Special Issue Editorial

Intersectionality: From Theory to Practice

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CRAFTING A SPECIAL ISSUE IN AN INTERSECTIONAL, PROCESSUAL, AND REFLEXIVE MANNER

Over the past two decades, intersectionality has emerged as an important framework and praxis in the social sciences (Al-Faham, 2019). It offers a unified approach to understanding the complex relationships between social identities and systems of oppression, deliberately moving away from siloed or single-category thinking and toward multiple identity factors such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and more that are often interconnected at the experiential level (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019). This recognition highlights scholars' ongoing search for a theoretical tool that not only advances academic inquiry but also reflects lived experience authentically. Intersectionality, while instrumental in navigating the complexities of social structures and identities, requires critical examination and understanding of its challenges in practical application.

Intersectionality gained prominence because of its unique strengths in addressing the marginalization and oppression of populations, particularly Black women. However, its increasing popularity has led to debates over its correct interpretation and application, and whether a correct method exists. Salem (2018) highlights several concerns, including the historical erasure of its radical beginnings in Black feminist histories and the shift from radical to liberal interpretations, which can dilute its potential to challenge the status quo. Another tension exists between Marxist approaches from the Global South, which

emphasize the role of imperialism and colonialism in capitalism, and Northern feminist theorizing, which may be Eurocentric and centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women (Salem, 2018). This tension is compounded by differing views on the roots of intersectionality. Some scholars emphasize its deep connections to Black feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1995), while others trace its beginnings outside of academia (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Collins and Bilge (2016) argue that intersectionality is more than simply an academic form of inquiry; it is a process that combines critical examination of inequalities with critical praxis (Feree, 2018).

Building on these perspectives, scholars such as Hancock (2007) advocate for a broader use of intersectionality, claiming that this does not erase its origins or diminish the contributions of Black feminists. Instead, a wider application can better address questions of injustice, power, and governance, going beyond traditional content specializations (Al-Faham, 2019). Nonetheless, intersectionality's promise in policy analysis remains largely untapped. While conceptual clarity is advancing, it is important to explore its application in public policy (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019). At the same time, within academia, the influence of university corporatization and the neoliberal emphasis on diversity shape the discourse around intersectionality. Nash (2017) argues that these neoliberal structures often align intersectionality with market-driven priorities, potentially obscuring its radical roots and implications. The dispute persists over whether intersectionality's significance in academic discourse is critically examined or co-opted by market-driven agendas. This ongoing discussion highlights the need to critically engage with the interpretations and applications of intersectionality — which is the primary focus of our work on this special issue.

With the challenges of effectively and ethically applying intersectionality in research, activism, policy-making, and daily practices in mind, our goal through this special issue was to expand and deepen the understanding and application of intersectionality, both conceptually and practically. Recognizing intersectionality's untapped potential, we invited contributions from academic and practitioner viewpoints worldwide, fostering submissions from diverse perspectives across the Global North and South. Our goal was to explore diverse perspectives on the interpretation and application of intersectionality as a valuable approach in research, practice, and advocacy across various contexts and disciplines. As such, we, the guest editors of the issue, adopted an intersectional approach throughout the process of co-creating this special issue, from the initial call for proposals to the finalization of the manuscripts. We specifically employed Collins and Bilge's (2016) approach which suggests three distinct yet interconnected ways of understanding intersectionality; as a theoretical framework, an analytical strategy, and praxis. Throughout our editorial process, we organically embraced all three understandings rather than through a deliberate attempt to adopt it in a singular manner. Before we share an overview of the articles of this special issue, we

wanted to describe how our role as editors is processual rather than consisting of discrete responsibilities. We believe it is important to share these insights because praxis involves reflecting on our own (un)learning and applying it to our practices.

