Incorporating Intersectionality Into Psychology: An Opportunity to Promote Social Justice and Equity

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Intersectionality is receiving increasing attention in many fields, including psychology. This theory or framework has its roots in the work of Black feminist scholar-activists, and it focuses on interlocking systems of oppression and the need to work toward structural-level changes to promote social justice and equity. Thus, the current interest in intersectionality in psychology presents an opportunity to draw psychologists’ attention more to structural-level issues and to make social justice and equity more central agendas to the field. The large, ever-growing bodies of research demonstrating the wide-ranging adverse consequences of structural- and interpersonal-level oppression, inequality, and stigma for the health and well-being of many diverse groups of people support that these issues are central to the field of psychology. We as individual psychologists and the field as a whole can work to fully incorporate the insights of intersectionality and therefore contribute to making social justice and equity more central across the varied subfields and realms of our work. Specific ways that we can do this are to (a) engage and collaborate with communities, (b) address and critique societal structures, (c) work together/build coalitions, (d) attend to resistance in addition to resilience, and (e) teach social justice curricula. There are important examples both within and outside of psychology that can guide us in achieving these goals. These suggestions are meant to foster conversation and consideration by psychologists across all subfields and areas of focus.

Keywords: equity, intersectionality, oppression, social justice, stigma

Intersectionality is a form of resistant knowledge developed to unsettle conventional mindsets, challenge oppressive power, think through the full architecture of structural inequalities and asymmetrical life opportunities, and seek a more just world. It has been forged in the context of struggles for social justice as a means to challenge dominance, foster critical imaginaries, and craft collective models for change. (May, 2015, p. xi)

Within the past decade, intersectionality has received increasing increasing attention in psychology and other fields. Both theoretical (e.g., Cole, 2009; Earnshaw, Bogart, Dovidio, & Williams, 2013; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2011; Townsend, 2008) and empirical (e.g., Galinsky, Hall, & Cuddy, 2013; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Settles, 2006; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoaxha, 2011; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008) work has incorporated insights of intersectionality to better understand a range of psychological phenomena, including discrimination, health disparities, identity development, psychological distress, socialization, and stereotypes. As has been reviewed previously (e.g., Cole, 2009), intersectionality has its roots in Black scholar-activist thought going back many decades in the United States and, in particular, the work of Black feminist scholar-activists (e.g., Collins, 1990; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1989). A critical aspect of intersectionality is its focus on interlocking systems of oppression and the need for broad structural-level changes to promote social justice and equity. Yet, many (e.g., Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Bilge, 2013; Collins, 2015; May, 2015) suggest this aspect is being lost and not given enough attention by some involved in the current academic interest in intersectionality.

Psychology’s recent increased interest in intersectionality presents a valuable opportunity for the field to make social justice and equity more central agendas and to be at the forefront of calls for radical structural changes to promote the well-being of all people. To support our role as psychologists in struggles for structural change, social justice, and equity, in this article, I draw on intersectionality and the large, ever-growing bodies of literature demonstrating how various forms of oppression, inequality, and stigma at mul-

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multiple levels harm diverse groups of people. Further, I present examples of work in psychology that has incorporated intersectionality to promote social justice and equity through research, teaching, and clinical practice. Finally, I make specific suggestions about ways that we as individual psychologists and collaboratively as a field can make these issues more central across the varied subfields and realms of our work.

Intersectionality, Interlocking Systems of Oppression, and Activism

Intersectionality highlights the importance of attending to multiple, intersecting identities and ascribed social positions (e.g., race, gender, sexual identity, class) along with associated power dynamics, as people are at the same time members of many different social groups and have unique experiences with privilege and disadvantage because of those intersections. Given its activist roots, focusing on systems of oppression and the need for structural change to promote social justice are central components of intersectionality. Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) described “intersectionality’s grounding as a counter-hegemonic and transformative intervention in knowledge production, activism, pedagogy, and non-oppressive coalitions” (p. 308). In particular, intersectionality contributes an important understanding of multiple systems of oppression as “interlocking,” suggesting they must be both understood and struggled against simultaneously. As one example, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989, 1991), legal scholar-activist who first used the term intersectionality, critiqued both antidiscrimination law as well as activist theory and movements because of their marginalization of Black women due to a focus on racism and sexism as separate rather than interconnected forms of oppression. As another example, bell hooks (2014), a prominent Black feminist scholar-activist that has been a voice of intersectionality, refers to our society as an “imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy,” highlighting intricate connections among multiple systems of oppression.

