Backward Thinking: Exploring the Relationship among Intersectionality, Epistemology, and Research Design

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Backward Thinking

Exploring the Relationship among Intersectionality, Epistemology, and Research Design

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Scholarship on intersectionality, particularly in educational research, often focuses on the intersecting identities of participants (e.g., Jones & Abes, 2013; Tillapaugh, 2012). Despite this focus, Renn (2010) argued that some scholars' use of intersectionality inadvertently created "some slippage of the term among educational researchers" (p. 7). The lack of exploration regarding the interrogation of power implicit in intersectionality, how it influences one's multiple identities and how it mediates one's interactions with others, troubles us as scholars. We believe intersectional thinking that begins and ends with research participants' identities misses an important step, which is how intersectionality is implicated in, and thus influences, the research design. We argue that one's epistemological grounding, how one conceptualizes truth and power and the ways in which scholars influence each other's thinking about their research projects, has a direct impact on the soundness of the research content. These are the topics around which we frame our analysis within this chapter. In doing so, we find it important to engage in backward thinking, or the idea that one not only needs to leverage intersectionality with participants and in data analysis but also prior to seeking participants, specifically in terms of one's epistemology, reflexivity, and overall research design.

In this chapter, we pose the following questions, which serve as a guide to our backward thinking:

1. What happens when one thinks about intersectionality as a concept influencing study design and the research process itself?
2. How might thinking about intersectionality as affecting what happens before data collection and analysis be an important lens for better addressing the multifaceted political aspects of research?

3. What could an investigation of intersectionality of researchers' epistemological groundings offer the field of educational research, particularly for higher education?

In asking these questions, we seek to expand our collective thinking about the concept of intersectionality by reflecting on how it impacts the design of research studies as well as how one thinks about the research one does. By doing so, we argue that not only do researchers and participants benefit, but the potential effect(s) of one's research may be positively influenced as well. In other words, by engaging in backward thinking regarding intersectional research, we allow for greater visibility for highly marginalized student populations, thus increasing our visibility of their (and our) lives.

**EPISTEMOLOGY DEFINED**

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, comprises "the relationship between what we know and what we see [and] the truths we seek and believe as researchers" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 103). Seen in this way, a researcher's epistemological grounding is always already embedded in a relationship between oneself (e.g., one's social identities) and something or someone else. Although concerns about truth, power, values, and knowledge are central to one's epistemology, these are understood not solely through internal thought but as a result of didactic interactions between an individual and others in one's social context, including between researcher(s) and participant(s). For higher education researchers, this means one comes to one's own epistemic beliefs as a result of interacting with research participants as well as other scholars.

Epistemologies may range from positivism—the belief in absolute and objective truths that can be established through scientific inquiry—to poststructuralism—the belief that categories of identification are constantly in flux and do little to convey specific meaning about that which is being explained (Lincoln et al., 2011). Furthermore, some epistemologies foreground participants and their voices (e.g., constructivism), while others place primary emphasis on exposing and interrogating overarching systems of societal power, privilege, and oppression (e.g., criticalism, Lincoln et al., 2011). Although research studies have traditionally been rooted in one episteme (e.g., constructivism), some scholars (e.g., Abes, 2009; Kincheloe, 2001) have begun to recognize how epistemologies overlap, converge, and can work in collaboration to provide a more complete and complex understanding of data. Because how one thinks about knowledge is rooted in how our identities intersect with one another, we must reflect on and understand how our chosen epistemes inform our own worldview as researchers but also as people. For this theoretical analysis, we as authors discuss how researchers can work together across epistemological perspectives to enhance the research process and resulting analysis.

**INTERSECTIONALITY DEFINED**

Dill and Zambrana (2009) framed intersectionality “as an analytical strategy—a systematic approach to understanding human life and behavior that is rooted in the experiences and struggles of marginalized people” (p. 4). Citing the increasing emergence of studies on intersectionality in higher education, Jones and Abes (2013) maintained, “with an explicit focus on locating individuals within larger structures of privilege and oppression, intersectionality as an analytic framework for understanding identity insists on...a more holistic approach to identity” (p. 135). By centering the conversations of social identities in an intersectional view, scholars begin to interrogate the “interconnected structures of inequality” (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 5) by which power and privilege are granted (or not granted) based on the intersections of one’s social identities, as well as how these systems are maintained and replicated within society (Berger & Guidroz, 2009; Crenshaw, 1995). Elaborating on this point, Weber (1998) highlighted that one’s own internalized understanding of one’s identity (e.g., gender, race) “depends on one’s simultaneous location in the race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies” (p. 26). As a result, power intrinsically plays a role in the identity politics at both an individual and collective/societal level (Crenshaw, 1995; Weber, 1998).

