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Intersectionality and Identity: A Systematic Review and Qualitative Analysis of U.S. Research in Psychological Science

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ABSTRACT

Psychological science has historically centered white, cisgender male experiences. Using predominantly quantitative, comparative methods and designs, this limited slice of humanity has been deemed normative and universal. The study of identity is one area in which diversity and minoritized experiences have increasingly been examined. Yet, this work remains largely single axis, focusing solely on race *or* gender, for instance. Intersectionality grounds identity in context, challenging single-axis approaches and problematizing inequitable research norms. In this systematic literature review, we examined the state of intersectional identity research in U.S. psychological science. We analyzed empirical studies published between 2005 and 2022 ($N = 555$) for *how* (methods/design) this research is conducted, *what* identities are examined (social categories/positionalities), and *who* (sample diversity) is studied. We found that 82% of studies used qualitative methods; race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were the most frequently studied identities, both in intersection with each other and with dozens of additional social categories; and adults, women, and racial/ethnic and sexual minorities were the most commonly represented populations. This review suggests that intersectional identity research centers individuals whose experiences have long been marginalized in psychology. We discuss how intersectionality offers a path toward more diverse and justice-oriented research in psychological science.


KEYWORDS

intersectionality; identity; systematic literature review; social justice research; diversity; qualitative analysis

From its inception, the field of psychology was led by white male scholars who designed research that upheld societal hierarchies along the lines of race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation (Guthrie, 1976; Rutherford, 2020, Winston, 2020). This starting point shaped not only *who* and *what* has been studied, but *how* empirical research has been conducted. Intertwined with whose experiences have been deemed normative and superior are the methods used; quantitative, comparative study designs remain the gold standard (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). These methodological norms continue to shape our science (Medin et al., 2017), creating boundaries around which research is viewed as scientific and valuable, and which is dismissed or denigrated (N. A. Lewis, 2021; Nzinga et al., 2018). Relatedly, People of Color remain underrepresented in psychological research, and the topic of race is rarely examined in mainstream psychology journals, whereas white¹ people are overrepresented as study participants, researchers, and journal editors (Roberts et al., 2020).

One area within psychological science in which diversity and minoritized experiences have been increasingly examined is the study of identity. Identity research cuts a broad swath across

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psychological sub-disciplines, including clinical, community, counseling, developmental, educational, personality, and social, as well as adjacent fields such as psychiatry and social work. The term “identity” is widely applied and taken up in diverse ways. At its core, identity refers to one’s sense of self – the knowledge, feelings, behaviors, and attitudes that define who we are in relation to others (e.g., Côté, 2006; Elliott, 2012; McLean & Syed, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2011). While the social identity approach (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Erikson’s psychosocial model (e.g., Erikson, 1968) provide two key foundations on which psychological identity research has been built, there are myriad frameworks, theories, models, as well as methods, measures, and designs used to assess this multifaceted construct.

Across this discipline-spanning research, identity scholars often focus on members of socially stigmatized groups, for instance studying ethnic-racial identity among People of Color or gender identity among women. In this way, identity research has become a space to study stigma, marginalization, exclusion, and belonging. At the same time, identity is often positioned *within* individuals (even when situated in social groups), rather than as a cultural process that develops through a dynamic interplay between person and context (McLean & Syed, 2015). Moreover, identity research often takes a single-axis approach; ethnic-racial identity is studied separately from gender identity, for instance (Cole, 2009; Ghavami et al., 2016). Consequently, identity is often cast as individually important but societally neutral (Rogers, 2018).

Intersectionality, in contrast, makes explicit that identity is contextually linked to interlocking systems of privilege and oppression – how we experience race and racism, for instance, is necessarily informed by our experiences with sexism, classism, and beyond (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1989). As a paradigm, intersectionality not only challenges the single-axis focus of identity research (Rogers et al., 2015), but problematizes the methodological norms dominant in psychological science by centering lived experience over universality or generalizability, and resistance to oppression over presumed neutrality (Overstreet et al., 2020; L. R. Warner et al., 2016). Intersectionality is not simply about multiple identities; it is a critical paradigm that resists oppressive norms by shedding light on the *who*, *what*, and *how* of our science – *who* is included, *what* is studied, and *how* research is conducted.

Over the past decade, numerous scholars have theorized how psychologists can and should engage intersectionality, including in the study of identity (e.g., Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Rosenthal, 2016; Settles et al., 2020), with practical guides put forth for moving beyond a single-axis approach (Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016). To our knowledge, however, no scholars have systematically examined what researchers *are doing* when they engage intersectionality, specifically in the psychological study of identity. Which methods are used, what identities are studied (in which intersections), and who is included in this research? In what ways, if any, does this scholarship challenge inequitable norms? To answer these questions, we conducted a systematic review of intersectional identity research in U.S. psychological science. To situate our review, we first discuss intersectionality and identity. We then describe three key research norms that perpetuate the status quo of oppression in psychological science, and how intersectionality, as a justice-oriented paradigm, holds the potential to disrupt and transform them.

Intersectionality and identity

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, coined the term *intersectionality* to challenge the single-axis frameworks of both critical theorists and feminist scholars. A single-axis view of oppression focuses on Black men as targets of racism and white women as targets of sexism, rendering the experiences of Black women invisible (Crenshaw, 1989). Social psychologists have examined this tendency, showing that the most privileged members of a group tend to be taken as prototypes, obscuring the experiences of all others (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Intersectionality anchors the individual within interlocking systems, offering a paradigm for understanding how multiple social categories embodied by the individual are both shaped by and shape the systems that give them meaning. Rooted in the experiences of Black women, other Women of Color feminists from within

and outside the U.S., for example Anna Nieto-Gómez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Mitsuye Yamada, have influenced the current definition, method, and practice of intersectionality (see Mays & Ghavami, 2018).

Intersectionality has most readily been applied in disciplines already focusing on social structures, such as sociology and ethnic studies; its uptake in psychology has been comparatively slow (Cole, 2009). Among psychological research engaging intersectionality, identity is a key area of focus. The focal identity domains often studied in psychology, particularly in recent decades, align with the core dimensions that characterize intersectionality in the U.S.: race/ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation (Bowleg, 2008; Ghavami et al., 2016; Shields, 2008). Identity is not, however, the only topic studied through an intersectional lens. In the critiques of how intersectionality can and should be operationalized in psychology, authors rightfully point out that this critical paradigm is often reduced to “having multiple identities” (Marecek, 2016; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). This critique, while relevant, does not negate the importance of identity to the human experience. Moreover, studying identity can elucidate mechanisms and processes related to the maintenance and resistance of systems of privilege and oppression (Rogers, 2018; Syed & McLean, 2021), particularly when an intersectional lens is applied (Rogers & Syed, 2021). For social justice-oriented change to occur, however, it matters how and among whom intersectional identity research is conducted.

Conceptualizing the impact of intersectionality on research norms in psychology

A central critique of psychology’s application of intersectionality is tied to the field’s research practices and core beliefs about ways of knowing – its epistemological tenets (Overstreet et al., 2020; Settles et al., 2020). Settles and colleagues (2020) argued that, “intersectionality has been epistemically excluded because it challenges dominant psychological norms about the scientific process and has been most readily endorsed by psychologists from marginalized groups” (p. 796). Related to this argument, an increasing number of scholars have named and interrogated the boundary-policing that occurs in psychology (Grzanka & Cole, 2021; N. A. Lewis, 2021; Stewart & Sweetman, 2018), which situates certain research as “scientific” and worthy of funding and widespread dissemination, while other research is relegated to the margins of the field. Thus, incorporating intersectionality into psychological science is not only about whether interlocking positionalities are studied, but the practice of research itself.

There are three key research practices that are upheld as normative in psychological science: (a) *the use of quantitative methods*, (b) *reliance on comparative study designs*, and (c) *sample (non-)diversity* (McGrath & Johnson, 2003; Medin et al., 2017; Ponterotto, 2005). If intersectional research goes beyond studying “multiple identities” to take up the epistemological tenets of intersectionality, the empirical literature should diverge from these norms; it should showcase methodological diversity including qualitative and critical approaches, within-group and contextualized study designs, and diverse samples of participants. Given our interest not only in describing what intersectional identity research in psychology looks like, but in *how* it can serve as tool of (methodological) resistance, we review how these research norms uphold longstanding hierarchies and inequalities in psychological science and society.

