ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Coalitions as a Model for Intersectionality: From Practice to Theory

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Abstract This conceptual paper uses the concept of coalition to theorize an alternative to categorical approaches to intersectionality based on review of an archive of oral history interviews with feminist activists who engage in coalitional work. Two complementary themes were identified: the challenge of defining similarity in order to draw members of diverse groups together, and the need to address power differentials in order to maintain a working alliance. Activists' narratives suggest intersectionality is not only a tool for understanding difference, but also a way to illuminate less obvious similarities. This shift requires that we think about social categories in terms of stratification brought about through practices of individuals, institutions and cultures rather than only as characteristics of individuals. Implications of these themes for research practices are discussed.

Keywords Intersectionality · Coalitions · Women of color · Political activism · Theory

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Introduction

In 1981, Bernice Johnson Reagon addressed the West Coast Women's Music Festival about the importance of coalitions for achieving political change and the dangers and opportunities coalition building presents. Her speech, subsequently published in *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), became widely read and cited. Reagon criticized women's organizations working for social change that had attempted to create homogeneous "safe spaces" based on narrow identity politics. She playfully described how any effort to define the membership of an organization narrowly would either quickly confront the reality of the differences implicit within the category, or come face to face with the constraints the category assumes. As an example, she spoke of a hypothetical woman—perhaps a woman of color—approaching a "women's" organization:

> So here you are and you...speak English and you know about this word "woman" and you know you one, and you walk into this "woman-only" space and you ain't there [laugher]. Because "woman" in that place does not mean "woman" from your world. [The word "woman" is] a code word and it traps and the people that use the word are not prepared to deal with the fact that if you put it out, everybody who thinks they're a woman may one day want to seek refuge [in that organization]. (p. 360).

Reagon went on to argue the only way to address the most pressing political issues successfully is to join forces across difference, and this requires resisting the impulse to

seclude ourselves with similar others. But she also warned that forming coalitions, that is, "temporary, means-oriented, alliances among individuals or groups which differ in goals" (Gamson 1961, p. 374), is difficult and taxing work, requiring that people move beyond their comfort zones to face, understand and accept difference. To forge these alliances, activists from social identity groups that have historically been denied social, economic and/or political power find innovative ways to transcend simple identity politics by recognizing multiplicity within these categories, and working to address the divisiveness of power differentials within their alliances (Bickford 1997).

Difference poses a similar challenge for psychology and other empirical social sciences. Those working within the discipline have tended to adopt a categorical, rather than a political, approach to intersectionality, and this conceptualization has limited the field's ability to recognize and understand diversity within categories such as "Black," "woman" or "lesbian." In this conceptual article, I use the concept of coalition to theorize alternative ways of approaching the meaning of social categories such as race, gender and sexuality within psychology.

My argument draws on insights from an archive of ten oral history interviews with activists whose political work addresses sites of intersection between US feminist social movements and other axes of oppression such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class and ability status, and thus was inherently intersectional. A detailed description of the archive, including a link to the interview transcripts is available at http://www.umich.edu/~glblfem. Many of these activists work in coalition with organizations serving diverse constituencies. Because activists' applied work in this area has moved ahead of academic theorizing, in this paper I use the interviews in this archive as a form of "expert testimony" akin to the use of personal communications with experts in the field. All interviewees signed consent forms that allowed their interviews to be stored in an archive intended for educational and research use, and permitted the use of their names in transcriptions of the interviews (verbatim or edited). Their knowledge, grounded in their experience of working collectively for social change, is a rich source for theory building. This approach is in the tradition described by Christian (1989), who argued that Black women have long created theory, despite the fact that the form of their theorizing may not be recognizable to academics as such.