The Concept of Systemic Power

The notion of power is deeply implicated in intersectionality. Baca Zinn and Dill (1996) argued that intersections of identity create a confluence of privilege and oppression for individuals. Shields (2008) expanded on this idea, stating that the intersection of identities “instantiates social stratification” whereby identities may be experienced as a feature of individual selves, but [they] also reflect...the operation of power relations among groups that comprise that identity category” (p. 302). In their work, Dill and Zambrana (2009) offered four domains by which power structures subordiate others based on dimensions of their identities and maintain systems of inequality. These included the following:

1. The structural domain, which consists of the institutional structures of the society including government, the legal system, housing patterns, economic traditions, and educational structure.

2. The disciplinary domain, which consists of the ideas and practices that characterize and sustain bureaucratic hierarchies.
3. The hegemonic domain, which consists of the images, symbols, ideas, and ideologies that shape social consciousness (Collins, 2000).
4. The interpersonal domain, which consists of patterns of interaction between individuals and groups. (p. 7)

Any discussion of intersectionality without due consideration given to the implications and effects of systemic power misses the proverbial mark. Rather than talking about intersectionality, which includes the ways in which power mediates the lived experiences of people based on dominant and/or subordinated identities, the lack of focus on the effects of systemic power often leads researchers to equate intersectionality with the notion of identity convergence (D. L. Stewart, personal communication, July 5, 2013) or the exploration of individuals’ multiple identities without considering their social contexts and the influence of power on their experiences and, thus, the livability of their lives (Butler, 2004).

INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES ↔ INTERSECTIONAL RESEARCH

Who a researcher is—one’s worldview, life experiences, and social identities—often influences the research one undertakes (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Moreover, a researcher rarely if ever conducts data collection and analysis in isolation. Instead, researchers work within a community of scholars, examples of which include not only the conferences at which research results are disseminated but also the personal interactions researchers have with one another to discuss and work through the particularities of one’s work. Therefore, not only is there a synergistic relationship between who one is as a researcher and one’s work but also how one interacts with others in a community of scholars and one’s work. In other words, while we are not suggesting every research project needs to have multiple researchers, we are suggesting that researchers’ identities do influence the ways in which they make meaning and view their own research from a variety of epistemological foundations (e.g., those of our colleagues).

Dill (2009) stated, “Intersectional work is dependent upon collaborations, alliances, and networks among scholars with similar intellectual interests, visions, ideas, and values” (p. 234). Additionally, Kincheloe (2011) suggested researchers bring together multiple ways of thinking and collecting data as a way to engage in inquiry with emancipatory aims. Here, it becomes clear that who one is as a researcher and how one interacts with others in the community of scholars directly influences the way one thinks, constructs, and enacts research. As examples of how these intersectional relationships enhance one’s research, we as authors will now reflect on how our own thinking has been altered as a result of our ongoing dialogue and collaboration with each other.

The Evolution of Dan’s Research

As a qualitative researcher, I (DT) have come to understand the importance of reflexivity and its role within my work. Being a White, gay, cisgender male from a middle-class, rural farm family in upstate New York, I know that my own lived experiences and multiple social identities play a significant role in how I make meaning of myself and others. My research interests are really passion areas of mine that stem from my personal life. The feminist slogan of “the personal is political” (Hanisch, 2006, p. 1) resonates with me in that my research is informed by my personal life and vice versa. My interest in intersectionality in higher education stems from my interest in student development and my critique that much of the traditional theories used in practice in higher education subjugate and splinter aspects of one’s identities into fragmented parts rather than encouraging one to take a holistic approach. To me, intersectionality provided an outlet for understanding one’s multiple identities within the context of the larger systems of power in which one lives.