Quantitative methodology

Quantitative research in the social sciences is generally rooted in positivist and post-positivist epistemologies, which assume that there is a single, objective truth (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Suzuki et al., 2021). (Post)-positivist research is designed to eliminate or control human subjectivity and bias (Ali & Sichel, 2018). From this perspective, the development, standardization, and norming of research measures, for instance, as well as the interpretation of research findings, are assumed to be neutral and objective, when in fact it has historically been the perspective of white, well off, cisgender men who are held as the norm, against which all other experiences are compared (Dupree & Boykin,

2021; Winston, 2020). Moreover, because most quantitative approaches assume neutrality, most psychology research strives for generalizability and universality instead of examining how social hierarchies differentially shape individual experience (Bowleg, 2008; Suzuki et al., 2021). Intersectionality, in contrast, embraces a critical epistemological stance of subjectivity that challenges objectivity, neutrality, and universality. Examining the ways in which wealthy and working-class Black women and white women experience gender differently due to intersecting systems of racism, sexism, and classism, for example, makes generalized arguments about “women” less tenable.

Though explicit examinations of epistemological beliefs are more commonly associated with qualitative methods (McGrath & Johnson, 2003), simply gathering or analyzing qualitative data does not automatically attune researchers to intersecting systems of power. It may afford greater possibility for doing so, however, as most qualitative approaches are anchored in constructivist epistemology (McGrath & Johnson, 2003; L. R. Warner et al., 2016), meaning they recognize that there is no single truth, and that knowledge is, “a historical and culturally situated account of the world in terms of the values and needs of a particular community” (Gergen et al., 2015, p. 4). Moreover, qualitative designs more readily allow for an inductive examination of data. Studying identity using a bottom-up, inductive approach may allow scholars to identify intersections of lived experience that were not theorized *a priori*, but are meaningful to participants and thus become part of a given study *post hoc*. Such data-driven analysis can help inform theory and strengthen the external validity of research (Locke, 2007). Thus, the reason we highlight the normative use of quantitative methods is not about numbers over words, but rather the privileging of certain experiences and erasure of others, and a lack of recognition in the field regarding this inequitable tendency (McGrath & Johnson, 2003).

Comparative study designs

Comparative study designs, wherein one social group’s beliefs, behaviors, or experiences are compared to another (e.g., men to women), are foundational to quantitative research and are thus common in psychological science. Such designs are problematic when psychologists report group differences, yet fail to acknowledge the systems that shape them (Rutherford, 2018; Spencer, 2017). As Suzuki and colleagues (2021) explain:

Although the use of comparative analyses (e.g., between-group mean comparisons) is not inherently problematic (Syed, 2020), the interpretations from comparative work can and have been used to draw unidimensional and essentializing conclusions about people of color while upholding white people as the norm against which others are compared. (p. 543)

For instance, a researcher may examine “gender differences” with a sample predominantly comprised of white, college educated, cisgender men and women, without analyzing intersecting positionalities. This approach can promote the idea that white, college educated, cisgender women’s experiences represent *all* women’s experiences, making divergence from normative “womanhood” a problem of the individual (Reid & Kelly, 1994). Intersectionality, in contrast, underscores that the personal is inherently political, and that all identities are shaped by interlocking systems of power and privilege (Hill Collins, 1989; Rogers et al., 2021). Intersectionality is also attuned to variation within groups – diversity in terms of class and sexual orientation *among* Asian American women, for instance – rather than assuming homogeneity across group members. Thus, intersectional identity research may afford greater diversity in *what* is being studied, namely which social identities or positionalities (e.g., race, sexuality, gender) are studied in intersection with one another (e.g., among Asian American lesbian women).

Sample (Non-)diversity

Studying within-group heterogeneity and interlocking systems of oppression necessitates diversity in *who* is included in the research. From its disciplinary beginning, psychology has investigated humanity based on samples that almost exclusively include those positioned as dominant in society (Rutherford, 2018;

Winston, 2020). Such “normative samples” have been consistently rendered the standard against which all “others” – Black people, poor people, women, LGBTQ+ people – are compared, and very often found to be deficient (Bates & Ng, 2021; Causadias et al., 2018; Guthrie, 1976). The continued practice of recruiting samples of mostly white, privileged individuals and generalizing to the full human population is not only inaccurate (Medin et al., 2017; Syed et al., 2018), but reinforces notions of white normativity (if not supremacy) and renders the “nonwhite” human experience as *different* and *deviant* in service of upholding this standard (Roberts & Mortenson, 2022; Rogers & Way, 2018).

In contrast to this research practice, intersectionality recognizes those who have been marginalized as fully human and centers their perspectives, making visible the experiences of those deemed invisible by exclusionary norms (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality privileges voices that are often “othered” in order to know and understand the full breadth of humanity (Rogers & Way, 2016, 2018). Rather than generalizable and universal, intersectionality attends to the unique and specific ways that humans experience the societies in which they live. Thus, an intersectional approach to identity ought to include samples that reflect those who have been historically marginalized in science and in society.

The current study

In this systematic literature review, we first examine the state of empirical intersectional identity research in U.S. psychological science, and then qualitatively analyze the research practices that characterize this body of literature. We focus our review on identity because it is a focal topic across psychological science and is directly tied to intersectionality through the social categories (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality) that organize U.S. society and the systems that shape them. Because social group boundaries and identities are delineated differently across sociocultural contexts, and thus intersectionality is applied differently (Lentin, 2016, Mays & Ghavami, 2018; Moffitt et al., 2020), we focus on U.S.-based research. We recognize the importance of examining intersectionality across the globe, including to decolonize this framework (Kurtiş, & Adams, 2016). That said, the socio-historically situated nature of constructs including race, gender, and sexual orientation makes aggregation and comparison across national contexts untenable at best and harmful at worst. For instance, data on race is not gathered in most countries across Europe and Asia (where in many cases it is illegal to do so), yet terms such as “migrant” are used across generations, reinforcing exclusionary, racialized notions of national identity that intersect with religion and social class (Moffitt et al., 2020; Yamashiro, 2011). Interrogating such practices and the related implications of intersectionality in a global context, while extremely important, falls beyond the scope of this systematic review.

Although many questions persist about how psychologists *should do* intersectional identity research, the empirical focus of this review will assess how scholars *are doing* intersectional identity research in the U.S., which is currently missing in the literature. In addition to describing the state of this research, we were motivated to assess whether and how this corpus, “challenges and transforms dominant perspectives in psychology” (L. R. Warner et al., 2016, p. 173). Our review was therefore guided by two primary aims:

AIM 1: To systematically investigate *how* intersectional identity research in U.S. psychological science is conducted (method/design), *what* identities are examined (social categories/positionalities), and *who* is studied (diversity of samples). Our goal is to document the scope of scholarship in this area. Gaining a more comprehensive picture of the existing literature will help illuminate gaps in our state of knowledge and empirically inform future research.

AIM 2: In terms of the *how*, *what*, and *who* outlined above, we analyze the reviewed articles to shed light on the ways in which intersectional identity scholarship may diverge from and challenge inequitable research norms in mainstream psychological science.

Method

Following guidelines for best practice in systematic literature reviews (Baumeister, 2013; Siddaway et al., 2019), we conducted a comprehensive review of U.S.-based empirical studies in psychological science that focus on identity through an intersectional lens. We conducted this search in PsycINFO, an abstracting database associated with the American Psychological Association, which indexes psychological literature dating back more than 150 years. The decision to confine our search to PsycINFO was made with discussion and guidance from a university librarian and an expert scholar in systematic literature reviews (Bethel, Personal Communication, February, 2019; Eagly, Personal Communication, October, 2018). PsycINFO is described by the American Psychological Association as, “the most trusted index of psychological science in the world” (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/data/bases/psychinfo>).

We recognize that PsycINFO indexes research cross-listed in adjacent disciplines, yet did not want to rely on subjective definitions to delineate what is or is not psychology, which could exclude meaningful contributions to the psychological study of identity in interdisciplinary journals. Finally, although it is common when conducting systematic reviews to examine only “top” journals in a given area, we decided against this practice to allow for greater inclusion of research relegated to margins. Reviewing “top” journals can inadvertently invisibilize relevant (and often non-traditional) research published elsewhere, contributing to the maintenance of inequitable norms in our science. Moreover, because we were interested in examining doctoral dissertations, we did not want to limit our search to specific journals, as it would have excluded such work. Using PsycINFO to conduct our review therefore provided a meaningful boundary for psychological science, and an opportunity to include the breadth and diversity of the field. This project was not preregistered. All supplementary materials and data files used in our analysis are available on the Open Science Framework at <https://tinyurl.com/bdd7d78w>.

