

Intersectionality Theory, Challenges for Empirical Research and Contributions to Psychology

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Abstract: The Theory of Intersectionality is an important contribution from feminist epistemologies to the scientific field. This narrative literature review aims to discuss methodological possibilities and challenges in producing and analyzing empirical evidence based on the Theory of Intersectionality, as well as its contributions to Psychology. While this theory is increasingly being cited as the basis for empirical research, articulating its assumptions in knowledge production processes is still a difficulty. Qualitative approaches prevail in the field, but advancements in statistical analysis methods allow for an intersectional interpretation in quantitative studies. Intersectionality contributes to understanding psychological processes and challenging dominant and exclusionary assumptions in the field of Psychology. Embracing this theory requires a commitment to the imperative of social transformation and entails placing claims, values, practices, and power relations at the core of scientific knowledge production, regardless of the field under study.

Keywords: intersectional framework, empirical research, psychology

Teoria da Interseccionalidade, Desafios para Pesquisas Empíricas e Contribuições para a Psicologia

Resumo: A Teoria da Interseccionalidade é uma importante contribuição das epistemologias feministas para o campo científico. Este estudo de revisão narrativa da literatura teve como objetivo discutir possibilidades e desafios metodológicos na produção e análise de evidências empíricas embasadas na Teoria da Interseccionalidade e contribuições para a Psicologia. Embora essa teoria esteja crescentemente sendo citada como base de pesquisas empíricas, ainda se identifica a dificuldade de articular seus pressupostos nos processos de produção de conhecimento. As abordagens qualitativas são predominantes no campo e observa-se avanços em métodos de análises estatísticas que permitem uma leitura interseccional em estudos quantitativos. A interseccionalidade contribui para compreender processos psicológicos e desafiar suposições dominantes e excludentes no campo da Psicologia. Adotar essa teoria requer uma implicação com o imperativo de transformação social e implica tornar as reivindicações, valores, práticas e relações de poder como cerne da produção de conhecimento científico, independentemente do campo estudado.

Palavras-chave: teoria da interseccionalidade, pesquisa empírica, psicologia

Teoría de la Interseccionalidad, Desafíos para la Investigación Empírica y Aportes a la Psicología

Resumen: La Interseccionalidad es una importante contribución de las epistemologías feministas al campo científico. Este artículo de revisión narrativa tiene como objetivo discutir las posibilidades y desafíos metodológicos en la producción y análisis de evidencia empírica basada en la Interseccionalidad y sus contribuciones a la Psicología. Aunque esta teoría se cita cada vez más como base de investigaciones empíricas, aún se identifica la dificultad de articular sus supuestos en los procesos de producción de conocimiento. Los enfoques cualitativos predominan en el campo y se observan avances en métodos de análisis estadístico que permiten una lectura interseccional en estudios cuantitativos. La interseccionalidad contribuye a comprender los procesos psicológicos y desafiar suposiciones dominantes y excluyentes en el campo de la Psicología. Adoptar esta teoría requiere una implicación con el imperativo de transformación social e implica poner las demandas, valores, prácticas y relaciones de poder en el centro de la producción de conocimiento científico, independientemente del campo estudiado.

Palabras clave: teoría de la interseccionalidad, investigación empírica, psicología

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Intersectionality is understood as one of the main contributions of feminist epistemologies to the scientific field (McCall, 2005). Feminist epistemologies—the research field of Social Epistemology—are interested in understanding the role of gender in the various activities of knowledge construction. They compose, from the beginning, a space of contesting what is considered knowledge, as well as who defines it and how it is captured by individuals (Harding, 1987). They emerge as a multidisciplinary field that defends methodological plurality and different research approaches—ethnography, theory based on reality, experiments, etc.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2006) included intersectionality in its multicultural guidelines for work, research, and knowledge production. In 2006, the APA published guidelines on Evidence-Based Practice in Psychology (EBPP). It includes the need to understand individual, cultural, and contextual influences to provide adequate practice. In this sense, aspects such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, religiosity, among other characteristics of the individual are considered for *carrying out* Psychology and for producing research in the area.