Our call for papers was crafted to invite contributions from researchers and scholars who were interested in examining the intersectional relationships among various social identities and systems of oppression affecting underrepresented minorities. This initiative garnered unanimous support from the entire editorial board, prompting us to move forward with inviting submissions. After inviting authors to submit full papers, we issued a special call for reviewers interested in participating in the special issue on intersectionality. We also decided to organize a meeting and workshop for the reviewers, so that we could develop a community who endorsed constructive peer review feedback. The response to the workshop was positive, where respondents not only shared their backgrounds and motivations for joining the project but also how their intersectional social identities and lived experience could be an asset to the project. From that meeting, it became evident that for many reviewers, the true value lay not in gaining credentials or enhancing their resumes, but in their intrinsic praxis and commitment to advancing underrepresented minority progress through the notion of intersectionality. The well-attended workshop was both productive and inspiring, setting the stage for the next phase of peer reviews.

The articles we received from contributors employed a variety of methodological approaches to explore the multifaceted dimensions of identity and their intersections within diverse contexts. In the peer review phase we were presented with various opportunities and challenges, which prompted us to reflect deeply on the process. By engaging in an intersectional praxis, we prioritized inclusivity toward intentionally creating spaces where diverse voices and their lived experiences, with intersectional aspects of their social identities, were not further marginalized to meet the rigorous standards of academia. For instance, there were frequent issues with meeting deadlines, and several scholars requested extensions. However, we recognized that underlying neoliberal productivity norms in academia could be the root cause of this issue. As a result, even though our initial goal was to adhere to our original timeline, we decided to prioritize work that emerges from a state of well-being and joy, reducing the pressure of the usual time constraints that are often prevalent in academia. Similarly, some reviewers faced challenges in submitting their reviews on time. However, since we had already engaged with many of them during our workshop, we were able to communicate transparently and show mutual empathy.

We frequently deliberated on the potential impact of assigning a variety of reviewers to an article, considering factors such as their interests, expertise, geographic origin and institutions of training, whether from the Global North or South, gender diversity, and academic experience and seniority, including professors and graduate students. While this may seem contrary to the principle of

a double-blind review, we implemented what we termed a *double-anonymous review with sensitivity*. Anonymization was impractical given the inherent nature of our work, where authors' social identities were integral to their lived experiences, contexts, identities, and writing styles. Nevertheless, our reflexive approach ensured a carefully sensitive double-anonymous process by focusing on academic rigor by the first reviewer, while a second reviewer, who was well-versed in intersectional contexts, provided nuanced feedback. We revisited our decisions regarding the context and quality of manuscripts, reviewer feedback, the overall timeline, and our responses to the editorial board's queries during their monthly Saturday meetings, guided by our commitment to intersectional praxis.

Despite our considerations, the process was not without its missteps. For instance, an article by a racialized emerging female scholar was initially assigned two reviewers. However, when the first reviewer declined, the replacement reviewer for academic rigor happened to be a senior white male professor. While his suggestions were academically rigorous and robust given his training and experiences, we took on the responsibility of editors with an intersectional praxis to pause and reflect on the potential impact of that feedback if shared without sensitivity. We questioned whether our actions might discourage minority scholars by closing these spaces and further marginalizing their lived experiences and contributions to academia. Would this approach uphold equity in our review process? To understand the scholar's perspective, we conducted a simulation exercise. As editors, we assumed roles as both authors and reviewers, reevaluating the comments to gauge how they might be received and responded to, considering both emerging scholars of color and those with robust training and experiences. While acknowledging the limitations of fully comprehending their expertise, experiences, and identities, this simulation exercise afforded us a chance to enhance our reflexivity and apply our intersectional praxis to editorial practices. A third reviewer was assigned again, taking into account all of these nuances.

We are grateful that we received support from our editorial team every step of the way. Throughout this process, we reflected on our own positionality as women of color and early career researchers living in the diaspora. These reflections materialized through our numerous conversations over the past few years. For example, not only did we experience shifts in timelines with the reviewers and authors, but we also experienced shifts in our own timelines. One of us moved countries and defended her PhD while contributing to the special issue, whereas the other balanced motherhood with her postdoctoral role. We held weekend meetings after family responsibilities and managed an intensified workload, partly due to ingrained societal expectations for women to be caregivers. Women of color are underrepresented in Western academia (Agunsoye, 2020; Institute of Education Sciences, 2018), which often drives them to take on extra responsibilities in fear of stalling their careers; we also faced a similar fear, for instance, choosing to take on tasks at times that could have been delegated to

others. However, we did not allow our intersectional identity to be perceived solely as a deficit. Rather, as South Asian women in the diaspora, we leveraged this perspective to challenge the binary between the Global North and South. This approach enabled us to engage in a process of learning, unlearning, and relearning insights typically attributed to each region. This transformative experience has significantly contributed to defining our identities as researchers and cultivating our community.