Step 1: searching for relevant literature

The full search in the PsycINFO database was first conducted on October 18, 2019, with a second search to update our analysis on January 18, 2023. We did not set a start date for publications, but set December 31, 2022 as our cutoff date. We searched for texts that included the words “intersectional*” and “identit*” found anywhere in the full text. The asterisks were used to capture variations of these words, including “intersectional,” “intersectionality,” “identity,” and “identities.” We did not limit our search to a specific definition of either intersectionality or identity, as we wanted to leave space for the very broad range of operationalizations of each concept in the literature. We recognize that some research examining intersecting systems of oppression and privilege does not use the term intersectionality, for instance drawing on queer theory or Black feminist thought (e.g., Hill Collins, 1989). In an effort to focus our search parameters, we only sought research that named both identity and intersectionality (or a variation of these words) in the full text. The search criteria included English language book chapters, dissertations, and peer-reviewed journal articles.

The search in 2019 resulted in 1,362 citations and the search in 2023 resulted in an additional 1,322 citations – an initial indication of a sharp increase in intersectional identity research in recent years. Throughout our Results section, findings will be reported together, meaning the collective results from 2005 through the end of 2022. That said, we also offer some comparative analysis to highlight trends in intersectional identity research from recent years. All 2,684 citations, as well as accompanying abstracts, were exported to EndNote X9 for inclusion coding. [Figure 1](#) shows the chronological distribution of citations identified in our search, with the striped bars representing the final 555 texts that ultimately fit the inclusion criteria and were thus included in our comprehensive review. The timeline displays the sharp uptick beginning from 2008 in research on intersectionality and identity, with a second uptick in 2019.

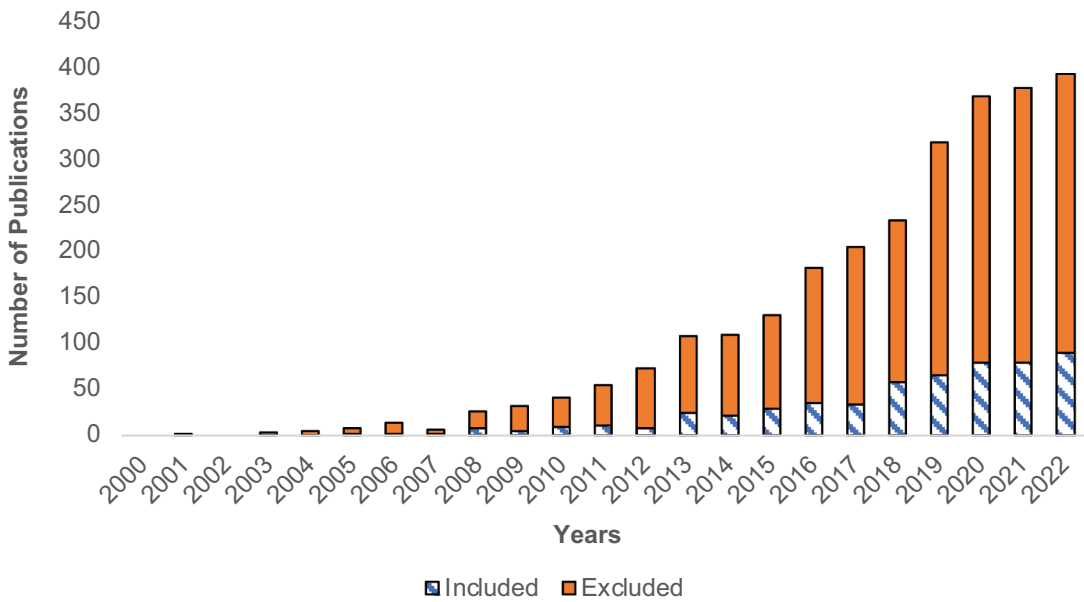


Figure 1. Frequency of coded publication years. *Note.* The stacked bars together represent the total yielded from our search in each year, with the striped bars representing the proportion included in our analysis.

Step II: screening the literature

To meet our inclusion criteria, texts needed to include (a) empirical analysis, (b) a U.S.-based sample, and (c) an explicit reference to an identity-related construct (see Table S1). For the purposes of this review, only studies with human participants were considered empirical, excluding literature reviews, theoretical papers, historical texts, and studies with non-human samples. We defined a U.S.-based sample as any study with participants located in the U.S., including multi-site research. Our definition of identity for inclusion purposes was very broad (see Table S1), though we adapted it based on texts being reviewed, as described below.

To apply these inclusion criteria, the first author worked with a team of nine trained research assistants across two multi-month periods. We reviewed the abstracts of the 2,684 identified texts, screening initially for empirical research and U.S.-based samples. If we were unable to make a determination based on the abstract alone, we searched for and consulted the full text. Following our inclusion guidelines, 1,909 texts were excluded: 934 (35%) were not empirical and 524 (20%) reported solely non-U.S.-based samples. To eliminate duplicates, nine dissertations were excluded at this stage, and peer-reviewed journal articles based on the research were retained. To screen for our third inclusion criterion, a focus on identity, we located and uploaded full text versions of the remaining texts to EndNote X9. Reading for mentions of identity as a research focus led to the exclusion of an additional 448 texts. After searching all possible sources, full texts could not be located for three studies. This initial inclusion coding thus resulted in a total of 766 texts, or 29% of the initial yield. Research excluded at this stage focused on a wide range of topics, including access to health care, academic engagement, HIV, and mental health. Although each study included the word “identity” somewhere in the full text, none assessed identity in the research itself. A flowchart of our multi-step screening process based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA; Liberati et al., 2009) is shown in Figure 2.

After each search, the primary coding team, which included the first author and at least four research assistants at any given time across the multiple months of coding, engaged in

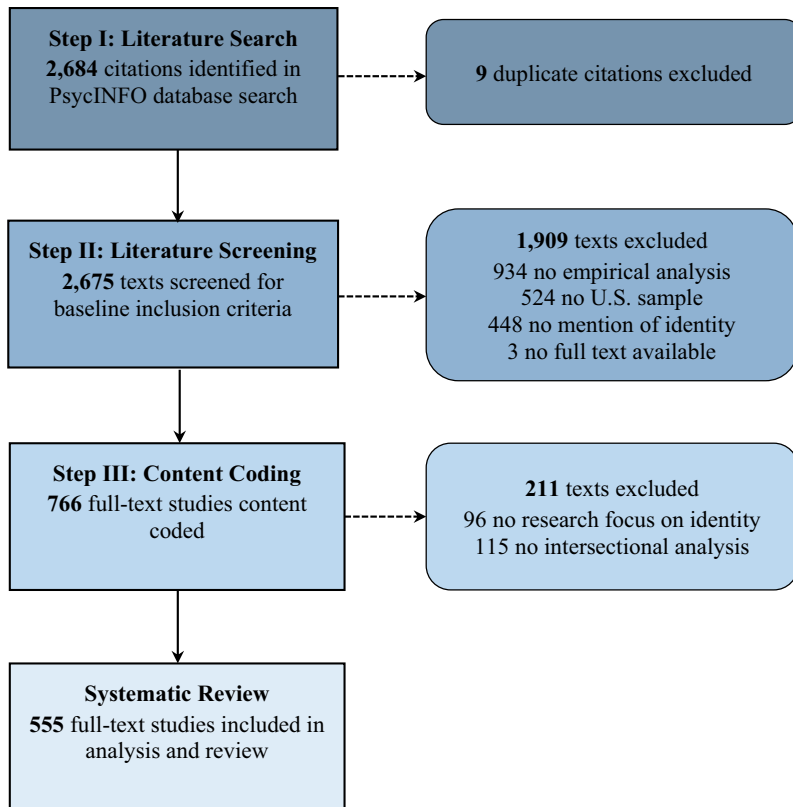


Figure 2. Flow chart of literature search, screening, coding, and review process.

weekly hour-long meetings to ensure clarity regarding our inclusion criteria. We noted down any citations about which we were unsure and collectively discussed each case, which helped us hone our codebook and screening criteria. Disagreements were minor, for instance regarding a book chapter that included both historical and empirical sections, resulting in one coder excluding it and the others including. All disagreements were resolved through discussion. Because we consistently engaged in collective coding and check-ins to discuss any questions that arose, inter-coder reliability was not calculated.