A systematic review that aimed to identify how intersectionality has been approached and applied in research that, for the most part, had quantitative analysis methods simplistic and insufficient to account for an intersectional analysis (Bauer et al., 2021). Although ‘intersectionality’ has appeared more and more in scientific articles, recommendations, and guidelines, a clear understanding of its assumptions is absent, leading to a politically disengaged use of this critical social theory.

Intersectionality can be an important tool for understanding psychological processes and subsidizing practices implicated in an imperative of social transformation and non-maintenance of the *status quo* (Grzanka, 2018). However, the intersectional tradition challenges a number of assumptions and understandings of evidence constructed in the field of hegemonic psychology—so that some authors even question the extent to which intersectionality can, in fact, be incorporated into psychological research practices (Warner et al., 2016). Therefore, this narrative literature review study aimed to discuss methodological possibilities and challenges in the production and analysis of empirical evidence based on the Theory of Intersectionality and contributions to Psychology. To this end, the following will be addressed: the Theory and its presuppositions, the contributions of the Global South, the methodological challenges for empirical research, and the potential contributions to Psychology.

Assumptions of the Theory of Intersectionality

Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), often cited as the author who gave rise to the term Intersectionality, used it to indicate the interdependence of power relations between race, class, and gender. Crenshaw was particularly interested in the multiple ways in which race and gender interacted and affected the employment conditions of Black women in the United States. The author works with three levels of intersectionality: political,

structural, and representational. Political intersectionality concerns the extent to which race and gender structures jointly produce a different experience of oppression for people who are part of both minority groups—Black women, for example. Structural intersectionality refers to feminist and anti-racist social movements and the difficulty they had in proposing alternatives that consider the interrelationship between race and gender. Finally, representational intersectionality is related to pejorative images and stereotypes that contribute to the marginalization of black women.

Crenshaw’s reflections—as well as McCall’s and those of so many other theorists—characterize intersectionality as an analytical sensibility, whose meaning emerges during its use. This definition serves as a starting point for a whole intellectual tradition that names itself based on intersectionality and broadens its understanding. Patricia Hill Collins (2022), one of the most important authors in advancing the intersectional tradition, understands intersectionality as a theory that contemplates the understanding that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, physical capacity, and age do not operate in a unitary and exclusionary manner, but rather as a reciprocal phenomenon that produces complex social inequities. Thus, the focus is not on the experiences or identity construction of those who inhabit the intersections, but rather on how social, political, economic, and interpersonal inequities are created and sustained. Although it emerged (and was exhaustively developed and worked on) from Black women, intersectionality can act as a tool to understand categories of experience, identity, and oppression, and is extensible to a range of intersections (Hancock, 2007).

An intersectional tradition is constituted from the contributions of different authors. Currently, intersectionality is a critical social theory, that is, it is part of a field that has as its primary investigation object understanding and transforming the social world (Collins, 2022). It is an active refusal of the post-positivist perspective and its supposed scientific universality that ends up only incorporating the worldview of those who hold power in the social context, privileging a universal male, white, cis-heterosexual subject. Intersectional theory composes an analytical sensibility that comprises the situation of multiply marginalized individuals from the matrix of oppressions—a point at which different experiences intersect (Collins, 2022). Intersectional perspectives, therefore, require complex, open, and dynamic matrix thinking (May, 2015).