Yet, there is concern that these key aspects of intersectionality focused on interlocking systems of oppression and the need for structural-level changes to promote social justice are not being given sufficient attention by many academics currently drawing on intersectionality. In a critique of social science research employing intersectionality, Alexander-Floyd (2012) summarized concerns of scholars, including Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Michelle Fine, and Julia Jordan-Zachery, that researchers are “flattening” intersectionality by only focusing on multiple identities and not addressing structural inequities or connections to political activism. Bilge (2013) argued that some feminist academics are “depoliticizing” or “undoing” intersectionality by disconnecting it from its social justice goals. In a review, Collins (2015) noted that it is more common for scholarly work using intersectionality to focus on identities than on social inequities and social justice, concluding that “intersectionality as a knowledge project faces the fundamental challenge of sustaining its critical edge” (p. 17). As psychologists, I suggest we should fully attend to and embrace intersectionality’s critical, social justice core, taking this opportunity of the field’s (and other fields’) increasing interest in intersectionality to reorient ourselves toward more central social justice and equity agendas in our work.

The Role of Psychology in Struggles for Structural Change, Social Justice, and Equity

One might argue that focusing on structural oppression and social justice constitute the work of other fields, such as sociology, public health, or gender and race studies, and/or of activists, but not of psychology. However, there are large bodies of existing evidence about the adverse effects of both interpersonal and structural oppression, inequality, and stigma across the spectrum of human experience and behavior (for reviews, see Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; Kramer & Hogue, 2009; Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015; Livingston & Boyd, 2010; Logie & Gadalla, 2009; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009), suggesting these issues fall squarely within the realm of psychology across subfields, populations, and specific phenomena of interest for psychologists.

As just a few examples, experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies with diverse adult and adolescent samples both in the United States and various other coun-
tries around the world have found interpersonal discrimination or other forms of stigma (e.g., stereotyping, internalized stigma) based on characteristics such as age, chronic disease, gender, HIV status, mental illness, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, to be associated with a range of adverse outcomes, such as poorer body image, educational outcomes, health behaviors, job satisfaction, mental and physical health, self-esteem, psychiatric outcomes, quality of life, relationship quality, and sleep (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2011; Choi, Bowleg, & Neilands, 2011; Earnshaw & Quinn, 2012; Lewis et al., 2013; Sabik, 2013; Settles, Cortina, Stewart, & Malley, 2007; Trail, Goff, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). Various forms of structural-level oppression, intersectionality, and stigma, such as constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage, laws restricting rights of and media images promoting stereotypes of people living with mental illnesses, racial residential segregation, as well as poverty and unemployment (both disproportionately experienced by some groups in the United States such as Black and Latino Americans; e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015) have also been associated with a range of adverse outcomes, such as poorer cognitive functioning, development, health behaviors, mental and physical health, psychiatric outcomes, and risk of early death (e.g., Corrigan, Markowitz, & Watson, 2004; Evans & English, 2002; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, Keyes, & Hasin, 2010; Lukachko, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2014; Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao, 2013; Roelfs, Shor, Davidson, & Schwartz, 2011).

Evidence also supports that reducing structural-level oppression, inequality, and stigma can improve the well-being of members of stigmatized groups (e.g., Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007; Krieger et al., 2008; Orr et al., 2003). Further, interpersonal stigma is not separate from or unrelated to structural oppression, inequality, and stigma; rather, evidence supports that they are closely connected, interact with, and influence each other (e.g., Fuller-Rowell, Evans, & Ong, 2012; Pachankis, Hatzenbuehler, & Starks, 2014). As articulated by Hatzenbuehler and Link (2014) in discussing structural stigma, “social structures actively shape individual- and group-level processes; at the same time, however, structures are themselves molded and altered by individual and interpersonal factors” (p. 3). Indeed, an important insight of intersectionality is that individuals’ intersecting identities and the interpersonal experiences that come along with them are intricately linked to societal structures, particularly interlocking systems of oppression (May, 2014).