Step III: content coding

For content coding, full texts were transferred to NVivo12, a qualitative analysis software program. We read closely the 766 texts screened for initial inclusion to determine the research design and study focus. We created a codebook with three primary codes: (a) *how* the research was conducted in terms of method and design; (b) *what* identities were examined, and (c) *who* was included in terms of sample demographics (see Table 1). To refine the codebook, we each first coded the same randomly selected 30 texts, discussing our inclusion/exclusion process and updating our codebook. We then coded all 766 texts, with two coders focusing on a single code: *how*, *what*, or *who*. Throughout this content coding process, we continued meeting weekly to discuss questions and clarify our codebook. We also rotated coding throughout, meaning that each text was read by multiple coders, which allowed for double checking and prompted continual discussions to ensure thorough and consistent coding.

Table 1. Overview of the codebook including examples from coded studies.

Content Coding	Categorical Code	Example of Coded Text	Target Code(s) Assigned
<i>How</i> Methods and Design	Qualitative	"Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight transgender therapists . . ." (Cherry, 2021)	Interviews
	Quantitative	"We conducted several experiments to compare Americans' stereotypes of men at various intersections. . ." (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2019)	Experiments
	Mixed- Methods	"The study involved two parts: (a) an initial qualitative investigation, in which a series of focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted and (b) a quantitative assessment, which consisted of an in-depth survey. . ." (Reid et al., 2011)	Interview Survey
	Participant	"The primary aims of this study were to examine Black adolescent male's self-reported gender and racial identities. . ." (Buckley, 2018)	Participant
	Perceiver	" . . . a different sample of college student participants was asked to assess stereotypes associated with three sets of target groups. . ." (Ghavamli & Peplau, 2013)	Perceiver
<i>What</i> Identities Studied	A priori	"As such, the research objective for this study was to determine how the intersectionality of the African American and mother identities are perceived to affect counselor educators' experiences. . ." (Haskins et al., 2016)	Race/ethnicity Parental
	Post hoc	" . . . another participant noted fundamental ableism. . ." (Mattheis et al., 2022)	Ability
	Both	"In the dissertation, I ask, How are Korean immigrant students' identities, including academic identities related to science learning. . ." (Ryu, 2012) " . . . students were further categorized by how much they were 'Americanized'—speaking fluent English, giving up Korean cultural practices, and engaging in American ways of thinking, speaking, and acting." (Ryu, 2012)	Immigrant – child of immigrants Academic American – national
<i>Who</i> Diversity of Samples	Age	"The age range for participants was 54–77 years old with an average age of 61.8 ($SD = 9.29$)" (Abreu et al., 2020).	Adults
	Gender	"Interviewees were 11 Arab American women" (Abdel Salam et al., 2019)	Women
	Race	"My analysis is based on 23 LGBT-identified Black women who live in North Philadelphia. . ." (Brooks, 2016)	Black – African American
	SES	"Additionally, in terms of social class, 37.4% identified as being working class, 41.2% as middle class, 19.8% as upper-middle class, and 1.5% as upper class." (Ojeda et al., 2016)	Low SES Middle – High SES
	Sexuality	"Participants self-identified as sexual minorities, including lesbian/gay (40.0%), bisexual (23.0%), pansexual (15.6%), queer (15.6%), fluid (1.8%), asexual (1.3%), and other (2.7%)." (Galupo et al., 2015)	Lesbian Gay Men – MSM Bisexual Queer Other

How U.S. intersectional identity research is conducted: methods and design

To code for *how* the study was conducted, we focused first on the Method section of each text. We coded for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, then for the specific type of method/s used in each study (e.g., interviews, focus groups, experiments, surveys). We also noted the type of text: journal article, dissertation, or book chapter, as well as whether it was single or multi-study, and comparative or within-group. This last code was not based on the sample or identities included, but rather the framing and analysis. For instance, two studies could both include Black queer women, but if one compared their experiences based on social class, for example, it was coded as comparative, whereas if the other examined the breadth of experiences without the frame of between-group comparison, then it was coded as within-group.

What identities are studied: social categories/positionalities

To establish *what* was being studied, we read the Abstract, Introduction, Method, and Discussion sections of the initially included texts and generated a list of all identities named. To refine this list, if a given identity was mentioned in two or more texts, it was included in the coding scheme; if an identity was named in only one text, it was coded as "other" (e.g., kink identity, social justice identity).

At this stage, additional 96 texts were excluded because identity was not a focus of research (e.g., a study of health outcomes among individuals experiencing racism), resulting in 670 texts (25% of the original 2,684 texts yielded).

Based on the *what* coding outlined above, it became clear that some texts were laid out in a way traditional to (quantitative) psychology, with all identity domains being researched described in the Introduction section (*a priori*). Other texts named only broad categories or a limited number of identities up front, then highlighted data-driven identity domains or social categories in the Results or Discussion (*post hoc*). To account for this variation systematically, we updated our codebook to delineate: (a) which identity domains were named *a priori*, meaning in the study aims, research questions, or hypotheses; and (b) which identity domains were specified *post hoc* in the Results or Discussion section.

The remaining 670 texts were re-coded using this more precise delineation. Additionally, in an effort to capture the wide range of operationalizations found across studies (Cho et al., 2013; McCall, 2005), we defined intersectionality within our coding parameters on the basic inclusion requirement that at least two identity domains were named and studied, either *a priori* or *post hoc*. During the second round of *what* coding, an additional 115 texts were excluded which did not name at least two identities or identity domains (e.g., race/ethnicity and gender), meaning they were framed as intersectional analysis but only named and analyzed a single social category or positionality (e.g., gender). Our final analytical sample therefore included 555 texts, or 21% of our original yield (see Figures 1 and 2).

Who is included: diversity of samples

To assess *who* was included in each study, we reviewed the Method section of each text, focusing on the Participant sub-section, if available. Our pre-identified participant demographic categories included: age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. If information for one of these was not reported in a given study, the text was coded as “not specified” for that demographic category. If additional demographic information was reported beyond the pre-selected categories, it was coded as “other” (e.g., citizenship, immigrant generation, marital status). To account for those studies in which participants were asked to assess the identities of other people (meaning they were perceivers, but their own identities were not being studied), we also coded each study as either participant-oriented or target-oriented.

Results

Of the 2,684 texts pulled from the search (Step I), 766 included empirical analysis with human subjects, a U.S.-based sample, and a focus on identity (Step II). Of those, only 555 included an intersectional analysis of multiple identities (Step III). Among the texts included in our review, roughly half (48%, $n = 268$) were dissertations, another half were peer-reviewed journal articles (49%, $n = 273$), and a few were book chapters (3%, $n = 14$). Looking across publication years from 2005 through 2022, variation is evident in the breakdown of included publication types (see Figure 3), though no clear trend is discernable in terms of the dominance of dissertations vs. peer reviewed journal articles. Similarly, no patterns were evident in terms of the *how*, *what*, or *who* of dissertations differing from journal articles or book chapters, indicating few substantive differences in the methods, focus, and participants of published and unpublished intersectionality research. It is clear, however, that the overall number of both journal articles and dissertations taking an intersectional lens to the psychological study of identity is growing.

Examining the publication outlets of the journal articles, a wide range was evident, including both “high impact” and more niche outlets, such as *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *Gender and Society*, *Journal*

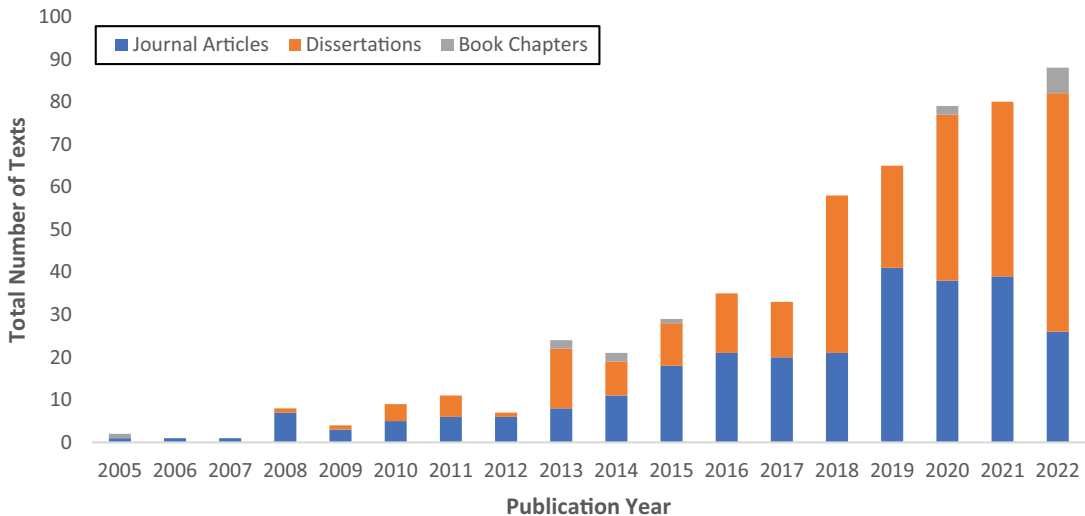


Figure 3. Overview of included studies by year and type.

of *Homosexuality*, and *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Similarly, dissertations were drawn from a variety of disciplines, with the majority coming from counseling, clinical, developmental, educational and social psychology, as well as social work and education. In the sections below, we provide an in-depth review of the *how*, *what*, and *who* of these 555 texts, offering a summative view of the current state of intersectional identity in U.S. psychological science (see supplemental materials for a reference list of all included texts).

