage and oppression. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) illustrates how White women can pursue other forms of work or leisure *due* to women of color's care for their families. In this way, White families' hiring of women from racially subordinate groups to carry out low paid and stigmatized reproductive work creates opportunities for White women. Similarly a relational lens shows how Global South migrant workers subsidize privileges for families in the Global North (Parreñas 2000). One group's privilege is not free-floating, but directly tied to another group's disadvantage.

Complexity

Intersectional researchers also emphasize that social inequality is *complex*. While it may be simpler to consider inequality on the basis of one category—for example, social class, or race, or gender—inequality always reflects a variety of socially constructed dimensions of difference. Intersectionality's core tenet of complexity also illustrates an underlying theory of knowledge that stands in stark contrast to Western epistemology that seeks to organize the world into binaries: man versus woman, Black versus white, gay versus straight, the “west versus the rest” (Lugones 2003). Reckoning with complexity instead means that intersectional researchers insist that these seemingly distinct and oppositional categories are linked, interactive and relational. Researchers' recognition that sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism and other structures of power are connected transforms the research process (Collins 1986; Lugones 2003; Norris 2012). Intersectional researchers also pinpoint how the interplay of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. operates across many different domains of power—both structurally and culturally at interactional, institutional, and societal levels (McClintock and Sheehan 2019; Norris 2012).

Intersectional researchers identify race, gender and class identities as mutually constituted, rather than separate systems of inequality; each dimension of oppression contributes to our identities as they are created through one another (Collins 1998). Ivy Ken (2008) suggests thinking of this as how flour, sugar, eggs, and butter come together differently, depending on the measurements and how long and in what shape they are baked. Therefore, rather than trying to pull apart these factors, we must recognize how they intermingle to create particular outcomes.

Intersectional scholars recognize that the socially constructed dimensions of difference are interrelated, impacting each other, and impossible to untangle. An additive misunderstanding of intersectionality may lead researchers to think that people in certain groups will *always* experience greater privilege or disadvantage than people in other groups (Mandel and Semyonov 2016). This oversimplification assumes that positionality determines disadvantage in a simple, additive way. For example, while Black straight men have privileges that are linked to the disadvantages that Black lesbians experience—it is imperative to understand all of the other statuses that may be reflected; in some contexts, a wealthy, married Black lesbian might have greater privilege than a poor, single Black straight man (Carbado 2013).

Context

Many intersectional scholars, in their insistence on complexity, comparison, and relationality also show keen attention to how context matters. Sociological researchers more generally consider context, but intersectional researchers further identify the specific contexts in which privilege and disadvantage play out (Byrd et al. 2015; Collins and Bilge 2016; Norris 2012). For example, Byrd et al. (2015) show that adolescent misconduct in schools reflects not only intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender, but rural, urban, and suburban settings as well as social control mechanisms at the school level. Robyn Wiegman (2012) analyzes a judicial case of a White woman giving birth to a Black embryo that was not her own, to demonstrate how the historical context of White control over Black women's reproduction during slavery continues to impact forms of motherhood and kinship. As opposed to understanding socially constructed dimensions of difference as variables that compete with one another to explain the majority of variance in a model, intersectional researchers think about *when and where* a particular set of overlapping conditions matter the most. The contingent nature of intersecting statuses is thus central to intersectional researchers. These researchers' findings theoretically and methodologically challenge the notion that independent variables can be analyzed in isolation and are fixed as opposed to contingent and relational.

One misunderstanding about intersectional claims is the assumption that socially constructed dimensions of difference are fixed in a hierarchy that never changes. Race, class and gender are contextual and constantly changing, especially "as the economy changes, politics shift and new ideological processes, trends and events occur" (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004:108). There is no one unified experience or "true" experience of inequality. Rather, people face oppression in ways that reflect variations of power and privilege and where the *salience* of race, class, gender and other statuses vary according to time, space and place (Browne and Misra 2003; Collins and Bilge 2016). Carrying out intersectional research requires being cognizant of how a variety of socially constructed dimensions of difference intersect with each other and with different contexts to shape outcomes.

Comparison

Intersectional researchers often rely on a *comparative* logic, which is also common to sociological research more broadly. Many intersectional researchers compare outcomes for diverse groups, for example looking at differences in experiences of policing by race and gender (Preito-Hodge 2019). Yet intersectional studies also can compare sub-groups—such as Dawn Dow's (2019) analysis of Black mothers, in which she identifies different strategies for mothering Black children in a racist society.

One misunderstanding about the comparative nature of intersectional research is the implication that intersectional researchers must incorporate variation on *all* potential socially constructed dimensions of difference in their sample and in their analyses. Exploring all of the possible intersections of race, gender, class, educational attainment, relationship status, parenthood, sexuality, gender identity, nationality, ability, etc. is simply not feasible in a practical sense. In her intersectional analysis of family, Collins (1998:64) argues, "While I allude to class, ethnicity, sexuality and age in the following discussion, I place greater emphasis on how family links social hierarchies of gender, race, and nation." This allows Collins to focus on the intersections that are most salient for her particular argument, reducing the complexity of the analysis, while still leveraging the insights of intersectionality.