Taken together, there is ample evidence that interpersonal and structural oppression, inequality, and stigma are connected and have a wide range of adverse consequences relevant to psychology. Therefore, it is important for psychologists in their varied areas of work to give more attention to these issues to contribute to a core goal of the field, which is to understand human behavior (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015a). Further, many support that beyond understanding human behavior, psychology also has at its core a goal of helping people to promote health and well-being. APA identifies its mission as being “to advance the creation, communication, and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people’s lives” (APA, 2015b). Given this goal, the existing evidence that oppression, inequality, and stigma harm and that structural changes toward social justice and equity can benefit diverse groups of people suggests that promoting social justice and equity is indeed part of psychologists’ work.

One might also argue that advocating for structural changes to promote social justice and equity are liberal/progressive/radical goals that if incorporated more into psychology would contribute to what some suggest is an already existing and problematic bias against conservative perspectives in the field (e.g., see Duarte et al., 2015). This is certainly a political issue, and concerns about bias in psychology and other sciences are critical. An important contribution of intersectionality has been highlighting biases that exist in society broadly and specifically in academia that affect which ways of understanding the world are valued versus ignored; this includes highlighting ways in which intersectionality itself has been critiqued based on dominant perspectives that intersectionality challenges (May, 2014). A benefit to intersectionality is that because social justice and equity goals are at its core, its potential bias is stated explicitly and therefore can be directly explored in relation to other forms of bias that may go unquestioned without an intersectional perspective. May (2015) has asserted the importance of being biased toward intersectionality to challenge dominant perspectives that are entrenched in societal inequalities and therefore are inherently biased against and ignore certain perspectives. This direct exploration of the way our biases affect our work is incredibly valuable, as asserted for example by qualitative researchers (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thus, intersectionality can greatly benefit our ability to understand and address various forms of bias in psychology.

Working to promote social justice and equity is about being responsible scientists, teachers, and practitioners. If scientific evidence has identified factors and conditions that are harmful, it is incumbent that psychologists document and report those harmful effects, as well as suggest and work on ways to intervene to reduce the conditions that produce harm, with the goal of improving the well-being of individuals and benefiting society as a whole. As Eagly (2014) recently suggested, being committed to striving for unbiased science does not contradict having social justice and equity agendas as psychologists. These agendas are directly supported by a large and strong base of scientific evidence. We can and should encourage debate and discussion among dissenting views within our field, including examining various forms of bias that affect our work, while...
building and acting on the evidence that we have. Incorporating intersectionality helps us to do both simultaneously.

**Contributions of Intersectionality in Psychology**

The wide-reaching and growing interest in and influence of intersectionality across disciplines and recently within psychology highlights the incredibly valuable insights that are generated among communities experiencing interlocking systems of oppression and activists struggling for social justice and equity. Psychologists have incorporated intersectionality into their research, teaching, and clinical practice, and I will describe several examples of this work that underscore what intersectionality and psychology offer each other. This is by no means an exhaustive list of work in psychology that employs intersectionality; rather, these are examples that demonstrate the applicability of intersectionality to understanding experiences of diverse groups of people and the intersections of both oppressed and privileged identities, directly addressing the critique that intersectional work reinforces the very identity categories it seeks to disrupt by focusing on Black women as “prototypical intersectional subjects” (Nash, 2008, p. 8). These examples also illustrate how incorporating intersectionality helps to promote social justice and equity and to bring attention to the role of structural inequalities. Each of these critical insights can be missed without an intersectional framework, underscoring its value to our field.