Before turning to the activists' narratives, I begin by describing two levels of intersectional analysis, categorical and political, and discuss how reliance on categorical approaches has shaped the way the discipline of psychology typically understands gender, race and other social categories. I then turn to a discussion of two themes from the activists' narratives: the challenge of defining similarity in order to draw members of diverse groups together, and

the need to address power differentials in order to maintain a working alliance. In the final sections, I consider how these themes suggest intersectionality is not only a tool for understanding difference, but also a way to illuminate less obvious similarities, and I present specific suggestions for research psychologists based on these insights.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, an analytic approach that simultaneously considers the effects of multiple categories of social group membership (e.g., race, class and gender), takes place at multiple levels (Crenshaw 1995; see also Settles 2006). Within the discipline of psychology, intersectionality is often investigated by classifying research participants in terms of identity positions defined by multiple dimensions. This *categorical* intersectionality (which Crenshaw (1995) termed "structural intersectionality") attends to the ways that the experience of membership in a category varies qualitatively as a function of other group memberships one holds. For example, race shapes the experience of gender for both women of color and White women (Hurtado 1989). Obviously, categorical intersectionality is of particular interest to psychologists because it lends itself to hypotheses at the level of the individual, and to operationalizing category membership in terms of independent variables that influence outcomes.

Intersectionality also has a political manifestation. Although institutions such as organizations, social movements and public policies sometimes recognize certain identity groups, often their analysis is framed to address the concerns of individuals who, but for one marginalized status, are otherwise privileged. The term *political intersectionality* describes the ways that those who occupy multiple subordinate identities, particularly women of color, may find themselves caught between the sometimes conflicting agendas of two political constituencies to which they belong (Crenshaw 1995), or are overlooked by these movements entirely. For example, Crenshaw (1995) showed how the domestic violence movement overlooked the concerns of women of color and immigrant women, and King (1988) recounted how US movements for civil rights, women's rights and labor each failed to address Black women's particular interests. However, King's analysis of the active role played by Black women within all three of these movements reminds us that women of color have also used their political intersectionality to provide opportunities for working across conventional boundaries of difference. Compared to categorical approaches to intersectionality, political intersectionality, with its macro-level focus on organizations and policies, is less often addressed by psychologists' work.

Political intersectionality includes the challenge of working politically with the diversity within an identity group. Rogers and Lott (1997) observed, "oppressed groups struggle not only against the boundaries dividing them from privileged groups but also against boundaries constituted by mixes of privilege and disprivilege within their ranks" (p. 497). Too often, social movements are not able to meet this challenge successfully. As Crenshaw (1995) argued, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference,... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences" (p. 93). Because political agendas are often set by subpopulations within a constituency that have relatively more privilege and therefore more status, and sometimes, resources (Cohen 1997, 1999), other subgroups may experience secondary marginalization (Cohen 1999) in which their interests are not addressed by the organizations or movements purporting to serve them.

As these examples suggest, political intersectionality is most often discussed in terms of silences, tensions, and failures within identity based movements. However, implicit in the idea of heterogeneity within social identity groups is the corollary that group memberships are overlapping. For example, as I will discuss later, women of color are in a position to negotiate collaboration between feminist and civil rights organizations. Feminist activists, particularly women of color, have long used this insight to mobilize coalitions for political work (Lyshaug 2006; Reagon 1983). Moreover, viewing intersectionality at a macro level, rather than strictly at a categorical one, reveals that social identity groups that our systems of categorization deem fundamentally different may also share some common experiences. For example, women receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) who are targeted by marriage incentive policies share some political interests with gay men and lesbians whose sexuality and intimate partnerships are also stigmatized and proscribed (Cohen 1997). By recognizing the interplay of multiple systems, what Collins (2000) termed the "matrix of domination" (p. 18), activists have found ways to cut across conventional identity categories to build common cause among populations that share similar or related experiences of oppression. This shift in perspective— from an intersectionality focused on understanding difference to one that seeks to find and make use of less obvious similarities—requires that we think about social categories in terms of stratification brought about through practices of individuals, institutions and cultures rather than primarily as characteristics of individuals.