Researchers should consider *which* intersections matter most for the research question being posed, focusing on the intersections that seem *most salient* based on the research focus (Browne and Misra 2003). No one project can cover every base; yet, they can be designed creatively to consider how simple additive categories may not fully uncover the social processes of interest. Intersectional researchers work to analyze the most salient statuses for their research question,

recognizing that exploring other socially constructed dimensions of difference might lead to different insights.

Deconstruction

All of these factors further contribute to some intersectional scholars' *deconstruction* of categories—calling into question simple notions of categories themselves. As described by McCall (2005), researchers who conduct intra-categorical analyses explore the experiences of people who share certain socially constructed dimensions of difference, while those who conduct inter-categorical analyses compare differences among people with different statuses. For McCall, researchers who use anti-categorical approaches critique the integrity of categorical distinctions themselves, calling for a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories. Indeed, if researchers' uncritically use social categories of difference such as race and gender, they may unintentionally essentialize differences between groups (Misra 2018).

For example, the heteropatriarchal state creates rewards and penalties that are not simply and categorically gendered, but routinely imposed on bodies based on notions of gender conformity and non-conformity (Meadow 2018). Policies and practices that uncritically deploy social categories, such as segregating trans people in immigration detention, leave immigrant trans people vulnerable to abuse, sexual assault and demonization (Bement 2016). Intersectional researchers should stay analytically attentive to the malleability of categories. The point of deconstruction is to identify how partial and fluid socially constructed categories are and how categories themselves are often by-products of oppression.

A misunderstanding of this approach is that deconstructing categories, releases all categories of meaning vis-à-vis power and inequality. Such an assumption suggests that because we show categories to be socially constructed and contingent, we rob them of all meaning; there is no inequality between dimensions of difference, if those categories themselves are not real. Yet, as W.I. and D.S. Thomas argue, if people “define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). Deconstructing categories, highlighting their instability, gives researchers greater traction at explaining how inequality works; it does not mean that inequality does not exist.

We have argued that there are a number of central tenets that intersectional methods share: *oppression, relationality, complexity, context, comparison, and deconstruction*. Taking these tenets into account when designing research is important. Yet, researchers need not address each of these tenets for their work to be considered intersectional. Many excellent intersectional scholars do not attempt to deconstruct categories; others may focus less on context. Our goal is not to present a “litmus test” for intersectionality, but instead, provide a set of rough blueprints of research designs that address intersectionality in thoughtful ways. We next discuss how intersectional research can be carried out using a variety of qualitative, comparative, and quantitative methods.

Approaches to designing intersectional research

Methodologically, intersectionality is a framework that can be wielded by researchers to analyze qualitative, comparative historical, or quantitative data. Many scholars associate intersectionality with qualitative research because these methods align with complex and dynamic understandings of socially constructed dimensions of difference and context. Yet, researchers regularly use intersectionality to inform comparative (Glenn 2009; Romero 2008) and quantitative projects (Harnois and Ifatunji 2011; McCall 2000; Penner and Saperstein 2013; Steinbugler, Press, and Dias 2006), and such models inform our understandings of social processes.

We think a wide range of sociological researchers can create intersectional research designs and analytical approaches; we provide an array of methodological strategies that can be used to develop intersectional insights. We discuss four qualitative studies (an ethnography, two interview studies, and a study using participatory action research), one comparative historical approach, and three quantitative studies (fixed effects, generalized estimating equations models, and decomposition). We hope to correct misunderstandings that intersectionality can only be qualitative, or if quantitative, can only be carried out through analyzing “interaction effects.” Researchers can wield many different methods to develop intersectional insights. We describe a number of examples of intersectional research and how researchers designed research to allow for these insights to emerge. [Table 1](#) summarizes our analysis for qualitative methods across our key tenets of intersectionality.

Ethnographic approaches

Researchers using ethnographic research take a powerful methodological approach that allows them to uncover the social processes that generate complex inequalities while pointing to the contingent and unstable nature of inequality categories such as race, class, gender and citizenship. Miliann Kang’s (2010) work on Korean-owned nail salons in New York explores how racialized representations simultaneously linked to gender, the body, and immigration status play out in face-to-face interactions between women manicurists and their clients. Her research design included ethnography at six sites, observation in other natural settings, as well as in-depth interviews with nail salon owners, customers, and manicurists.

Kang’s (2010) analysis recognizes *oppression*, including between managers and workers as well as customers and workers. She further places this work within a larger political economic and global framework to explain how both labor law and immigration policy lead Korean immigrant women to work in U.S. nail salons. Kang’s study highlights the *relationality* in statuses between workers and the women they serve. For example, White middle-class women can pay so little for the “treat” of a manicure due to the low pay and poor working conditions Korean immigrant women experience.