**Research**

The influence of intersectionality in psychology is most prominent in research, including both theoretical and empirical contributions, and much of the research employing intersectionality has focused on experiences of Black women in the United States. Using an intersectional framework, Settles (2006) employed qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the intersections of Black women’s racial and gender identities. This study revealed the importance of the intersection of race and gender for Black women, the unique experiences that intersection creates, including both challenges and benefits, as well as the connections among individual identities, interpersonal interactions, and societal structures. Further, the study acknowledged diversity within Black women due to other intersecting identities and highlighted Black women’s resistance to oppression. Thomas et al.’s (2011) focus group study with young Black women that employed an intersectional perspective revealed similar insights as Settles’ (2006) study, such as the inseparable nature of race and gender identities, multilevel factors ranging from personal to structural that affect those identities, and experiences of both oppression and resistance. Rosenthal and Lobel (2011) drew on intersectionality to argue for the importance of attending to unique challenges Black women face due to historically rooted structural and interpersonal oppression and stigma to understand persistent racial disparities in birth outcomes. Following from that theoretical framework, Rosenthal and Lobel (2016) conducted an experiment documenting the continued influence of historically and structurally rooted stereotypes of Black women related to sexuality and motherhood on people’s perceptions of Black women. This work’s use of intersectionality called attention to the need for structural changes, such as in media portrayals of Black women, to promote social justice and equity.

As examples of the growing body of research focused on groups other than Black women that incorporates intersectionality, Bowleg (2013) and Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, and Tschann (2013) conducted qualitative interviews to explore experiences of Black gay and bisexual men, and low-income Black heterosexual men in the United States, respectively. These studies (Bowleg, 2013; Bowleg et al., 2013) revealed complex dynamics involved with intersections of both oppressed and privileged identities, the connections of those identities to inequities and discrimination in societal structures, as well as ways that intersecting experiences of oppression can both harm and provide benefits to individuals. In drawing on intersectionality, these investigations utilized expertise of community members themselves, highlighted participants’ engagement with social justice issues, and called for addressing oppression and stigma in communities and more broadly in society. Each of these articles also spoke directly to the implications of study findings for strengthening clinical work (Bowleg, 2013) and HIV prevention efforts (Bowleg et al., 2013). All of the described studies exemplify how intersectionality deepens our understanding of complex, dynamic psychological experiences of diverse individuals while drawing attention to structural oppression and calling for the promotion of social justice and equity.

**Teaching**

Case and Lewis (2012) wrote about their strategies and experiences using intersectionality in teaching undergraduate and graduate courses focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) psychology at historically Black and Latino-serving institutions in the United States. Drawing on intersectionality, Case and Lewis (2012) designed their courses and created coursework with the goals of drawing students’ attention to diversity within LGBT communities, the interlocking nature of different forms of oppression, and connections between individual identities and experiences with broader communities and societal structures. They used intersectionality to “support the development of a critical framework for making privilege and power visible, examining social location and complex identities, exploring subjugated knowledge and developing
strategies for empowerment” (Case & Lewis, 2012, p. 262). Case and Lewis’ (2012) analysis of these courses offers examples of how incorporating intersectionality into the teaching of psychology helps instructors to enhance students’ learning and development as well as to encourage student activism to promote social justice and equity.

Clinical Practice

Das Nair and Butler (2012) edited a book including a collection of chapters providing insights into how to incorporate intersectionality into psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients in the context of the United Kingdom. The chapters in this book address intersections of sexuality with gender, race/ethnicity, religion, refugee/asylum status, social class, physical health, mental health, disability, and age (Das Nair & Butler, 2012). This work was designed to explore diversity within LGB communities, challenge assumptions that all LGB individuals have similar experiences, and draw attention to LGB individuals with other intersecting marginalized identities whose perspectives have been ignored even within work in psychology focused on LGB communities. This use of intersectionality also encouraged clinicians to attend to the connections of individuals’ (clients’ and clinicians’) intersecting identities with societal structures that create experiences of both privilege and oppression, as well as to consider the potential role clinicians can play as activists. Das Nair and Butler’s (2012) edited book is one example of how incorporating intersectionality helps clinicians to more adequately address their clients’ diverse experiences and strive for social justice and equity to empower and promote well-being in clients and their communities. Together, these examples illustrate how intersectionality can strengthen our field, and that we may miss opportunities to have greater positive impact on individuals, communities, and society through research, teaching, and clinical practice if we do not fully embrace intersectionality’s core components.