Despite different ways to conceptualize and understand intersectionality, Bohrer (2019) proposes—based on authors such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, Ange-Marie Hancock, and Vivian May—six postulates for intersectional thinking: the first indicates that intersectionality proposes the inseparability of oppressions, so that there is no primacy of one system over the other. Therefore, the experiences of oppression are understood as mutually constructed from the intersection of different systems. Thus, the basis is not a summative logic (sexual orientation + race, for example), but rather on the interaction between these different categories. The second establishes that oppressions cannot

be hierarchical. This means that, both at the level of activism, and at the level of ontological and knowledge production, no oppression unilaterally causes the other. This does not mean that at certain times a social marker is more prominent or brings more consequences to the experience of the subjects, but rather that oppressions are understood as interconnected and mutually constitutive. As long as there is a system of class exploitation, there is no way to eradicate gender and racial inequities, as Marxist feminists point out from the centrality of reproductive labor to the accumulation of capital (Federici, 2018). Therefore, oppressions are experienced inseparably and are ontologically constructed in relation to each other.

The third assumption concerns the need to conceptualize oppressions not only at the individual level, but also at the structural, representational, and discursive level. Intersectional thinking can and should include different instances: individual, familiar, community, political, and structural since these interact with each other in different ways. The fourth assumption emphasizes how much intersectionality considers identity as an important category, but not in an individualizing perspective. On the contrary, it understands identity as multifaceted and constructed in a dialectical relationship between nature and historical-social context, so that it does not start from an essentialist or homogenizing perspective. Identity, therefore, is constituted dialogically with social structures and goes against a notion of politics or purely “identity” theory. The fifth assumption emphasizes that intersectionality is indeed a theoretical perspective, but it is intrinsically related to the critical analysis of the multiple relations of power inequalities and to the spaces of activism and militancy. Intersectionality does not start from an assumption of neutrality and necessarily presupposes an emancipatory stance of those who use it—either as a tool, theory, epistemology, or methodology. Finally, intersectionality is both an acknowledgement of power relations and a critique of those relations. It is descriptive, but also normative, and aims to combat inequities and contribute to the transformation of material and symbolic reality (Bohrer, 2019).

Contributions of the Global South to Theory of Intersectionality

The Global South historically analyzes different axes of oppression, questioning the influence of Eurocentric foundations on colonized cultures—materially and symbolically—by the Global North. Anzaldúa brought the multicultural diversity of the female gender by addressing themes related to Latin, non-Christian, non-heterosexual women and other categories hitherto made invisible or disregarded by the feminist movement (Anzaldúa, 1987). More than that, Anzaldúa provokes the universalizing bases of the movement, bringing to the analysis her own frontier experience of resistance—woman, Chicana, lesbian. Her great contribution is to think about this non-place, the limits of different systems of domination and the intersection of different social categories. Another author who questions the dominant and whitened discourse of feminist movements is Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí. The author discusses how much

Eurocentric and North American foundations echoes on African culture, on the way it is understood in an attempt to standardize it according to their own norms (Oyèwùmí, 2020). The author highlights the introduction of the concept of gender to Yoruba society, which did not have a gender binary system as the dominant Western context has.

Brazilian authors have brought important insights to intersectional theory, although they have not used this specific nomenclature in their works. In the feminist analyses by Heleieth Saffioti (2013) and Lélia Gonzalez (2020), for example, they pointed out that gender is not the only regime of power that constitutes us as subjects and that permeates social inequities. The authors complexified the analyses by bringing the categories of class and race to understand processes of vulnerabilization and oppression in the Brazilian context. Lélia Gonzalez (2020) denounced that the Brazilian patriarchy is capitalist, dependent, racist, and heteronormative. This indicates that the oppression of Brazilian and Latin American girls and women is crossed by race, class, and sexual orientation and that all this takes place in a region peripheral to capitalism and marked by colonization and exploitation arising from the Global North. The representation of what it means to be a woman, therefore, lies in the intersection between gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. In her words: “To deal with the sexual division of labor without articulating it with its counterpart on a racial level, is to fall back on a kind of abstract universal rationalism, typical of a masculinized and white discourse” (Gonzalez, 2020, p. 42, free translation).