Her analysis is extremely *complex* in its recognition of many different kinds of intersections and interactions among women who vary by class, race/ethnicity, and immigration status. Kang (2010) illustrates how embodied service work reflects gendered, racialized and classed social relations among various groups of women. By designing the study to allow for the interplay of race, class, and gender in different *contexts*—working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle class settings—Kang (2010) makes contributions to our understandings of race, class, gender, and labor. Rather than telling a simple story of how Korean manicurists relate to customers, she explores how the meanings of race, class, and gender hierarchies are expressed across differently classed research sites.

This attention to context also leads her to make *comparisons* of Korean manicurists’ experiences. In “nail spas” that predominantly serve a white upper middle class clientele, workers employ what she calls “a pampering body labor,” where gendered service practices intersect with the model minority stereotype to uphold the racial and class privilege of mostly White customers (Kang, 2010). In “nail art salons” serving a Black working-class community, workers employ what Kang calls “expressive body labor.” This form of body labor offers creative nail services and designs where the gendered nature of the work makes nail salons appear less exploitative of the Black community they serve (Kang 2010). In “discount nail salons,” commonly located in commercial centers such as malls, Korean workers serve a socioeconomically mixed clientele through “routinized body labor.” In this site, gendered and racialized “yellow peril discourse” concerning the spread of disease and toxicity fuel negative stereotypes about manicurists. Kang’s comparisons ultimately *deconstruct* the meaning of the “Korean manicurist,” given that the work varies so



Table 1. Key tenets of intersectionality illustrated in qualitative research.

Author	Oppression	Relationality	Complexity	Context	Comparison	Deconstruction
Kang (2010)	Oppression by race, gender, nationality, and class	Customers' privilege relies directly on disadvantages experienced by Korean immigrant manicurists	Attention to varying experiences reflecting race, gender, class, nationality, citizenship status, and context	Explores working-class, middle-class, and upper-class nail salons as different contexts	Comparisons across "nail spas," "nail art salons," and "discount nail salons"	Deconstructs the notion of "Korean immigrant manicurist" by identifying varying experiences
McGuffey (2005)	Oppression by gender, race, class, and partnership status	Fathers' privilege in being blamed less than mothers; White single mothers benefit over Black single mothers	Attention to racially diverse sample, middle class parents, single and married, mothers & fathers	Focuses on parents of children receiving group therapy in one therapeutic setting	Comparisons including between mothers and fathers, and White single mothers and Black single mothers.	Deconstructs by showing variation within categories, such as among men or mothers
Acosta (2013)	Oppression by gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and citizenship status	Directly examines how power is relational, for example within an intimate relationship, or between family members	Attention to varying experiences based on many different social locations	Highlights how the anti-Black racial context, as well as the immigration context impacts intimate relationships	Comparisons between sexually non-conforming Latinas with different positionalities	Deconstructs by showing the "heterogenous experiences of marginality"
Kong (2010)	Oppression by sexuality, gender, age, and coloniality	Generational difference, privileging the experiences of younger gay men	Attention to how many different oppressions intersect in the experiences of aging gay Chinese men	Identifies how the historical legal and colonial context, as well as cultural context focused on family, shapes men's experiences	Comparisons between men who married women, and those who stayed single, as well as generational differences	Deconstructs by showing the variation among aging gay men in Hong Kong

much based on the classed and racialized contexts and expectations of the customers. Korean manicurists' experiences differ based on setting.

Interview research

Researchers can use a variety of forms of interviewing, and may draw from interviews embedded in ethnography, focus group interviews, or individual interviews that form the primary data for the study. Shawn McGuffey's (2005) interview study explored how parents responded in the wake of child sexual abuse. He interviewed parents multiple times, both individually but also as couples, with mostly married parents of boys between eight and eleven, whose children had been abused by neighbors, friends, or others outside the family, and who had voluntarily enrolled their children in group therapy sessions in a therapeutic setting.

McGuffey's (2005) analysis considers how *oppression* leads to different experiences for parents navigating recovery from their child's experience of sexual abuse. Gendered oppression means that mothers are more likely to be "blamed" than fathers; oppression based on race and marital status means that there is *relationality* between groups, as when white single mothers are less likely than Black single mothers to be penalized by social services when their children experience sexual abuse, due to racist stereotypes that focus on Black single mothers' mothering.

McGuffey's (2005) research design is *complex* in that he included a racially diverse sample of middle-class parents, including both fathers and mothers, and married and single parents. Indeed, he targeted all parents in the first four groups receiving therapy; in the last three groups, he focused on parents of color to increase the racial diversity of his sample given the differences he was finding. He was also attentive in analyzing how race, gender, and class intersected to shape parental responses. But McGuffey (2005) holds *context* more constant, focusing on middle class parents whose children are receiving group therapy through one therapeutic setting.

The design allows McGuffey to *compare* how middle-class parents' response to trauma reflects class, gender, race and marital status. For example, fathers tend to focus on how to ensure that their sons grow up to be heterosexual, while mothers are more concerned with how they failed their sons, with many accepting tropes of mother-blame. Mothers' accounts suggest that social service professionals impugn Black single mothers, making inaccurate assumptions about their parenting skills or dependence on welfare (McGuffey 2005).