My line of research has been largely focused on how sexual minority males in college make meaning of their multiple identities, particularly their sense of masculinity and sexuality (see Tillapaugh, 2012). As a researcher who tends to identify as a constructivist, I embrace the notion of social construction of identities. Therefore, in my research, I place an emphasis on understanding data (e.g., students’ personal narratives) in the social contexts in which they live as well as examine the construction of knowledge between the participants and myself (Charmaz, 2006). Exploring my own meaning making process of my social identities illuminated important aspects of my positionality, which certainly helped me check some biases and assumptions. At the same time, my peer review team—of which Z was a member—also played an important role in the evolution of my work.

Z’s role within my research shifted my work forward tremendously, particularly in thinking critically about aspects of identity, especially the location of power and difference. As a critical researcher entrenched in critical trans politics—a critical theoretical perspective centered on increasing the life chances of trans* individuals via broad-based coalitions and movements for social change (Spade, 2011)—I appreciate Z’s interrogation of aspects of my work that I often take for granted or on which I did not push back. The tensions between our different theoretical paradigms may be present, but they have allowed for a blending—an epistemological bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001), of sorts—that has certainly helped my own thinking around intersectionality. As a constructivist, I appreciated the aspects of one’s multiple identity development within the work but often would find myself bringing in aspects of Z’s critical approaches to the systemic parts of my research. For example, in discussions of heteronormativity experienced by many of my participants in college, conversations with Z heightened my ability to dig into
how heteronormativity tended to be replicated within the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community and its advocacy for same-sex marriage rather than issues that may take higher priorities for others within our community (e.g., employment nondiscrimination laws, immigration laws for same-sex partners, access to health care for trans* people). This epistemological bricolage has provided a more nuanced and complex examination into the ways in which intersectional approaches to research can provide significant implications for practice, policy, theory, and research in higher education, which we discuss further in this chapter.

The Evolution of Z's Research

When positioning myself (ZN) within my research, I often struggle to provide "something other than a list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class), that usually mean that we have not yet figured out how to think [about] the relations we seek to mark" (Butler, 2011, p. 123). Although I am a queer, trans*, temporarily able-bodied researcher who, due to my educational attainment, has transcended the lower middle-class background I was thrown into when my parents divorced, stating these identities does little to shed light on who I am. Similarly, stating that Dan, as a gay cisgender man, has influenced my work also seems devoid of meaning. I am not saying that social identities do not matter. Quite the opposite; I am suggesting that they matter too much to just string them together with commas and think one has explored fully one's positionality.

In reflecting on my work with Dan, what does seem important is that we simultaneously converge regarding some identities (e.g., we both identify as White) while diverging across other categories of difference (e.g., Dan identifies as cisgender and I as trans*). Additionally, we negotiate dominant and subordinate identities, both individually and between us. As such, my relationship with Dan, which has spanned more than a decade, has set the stage for us to support each other as our identities shift over time as well as challenge how our thinking, life experiences, and social identities mediate our worldviews and how we make meaning of our research. Specifically, Dan's commitment to constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) has reminded me of the importance of listening to the voices of my participants and building strong, reciprocal relationships with them. Concurrently, in keeping with the tenets of critical trans politics (Spade, 2011), I also maintain a focus on interrogating the genderism in which the trans* students with whom I research are culturally embedded to increase the livability of our lives. Furthermore, Dan has impressed upon me the importance of focusing on my own feelings, reactions, and responses throughout the research process. As a result of this new affective orientation toward my research, I am continually drawn back to my participants and the process of working alongside of them rather than solely foregrounding the systemic forms of oppression on which my critical theoretical perspective centers.

Thinking Through Intersectionality Together

It is evident in reflecting on our own experiences as researchers that our work has been enhanced by recognizing not only the connections we have to our lines of inquiry but also to each other as scholars. Nevertheless, because we have different epistemological groundings (e.g., I (DT) am a constructivist and Z a criticalist), which tend to foreground different things (e.g., constructivism foregrounds participants' voices while criticalism foregrounds a thorough critique of social inequity), we have to negotiate what our working together means. For example, we want study participants to share their stories in whatever way they make meaning of them (a constructivist tenet), but we also realize that how they tell these stories, and the context in which these stories are placed, are often laced with elements of power, privilege, and oppression (a critical tenet). Put another way, participants' stories may be studded with elements of power, privilege, and oppression that they may not know how to articulate or make meaning of but may be highlighted by a critical analysis. As such, our working together in an intersectional way has mandated that we address questions regarding how each of us approaches research, the ways we structure research questions, and how we collect and analyze data. Furthermore, we were constantly cycling back to how our social identities, life experiences, and social contexts were mediating our responses both to each other and our work. For example, the salience of my (ZN) trans* identity allowed me to recognize a theme of gender policing grounded in transphobia that emerged from the data obtained in Dan's research (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2013). Our own vantage points as researchers have been informed by our multiple identities and the institutional and societal systems in which we are embedded, which is consistent with taking an intersectional approach to the research process. Although thinking through intersectionality requires consistent and intense reflection in all phases of the research process, we have found the resulting effects to be worthwhile.