Saffioti (2013), based on Marxist analyses of class and oppression, denounces how much gender conceals class antagonism: men of the dominated class function as mediators in the process of marginalization of women of their same social class, contributing to the interests of those who occupy dominant classes. This dialogues with intersectional theory, which understands that individuals can be—and often are—subjectified by some oppressions and, at the same time, conniving with others. The experience and maintenance of the different systems of oppression, therefore, has a series of contradictions. Hence, the importance of a dialectical interpretation that recognizes them as politically and epistemologically significant (May, 2015). Thus, feminist-Marxists and militants of the black movement contributed significantly to the expansion of conceptions of gender in Brazil and present a vast production that dialogues with the intersectional tradition, despite points of differentiation between Marxism and intersectionality.

In the contemporary scenario, Débora Diniz (2007) was essential in the critique of the first social model of disability in Brazil and, together with other authors in the field, demonstrated that gender and disability are ways of signifying power relations. Feminist studies on disability, therefore, united the theoretical fields of gender and disability and enabled a complexification in the ways of understanding social justice, subject constitution, subjugated knowledge, and collective actions. Recognizing the intersection between these categories provided the opportunity to expand the notions of care, material and symbolic barriers, social

representations, meanings in the body itself, and new resistance policies. In Psychology, the work of Piscitelli (2008) is considered one of the main Brazilian references. The author used intersectionality to analyze the phenomenon of the feminization of international migration, pointing out categories that allude to the multiplicity of differentiations that, when related to gender, permeate the social.

Empirical Investigations and the Theory of Intersectionality

Intersectional theory has as its imperative the search for social justice and that it remains central to the process of knowledge production (Rice et al., 2019). Working dialogically in the midst of power differences is central to intersectionality, so as to devise a methodology that incorporates multiple expressions of epistemic resistance in a broader context of power. Also, in addition to dialogical engagement, abductive analysis and reflective positioning are necessary characteristics in methodologies consistent with the intersectional tradition (Collins, 2022).

The author Leslie McCall (2005) proposes three levels of knowledge production, in which most intersectionality studies are located, namely: anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical. This separation concerns the way that each study understands and articulates social categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in the lives of the subjects and relates to the research strategies employed. Despite this separation, the author indicates that some studies may not be contemplated in any of the three levels, or even involve more than one. The anticategorical level is based on methodologies that deconstruct analytical categories, since social reality is understood as too complex to be reduced to a set of fixed and crystallized categories. An example of this is that gender was understood as purely biological and encompassed two possibilities: man and woman. Currently, gender is understood as a gendered category that is not reduced to the male/female binary. Thus, it is a category that has undergone and undergoes several transformations throughout history. Disregarding this variability would result in a simplified understanding that does not account for the multiple and fluid determinants of subjects and structures and, therefore, would lead to reproducing inequities. More than that, deconstructing categories would be part of deconstructing inequality itself. Since symbolic violence and material inequalities are found in relations defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender, tensioning the normative assumptions of these categories would contribute to social transformation (McCall, 2005).

Although the feminist movement has recognized – especially from the notes of Black and Latino authors – that a universalist perspective of the category woman is insufficient to understand the experiences and dynamics of gender, some proposals understand that it is not necessary to totally reject social categories, but rather to use them critically in empirical and theoretical studies. These studies make up the intracategorical level (McCall, 2005). Intracategorical studies tend to focus on particular social groups that are located at neglected points of intersection to reveal the complexity of

lived experiences. Personal narratives and studies about a particular group require a partial crystallization of identities in social relations, so that they represent how these intersections relate. Studies that start from this intracategorical notion predominantly opt for qualitative research strategies, such as case studies (McCall, 2005).