McGuffey (2005) also identifies how some men and women in the study resist tropes of blame, *deconstructing* the notion that all men and women respond similarly to child sexual abuse. Many fathers link their own masculine identity to breadwinning; others take a leave from their jobs, redistribute household labor, and spend *more* time caring for their children. Similarly, some mothers push back against mother-blame; two of sixteen married White mothers resisted, compared to six of the eight married Black mothers (McGuffey 2005). Thus, mothers do not always respond to child sexual abuse in the same way. While Black mothers are less likely to accept mother-blame, there is variation among both White and Black mothers.

Intersectional interview researchers do not, however, always require a racially diverse sample. As the social construction of categories such as race homogenizes and therefore occludes difference, one of the contributions of intersectionality is in allowing researchers to deconstruct categories while attending to the intersections of salient socially constructed dimensions of difference (Dow 2019; Moore 2011). For example, Katie Acosta's (2013) work on sexually non-confirming Latinas' negotiation of their families of choice and families of origin illustrates how parents seek to control Latina women's gender performance to diminish their sexual non-conformity. She finds that sexually non-confirming Latinas differently manipulate dominant discourses of femininity as they attempt to reconcile the, at times, conflicting needs of their families of origin and families of choice. Often, they work toward integrating these two groups, sometimes at the expense of inhabiting visible LGB identities in their families of origin.

Acosta's (2013) research clearly identifies *oppression* as central to these women's experiences; her research participants experience oppression on the basis of their sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity, class, and citizenship status. Her focus on how power is *relational* in the borderlands is especially insightful; for example, working class, undocumented Latinas may have access to less power and control in their intimate relationships if their partners are citizens and have more class privilege than them.

Complexity becomes clear through Acosta's (2013) methodological choice of sampling a racially homogenous sample of sexually non-conforming Latinas while considering how their positionality, as well as the positionality of their partners, relate to how they negotiate parenthood, form intimate partnerships, and navigate religion in the United States. Rather than homogenizing these women's experiences, the research explores the complexity and variation in their experiences. Acosta (2013) further draws attention to the U.S. legal and racial *context* that shapes these women's intimate and familial relationships, such as immigration policy or cultural narratives.

Comparisons between women's experiences highlight why some women navigate particularly challenging terrain. For example, racial hierarchies steeped in anti-Blackness, class differences, and differences in immigration statuses create what Acosta refers to as "heterogenous experiences of marginality" (2013: 81). A Latina woman without legal status may negotiate different power relationships than a woman with legal status. A sexually-nonconforming Latina partnered with a Black woman, due to the internalization of anti-Black racism among their family of origin, may be perceived by that family as transgressing racial, as well as gender and sexual, borders. Drawing on a group of participants that share a racial identity in the United States, Acosta explores differences in marginality, based on class and ethnic differences, immigration status, and racial hierarchies—ultimately *deconstructing* the category of sexually-nonconforming Latinas itself. Thus, interview researchers need not focus on different race/gender groups to develop intersectional insights.

Participatory action research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is another qualitative method that can be intersectional; indeed, intersectionality has always been a project devoted to critical praxis (Collins and Bilge 2016). PAR primarily seeks to produce knowledge collaboratively with members of the communities being investigated, problematizing what "expert" knowledge is and emphasizing experiential and lived knowledge (Chandler and Torbert 2003; Freire 1970). In this way, PAR grapples with connections between knowledge and power within communities, because as Collins (2015:5) reminds us, "knowledge projects are not free-floating phenomena; they are grounded in specific sociological processes experienced by actual people."

Travis Kong's (2010) study investigates how sexuality, ethnicity, age, and gender impact knowledge production about homosexuality within the LGBTQ (*tongzhi*) Chinese community in Hong Kong. Interlocking queer studies with PAR methods, Kong's (2010) study shifted from an oral history project on Chinese men in their 60s into PAR as participants wielded power over the knowledge of their experiences of their multiple intersecting identities against larger patriarchal, and colonial knowledges that deemed their homosexual identities deviant.

Oppression is central to this project; aging, gay Chinese men define the different forms of oppression that they experienced. Kong (2010) finds that in China, heteronormativity cooperates with larger "interlocking systems of oppression" like patriarchy and colonial domination, to shape these men's queer identities. Relationally, Kong also notes that younger gay men have experienced somewhat more privilege, as they had fewer hurdles in the post-colonial period when homosexuality was decriminalized than older men experienced under British rule.