Implications for Our Work as Psychologists

Incorporating intersectionality into psychology offers the opportunity to incorporate social justice and equity agendas more centrally in all aspects of our work. Similar calls to focus more on stigma and inequality experienced at multiple levels, including structurally, as well as to make social justice a core goal have been made in some other fields, like public health (e.g., Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; Northridge, 2014), as well as within some subfields of psychology, like social (e.g., Fine, 2012) and counseling (e.g., Speight & Vera, 2004; Watts, 2004) psychology. There are also subfields of psychology that originated with a focus on social justice, like community (Levine, Perkins, & Perkins, 2005), critical (Teo, 2015), social (Fine, 2012), womanist, and mujerista (Bryant-Davis & Comas-Diaz, 2016) psychology. We have the opportunity as a field to be at the forefront of advocating for and working toward social justice and equity to promote well-being, and as psychologists, we have much to contribute to this work. Next, I make several suggestions of ways to do this, drawing on examples of psychologists who already are, whether or not they explicitly draw on intersectionality. I make suggestions that individual psychologists can implement in their own work, as well as suggestions for the field more broadly that may need coordination and collaboration across psychologists and organizations in the field to be achieved (see Table 1 for a summary).

In her important theoretical article, Cole (2009) outlined three questions for psychologists to ask at different stages of the research process to incorporate intersectionality into their research: (a) Who is included within this category (to highlight the diversity of individuals within a group because of other intersecting identities)? (b) What role does inequality play (to highlight the importance of historical and contemporary inequities, power imbalances, and stigma)? and (c) Where are there similarities (to highlight shared experiences across diverse groups of people, related to building coalitions of activists)? As the contributions of intersectionality are complex, multifaceted, and continuously being discussed, I aim to build on Cole’s (2009) suggestions and present several ways that psychologists can make social justice and equity more central agendas in all realms of their work, including in research, teaching, and clinical work, to fully embrace the radical nature of intersectionality. These suggestions are connected to and should be considered alongside Cole’s (2009) suggestions. One need not employ all of the following suggestions to make an important contribution to a move toward greater focus on social justice and equity, and there may be other ways to do so not included here. These suggestions are meant to serve as a starting point for conversation and consideration.

Engaging and Collaborating With Communities

We can engage and collaborate with communities that experience and are struggling against oppression, inequality, and stigma. Indeed, engagement and collaboration with communities committed to social justice is the source of intersectionality’s incorporation into academic disciplines. This engagement and collaboration can be a part of but is distinct from studying, teaching, intervening with, or providing clinical services to communities in ways that maintain power imbalances between psychologists and communities. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) provides a useful framework, as CBPR is an approach to research that involves equal partnerships between academics and the communities affected by the issues being studied as well as a focus on social change (e.g., Israel, Schulz,
Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). This means that communities actively contribute (as equal partners) to all parts of the research process, including developing research questions, choosing methods, conducting and interpreting results, and deciding how results will be disseminated and used to advocate for change (e.g., Israel et al., 1998). Even if some psychologists do not believe CBPR is the best approach to use for their own research, it can serve as a model from which to incorporate insights about how to engage and collaborate more with communities to the benefit of research and other work. Many academics conduct “community-based,” “community-involved,” or “community-engaged” research that would not necessarily be considered CBPR or include communities as completely equal partners, but that incorporates community advisory boards, community discussion forums, or other methods to connect with and learn from the communities on which the research is focused (e.g., Israel et al., 1998). A CBPR or community-engaged framework can also be applied to including community members as partners in shaping provision of clinical services, of which we can find examples in community psychology practice (e.g., Brookman-Frazee, Stahmer, Lewis, Feder, & Reed, 2012). Through this process, issues that communities view as important are brought to the forefront, and communities are empowered to be leaders in understanding and addressing those issues (e.g., Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