Strengths and Limitation of Categorical Approaches

The use of statistical models that test the separate and combined effects of two different social category member-ships on an outcome is well suited to the investigation of categorical intersectionality. This approach is an important tool in the empirical social sciences, particularly when used to investigate patterns of disparity and inequality, and was recently advocated as a separate methodology within intersectionality studies (McCall 2005). However, some aspects of the intersection of categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage cannot be addressed by this approach. Because this practice assumes the definition and operationalization of social/structural categories as independent variables (e.g., race or gender) is fairly straightforward and unproblematic, it does not address the processes that create and maintain the social construction of the categories. For example, Helms et al. (2005) observed that racial categories used in social science research reflect prevailing social definitions rather than any underlying biological rationale. Given this lack of clarity about measurement, they recommended psychologists move away from viewing race as an independent variable and instead operationalize specific mechanisms through conceptual variables (e.g., stereotype threat or racial identity). Research suggests this observation also applies to other categories whose meaning seems to be self-evident such as "lesbian" (Diamond 2003), "disability" (Sheldon 1999) or even "gender" (Dozier 2005).

Thus the common methodological approach employed in psychology and the empirical social sciences to investigate intersectional research questions—operationalizing group membership in terms of independent variables reflecting social categories—may only address one aspect of intersectionality. However, this limitation need not imply that understanding social categories and the ways they depend upon each other for meaning (Collins 2000) is beyond the scope of psychology's familiar tools.

In the sections that follow, I argue that the concept of political intersectionality and activists' strategies for seeking similarity across seemingly disparate social identity groups based on shared relationships to power represents an innovative opportunity for the conceptualization of research questions and the generation of hypotheses in psychology. In my reading of the archive of interviews with activists, I discerned two complementary themes, each addressing a challenge facing those involved in coalitional work: the first considers what conditions foster coalition across difference; the second addresses internal fault lines within coalitions that may pull them apart.

Which Social Identity Groups are "Natural" Allies?: Challenges of Defining Similarity

One might expect that the first challenge facing activists who wish to build an alliance is finding common ground shared

by members of diverse social identity groups; however, many of the activists' narratives questioned the assumption that forming political alliances even within populations deemed socially similar is a straightforward matter. In the practice of political organizing and community life, social identity groups that may in principle seem homogeneous are revealed to include multiple subpopulations defined by crosscutting identities (Crenshaw 1995), including (but not limited to) generation, immigrant status, social class and sexuality. For example, Rabab Abdulhadi (Naber and Abdulhadi 2004) discussed the complexity of defining membership criteria within her own organization, the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in North America.

> Are the members Palestinians? Or Palestinian identified? And what is Palestinian identified? You know, it's [a] very loose thing. But what's Palestinian? Is Palestinian a woman of Palestinian parents? Half? One parent Palestinian or not? Married to a Palestinian? What do we do with the women who have Palestinian women partners? (Naber and Abdulhadi 2004, p. 27).

She went on to explain how the controversy over these definitions became a source of conflict within the group.

Subpopulations may have substantively different interests even within a marginal community. Political scientist Cathy Cohen, whose organizing work has focused on progressive organizing around queer issues across communities of color, extensively theorized the challenges presented by diversity within minority groups, both in her interview from the archive (Cole and Cohen 2004) and elsewhere (1999). In her interview, she recounted a classroom conversation in which students debated whether Blacks with conservative political allegiances (e.g., Clarence Thomas) had somehow forfeited membership in the imagined Black community. Cohen observed, "... [there] were all sorts of ways in which Blackness was contested. And so it wasn't just kind of phenotypic, you know, if you looked like you were Black, but that there were also normative standards for what Blackness was" (Cole and Cohen 2004, p. 120). Cohen's scholarship and activism focus on the ways that the interests and experiences of segments of the community that enjoy greater resources—whether financial, or in terms of status or social capital—often frame a community's political agenda. Those with more status within the group may rationalize this inequality in terms of authenticity, that is, ideological claims about how membership ought to be defined:

> ... how do we decide who's Black enough for the community to mobilize around? And oftentimes, when thinking about HIV and AIDS, those who are most at risk, Black gay men, Black men who sleep with men, Black injection drug users, Black women...engaged in

kind of sexual exchange for money, are not always considered Black enough, right? That somehow their behavior questions their authenticity (Cole and Cohen 2004, p. 121).