Due to the lack of emphasis on power as a mediating force in educational research on intersectionality, we now turn to do some backward thinking on its influence on the research process prior to data collection and analysis. In doing so, it is important to recognize the way power has the potential to influence participants despite them not articulating the connection. In other words, the constellation of identities for any given researcher (see Chapter 12), along with one's epistemological and methodological choices for any given study, influence the following: which participants seek to join a study, which participants are selected, what experiences they share, how they share their experiences, and what meaning is made from their sharing on behalf of the researcher, participant(s), and for them as co-constructors.
of knowledge. For example, my (ZN) epistemological choice to use critical race politics (Spade, 2011) likely had an influence in who I was able to recruit for my dissertation study as well as the meaning(s) my participants and I reached as a result of our collaboration. How one talks about one's work, the questions one uses to frame one's inquiry, and the places one seeks (and does not seek) participants not only impact what data one collects (and does not collect), but also are directly related to one's personal identities as an individual and researcher as well as one's interactions among one's scholarly community.

These are not idle decisions, and they are not without consequence. Power not only mediates the direction in which a study goes and how meaning making in the data analysis process occurs. Additionally, power also affects how the research is received, the extent to which it is welcomed, by whom it is welcomed, and the access one may or may not get to publish and/or present in certain venues. Scholars have pointed out that the complex intersections of personal identities and overarching social contexts (e.g., neoliberalism) may influence one's ability to be recognized as a knowledge producer in the academy (Elia & Yep, 2012; Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012). Furthermore, although researchers are often able to gain access to publish their work, questions of in what venue, at what cost, and if such access acts as a form of "buffer zone" (Kivel, 2007; Spade, 2010) that excludes the continued pervasiveness of systemic oppression (e.g., sexism, genderism, heterosexism, ableism, classism) embedded within the institutions through which such knowledge is shared persist. As Dill (2009) reinforced, research on intersectionality should actively call for and maintain social justice and the disruption of these pervasive systems of oppression for the benefit of those marginalized within society. For example, Tierney's (1997) commentary on whether gay scholars should look to publish in mainstream journals or queer publications, and the effects of such decisions, shows how power mediates not only how one approaches research and the research process but the extent to which one's research is viewed as valid, appropriate, and useful by others in one's respective field of study.

As researchers and scholars, one needs to engage those aspects of oneself through reflexivity by considering one's positionality as well as one's work with collaborators, when possible, to help examine and illuminate potential biases. Additionally, one needs to also have a keen awareness of the contexts in which participants live and learn and become well-versed in considering those while engaged in data analysis. For example, one of my (DT) participants, a first-generation Cambodian American gay male from a working-class family, discussed his experiences of taking out additional student loans to provide money to his family back home for their expenses, working two part-time jobs, and thus not being connected to student organizations on campus. In the interviews, the student discussed this as being connected to his Buddhist upbringing, but I, from my positionality of being from a middle-class background, felt as though these behaviors were indicative of the student's social class. During the study's focus group, I asked the student directly about his social class and its potential impact on his college experience; the student once again pressed back and said his faith had more to do with his personal engagement with family and college and that his social class played very little into his identity. This experience was significant because ultimately the power I had as a researcher could easily have been used to manipulate the student's truth, that his faith was more salient than his social class. Instead, I had a transformative learning experience related to his own reflexivity and the ways in which he made meaning of the data needed to be in concert with thoughtful discourse with myself and others to limit his biases and suspend judgment.

This connects to Warner's (2008) discussion of master categories versus emergent categories in intersectional research. Warner stated, "Before researchers make the assumption that the master category validly represents all or most groups, the researcher must first establish the merit of that assumption" (p. 458). As with the aforementioned example, my (DT) positionality ultimately played into an incorrect assumption around the master category of the participant. The participant's religious beliefs combined with his racial identification as well as his status as a first-generation American played a much more significant role in his own master narrative than his socioeconomic status. Through the act of suspending my own judgment and engaging with my participant around his own meaning making of his intersectional identities, his truth was validated rather than my own incorrect assumptions. By engaging in reflexive work, I (DT) came to understand that it is essential that individuals become vigilant in understanding their own reflexivity as it relates to how they think about research, who they are, and how they approach their work.