How intersectional identity research is conducted: methods and design

In this sample of intersectional identity research, 82% of studies² were conducted using qualitative methods ($n = 457$) and 22% ($n = 122$) used quantitative methods, with 7% ($n = 39$) using multiple methods. The vast majority (86%; $n = 480$) used a within-group research design, meaning they examined a group of people sharing intersecting identities of interest. For example, one study examined the experiences of “deaf lesbian Students of Color” at a school for the deaf (Dunne, 2013), while another studied, “the intersection of gender and sexuality among transgender individuals” (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016). The remaining 14% of texts ($n = 75$) used a comparative study design, comparing one group to another, for example by examining identity conflict among LGB People of Color compared to LGB white people (Sarno et al., 2015).

The majority of studies (85%; $n = 469$) named identity domains *a priori*, meaning they were specified in the research questions, study aims, and/or hypotheses; an approach aligned with disciplinary norms. The modal number of identities named in *a priori* texts was two. For example, one study (Berry, 2022) laid out the intersectional focus on race and gender as follows: “A sample of 564 self-identified Black American women, born and raised in the United States, were surveyed to understand recollected gendered racial socialization messages and subjective gender role stress mediated through racial identity” (p. xi). A fifth of studies either solely or additionally named identity domains *post hoc* (20%; $n = 109$). For example, in a study drawing on autoethnography and focus groups, Jones (2009) set out to conduct an intersectional analysis of the “tensions between privileged and oppressed identities” (p. 287) among diverse participants, meaning no identity domains were specified *a priori*. It was during the research process that race, gender, sexuality, and social class were named by participants and thus were specified and examined in analyses. In studies which included

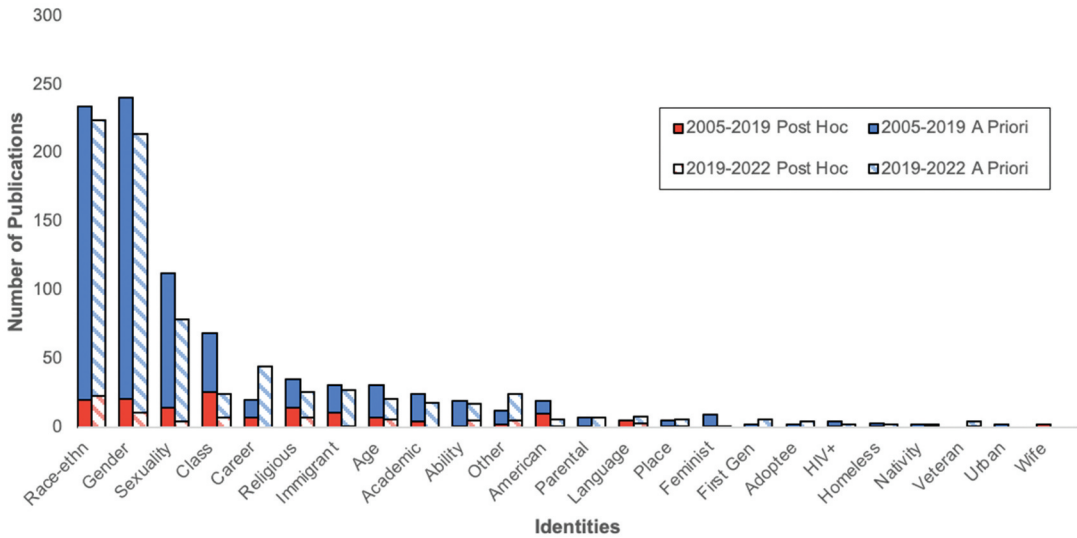


Figure 4. Overview of identities studied, grouped by publication year.

post hoc identities, the modal number of domains studied was three, but included a maximum of eight identities.

Some studies included a mix, listing at least one identity *a priori* in the research questions, study aims, and/or hypotheses, and at least one identity *post hoc*. For instance, Rogers et al. (2015) measured race and gender identity (using surveys) *a priori* among Black adolescent boys. However, their *post hoc* interpretation of the results contextualized these patterns in reference to sexuality as it intersects with gender, drawing on interview data that engaged social class and heteronormativity in boys' constructions of their gender and race identities (Rogers et al., 2015). Because our analysis included nearly the same number of texts published from mid-2019 to the end of 2022 ($n = 276$) as those published from 2005 to mid-2019 ($n = 279$), we were able to examine whether there were changes over time in this and other areas. Interestingly, the number of studies naming identities *post hoc* decreased from 78 to 31 across time (see Figure 4).

What identities are studied: social categories/positionalities

Across the 555 texts, 23 distinct identities were focal in at least two studies, and the number of identity domains specified in a given text ranged from two to eight, with a mode of two. These patterns, as noted in the previous section, depended to some degree on whether the identities were listed *a priori* or *post hoc*.

As we anticipated, given the history of the intersectionality paradigm, race/ethnicity and gender were the two most frequently studied identity domains, represented in 82% ($n = 454$) and 81% ($n = 451$) of texts, respectively. Each of these were overwhelmingly named *a priori*, suggesting that they were intentionally focal to the conceptualization of identity intersectionality; only a small proportion of texts used a *post hoc* approach to name race/ethnicity ($n = 41$; 9% of studies focusing on race/ethnicity) or gender ($n = 32$; 7% of studies focusing on gender). Somewhat surprisingly, we found few substantive differences over time, with race/ethnicity and gender far and away the most studied identities at each time point (see Figure 4).

The third most common identity was sexuality,³ which was named in 34% ($n = 190$) of texts; a sizable representation but less than half the frequency of race/ethnicity and gender. Sexuality was also most often named *a priori* ($n = 172$; 91% of studies focusing on sexuality) as a planned focus of the

study. Social class, the fourth most studied identity category, was focal in only 17% of texts ($n = 92$), marking a sharp decrease relative to sexuality. Interestingly, compared to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, social class was far more likely to be named *post hoc*. In fact, 36% of texts ($n = 33$) that focused on social class did so *post hoc*, whereas less than 10% of references to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were *post hoc*. That said, both sexuality and social class markedly declined as identities studied in 2019–2022 as compared to 2005–2019. When examining only the 276 more recent studies, leadership and career (grouped together as one identity domain, as the two were often used together in the studies reviewed) replaced social class as the fourth most common identity domain studied. From 2005 to 2019, leadership and career identity were focal in only 7% of total studies ($n = 19$ of 279), which grew to 16% ($n = 44$ of 276) in 2019–2022. Moreover, 100% of newer studies focusing on leadership and career identity did so *a priori* (as compared to 68% of those from 2005 to 2019), underscoring the more recent and intentional focus on this domain. Additionally, the number of “other” identities focalized in individual studies rose in recent years, including domains such as foster youth, sex worker, and formerly incarcerated identities.

In an effort to probe which intersections were examined across studies, we used matrix coding in NVivo 12 and exported the resulting data to Python, where we created an UpSet plot. As shown in Figure 5, this plot offers an overview of each intersection of identities that occurred in three or more studies. What we found was that the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender (with no other social categories included) was far more common than any other identity intersection, occurring in 19% ($n = 104$) of total studies. The second most common intersection was between race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, with this triad occurring in roughly 10% ($n = 53$) of studies. The next most common intersections were race/ethnicity, gender, and leadership and career identity (4%; $n = 24$) and race/ethnicity, gender, and social class (4%; $n = 23$).