Cohen's work reveals how the very idea of a "natural" constituency may be premised on excluding those who threaten the group's construction of its own identity. Political theorist Iris Marion Young (1986) criticized the ideal of community as implicitly premised on hierarchical oppositions ("us" vs. "them") that rely on exclusion of those on the outside, and the denial of difference among those inside the circle. Among proponents of community as a model for political organizing, Young identified a fantasy in which "persons will cease to be opaque, other, not understood, and instead become fused, mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves" (p. 10). In practice, such a vision is exclusionary. Reagon (1983) and Mohanty (2003) both described the ways this ideal of a universal "woman's experience" as the basis for a shared "sisterhood" serves to work against the inclusion of the marginal and less powerful. Stringent criteria for political inclusion may also be impractical; in some interviews from the archive activists described how efforts to police the boundaries of membership led to expenditures of time and emotional energy they later felt were unproductive.

Thus, even constituencies that are often represented as unproblematically monolithic (e.g., "the Black community," "women of color") are in fact coalitions of sorts (Crenshaw 1995). Because the intersectional nature of all social categories means that uniformity of identity and vision cannot be assumed, all organizations involve building alliances. For example, Andrea Smith, an academic and activist known for her work on coalition building and Native American feminisms, described a "disastrous organizing effort," (Cotera and Smith 2003, p. 275) in which women of color, in response to a racist incident, attempted to leave a mainstream organization to found their own association. But disagreements within the protesting group led to "fistfights...crying and screaming and having a fit" (p. 275). Reflecting on the experience, Smith said,

> ...when you organize something just in opposition to it, then you don't necessarily figure out or create the alliances between ourselves... And I think in that historical moment, there tended to be the assumption that women of color would get along...So then I learned from that experience, that you can't assume allies with other communities of color... You have to go through the trouble of actually creating [alliances]. (Cotera and Smith 2003, p. 275)

Repeatedly, these narratives troubled the idea of "natural" affinity groups. The alliance building that Smith spoke

of requires a delicate balancing act, including an analysis of what common interests exist across social identity groups, coupled with sensitivity to the limits of similarities. Abdulhadi argued that although it is possible to build alliances across borders, "if you cross the borders virtually, it doesn't mean that they're gone. They're there. The wall is there" (Naber and Abdulhadi 2004, p. 44). In her view, the challenge is to work together on the basis of a shared vision for change, "while always acknowledging the specificity of each group and...and the context in which particular forms come up, without thinking that one form should dominate another" (p. 44).

The activists also recounted how they had worked to forge coalitions and alliances on grounds other than essential similarity. These alliances worked when different organizations were able to embrace an analysis exposing shared marginalization in relation to power. This insight makes clear that although intersectionality may be misconstrued to suggest a politics of identity ultimately tailored to vanishingly small constituencies, in fact the concept holds the promise of opening new avenues of cooperation (Bickford 1997; Collins 1993). In her interview, Cohen described such a vision:

> The moment of intersection is really the moment of building a broader movement, at least to me, right? If you can find those places where people may not agree in terms of racial identification or sexual identification, but where they in fact suffer from state regulation or some "system of oppression," where they share that experience, it seems to me if we can find those spaces, those are also the spaces for shared mobilization. And I think too often our analyses, while kind of gesturing towards those moments, or even sometimes identifying those, don't take the next step and try to kind of see them implemented. (Cole and Cohen 2004, p. 135).