Another implication of using intersectionality in educational research is to understand the political ramifications of that work on a micro and macro level. Truly intersectional research must address the micro and macro levels in concert with one another to frame one's multiple social identities in the larger context of
systems of inequality in which one is a part (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Jones & Abes, 2013). Jones and Abes (2013) highlighted this point when discussing the difficulty of completing research that adheres to the core tenets of intersectionality by stating, “Although some research focuses more closely on the micro-analysis of individual narratives, this is not true to intersectional tenets, as macro considerations—variables and constructs in research terminology—must also be integrated” (pp. 155–156). Similarly, Choo and Ferree (2010) posited, “The complexity of multiple institutions that feed back into each other—both positively and negatively—can become obscured when the macrostructures of inequality are separated from the microstructures of social construction of meaning” (p. 146). When thinking backward, it becomes critical to situate one’s work at both the micro and macro levels to allow for the visibility inherent in illuminating the phenomena being studied. As Warner (2008) cautioned, “One of the central issues in the study of intersectionality is that of visibility—who is granted attention, who is not, and the consequences of these actions for the study of social issues” (p. 462). Therefore, care must be taken as one sets forth with one’s research to ensure that questions of visibility are addressed in the name of research that interrogates social structures and attempts to forward human dignity and social equity.

CONCLUSION

In articulating the importance of intersectionality, Dill and Zambrana (2009) stated the following:

We argue that intersectionality challenges traditional modes of knowledge production in the United States and illustrate how this theory provides an alternative model that combines advocacy, analysis, theorizing, and pedagogy—basic components essential to the production of knowledge as well as the pursuit of social justice and equality. (p. 1)

As researchers who are heavily invested in intersectional approaches to research, we agree with this statement. Yet, rather than just thinking about how intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool, we place emphasis on the notion of backward thinking, or identifying how intersectionality is essential to thinking through one’s epistemological, axiological, and/or ontological groundings. These aspects of one’s thinking are foundational for the ways in which research studies are framed and carried out. Whether one does research alongside other researchers, in collaboration with participants, or by oneself, backward thinking is one strategy to engage in deeper reflection about the research process rather than just using intersectionality as a lens for analyzing research content. In doing so, scholars are able to provide richer and more complex analyses of their research—both the process by which research was done and the data co-constructed with participants—and to promote equity and justice for those participants with whom one researcher.

NOTES

1. The use of the asterisk in the word trans* is used to symbolize the multiplicity of gender identities, expressions, and embodiments within the trans* community. For more information about the use of the asterisk in the term trans*, see Killermann (2012).

REFERENCES


Raw Tongue

How Black Women and Latinas Bring Their Multiple Identities into Collegiate Classrooms

SHELLEY A. PERDOMO

If one considers the intersecting identities of race, socioeconomic status, and gender in relation to verbal participation in classrooms, a number of feminist and educational scholars suggest that women of color employ voice and silence differently than White women (Anzaldúa, 1990; Blue, 2001; Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Gilmore, 1997; hooks, 1989; Hurtado, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Luke, 1994). Unlike some White women, a number of women of color deliberately adopt voice and silence as methods of knowledge acquisition and/or resistance within classrooms (Hurtado, 1996). Although verbal participation and silence within a classroom have the potential to function as a process of knowledge acquisition and learning for women of color, women of color must constantly be aware of what they say and how they speak within classroom settings, because of the visible markers of race and gender (Hurtado, 1996; Luke, 1994; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Because voice and silence have come to occupy vitally important places in U.S. educational systems (Kim & Markus, 2005), and voice is linked to effective learning in classrooms for women (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hayes, 2000; Hurtado, 1996), this chapter explores how voice and silence, especially for Black women and Latinas, are never neutral or without meaning in collegiate classrooms.

The chapter focuses on undergraduate Black women and Latinas because racial and gender stereotypes, institutional climate, admissions criteria, socioeconomic issues, and financial need continue to be factors impacting their educational persistence (Allen, 1995; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1989; Howard-Vital, 1989; Hurtado,