Complexity is visible in this participatory research project that reshaped the subject under study. Kong (2010) shows that the status of the family, national cultural norms, and sexuality are

impossible to untangle for the men participating in the study. *Context*—both culturally and structurally—shapes these men’s experiences. Individual queer identities are subsumed under gender roles necessary to sustain the heterosexual family model central to Chinese culture, paired with oppressive structural policies and a lack of legal protection for civil partnership and same-sex marriage. *Context* also matters in how the Western “coming out” model of queer social visibility does not reflect the lived experiences of these older gay Chinese men. Because the family lies at the center of social identity formations, many men concealed gay identities by marrying women to satisfy the nationalistic heterosexual family model. Whether single or married, these men negotiated their gay identities in the closet and within the parameters of familial heteronormativity.

Kong’s (2010) study *compares* certain groups of Chinese gay men in their 60s; he identifies differences in “generational sexualities” between older and younger Chinese men (2010:260), while also highlighting different approaches to navigating heteronormative and family-based life, such as marrying a woman versus staying single. As a result, Kong *deconstructs* simple understandings of gay identities, showing that differences in context plays a key role in shaping older gay men experiences.

Comparative historical research

Enobong Branch’s (2011) study explores the labor force experiences of Black women, White women, Black men, and White men from 1860 through 2010 (focused primarily on 1860-1960), considering how race and gender limit Black women’s labor market opportunities and push them into less desirable jobs. Examining occupational segregation over a long historical period, Branch (2011) carefully documents the economic disadvantages faced by Black women. Drawing from a wide array of data, including Census data, GIS maps, and archival materials, she carefully lays out variation in the “Black experience” in the United States, as reflecting the intersection of race with gender, nationality, citizenship, economic class, and socio-historical context. In [Table 2](#), we summarize our analysis for studies using comparative historical and quantitative approaches.

Using a wide array of quantitative and qualitative data, Branch (2011) shows how Black women’s involvement in occupations changed from 1860 to 1960. *Oppression* is central to the narrative, since Black women worked in every decade in the worst jobs—not because of their preferences, but because they were relegated to less popular jobs. *Relationality* is essential to her analysis as she shows how White men’s, Black men’s, and White women’s privilege is relative to Black women’s disadvantages in the labor force. While White women’s and even Black men’s occupational status improves over time, Black women take the jobs that these groups no longer want.

Branch’s (2011) analysis is extremely *complex* given the different time periods she addresses, as well as the varied sources of information. Each historical period is framed with Census data and further enhanced by Branch’s (2011) historically contextualized interpretations of archival data and maps. While the quantitative data indicates how Black women have been denied opportunities for better positions, the qualitative data illustrates the meaning of these denied opportunities in the lives of Black women. *Context* is central to the research design; Branch (2011) emphasizes the historical context throughout the book, while also identifying how geographic location shapes outcomes for Black women.

The research is *comparative* in a number of ways; Branch (2011) rewrites the history of women’s labor in the U.S. by comparing Black women to Black men, White women, and White men, over many different historical periods, and different geographic locations. As a result, she compares Black women’s status over time, and their status relative to other groups over time. This also allows her to *deconstruct* notions of a unified experience for Black women, even as her work reinforces the notion that Black women’s opportunities have always been more limited than those of other groups.

Table 2. Key tenets of intersectionality illustrated in comparative and quantitative research.

Author	Oppression	Relationality	Complexity	Context	Comparison	Deconstruction
Branch (2011)	Oppression by race, gender, class, nationality, citizenship	White men's, White women's, and Black men's privilege is based on Black women's disadvantage	Explores a very long time period (1860-2010) using Census data, GIS maps, and archival data	Focused attention on both historical and geographical contexts shaping outcomes for Black women	Compares differences for Black women over time and place; also compares Black women to White men, White women, and Black men.	Deconstructs the notion of one unified experience for Black women
Hodges and Budig (2010)	Oppression by race and class	White men privilege in receiving a higher "bonus" for being fathers than Black and Latinx men	Explores how race further intersects with breadwinning, professional status, occupational skills, and educational attainment	Recognizes these analyses hold for the U.S. for a time that reflects notions of "hegemonic masculinity"	Compares differences among men by race, and in relation to their education, family structure, and occupation	Deconstructs ideas of how "fatherhood bonuses" privilege all fathers, by showing that they vary by race and other factors
Curington et al. (2015)	Oppression by race and gender	White/nonwhite privilege over nonwhite monoracial daters	Explores how monoracial and multiracial daters send and receive messages with other online daters	Focuses on one online dating community taking city context into account	Compares differences in messages received by daters by race and gender, including multiple types of multiracial daters	Deconstructs notions of "multi-raciality" by exploring the many variations among multiracial people
Alegria (2016)	Oppression by race, gender, and nationality	Asian and White men's privilege over other groups	Explores how race, gender, and nativity intersect to shape wages for technology workers in 12 different groups	Focuses on technology workers in the U.S., with recognition of geographic context	Compares wage differences among workers across 12 different groups	Deconstructs notions of "Whiteness" and "womenhood" given many variations among these groups

Quantitative modeling

Quantitative modeling of intersectionality can take many different forms. Many sociological researchers assume that interaction effects (for example, multiplying race by gender) are essential for analyzing intersections. But intersectionality can be built into the models and measures in different ways. For example, a measure of the percentage of agricultural workers who are Black women in a state captures the intended meaning more effectively than a measure of agricultural workers interacted with a measure of Black workers interacted with a measure of women workers by state. The former is a truer measure of Black agricultural women workers, while the latter is an approximation. Quantitative models may also be run separately by racial group, giving the researcher an ability to consider intersections without interaction terms, as long as the researcher remains alert to thinking intersectionally about what these models tell us.