LAYOUT OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Organizing the articles into clear sections proved to be challenging due to the conceptual and overlapping intricacies of intersectionality. We identified several recurring themes, including the use of intersectionality as a tool to examine academic spaces and reproduction of inequality, critical praxis in exploring gendered experiences, and its role in understanding public policy and social justice initiatives. The articles in this issue cover a range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, from postcolonial discourse analysis to critical race theory, black feminism, and sociological and political lenses. The methodological approaches are also diverse, with the authors employing qualitative and quantitative empirical approaches such as interviews, secondary datasets, policy analysis, discourse analysis, and autoethnographies.

We classified the papers into three types. First are empirical papers, which present data generated by the authors. Second are conceptual papers, which use intersectionality to develop novel theoretical insights. Finally, we encountered articles that did not fit neatly into empirical or conceptual categories. These papers used intersectionality to provoke academic dialogue. Rather than dismissing them, we chose to classify them as academic commentaries, recognizing their importance alongside the other two types of articles and avoiding gatekeeping practices that perpetuate the status quo in academic publishing (Biesta et al., 2024).

Bishop's study offers insights into the impact of power dynamics and identity-based inequities on marginalized educators, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using intersectionality for quantitative data analysis, the study advocates revisiting sampling and data cleaning practices to challenge norms of Whiteness and heteronormativity, promoting a more inclusive understanding of identity in empirical research.

Expanding on this theme, Parker, Robertson-Hornsby, Smith, and Drake explore the intersectional dynamics of marginalization within academia, focusing on subalternity and subaltern studies. They highlight the diverse range of discursive practices, linguistic choices, and rhetorical devices employed by marginalized communities to navigate and resist dominant discourses and challenge power structures entrenched in educational institutions. By critically reflecting on their own positionalities and conducting a meticulous examination across 11 manuscripts, the authors showcase intersectionality as a robust

methodological tool. By combining this method with postcolonial critical discourse analysis, they provide an interdisciplinary framework that helps explain how intersectionality can effectively guide research practices, helping to break down oppressive systems and promote inclusion in academic settings.

Saito and Flores further contribute to the insights on marginalized educators in higher education. They explore the challenges of Asian-American non-tenured female faculty, and amplify their own voices through an autoethnographic approach. They adapted and created a framework using Asian Critical Race Theory, Critical Asian Feminism, and Collaborative Autoethnography. Through these theories, the authors analyze and detail the challenges they faced including covert and overt racism, academic elitism, and cultural and gender taxation. In particular the authors highlight that these challenges do not emerge through unidimensional aspects of their identity, but because of their intersecting identities in terms of gender, culture, race, and career stage.

The next set of papers also explore intersectionality in higher education, but focuses on students. Stanislaus, Wilkerson, and Hodge's study examines the experiences of second-generation Afro-Caribbean female students within Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), using qualitative case study methodology to explore the complex factors influencing these students' sense of belonging on campus. Their research contributes to ongoing discussions on the effectiveness of HSIs in supporting minoritized student populations and underscores the crucial role of intersectionality in understanding the perpetuation of inequality in educational settings. By expanding intersectional research in higher education, this study provides valuable insights that can inform the development of more inclusive support programs tailored to the diverse needs of student populations, particularly highlighting their significance for second-generation marginalized students navigating higher education institutions.

Complementing this perspective, Pinkney, Charlot, Samuels, and Wilkerson's study on peer mentoring practices in postsecondary settings adds another layer to our understanding of intersectionality in academia. By addressing a need for empirical evidence and examining the experiences of peer mentors and their impact on transfer students at a Hispanic-serving institution, the research provides valuable insights into effective mentoring strategies. Moreover, it highlights intersectionality by exploring how diverse identities shape mentoring experiences and academic support networks. The authors reiterate the importance of developing inclusive support programs, especially mentoring practices that recognize the complexity of intersecting identities in higher education.