Smith (Cotera and Smith 2003) recounted a specific instance in which activists implemented just this type of analysis, demonstrating both the challenge and powerful opportunity posed by such approaches. She described an organizing impasse in which a Native American organization asserting their treaty-protected right to hunt, fish and gather, encountered virulently racist rhetoric from sport fishing enthusiasts. A senior colleague advised her that open conflict between the sportsmen and the Native peoples ultimately served only the interests of business concerns who sought to develop the land for industries such as mining; thus, responding to the racism with anger and confrontation would ultimately prove unwise strategically. Her colleague argued, "We need to intervene in this violence in a way that does not create a barrier to potentially working with these people in the future.... they are yelling at you now, but they're going to be your

potential allies later" (Cotera and Smith 2003, p. 273). Smith said this approach went against her own instinct to openly engage the confrontation. However, when mines later opened in that region, Native American activists were indeed able to work across differences to successfully marshal opposition to the corporate interests "because the groundwork had been laid." They won a moratorium on mining from a governor who had supported that industry:

> that experience made me rethink about what oppression was, it was less about here's this line [between] the men or women, or white [people and] people of color, or whatever it is you want to focus on, and more the problem is a pyramid structure, that there is like one percent of the world who owns 90 percent of the wealth. But everybody else...has a long-term interest in changing these pyramid structures. So 90 percent of the world's population is my potential ally, so therefore it's very important to think in a coalitional way and look at how these things intersect, because we need to build a mass movement that can change this pyramid structure. And I think a lot of people when you get on narrow identity politics, basically, you're not trying to change a pyramid, you're just trying to get on top. (Cotera and Smith 2003, p. 274).

By defining commonality in terms of shared interests rather than shared identity, Smith recognized broad new opportunities for coalition building, opportunities she believed would strengthen her movement.

Addressing Power Differentials Within Alliances

In practice, organizations that attempt to form productive and successful coalitions across constituencies that differ in power face formidable obstacles: obviously the first is to transcend perceptions of difference to make common cause. Perhaps just as importantly, differences of power within coalitions may threaten the formation of working alliances. Attorney Martha Ojeda's description of the creation of the Tri-national Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora, an organization that she serves as Executive Director, illustrates the challenges posed by very basic questions of representation:

> In the beginning, as I told you, was just people from the United States so then when I start to work with them... I was saying... "Okay, since right now it's a coalition, it's a[n] alliance with many organizations trying to help Mexico, but where are the Mexicans.... okay? So Mexicans, they should be also here," and [that] was when everybody start to think "trinational label" in order to form this platform against NAFTA.

So they pass a resolution that 50 percent of the board it should be Mexican organizations, and from those 15, at least 8 should be from maquiladora workers' leadership. So that was the way that in the board is reflected all the social sector[s] from United States and Mexico and Canada...(Lal and Ojeda 2004, p. 179).

In this case, an alliance dedicated to improving labor conditions in Mexico needed to make explicit policy to include Mexicans, and specifically workers, in order to have all constituencies represented at the organizing table. Ojeda's anecdote poses several questions: How can coalitions among members of social groups with unequal political and economic power avoid reproducing existing inequality in their practice? What procedures will safeguard the voice and interests of the less powerful? How will agendas be set? How will finances be generated and expended, and how will these decisions be made?

Loretta Ross' experience negotiating the collaboration between women of color organizations working on reproductive health issues, and the mainstream and well funded feminist organizations that initiated the March for Women's Lives on Washington DC in 2004, highlights these questions, and provides one example for resolving them. When Ross, who now serves as national coordinator for SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, was first approached about the march, she expressed profound reservations: "I was the first one to say, 'Hell, no.' Been there, done that 20 years ago, ... the last thing I want to do is drop everything we're doing yet again for White women and their agenda" (Luna and Ross 2006, p. 203). But younger colleagues convinced her to consider what preconditions could make such a coalition a viable partnership. Collectively, members of the organization agreed that the focus of the march must be broadened beyond abortion rights. Reproductive concerns of women of color also include the right to have children and "to parent the children that we have. If you look at the foster care system, the criminal justice system, the zero tolerance policies kicking our kids out of school, I mean, 'reproductive rights' means a whole lot more than to abort or not to abort as far as we're concerned" (p. 203). The women of color also wanted representation on the steering committee. However, in order to seed the march, organizations were required to contribute $250,000 to obtain a seat:

And so when we demanded that women of color should be allowed to sit ... at the table, we knew those women of color weren't going to put up a quarter million dollars to get those seats. As a matter of fact, the cash flow was going to reverse itself, because for women of color organizations to drop what they're doing to participate in it, that time has to be bought. Because we're talking about organizations with three

to four staff people. So if they send somebody to sit at the steering committee, the organization's going to suffer, and we had detailed this in our book *Undivided Rights* [Silliman et al. 2004] how when we try to work in coalition with the mainstream, the mainstream benefits and we don't, so we were clear about that. (Luna and Ross 2006, p. 203).

The organizations initiating planning for the march agreed to these conditions of issue framing and representation, and the demonstration ultimately included more than one million marchers with unprecedented participation by women of color (Roberts 2004). Because women of color organizations participated in organizing the march, new alliances were formed: for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) endorsed the march. This alliance was successful in part because there was recognition that the organizations differed both in their understanding of the issue (abortion rights vs. reproductive justice) and in the resources they brought to the partnership. Perhaps even more importantly, those with more economic power within this alliance were willing to share decision-making and to respect the value of contribution of the less powerful, even if it was not a financial one.

In both examples, acknowledging these differences required those with relatively more power to critically rethink the ways they had worked in the past. Cohen discussed this challenge in relation to her work as director of an academic center that aims to forge working partnerships for research and social change with members of the low-income community surrounding the university:

How do you really build principled relationships and partnerships where there's going to be some negotiation, where you have to figure out ways to share power, where there has to be the acknowledgement that we come with more resources, but they may come with more knowledge about neighborhoods and communities? And it really is not easy work (Cole and Cohen 2004, p. 125).

The difficulty Cohen describes recalls Reagon's (1983) frequently cited aphorism about the emotional experience of working in coalitions: "Most of the time you feel threatened to the core, and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing" (p. 356). The activists' narratives described the way that coalitional work requires a willingness to critically revisit familiar assumptions, and to relinquish privilege.

Naber's (2002) work suggests coalitions may also demand that members of relatively privileged social identity groups assume some of the risks regularly faced by members of subordinate groups. She described the challenges of creating alliances among communities of

color in California in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. In this context, some members of immigrant groups came to realize that their claims for recognition as citizens had been constructed on the assertion that "'I am not the immigrant enemy'" (p. 228). In contrast to this stance, Naber recounted how a San Francisco-based Japanese American organization recognized the connection between the racialization and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the post 9-11 climate faced by Muslims of diverse racial and ethnic groups, and staged an event to foster solidarity between these communities. For this population, reaching out to a stigmatized population entailed stepping away from a privileged identity as an assimilated American citizen. In the political atmosphere that followed the "Attack on America," which could be expected to include a backlash toward immigrants (Esses et al. 2002), the Japanese American organization's decision to stand in solidarity with a denigrated immigrant group incurred the risk of sharing their fate, including being targeted for heightened prejudice and even hate crimes (Gerstenfeld 2002).

Implications for Psychology

Activists, particularly those from social identity groups that have historically been denied social, economic and/or political power, do not have the luxury of overlooking the ways that an intersectional "matrix of domination" (Collins 2000, p. 18) shapes their relationships with other groups. In order to build viable working alliances, they have theorized ways to recognize and make sense of two competing currents: the conditions that foster connection across difference, and the internal divisions of power that threaten to pull alliances apart. Their analysis of these relations and the practical strategies they've developed to make these partnerships effective hold at least three important implications for empirical social scientists.