There are many examples of psychologists and other scientists using CBPR or other community-engaged methods to great advantage to scientific knowledge, various communities, and society at large. As one example, Baffour and Chonody (2009) used CBPR methods to collaborate with rural Black American women on a qualitative study about racial disparities in infant mortality, finding that participants identified the important role of structural challenges they face, including barriers to receiving financial assistance, health insurance, and medical care. As another example, in conducting a quantitative study of Somali adolescent refugees living in the United States, Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, and Cabral (2008) developed a community advisory board and held community meetings about the study to increase community engagement, and they found evidence that trauma, resettlement and acculturative stress, and discrimination each contributed to posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in the sample. By using these methods to focus on what communities identify as important issues, structural and stigma-related issues are often highlighted. Further, many communities experiencing various forms of oppression, inequality, and stigma are currently calling for structural-level changes toward social justice and equity through social movements, such as those currently focused on environmental issues, immigration rights, LGBT rights, police violence, and sexual assault on college campuses. Through engaging and collaborating with communities, we
can make these issues more prominent in psychology. As individual psychologists, we can learn from CBPR methods to engage and collaborate more with communities that are stigmatized, disadvantaged, and disempowered in ways that support them to study issues important to them, advocate for changes in society to benefit them, and shape interventions and other clinical work targeting them to be better tailored to their needs. As a field, we can work toward making CBPR a better represented approach taught to students, recognized by awards, funded by grants, and published by journals.

Addressing and Critiquing Societal Structures

We can address structural issues and advocate for structural-level changes that promote social justice and equity, thereby improving the health and well-being of communities experiencing oppression, inequality, and stigma. Intersectionality compels us to address societal structures, as they are deeply connected to individuals’ experiences. This addressing of societal structures can sometimes result from engaging and collaborating with communities that bring attention to those issues, as described above, and as psychologists we can contribute our own analysis of ways that structures could be changed to benefit various groups of people because of our understanding of how those structures affect individuals’ well-being. Many psychologists discuss the roles of structural-level issues that harm individuals, groups, and societies, such as the role of segregation in intergroup conflict (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013), the roles of religion, law, medicine, and even the field of psychology itself in promoting or reducing sexual stigma (Herek, 2007), and the role of national minimum wage policy in poverty and its consequences (Smith, 2015). Indeed, there are theories in psychology that focus specifically on the roles of structural inequalities and power imbalances, such as social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and power basis theory (Pratto, Lee, Tan, & Pituatan, 2010). Addressing structural issues brings attention to “fundamental causes” of many of the outcomes psychologists care about (see Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013) and helps to generate multilevel approaches to intervention, even if structural changes seem difficult to achieve. This also includes addressing larger systems that play a role in structural oppression, inequality, and stigma. For example, psychological experiences resulting from racial and other forms of discrimination in the criminal justice system are linked to dynamics of capitalism, as there are companies that profit from and support having large numbers of people imprisoned as a source of cheap labor (e.g., see Davis, 2003 on the prison-industrial complex: Fine & Torre, 2006). Psychologists who feel that addressing societal structures is outside of their area of expertise can collaborate with and draw on the insights of experts on societal structures in other disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, gender and race studies, history, political science, public health, or sociology to do so.

We can also be activists and participate in social justice movements both as a part of and separate from our work as psychologists. Activism can involve a range of activities, and psychology has a rich tradition of activism to guide us. As one example, Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark (along with many other psychologists; e.g., see Clark, Chein, & Cook, 1952/2004; Pettigrew, 2004) played important roles in the Civil Rights Movement, using their expertise from work with Black American children on internalized racism to testify and contribute to court cases about desegregation of schools, including the Brown v. Board of Education supreme court case leading to segregation being deemed unconstitutional. As a more contemporary example, Maria Elena Torre, Michelle Fine, and others at the Public Science Project, use participatory action research methods in a range of projects to advocate for structural changes to promote social justice, such as for fair policing and access to college in prisons (e.g., Fine, 2012; Fine & Torre, 2006). There are also professional organizations within psychology that make activism and advocacy around social justice issues central to their purpose, such as the Association of Black Psychologists, the National Latina/o Psychological Association, Psychologists for Social Responsibility, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (Division 9 of APA). APA engages in policy-focused advocacy, including in relation to social justice issues, such as poverty, health disparities, and LGBT and women’s issues (APA, 2015c). As individual psychologists writing about research or clinical work with communities and individuals facing oppression, inequality, or stigma, we can make a point to include critiques of structural factors affecting those communities and individuals, as well as suggestions for ways to change those structures to promote social justice and equity. This can involve interdisciplinary collaborations with experts in other fields. We can also as individual psychologists consider ways to be activists advocating for change in structures affecting students we teach and/or communities we work with through research and/or clinical work. As a field, we can work toward making attention to structural issues and activism more prominent and recognized aspects of our work taught to students, recognized by awards, funded by grants, and published by journals.