Finally, the intercategorical level is anchored in observing the existing relations of inequities between socially constituted groups (although this construction is fluid and imperfect) and takes these relations as central in its analyses. The main focus is to understand these relationships from the social categories, provisionally adopted, and how these are transforming. Still, intercategorical studies seek to investigate whether socially constituted groups are different regarding some experience or phenomenon. This level, therefore, involves the analysis of more than one group and the method is systematically comparative. The great challenge of these studies is using the categories to understand structural relationships, without losing sight of the complexity that the intersectional tradition advocates (McCall, 2005). At this level, some quantitative studies can be descriptive or analytical. Descriptive studies examine possible differences in outcomes between groups defined by intersectional positions of power. Analytical studies, on the other hand, begin with a descriptive character and then aim to identify the causal processes that influence inequities in outcomes, understanding their differences in the intersection of categorical identities/structures (Scheim & Bauer, 2019).

Scheim and Bauer (2019) criticize analytical studies that do not make explicit the theory that underlies the research and that neglect the assumptions of intersectionality. According to the authors, quantitative and analytical intersectional intercategorical studies should have four characteristics: (1) consider that intersections are structured from dimensions that reflect differences in power; (2) make social inequities visible, starting from descriptive analyses that do not neglect different outcomes according to intersectional positions; (3) adopt theoretical understandings that consider the social processes that contribute to intersectional inequities; and, finally, (4) use statistical methods that make it possible to evidence variations in terms of magnitude, direction, and the very existence of groups at different intersections (Alvarez & Evans, 2021; Evans, 2019).

There are statistical methods that aim to explore complex and multidimensional relationships, recognizing that different factors can play important and interconnected roles in a given phenomenon. Complex network analyses and multivariate analyses, for example, start from this premise of greater complexity and have been used in the field of public health (Evans, 2019). These analyses do not start from a hierarchization logic, and therefore do not hurt this assumption of intersectionality.

Regarding the use of qualitative approaches, there seems to be a non-explicit agreement that these would more easily operationalize the Theory of Intersectionality, as well as studies that start from feminist and/or politically located premises. However, recommendations on how intersectionality can be employed in qualitative

methodologies show an important gap. This may imply a superficial usage, which cites the term intersectional, but does not deeply engage with its assumptions in the construction of the study (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2020). Collins (2022), when discussing the empirical production of knowledge based on intersectional theory, highlights abductive analysis as a path for dialogical qualitative investigation. Such an analysis allows to accommodate various social theories in an interactive process of work between theories and discoveries in the field. It suggests ethnography and, based on sociologist Dana Takagi's reflections on ethnic-critical studies, the use of participatory action research. Collaboration, iteration, and reflexivity would be the three interdependent principles of this approach. Still, Collins points out that power relations generate conflicts that characterize a great challenge for empirical research, since many of these are rooted in the very rules that regulate epistemology, theories, and methodologies.

Collins (1990) highlights the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods to build a more complete understanding of the experiences of people located on the margins. It emphasizes the need for an approach that incorporates personal narratives, critical analysis, and contextualized quantitative data. For the author, researchers should seek an awareness of method, that is, a reflective understanding of the different methods and how they can contribute to research in the field of intersectionality, as well as their inherent limitations. Decolonizing methodologies implies considering the context in which research problems are thought of and the implications of the research process for the people who participated in it and their communities. The premises of intersectionality can influence methodological choices in different ways. Although some methodologies have historically been associated with social epistemologies, no research strategy is emancipatory in nature. An implication with the imperative of social transformation is required. Thus, the discussion is much broader than the method selection technique and makes claims, values, practices, and power relations the core of scientific knowledge production (Collins, 2022).

Intersectional Theory and Challenges for Psychology

The Theory of Intersectionality can provide subsidies for psychology professionals to understand how multiple forms of marginalization and oppression affect the experiences of all individuals and social groups (Grzanka, 2018). Considering different social categories and their relations with psychological phenomena implies going against a vast psychological tradition of proposing universalist theories about human development (Teo, 2005). Adopting the Theory of Intersectionality to understand development requires the recognition that social categories produce different experiences that constitute and are constitutive of the subjects. It also involves acknowledging the limitation of a series of evidences produced so far.

