Intersectionality
2022 Version

The foundations of intersectional research and intersectional thought are based in the concepts of race and sexuality (Crenshaw, 1989), specifically black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1991). Despite its founding over three decades ago the concept of intersectionality continues to face challenges in implementation beyond the broader conceptual level (May, 2015). It remains rooted in a significant struggle to action its intentions, and while it has continued to see growth as a discipline in its own right (Chan et al., 2017), this growth is marked by difficulty in navigating various interpretations to related discourse, and how these terms, such as: inclusion, equity, or diversity to name a few, may be used without a more comprehensive understanding or commitment to the core tenants of intersectionality (Colpitts, 2019). Broad understandings of intersectionality, and various approaches taken to implementation from scholars as well as practitioners present challenges (Collins, 2015) in identifying a single unifying approach, as well as general applications beyond the conceptual level (May, 2015). In the decades since Crenshaw first spoke to the concept of intersectionality, research has drifted providing various understandings without a single definition by which to guide research, despite this there remain approaches best positioned to capture intent within research, namely that researchers must understand who they are researching, and why (Duran & Jones, 2019). Intentions to incorporate intersectional approaches within research must be foundational, and used throughout all aspects of inquiry to inform practice.

Key Points from the Literature

- Intersectional theory is different from Queer theory, and these differences need to be understood and distinguished in approaches utilizing either theory (Chan et al., 2019). Within this recognition there is opportunity to utilize the productive intersections between the two theories (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).
- A central challenge to the incorporation of intersectionality is limitation based on poor design and intention, which can limit or hinder broader efforts at incorporation for change (Harris & Patton, 2019). This can arise from to great a prioritization of gender (Martinez Dy, 2016) among other factors.
- Challenges to intersectional research also stem from resistance and efforts to undermine approaches (May, 2015).
- Usage within specific sectors can present risk, where the term intersectionality can be presented without meaningful commitment to incorporate all elements of the concept. In these spaces intersectionality is still viewed as a concept of addition rather than one of interrelation and connection (Colpitts, 2019).
- Intersectionality needs to be an active and ongoing process, rather than one that is static or passive (Duran & Jones, 2019), as these approaches risk a failure to reflect the other interconnected aspects of the research.
- Within current higher education research, intersectional approaches are most often used alongside, or in collaboration with, case studies and auto-ethnographies, along with interviews/self-reflection as a form of intervention on selves and social collectives.

Studies with sexuality as a focus are more likely to focus on deconstructive/boundary challenging approaches (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

- Further inquiry is necessary to explore how concepts like leadership are impacted through intersectional experiences, and the ways in which these may limit access to various identity groups (Fay et al., 2020).

Recommendations

- Efforts to utilize intersectionality should begin by moving usage beyond the theoretical and instead look at ways that intersectionality can be applied to critique dominant power structures and systems (Harris & Patton, 2019).
- Researchers should place emphasis on understanding how intersectionality has been misunderstood and misapplied so that future research efforts can incorporate it effectively without risking further diminishing the value of the theory (Martinez Dy, 2016).
- Researchers should recognize the importance of understanding both those who are being represented as well as those who are representing them, and the connection between those two groups and its relation to improving experiences for those traditionally underrepresented groups (Fay et al., 2020).
- Intersectional research starts with the researchers, and that they need to have insight and understand the identities of their participants, and not solely for the purposes of their study, but to understand the identities that exist beyond what is being focused on in the study itself (Duran & Jones, 2019).

Recommended Readings

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8
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