In their analysis of the “fatherhood bonus” in wages, the extra income that fathers earn relative to childless men, controlling for education, experience, work hours, and other relevant factors, Hodges and Budig (2010) show that *not* every father may receive the same “bonus” in their wages. Drawing on data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Study of Youth, a national probability sample, they use ordinary least squares regression to compare fathers with childless men with the same characteristics, and fixed effects regression to compare earnings of fathers with their previous earnings as childless men (Allison 2009). They compare White, Black, and Latino fathers and childless men, to consider how race intersects with fatherhood, while also analyzing how race intersects with spousal work hours (e.g. male breadwinner families versus dual earner), education, professional expertise, and managerial authority.

Racialized *oppression* results in wage differentials; men experience different levels of privilege and oppression based on their race and class. Hodges and Budig (2010) further identify the *relational* nature of these processes: White men, Black men, and Latinos all do see a fatherhood bonus, but the bonus varies and plays out differently for these groups. For example, White men generally see a higher bonus that becomes much larger as White men are more highly educated. College-educated Latinos also see a higher bonus, but Black men see a smaller bonus that does not vary by educational attainment (Hodges and Budig, 2010:738). These dynamics make clear that bonuses are relational, with some men experiencing greater privilege.

Complexity is also illustrated by this article. Examining the intersections of race and fatherhood already requires a high level of complexity. The authors further analyze *how much* of a bonus fathers can expect to receive, by examining how race intersects with breadwinning, professional status, occupational skills, and educational attainment, clearly identifying “how interlocking structures of privilege and disadvantage can produce very different returns to fatherhood” (Hodges and Budig, 2010:741). This authors further *contextualize* the work, describing how the culture of “hegemonic masculinity” present at the time and place of the study make affect patterns in the wage bonuses.

The logic of regression is one of *comparison*. The authors compare fathers to childless men, and intersect fatherhood with race, as well as a number of other factors, to show how fatherhood operates differently for different groups of men. The work *deconstructs* the concepts of the “fatherhood bonus” or “college education” that affect all men the same way. For example, college education does not benefit all groups equally; the higher fatherhood bonus to college-educated men does not accrue to Black men. This analysis shows how the effects of the category of college education are dynamic and unstable by race, calling into question simple ideas of “fatherhood bonuses” or “college education.”

In their work on online dating, Curington, Lin, and Lundquist (2015) draw from data on social interactions to assess the social significance of a White multiracial status (when users identify as White along with another minority category). They examined nearly seven million initial messages sent between heterosexual women and men on an online dating website and assessed whether White, Black, Asian and Latino men and women are less likely, equally likely or more

likely to respond to messages sent from White multiracial daters compared to messages sent from their same-race in-groups using generalized estimating equation models (Liang and Zeger 1986). Generalized estimating equations allow for the cross-comparison of multiple groups as well as complex variable interactions. Specifically, they model the likelihood of sending a message and the likelihood of responding to a message after controlling for an array of attributes of both members of the dyad. With this approach they are able to determine, for example, the likelihood that a Black heterosexual man will contact a White-Black multiracial woman compared to their probability of contacting Black, monoracial women, after controlling for all characteristics. This helps them identify biases in which groups receive messages.

Curington et al. (2015) explore how racial *oppression* and gender shape opportunities for dating. For example, Black monoracial men and women may receive fewer responses than White monoracial daters or White-Black multiracial daters. As less-preferred dating partners, Black monoracial daters have fewer dating opportunities. The racial hierarchies in online dater contacts are naturally *relational*. The privilege that White-Black multiracial daters have is relative to the disadvantage experienced by Black monoracial daters.

The model is *complex*, while by analyzing dyad dependency by focusing on daters within the same city, they incorporate attention to how *context* shapes dating opportunities. Simple regression analyses highlighting attractiveness rating by others users would miss the *complexity* of what they find. For example, not only multiracial women but also multiracial men are desired in online dating—though differentially based on their gender and *which* racial groups based they bridge. They further illustrate how the social consequence of multiraciality is nested in interactions and *contextually* dependent, focusing on dating within specific metropolitan areas.

Curington et al. (2015) use this analysis to *compare* differences between groups. For example, they find that White/nonwhite multiracial daters receive a preference premium, compared to minority counterparts who are monoracial. Yet online daters do not view all multiracial people as equal; in addition, gender also shapes their desirability. White daters afford Asian-White women daters a preferred status over other groups, whereas they treat Black-White women and men daters as an in-between group below White status yet above Black status. However, though Black-White daters are afforded a heightened status relative to Black daters, they experience less desirability relative to other multiracial women daters. Mono-racial specific stereotypes and racialized and gendered media depictions of multiraciality as exotic and attractive may be regulating online behavior in important ways. The authors therefore are able to ultimately *deconstruct* categories by illustrating differences *between* multiracial and monoracial categories and *within* the category of multiracial itself.