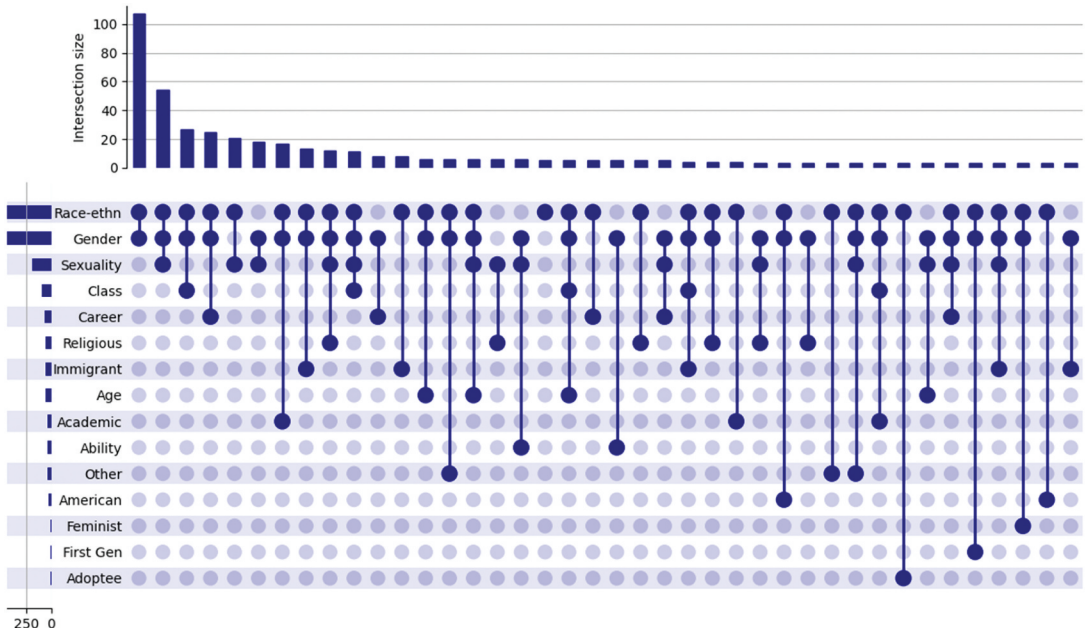


Figure 5. Overview of identities studied, grouped by publication year. *Note.* Only intersections of identities occurring in three or more papers are included in the plot above. The bar graph on the left represents the number of papers that investigate the given identity, sorted from most to least common, with racial-ethnic identity occurring in 458 studies. The bar graph at the top represents the size of the intersection, sorted from most to least common. The intersection is depicted with the dots below each bar. Thus, the most common intersection of identities is between racial-ethnic and gender identity, observed in 104 studies. Each column of dots represents studies in which *only* those identities were included.



Figure 6. Overview of the seven most commonly studied identities and their intersections. *Note.* The Venn diagrams represent the overlap within and across the seven most common identities. The left circle corresponds to the row and the right circle corresponds to the column. From left to right, the numbers within the circles represent the number of papers that investigate the row identity *not* in intersection with the column identity, the row identity in intersection with the column identity, and the column identity *not* in intersection with the row identity.

Taken together, these intersections accounted for just slightly over one-third of the studies. This indicates that, overall, the diversity of identity intersections is extremely broad, yet race/ethnicity and gender (and to a lesser extent sexuality and social class) act as the primary anchors with which many additional identities are examined in intersection. To better reveal trends in which identities tend to be examined in intersection, we created another visualization (Figure 6), offering an overview of the top seven intersections. This figure helps elucidate that when race/ethnicity and gender were included in a given study, they were most often examined in intersection with one another (83% of studies focusing on race/ethnicity did so in intersection with gender and vice versa). While no other identities were studied in intersection at such a high rate, we can see great variation in frequencies of pairings. For instance, 81% of studies focusing on immigrant identity did so in intersection with race/ethnicity, whereas only 9% of studies examining immigrant identity did so in intersection with religious identity. Similarly, while 70% of studies focusing on religious identity did so in intersection with gender, only 22% of studies focusing on religion did so in intersection with social class. Examining these trends

helps illuminate meaningful points of intersection, highlighting potential areas for future theoretical and empirical research.

Who is included: diversity of samples

To understand the demographics of these studies, we provide an overview of participant information on five demographic categories: age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. This breakdown emphasizes the heterogeneity of participants across multiple domains. We again offer a comparison between studies from 2005 to mid-2019 and those from mid-2019 to 2022, highlighting both stability in which demographic groups are prevalent across time, as well as some changes. Across both demographic categories and study year, the majority of studies focused on one specific participant group from across given demographic categories.

Age was the only demographic category that was reported in all texts we reviewed. The most commonly studied age group was adults (73%; $n = 404$). Twenty-nine percent of studies included college students and/or emerging adults aged 18–29 ($n = 160$), 8% ($n = 44$) included adolescents, and the least common age group was children (3%; $n = 18$). There were only very minimal differences in this breakdown across publication years, indicating a clear consistency in intersectional identity research focusing primarily on adults.

Gender was also reported consistently (96%, $n = 533$) across studies. Here, the majority of studies included women (78%, $n = 435$), 50% ($n = 279$) included men, 18% included trans and/or nonbinary individuals ($n = 98$), and 7% included additional genders ($n = 37$). Interestingly, while the number of studies including women stayed similar across time (222 from 2005 to 2109 and 213 from 2019 to 2022), the number of studies including men declined from 163 to 116. In contrast, the number including trans and nonbinary participants nearly doubled, going from 35 to 63. Additionally, while only a single study included participants with additional gender labels in 2005–2019, 36 studies did in 2019–2022. These included participants who identified as genderqueer, two spirit, gender nonconforming, pangender, and agender, among others. Because gender identities outside the binary were often grouped in a single category in earlier research, we unfortunately could not tease apart our coding category of trans and nonbinary participants. In more recent studies, however, clearer delineation was much more common. For instance, in one study the authors noted, “participants self-identified as male (6), transwoman (5), genderqueer (2), and nonbinary (1)” (Knee, 2019).

Race/ethnicity was reported most of the time, with 94% of the texts providing racial/ethnic demographics ($n = 521$). Black or African American participants were included in 61% of studies ($n = 341$), Latinx or Hispanic participants were included in 39% of studies ($n = 218$), white participants were included in 36% of studies ($n = 202$), Asian American participants were included in 26% of studies ($n = 146$), Multiracial participants were included in 22% of studies ($n = 122$), and Native participants were included in 9% of studies ($n = 51$). Additional racial/ethnic groups beyond these categories were included in 14% of studies ($n = 79$). Across these groups, all totals remained very similar across time, except for Multiracial participants, who were included in 56 studies in 2005–2019 and 66 in 2019–2022. Additionally, we added a Middle East/North African (MENA) participant category during our second round of coding. After recoding the full sample, we found MENA participants were included in 2% of studies from 2005 to 2019 ($n = 5$) and 6% of studies from 2019 to 2022 ($n = 16$).

Socioeconomic status (SES) was reported in just over one-third of the reviewed studies (38%, $n = 212$), with a slightly smaller number including low-SES samples (27%, $n = 149$) than mid- to high-SES (29%, $n = 162$). Interestingly, this represented a shift over time. While the number of studies including low-SES participants between 2005–2019 and 2019–2022 rose only slightly ($n = 70$; $n = 79$), there was a much greater increase in mid- to high-SES participants ($n = 62$; $n = 100$). Moreover, more studies

specified their participants' SES overall in recent years. While only 31% ($n = 86$) did so in 2005–2019, 46% ($n = 126$) did so in 2019–2022.

Sexual orientation was reported in 39% of studies ($n = 215$), a percentage that stayed roughly consistent across time. Both lesbians and bisexuals were included in 21% of studies ($n = 117$; $n = 117$), gay men or men who have sex with men were included in 20% of studies ($n = 110$), queer participants were included in 16% of studies ($n = 87$), and heterosexual participants were included in 15% of studies ($n = 81$). Interestingly, there was little change in these groups across time. However, participants identifying with additional sexual orientations were included in 11% of studies overall ($n = 63$), but this number nearly doubled between 2005–2019 ($n = 23$) and 2019–2022 ($n = 40$). Similar to gender categories, the diversity within this group has increased in recent years to include identities such as pansexual, sexually fluid, asexual, and demisexual.

Discussion

The aims of this systematic literature review were to 1) examine the scope of empirical intersectional identity research in U.S. psychological science – *how* it is conducted, *what* identities are studied, and *who* is included; and 2) situate whether and how this body of work diverges from exclusionary research norms that characterize the field. If we are committed to pursuing meaningful change as a discipline, we must interrogate the deeply ingrained practices and epistemologies in psychology, which continue to center the lives and experiences of white, college educated, cisgender men (Ali & Sichel, 2018; Settles et al., 2020; Suzuki et al., 2021).