Working Together/Building Coalitions

We can work to form, sustain, and grow coalitions and collaborations across different areas of psychology as well as with other fields, organizations, and communities that are focused on social justice and equity across multiple forms of oppression, inequality, and stigma. Sometimes our expertise and interests lead us to focus on one particular group (e.g., Black Americans, gay men, people living with HIV,
women), and many organizations (and as a result journals, conferences, etc.) focus on a particular group and advocate for structural-level changes to benefit that group. This type of focus is important in forming a deep understanding of factors affecting and ways to promote well-being in members of those particular groups. However, one of the insights of intersectionality is that many diverse groups of people have intertwined experiences with oppression, inequality, and stigma that can connect them and their struggles for social justice and equity, even though those experiences are unique for each group (and each individual) and forming coalitions among diverse groups can be challenging (e.g., Cole, 2008). Increasing collaborations and coalitions across groups and social issues can broaden our impact and increase innovation through learning from each other’s areas of expertise and experiences. This can also help to avoid the marginalization and instead draw on the unique and important insights of individuals that are simultaneously members of multiple oppressed and stigmatized groups (e.g., Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Indeed, intersectionality itself is a product of those insights, particularly those of Black feminist scholar-activists, and has received so much attention because of its utility in many contexts. Intersectional awareness, or seeing connections among multiple forms structural inequality, has been found to be associated with more positive intergroup attitudes and activism (Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015), further supporting benefits that increasing awareness of connections across forms of oppression and diverse groups has for people and can have for psychologists.

There are examples of organizations that explicitly address social justice issues relevant to many different groups of people, such as the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (Division 9 of APA). There are also examples of collaborations between organizations that focus on particular groups when they see their goals as allied, such as collaborative programming between divisions of APA at its annual convention that sometimes bring together divisions focused on particular groups, such as Divisions 44 (Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues) and 45 (Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race). Many individual activists and activist organizations also collaborate and create coalitions to address multiple social justice issues. As individual psychologists, we can make a point to explicitly draw connections in our research, teaching, and clinical work between the communities that we focus on in our work and other communities that may have related and interconnected albeit unique experiences. We can also as individuals collaborate with others whose work focuses on different communities to learn from and support each other in research and clinical work. As a field, we can work toward developing and sustaining coalitions across organizations focused on social justice within psychology as well as in other fields and outside of academic and professional circles.

Attending to Resistance in Addition to Resilience

We can attend to various acts of resistance in which individuals and communities experiencing oppression, inequality, and stigma engage. Many psychologists involved in research and clinical work with individuals and communities experiencing oppression, inequality, and stigma focus on individual-level “resilience” factors that help people to thrive despite exposure to adversity (e.g., see Masten, 2001). Identifying resilience factors is critical, as this informs intervention efforts targeting those factors. However, the activist roots of intersectionality draws our attention to resistance either as a potential resilience factor or in addition to resilience factors. Attending to resistance can help us to better understand individuals and communities as actors responding to (and not just passively receiving) experiences of oppression, inequality, and stigma, and can help us to identify novel ways to intervene to improve well-being among those with these experiences.