Sharla Alegria (2016) takes an intersectional approach to analyzing wages, with her focus on wages in technology work, and how gender, race, and nationality all intersect to impact wage outcomes. Alegria uses data on working-age adults in occupations related to information technology from the nationally-representative American Community Survey. This allows her to compare groups that differ by race, gender, and nativity: White men and women born in the U.S., Latinx/Black/Native men and women born in the U.S., Asian-American men and women born in the U.S., Asian men and women who are foreign-born, Western men and women who are born in Canada, Europe, Australia or New Zealand, and men and women from the non-Asian Global South.

Analyzing differences in wages for technology workers allows Alegria to consider how *oppression* may not fall into simple patterns of men over women, but may reflect more complex stereotyping and discrimination of workers by race, gender, and nativity. She controls for all of the factors that should explain wage differences—age, occupation, industry, education, experience, region of the U.S.; yet still sees wage differences that may reflect discrimination. *Relationality* is also captured in that her models specifically explore how each groups' wages compare to White

men's wages, allowing her to develop a clear hierarchy of how wages accrue to groups based on their gender, race, and nativity.

The model is *complex*. Alegria (2016) first estimates wages for each of her twelve groups, who differ by race, gender, and nationality, controlling for factors that should predict wages. She then set White men as the “base model,” with which she compares all other groups; if White men had the same characteristics on the control variables as, for example, White women, what would they earn? Decomposition methods allow her to disaggregate differences in wages between those that are explained (for example, if White women have less experience than White men), and those that are unexplained (Yamaguchi 2011, 2015). For example, there is an 18% difference in wages between White men and White women; only 4% can be explained by differences in the predictor variables, leaving a 14% unexplained gap (Alegria, 2016:36). The model is also *contextualized*; she focuses only on technology workers in the U.S. in a particular time period, and she controls for other contextual factors that might matter, such as geographic location.

Comparison between groups is how decomposition works. Alegria (2016) finds that Western foreign-born men, Asian-American men, and Asian men all earn somewhat more than White U.S. born men; this provides interesting insights in how Asian men may be viewed as particularly “appropriate” workers in technology. However, all other groups earn less than White men, although Asian-American women earn only a little less, with a difference that is not statistically significant. Following at a significant wage penalty are, in order, Asian women, underrepresented minority U.S. born men, non-Asian Global South men, underrepresented minority U.S. born women, Western foreign-born women, White U.S. born women, and non-Asian Global South women (who earn the least). White U.S. born women earn substantially less than many other groups. Gender intersects with nationality and race in ways that are clearly not simply additive. This also leads to a *deconstruction* of categories—for example, “Whiteness” as a category does not hold, as White native-born men receive much higher wages than White native-born women. The category of “women” is similarly deconstructed; women are not all equally disadvantaged, with Asian-American women earning about the same as White men, and underrepresented minority U.S. born women and Western foreign-born women earning more than White women.

Discussion

Our goal has been to provide rough blueprints for how intersectional epistemologies can be applied to designing intersectional research. Building from Collins and Bilge's (2016) theoretical tenets of intersectionality, we argue for six methodological tenets of intersectionality. All of the research we review emphasizes the role of *oppression*. Oppression may be illustrated by how Korean immigrant manicurists must tailor their work vis-à-vis customers of various race and class constellations (Kang 2010), how parents of children who have experienced sexual abuse face blame from social workers (McGuffey 2005), how sexually-non-conforming Latinas engage in relationships with families and intimate partners (Acosta 2013), or in how older gay Chinese men's lives are circumscribed by interlocking oppressions of heteronormativity, colonial domination, patriarchy, and sexism (Kong 2010). Oppression is also visible in the opportunities denied to Black women in the workplace over time (Branch 2011), how Black fathers experience a smaller fatherhood wage bonus, relative to White and Latino fathers (Hodges and Budig 2010), how online daters are more likely to respond to White multiracial daters than monoracial minority daters (Curington et al. 2015), or in how wages in technology differ by race, gender, and nationality (Alegria 2016). Within the field of sociology, intersectional research focuses on inequality, making an analysis of oppression central.