The total number of U.S. psychological science studies empirically examining intersectional identity has grown steadily between 2005 and 2022, with a few substantive changes in recent years, including greater specificity regarding participants' genders outside the man/woman binary and sexualities beyond the gay/straight binary. The large proportion of dissertations indicates a growing interest in engaging intersectionality among emerging scholars, and the slower but steady increase in peer reviewed publications may signify greater acceptance of this scholarship in the field. Our results suggest that this work largely employs qualitative methods and within-group designs to study race/ethnicity and gender in intersection with additional identities such as sexuality, social class, work and leadership identity, and beyond, primarily among adults from marginalized backgrounds. Based on these patterns, U.S. intersectional identity research diverges from dominant research norms in ways that align with the critical foundations of the intersectionality paradigm and challenge inequitable research norms. In the sections below, we delve into our findings, examining the links between methodology, representation, diversity, and equity in psychological science. We organize our discussion using the three interrelated norms laid out in the introduction: (a) *the dominance of quantitative methods*, (b) *comparative research designs*, and (c) *sample (non-)diversity*.

Challenging the dominance of quantitative methodology

In our analysis of *how* intersectional identity research is conducted, we found that a majority (82%) used qualitative methods. This marks a stark departure from the quantitative research predominant in psychological science. Examining these studies, we found that data-driven approaches were prominent, as evidenced by the addition of focal identity domains in the Results and Discussion sections in the overall 20% of studies including *post hoc* identities. Although exploratory analyses can be used in quantitative research, measures are set at the outset, limiting meaningful additions. Interviews, focus groups, or written narratives allow participants to elaborate on what they are asked, creating space for researchers to build iteratively on their initial research questions. Yet, the number of *post hoc* identities included across studies has declined in recent years from 28% of studies in 2005–2019 ($n = 78$) to only 11% of studies in 2019–2022 ($n = 31$). This change may be a result of greater intentionality and specificity in theorization, however, as evidenced by the increase in identities studied overall.

Despite this shift, when identities were named *post hoc*, this still notably increased the total number of identity intersections. This underscores the usefulness of data-driven analyses by revealing that what researchers anticipate will be important when studying identity may not always align with participants' experiences. Inductive, data-driven analyses can shift who and what is centered, adding to the external validity of the research (Locke, 2007). By centering what participants deem valuable, the focus shifts from researchers as “knowers” to participants as co-constructors of knowledge (Fine, 2006; Hill Collins, 1989). For example, that over one-third (36%) of studies focused on social class did so *post hoc* suggests that participants made its importance clear. Given the limited theorizing and research around social class as a salient identity within psychology (Destin et al., 2017; Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Mistry et al., 2015), this highlights the need for more identity research in this area. Interestingly, although the total number of studies focusing on social class declined in recent years, the percentage of studies including and reporting mid- to high-SES participants markedly increased. Because aspects of individuals' identities that are systematically privileged in society tend to be less well developed (e.g., Hazelbaker et al., 2022), it may be that social class was not as salient for these participants and thus was identified *post hoc* less frequently.

It is noteworthy that innovation was also evident among the quantitative studies we reviewed. One strategy among some survey-based studies was to devise new measures capturing specific intersections of lived experience. For example, the authors in one study developed a measure of “Asian Pacific Islander racial identity,” assessing identity centrality and internalized stigma among this group (Blankenship & Stewart, 2017). In another, the authors recognized that the everyday racism and sexism that Black women experience differs fundamentally from the discrimination both Black men and white women face, and thus created the Gendered Racial Microaggressions Scale for Black Women (J. A. Lewis & Neville, 2015). Such measures maintain the use of quantitative methods while engaging critical epistemology, examining the individual level consequences of and experiences at intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., Hope et al., 2019; Suzuki et al., 2021). In doing so, they de-center whiteness as universal and generalizable, offering much needed breadth to the study of human experience.

Privileging within-group over comparative study designs

Across methods, 86% of studies in this review used a within-group design, also a notable departure from disciplinary norms. While the traditional model in psychological science is comparative, the works reviewed here tend to focus on exploring variation and diversity *within* a given group rather than between. This actually increased slightly across time, representing 84% of studies published from 2005 to 2019 and 89% of those from 2019 to 2022. This methodological shift is important because comparative study designs can (unintentionally) reinforce social hierarchies (Causadias et al., 2018) by casting one group as healthier, better adapted, or more academically successful than others, for instance, often without examining the sociohistorical and structural underpinnings of such differences (Spencer, 2017; Suzuki et al., 2021). In contrast, attending to within-group heterogeneity disrupts oppressive systems that often homogenize and treat marginalized groups as monoliths (Cole, 2009). Moreover, within-group designs can help researchers shift their perspective, for instance by delving into the multidimensionality of a sample while recognizing that social group boundaries can be fluid and dynamic (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019).

Yet, because of the dominance of post-positivist epistemology and quantitative methods in psychology (e.g., Medin et al., 2017), the impetus for generalizable research often pushes researchers to begin with broad, acontextual questions about process or development, rather than with specific, context-oriented questions about how our inequitable society shapes the lived experiences of a given group (Rogers et al., under review). The studies included in this review tend to resist the disciplinary norm and instead reflect the latter approach, asking questions such as: “How do Brown women in graduate school make meaning of ethnic identity and self-authorship?” (Anaya, 2019, p. 17) and “How do Black and Latino gay and bisexual young men’s (18 to 25 years of age) personal experiences

influence their understanding of society and their situated location within society?” (Brown, 2018, p. 77).

In terms of which identities were studied, our review suggests that most intersectional identity research includes race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, sometimes social class, and more recently leadership and career identity (often in intersection with a plethora of additional identities, see [Figures 4 through 6](#)). This cluster of anchoring identities, with the exception of leadership and career, aligns with the dominant systems of oppression in U.S. society, as well as with the history of the intersectionality paradigm. Leadership and career can better be grouped with many of the additional identity domains included, which are themselves socio-historically raced, gendered, or otherwise linked to a given identity group. For example, many studies of leadership and career focused on the identities and experiences of individuals navigating spaces of historic marginalization, for instance in a 2022 study that explored, “adversity and the lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership” (Chance, 2022). Given that cisgender white men remain overrepresented in top positions across fields, leadership and career as an identity category is itself raced and gendered.

Similarly, “feminist” and “parental” were unique identities named in multiple studies, and these are gendered, just as “first-generation student” and “homeless” are classed identities. Thus, although these identities were named and studied as distinct constructs in some studies, in many others they were subsumed within the larger social categories. For instance, identities such as immigrant status, nationality, religion, and language were often embedded in the construct of race/ethnicity, and were thus named and operationalized for analysis far less frequently as separate identities. When scholars study ethnicity, it is often conceptualized as the ethnic label itself (e.g., Asian American) and how that intersects with gender, the label (e.g., women). Such terminology and labeling matters. As Bowleg (2008) articulates, the questions we ask in our research determine the findings. In other words, a within-group study of Asian American women is likely to differ from a within-group study of bilingual (language) Filipina (ethnicity) feminist women (gender). There is power in which language(s) one speaks, in how being Filipina is positioned within the Asian American category, and how feminist ideology is taken up within raced, gendered, and cultural groups. While power in terms of race/ethnicity and gender may be evident in a study of “Asian American women,” these additional layers may be harder to capture when using only broad identity labels. Thus, as we examined these studies, we observed varying levels of nuance, which raises questions about the myriad ways that structural power is included (or excluded) in empirical engagement with intersectionality. These questions warrant further systematic reviews and analyses, as well as greater attention in empirical research.

The findings on what identities were studied also posed questions regarding the boundaries of intersectionality. For instance, the wide range of identities studied (23 in total) also prompted us to ask what counts as a status-laden identity and whether status should be a parameter for inclusion in an intersectional analysis. For instance, do “adoptee” and “academic” count as status-laden identities, or only when intersected with race/ethnicity or social class? Likewise, whether intersectionality equally applies to identities of privilege warrants further consideration (e.g., Nash, 2008). Our review suggests that dimensions of privilege at the intersection of structural inequity (i.e., white, male, heterosexual) are far less explored than oppression. While the de-centering of privileged identities allows for greater exploration of those often marginalized in psychology, because intersectionality research *itself* remains marginalized in this discipline (Settles et al., 2020), this finding has complex implications. That is, centering marginalized identities without interrogating dominant or privileged identities to the same degree may serve to further mark certain identities as “other” in the realm of mainstream research (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Rogers, 2019). Yet, we also know that individuals often hold dominance along one dimension and subordination on the other, thus, “to ignore privileged identities would be to ignore the essence of intersectionality, the built-in relationship between social categories” (Rogers & Way, 2016, p. 269). These are complicated tensions that require further attention in intersectional psychological research.