In research, intersectionality can be used to investigate how structural dynamics result in social identities and affect psychological processes in general (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019).

However, effectively adopting an intersectional perspective in the process of knowledge production in psychology requires more than simply recognizing social categories. Using, in fact, an intersectional lens, means adhering to its basic assumptions and interrogating research practices, theories, and epistemological suppositions (Bohrer, 2019; Bowleg, 2017).

Intersectionality – and feminist epistemologies in general – challenge normalized processes in knowledge production. The application of standardized instruments, for example, can hinder the construction of an intersectional understanding of psychological phenomena. However, as some feminist authors argue, while new methods are not being constructed, “old” methods can be applied in new ways and from a new understanding. This requires making their limitations explicit, particularly in terms of which elements of intersectionality can and cannot be captured from their use (Warner et al., 2016).

For Burman (2004), what makes a research in emancipatory Psychology is who asks the research question, how it is collected, interpreted, discussed, and how it relates to social reality. The different research methods can be used in intersectional studies, as long as they challenge the positivist paradigm and discuss the inherent limitations. Thus, intersectionality should structure the research question – not just hypothesize the answer. An analytical sensibility is considered, which requires researchers to orient their research and interpretations from the social dynamics of power and not to start from a homogenizing assumption of processes and outcomes investigated (Bauer et al., 2021).

In Brazil, conceptual, theoretical, and qualitative articles about intersectionality predominate in the psychological field. A systematic review that investigated Brazilian scientific productions on intersectionality found 26 theses and dissertations and 9 articles published in Psychology (Silva & Menezes, 2020). From this review, we can also perceive a scarcity of empirical productions that dialogue with the intersectional theory in the area – which also reflects the hegemonic psychological science that still starts from a universalist understanding of the subject. This gap may be related to the methodological and epistemological challenges inherent in the construction of a research that dialogues with the assumptions of intersectionality, but it is also due to a resistance of science to recognize different social dynamics and processes of oppression. Still, more than just mentioning intersectionality and/or recognizing intersectional positions, studies that start from this extensive tradition must not contribute to whitening the theory, sanitizing it, disregarding unequal relations of power, and making invisible its character of intrinsic social transformation since its emergence from black feminism.

Final Considerations

This article aimed to present the assumptions of the Theory of Intersectionality to discuss methodological possibilities and challenges in the production of empirical evidence and contributions to Psychology. Intersectionality,

recognized as one of the main contributions of feminist epistemologies to the scientific field, is a powerful analytical sensibility that can contribute to the understanding of the most diverse psychological phenomena. Since it is an inherently interdisciplinary field, empirical studies based on the Theory of Intersectionality are characterized by a methodological plurality and different research approaches. Although this article has been limited to discussing more specifically methodological aspects, reducing the application of the Theory of Intersectionality to a methodology would be to simplify and limit its contribution to the field of Psychology. Methodologies must start from epistemologies that are coherent and congruent with intersectional thinking; so that the results can be analyzed in a matrix way and applied to different contexts without losing their complexity.

There is still a long way to go regarding the incorporation of this paradigm in the practices and production of knowledge in Psychology. In adopting the Theory of Intersectionality just recognizing the complexity of the power relations between race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories is not enough; a commitment is needed to act actively in transforming dynamics of oppression. In the field of health, intersectionality has been used to understand inequities in the processes of illness and to build more equitable strategies for promoting collective health. Empirical studies based on the assumptions of the Theory of Intersectionality are essential to identify and understand differences in indicators of mental health, self-esteem, perception of support network, experiences of vulnerability between different intersectional positions. They can also contribute to the understanding of different experiences, considering the interrelationship of identities and power structures. Thus, processes of health, illness, and social vulnerability are analyzed contextually to produce individual and collective strategies of social transformation.

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