Much intersectional research is also *relational*, exploring how different sets of experiences are linked. Intersectional research captures the multidimensionality of subjects' lived experiences, as well as how relations of power shape these experiences. So, for example, mothers whose sons

have experienced childhood sexual abuse report differential treatment of Black single mothers by social workers—White mothers attain privilege due to Black mothers' disadvantage (McGuffey 2005). But Black mothers are also more equipped to help their sons recover from childhood sexual abuse because of their ability to contest ideologies of mother-blame. In quantitative research, taking a relational perspective requires the researchers' moving away from analyses that simply seek to capture the net effect of independent variables and toward a strategy which prioritizes the diverse ways that causal conditions and outcomes are linked. Rather than neutralizing the combinatorial nature of inequality (i.e. "controlling" for difference such as age, race, educational attainment, etc.), researchers instead determine the different combinations of causally relevant conditions linked to an outcome of interest (Choo and Ferree 2010; Hancock 2007). For example, Alegria shows how groups of Asian and Asian-American men and Western foreign-born men earn more in technology jobs than White U.S. born men; Asian-American women earn the same as White men; while other groups—including White women—earn considerably less. Stereotypes affecting Asians and Asian-Americans appear to benefit these groups' earnings, while stereotypes of women are particularly harmful to White women and women from Global South countries.

The examples we highlight also illustrate that social inequality is *complex*. This analytical choice of striving for intersectional complexity translates to concrete methodological choices in the research design. A large data set provides enough statistical power for complex cross-comparison and complex variable interactions (Alegria 2016; Branch 2011; Curington et al. 2015; Hodges and Budig 2010); multiple field sites provides researchers with the ability to look for variation in the intersections of race, class, gender and nation across social context (Kang 2010); a sample of interview participants allows for a consideration of how themes may vary by intersecting group statuses (McGuffey 2005) or within a given status (Acosta 2013; Kong 2010). All of these methodological choices are informed, a priori, by the idea that the social world is complex.

A focus on social *context* is paramount. Intersectional analyses consider *when and where* a particular set of overlapping conditions matter the most. Branch's (2011) use of diverse data enables an analysis that compares Black women's work to White women, men and Black men *across* historical period and geographic contexts. Meanwhile, Kang's (2010) observations *across* disparate field sites provide important insights about the racialization and gendering of Asian nail manicurists' body labor within different classed settings. These methodological choices ensure that context is built into the research design. These findings illustrate the contingent nature of intersecting dimensions of difference and how intersectional inequality gains meaning within specific social contexts. These findings challenge the notion that independent variables can be analyzed in isolation and are fixed as opposed to contingent and relational.

Intersectional research is also fundamentally *comparative*. Yet, the research question often determines how to set up the research design. Striving for a diverse sample is important *if* the objective of the research is to illustrate variation in themes across groups, as in McGuffey's (2005) interview study, but may be less important if the study is aimed at analyzing differences within a particular group, as in Acosta's (2013) interview study. Quantitative studies focus on variation between groups, such as in how fathers may earn a fatherhood bonus differently by race, educational attainment, family structure, and a host of other factors (Hodges and Budig 2010). Comparing across groups, time periods, or experiences across socially constructed dimensions of difference, provides important intersectional insights.

While capturing variation across groups may provide intersectional insight, researchers who use *deconstruction* critique the integrity of categorical distinctions themselves, questioning analytical categories. The uncritical use of social categories of difference such as race and gender may in itself essentialize difference between groups (Misra 2018). Intersectional researchers can be analytically attentive to the breaking down and malleability of categories. Kong (2010) shows how experiences differ for older gay men in China from "coming out" narratives in the West, while further showing variations among these men that undercut simple narratives of the experiences

of older gay men. For online dating, Curington et al. (2015) show that multiracial daters experience a premium relative to monoracial minority daters—but that this premium varies by group, with Black-White multiracial daters experiencing a smaller premium than Asian-White or Latinx-White daters. By showing that experiences are contingent, intersectional researchers further question the meaning of categories.

We hope that our paper spurs future intersectional research, by providing researchers with ideas of how to engage intersectional epistemology and theory through grounded methodological choices. There is much more that needs doing. For example, researchers studying race must be more attentive to how race intersects with colorism (Hunter 2007; Monk 2014; Thompson and Keith 2001) as well as how gender and class shape experiences and outcomes. Gender researchers must become more attentive to the nuances of gender identity and expression (Grossman et al. 2005; Meadow 2018; Schilt 2006). Analyses of immigrants must further engage with the complex variations by nationality, citizenship status, and documentation status (Rodriguez 2019). Yet, the beauty of intersectional research is that its epistemology can always expand to consider a variety of socially constructed dimensions of difference that are salient in different contexts.

While intersectional scholarship has enhanced feminist theory, research and praxis more broadly, we argue that *all* sociologists benefit from employing intersectionality in their research. Simple either-or categorization has taken sociology only so far. Using intersectional methods enables sociologists to depart from closed, binary thinking, allowing for new, innovative research designs and exciting new avenues for research that center the social justice-oriented tradition that long has been part (albeit often neglected) of our discipline (Romero 2020).

We have argued throughout that if race, class, gender and other dimensions of difference are understood not as static but as dynamic, researchers can employ various methodological tools to analyze power relations via their intersections. This process of discovery that underlies using intersectionality as an analytical tool ultimately provides researchers with critical insight and knowledge about social inequality that provides great potential for promoting social justice. Intersectionality is a flexible and dynamic approach to carrying out research that deserves greater engagement from the field of sociology (Choo and Ferree 2010).

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