After establishing this comprehensive overview of academia and understanding relationships among the social identities of minoritized universities and students, we move on to the nuanced exploration of gendered experiences with policy through the lens of intersectionality. This examination spans academic

spaces and extends to public discourse, encompassing perspectives from both the Global North and Global South.

Jones and Ross-Gordon's examination of midlife, Black, female doctoral students' experiences advances our understanding of higher education aspirations, particularly at the intersection of gender and race. By incorporating Black feminist thought and intersectionality, they enable a deeper exploration of power dynamics, social inequalities, and resistance strategies within the context of doctoral education. Their use of qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, artifacts, and critical incident reflections underscores the need for inclusive research methodologies that center the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. This study serves as a reminder for higher education institutions to reassess their doctoral programs in response to changing demographics and evolving student needs.

Brass and Jenson examine the lived experiences of skilled immigrant women language teachers in Canada through an intersectional feminist lens. Through in-person and virtual interviews with participants, the study captures the nuanced experiences of immigrant women language teachers, highlighting the significance of qualitative approaches in understanding intersectional dynamics within marginalized communities. The study contributes to intersectionality both theoretically and methodologically, offering empirical insights into the systemic barriers faced by internationally highly qualified immigrant women language teachers.

Khanna and Mukherjee's investigation explores the challenges faced by Indian women academics in public higher education institutes in Delhi. Through an intersectional lens, their empirical study scrutinizes the interaction of multiple social identities, revealing challenges encountered by women academicians at different career stages. The research emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to address gender disparities in academia, emphasizing the need for environments that support women's career advancement based on their recognition of their intersectional identities and lived experiences.

The next few papers explore the use of intersectionality to address issues regarding Dalit communities. Nepali and Baral examine land access for the Dalit community in rural Nepal by employing an intersectionality-based policy analysis of survey data. The paper contributes to theoretical debates on caste, class, and gender by highlighting the complex relationships between these social categories in determining access to land resources and social status within Nepali society. By integrating concepts from sociology and political science, the study reveals the complexity of social hierarchy and exclusion faced by marginalized groups, offering avenues for employing intersectional approaches in interdisciplinary research. The study emphasizes the necessity for tailored policy interventions to address intersecting dimensions of inequality while also stressing the crucial need

for systemic intersectional frameworks in policy development, particularly within diverse contexts.

Sahu and Chauhan present a conceptual analysis of how intersectionality has been adapted, developed, and received in India and the relevance of this concept to the Indian context. The authors argue that intersectionality is an imperative theoretical and conceptual lens to understand the challenges of marginalized populations in India. To support this argument, they discuss the plight of the Dalit population and highlight how it is crucial to consider the intersection between gender, caste, and class in order to understand this issue.

Farooq and DeGalan use intersectionality to explore the world of media. They traverse the diaspora by analyzing the Ms. Marvel TV series, to illuminate how the show explores the interconnectivity between the protagonist's Pakistani-American identity, age, and religion. They employ theory of disidentification and a critical feminist lens to engage in this conceptual examination.

Lastly, Aspea's academic commentary explores the Indian Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 and ongoing intergenerational impact stemming from the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Aspea elaborates on the nexus between nationalism and religion by drawing on two novels that discuss the partition.

As such, this special issue offers a comprehensive exploration of intersectionality's multifaceted applications across various disciplines, distinct groups, and different theoretical frameworks, encompassing perspectives from both the Global North and South. As we move forward, we must emphasize that this is just the beginning. Scholars must engage with intersectionality as praxis before employing it as an analytical framework and theory. Understanding marginalized groups' lived experiences within their contexts is critical to knowledge creation and engagement without compromising the foundational academic rigor necessary for research. It requires collaborative efforts that respect both research robustness and experiential insights. Attention to power structures in knowledge production is imperative. Editorial boards and reviewers play critical roles in determining what is prioritized and advanced, and they must ensure that these decisions align with and serve the needs of the community. Incorporating an intersectional lens into the review process and establishing principles of a community of practice through reviewer training are essential steps in this direction.

Our aim has been to continue these essential discussions and promote scholarly dialogue. We hope that this issue inspires further research and activism, advocating for inclusivity, equity, and meaningful social transformation.

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