Increasing sample diversity

The majority of studies in this review included samples of adults from racially, gendered, and sexually minoritized groups. Based on samples alone, this literature diverges from mainstream psychological science in the U.S., which tends to include only a small, unrepresentative segment of society (Medin et al., 2017; Nzinga et al., 2018). Also, more than half the studies that reported racial/ethnic demographics included participants from just one racial/ethnic group. Since 64% reported Black or African American participants, that means many focused exclusively on this population, which aligns with the Black feminist foundations of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1989). However, it is worth noting how notions of white superiority may underlie these reporting patterns. In academia at large, it is (often) when samples differ from the “mainstream” (i.e., white, middle class, cis-male) that participant demographics are reported (Cundiff, 2012). Thus, the practice of not reporting race/ethnicity when most participants are white, for example, reinforces whiteness as normative and unmarked, while continuing to mark and marginalize nonwhite populations as “other.”

In terms of the gender of samples in this review, the focus on women counters the historical precedent of male-centered research in psychology (Gilligan, 1982; Rutherford, 2018). Moreover, 18% of studies reported non-binary and/or trans participants. This number is higher than would be anticipated in a random sampling of psychology studies, and includes a stark increase in recent years from 13% of studies in 2005–2019 to 23% of studies from 2019 to 2022. Despite mounting evidence and clear argumentation against the conceptualization of sex and gender as male/female (Hyde et al., 2019; Rubin et al., 2020), mainstream psychology, by and large, continues to reinforce this binary by gathering data on and reporting only two gender categories. The increasing number of studies in this sample, including and naming participants beyond the gender binary, resists such exclusionary research norms and offers strong disciplinary examples for how research inclusive of individuals outside the gender binary can be carried out.

Relatedly, that the majority of studies reporting participants’ sexual orientation included lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer participants diverges from the heteronormative status quo (Rubin et al., 2020). Moreover, the differentiation across participant groups went beyond the gay/straight binary historically found within social science research (Suen et al., 2020), by naming identities such as pansexual, sexually fluid, and asexual. This pattern aligns with recent research by Hammack et al. (2022), which describes the myriad ways in which young people understand and apply gender diverse labels to their evolving gender and sexual identities. It is worth noting, however, that the number of texts reporting sexual orientation as part of sample demographics was limited, just 39% overall. It is possible that some studies not reporting participants’ sexual orientation assumed heteronormative participants, which can similarly reinforce notions of normativity. Because sexuality remains a deeply personal and societally fraught topic, however, there are also good reasons not to ask participants to report their sexual orientation if it is not a specific subject of a given study. For that reason, that 39% of studies did report participants’ sexual orientation reflects the frequency with which sexuality was focal to the research included in this review.

Taken together, the findings related to race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation highlight two important and interrelated ways in which this research corpus diverges from disciplinary norms: a) by including more diverse samples and b) by more thoroughly capturing and reporting the diversity *within* a given sample. One finding that surprised us was the focus on adults (73% of studies included adults and the majority included only one age group, indicating that most included solely adult samples). This is notable given the considerable developmental work on identity theory and research with adolescents and young adults (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2011). Yet, the identity literature across sub-disciplines is adult-focused, which is evident in the studies reviewed here, and points to a gap in our understanding of identity intersectionality within a developmental framework (Ghavami & Mistry, 2019; Ghavami et al., 2016; Rogers & Syed, 2021). Given the rich evidence of meaningful identity development and outcomes from early childhood through emerging adulthood, the limited inclusion of youth voice in the study of identity intersectionality calls attention to this gap. The few studies that

do include youth show that young people make sense of identity intersections in meaningful ways (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2018). Moving forward, we urge researchers to consider intersectional paradigms in studies with young people.

Limitations and future directions

This systematic review and qualitative analysis, while large and comprehensive, was necessarily limited in scope. Specifically, our inclusion criteria were narrowed for feasibility and conceptual interpretability to the inclusion of only U.S. samples. Parallel reviews with a global lens are necessary, although we caution that for a global review to be impactful would require a deep and meaningful engagement with the highly diverse ways in which constructs such as race and gender are shaped by the specific histories of diverse nations (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2020; Yamashiro, 2011). Doing this kind of careful, historically grounded analysis could highlight parallel or divergent trends in intersectional identity research across national contexts.

We also kept our search criteria for intersectionality restrictive, meaning studies using terminology such as “Black feminist standpoint” to denote intersectionality may not have been captured. Yet, our inclusion criteria for intersectionality were also broad, such that some definitions of intersectionality, such as those that only considered “multiple categories” but did not necessarily include a meaningful assessment of power and inequity, were also included here. Further research into how intersectionality is operationalized to assess power is needed. Finally, a simultaneous strength and limitation of our review was our use of PsycINFO. By not restricting our review to “top” journals, as is often done in systematic reviews, we could include unpublished dissertations and articles published in more critical and interdisciplinary journals. Doing so allowed us to review a broader selection of intersectional identity research than we would have otherwise. That said, the choice to allow for such breadth also meant that some studies we reviewed could be situated in adjacent disciplines including communication, education, social work, or gender studies. Moreover, because database indexing can take time, it is possible that relevant research from 2022 was not captured in this review.

Despite these limitations, the review offers new directions. First, there is space for more empirical intersectional research in psychological science, as 35% of the yield was excluded on the basis of not being empirical. Psychological science is an empirical discipline, and our theories are tested and refined through systematic data collection. While theoretical and conceptual work is unquestionably important to the advancement of the field, we echo previous authors’ cautions that theoretical critique can sometimes serve to flatten or limit the potential of a paradigm like intersectionality (May, 2015; L. Warner et al., 2020), particularly without greater examination of how existing empirical work is being conducted. Future researchers could conduct a narrower review of “top” psychology journals to compare the scope of empirical intersectional research published there.

Second, in our inclusion coding we noticed an occasional disconnect from the conceptualization to the operationalization of intersectionality; a study may be framed as intersectional but when we examined the Method section there was no evidence of measuring more than a single social category, leading to its exclusion from this review. This points to the tendency to name intersectionality as important without doing the work to create or apply an intersectional scale, for instance, or meaningfully interpret qualitative data through a lens of interlocking systems of oppression. This aligns with our first point, which is that conceptual conversations about intersectionality must coexist with the practical *doing* of intersectional research to create change in the field.

Third, there are various rubrics for framing intersectionality (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009; Rogers et al., 2015; Rosenthal, 2016; Syed & McLean, 2016), which were evident in these studies. Further analysis can reveal which working definitions are employed, for example, whether and how power and systems of inequity are operationalized in research. A broader question for intersectional research in psychological science is how to situate the multiple approaches and findings in conversation with each other. Our intention here was not to evaluate each study against a particular benchmark of “identity”

or “intersectionality,” or to deem it as “good” or “bad” research, but our review does raise questions about what can (and should) constitute an accurate or authentic application of intersectionality in the study of identity.

Conclusion

Intersectionality, as a conceptual and epistemological framework, offers a path to move toward a psychological science that disrupts the status quo and challenges ongoing inequity. Yet, for meaningful change to occur, we must attend to how we do science, and shift the *how*, *what*, and *who* of our research. We will have to push beyond business as usual – transforming our methods, our research focus, our samples, and more critically, relinquishing positions of (post)positivity and of “knower,” to co-construct knowledge with participants from a position of intellectual humility and curiosity. Intersectionality is a critical paradigm aimed at understanding the interlocking systems of power and oppression shaping every aspect of life, including in academia; it is about calling them out while working to make change (Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 1981). Intersectionality is not a neutral paradigm; indeed, it helps us see that there is no neutral paradigm. This systematic review of U.S.-based intersectional identity research in psychological science revealed the broad diversity in this growing body of literature, highlighting the many ways in which this work diverges from disciplinary norms and provides a guide for how psychology can heed the call of working toward a more equitable science.

Notes

1. In this paper, we deliberately capitalize “People of Color” and do not capitalize “white.” This choice reflects the long history of racialized oppression against Black, Indigenous and other People of Color. Capitalizing “white” can subtly reinforce white supremacist notions of cultural unity and superiority among individuals racialized as white.
2. Because the large majority of texts we reviewed (93%; $n = 514$) were based on a single study, we use the term “study” interchangeably with “text” throughout the remainder of the manuscript.
3. We use the term “sexuality” here to encompass all studies focusing on sexual orientation, sexual identity, and any other forms of identity content or process named by authors in the broad realm of the expression and experience of sexuality.

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