Many psychologists study collective action as one form of resistance to oppression, inequality, and stigma. Some research has found involvement in collective action to have psychological benefits, such as increases in empowerment, well-being, satisfaction, and happiness (see Thomas & Louis, 2013, for a review). Recent theory also suggests that some “risky” behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex) may represent a form of resistance to oppression, inequality, and stigma for some individuals (Factor, Kawachi, & Williams, 2011). Whether consequences of resistance are positive or negative, attending to the role of resistance can help us to better understand psychological dynamics and processes among oppressed, disempowered, and disadvantaged groups. This can include a range of forms of resistance and community organizing to which psychologists should attend, some of which are familiar and consistent with past social movements, including the use of protests and marches, and some of which are new in recent years, including the use of social media (e.g., Juris, 2012; Tayebi, 2013). Further, there are models of clinical work, such as feminist psychotherapy, social justice approaches in counseling psychology, multicultural counseling, and multicultural psychotherapy, that involve promoting advocacy and activism in clients to empower and promote well-being in those individuals and their communities (e.g., Brown, 2009; Comas-Diaz, 2014; Sue & Sue, 2013; Toporek, Gerstein, Foud, Roysircar, & Israel, 2005). As individual psychologists, we can incorporate attention to resistance more in our research and clinical work, as well as consider activism and other forms of resistance as potential intervention techniques. As a field, we can work toward making resistance more commonly studied in research and addressed in clin-
Teaching Social Justice Curricula

We can incorporate social justice into our program and individual course curricula for all levels of training. Many psychology departments include multicultural and diversity themes in their curricula, as APA identifies “individual and cultural diversity” as a core competency included under the cluster of “professionalism” and has put forth guidelines for addressing these themes in the field (APA, 2003). These curricula often involve learning about how psychological phenomena may differ based on cultural backgrounds and about being “culturally-informed” and “culturally-appropriate” (APA, 2003), which are critically important in training students to appreciate the importance of and appropriately handle diversity. However, there is evidence that a multicultural approach can sometimes increase stereotyping when focused on cultural and other group differences (e.g., see Rosenthal & Levy, 2010), and this approach does not necessarily or always address dynamics of privilege, power, oppression, inequality, and stigma that are important in shaping the experiences of diverse groups. Intersectionality encourages us to teach social justice curricula to address these issues and help to make them more centrally and appropriately addressed in our field and in society.

One example of how psychologists can build on and add to multicultural and diversity curricula to address social justice and equity issues is to directly teach about power and privilege at a structural level in psychology courses (Case, 2013). This is important, as to address oppression, inequality, and stigma, we also need to focus on privilege and the roles that individuals with various forms of privilege play in maintaining or challenging the status quo (e.g., Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). As another example, service learning courses in psychology (and other fields) involve a community service component, which encourages civic engagement and social responsibility in students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Many have also advocated for the importance of acknowledging and addressing power dynamics between and among instructors and students connected to intersecting identities to promote student empowerment (e.g., Case & Lewis, 2012; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). As individual psychologists, we can consider incorporating these types of approaches into our own courses and programs as well as explore and evaluate new and innovative ways to teach social justice and equity agendas to our students. As a field, we can work toward making social justice themes considered standard to be a part of or in addition to multicultural or diversity curricula at all levels of training.

Conclusion

There is increasing interest in psychology and other fields in intersectionality, which has roots in the experiences, thought, and work of Black feminist scholar-activists. A core aspect of intersectionality is its focus on interlocking systems of oppression and the goals of social justice and equity. Large and ever-growing bodies of work demonstrate the wide-ranging adverse consequences of structural- and interpersonal-level oppression, inequality, and stigma for the health and well-being of many different groups of people. I suggest it is in our own interests as psychologists to fully adopt intersectionality, and thereby to push our field toward a psychology that regularly critiques societal structures that harm the well-being of diverse individuals, and that is committed to pursuing social justice and equity. There are many ways that we as individual psychologists and the field as a whole can contribute to this, including through engaging and collaborating with communities, addressing and critiquing societal structures, working together/building coalitions, attending to resistance in addition to resilience, and teaching social justice curricula. There are many examples of individuals and organizations both within and outside of psychology that we can use to guide us if we choose to do so. Our science, teaching, and clinical work can all benefit from the many insights that intersectionality brings to the table, and psychology has much to contribute to existing work and efforts focused on social justice and equity. As our field increases its interest in intersectionality, we have an opportunity to learn and grow not only from its focus on the ways that intersecting identities create unique experiences for individuals, but also from its focus on interlocking systems of oppression and the need for structural-level change to promote social justice and equity.

References


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