Attend to Diversity within (Even Seeming Homogeneous) Social Identity Groups

Rather than attending to the ways that social categories are created through lived experiences and social processes, psychologists have tended to construe social groups as composed of different types of persons. This approach can lead to essentialism and bias (Cole and Stewart 2001). For example Wong (1994) observed, the use of categories such as "Black" keeps us from seeing how "class mobility, gender differences or sexual orientation have altered the collective Black experience" (p. 141). These narratives about activists' struggles to engage difference within their associations and political organizing offer several insights

about how researchers might approach the study of difference without losing sight of the ways that social categories crosscut one another. Key to this endeavor is to recognize heterogeneity within social identity groups, and to incorporate attention to power into psychological research on race, gender and other social categories.

Just as the archived interviews with activists suggest they had to address multiple identities and interests as they developed their organizations' agenda and strategies, intersectionality theory suggests that researchers must attend to differences within groups if their work is to shed light on the meaning of social categories. For example, Gonzales and Rolison (2005) developed a theory of sexual capital, positing that social identity groups with relatively more social power will be freer to disregard hegemonic norms of sexuality. They found that White men's reported sexual activities and desires were least constrained by conventional morality, whereas Black women's were most constrained. Their findings concerning social class also supported their theory. Gonzales and Rolison's approach and findings move beyond seeing sexuality in terms of a simple gendered double-standard to consider the ways that the forms taken by desire are affected by multiple dimensions of power and privilege.

By the same token, the activists' narratives unsettle the sometimes facile use of umbrella terms such as "people of color," which can collapse important differences among racial/ethnic groups while simultaneously setting up an implicit binary opposition with "whiteness" (Carby 1992; Wong 1994). For example, Cohen's (Cole and Cohen 2004) campus dilemma involved faculty and community members who all identify as African American. Naber (2002) contrasted the post-September 11, 2001 response of the Japanese American organization with that of some Filipino/a airport screeners who advocated racial profiling, starkly illuminating the diversity of "Asian American" responses. Naber (2002) concluded that in this political context, coalition building "necessitated crafting frameworks for tackling racism that are flexible enough to expose sites of commonality and hierarchy between communities" (p. 230). Naber's work and Cohen's interview suggest that the concept of political intersectionality gives psychologists and other empirical social scientists a theoretical scaffold to understand intersecting relationships both among and within ethnic minority groups, relations that are contextualized by diverse histories and complex patterns of privilege and oppression.

One particularly good example of such an approach is Mahalingam and Leu's (2005) nuanced discussion of immigrant women from two different Asian countries whose separate histories and very different cultural and economic circumstances nevertheless led to some similarities in cultural adaptations. These similarities are best

understood not in terms of a "pan-Asian or Asian American" identity (which did not characterize the respondents' narratives), but in terms of their common *structural* experience of racial discrimination in the US.

Resist the Impulse to Normalize Certain Identities

When psychologists view social categories primarily as defining groups whose difference is a testable hypothesis (which, if not supported, implies similarity by default), they decontextualize the meaning of the categories and the dynamics of power and politics that have constructed them. In fact, the practice of categorization is a process of exclusion, and often the criteria for these judgments are only implicit and can reflect biases linked to visibility and privilege. Researchers must make these processes explicit and rationalized. Failure to do so can support the idea of dominant groups as the norm (Hegarty and Pratto 2004), as well as an essentialist view of subordinate categories. Within such a paradigm, the existence of these social categories becomes relevant only when members of subordinate groups are present; otherwise, the perspective of dominant groups is assumed to represent the universal (Wong 1994). As Carby (1992) observed, "because the politics of difference work with concepts of individual identity, rather than structures of inequality and exploitation, processes of racialization are marginalized and given symbolic and political meaning only when the subjects are Black..." (p. 193). This problem also recalls Reagon's (1983) admonition to feminists seeking the safety of homogeneous groups in the quotation that opened this article: a term such as "woman" can be used as a code to conceal diversity, presumably in the service of fostering shared identity and "sisterhood." An intersectional analysis reveals the conceptual emptiness of the label and the exclusionary practices that were necessary to maintain it. This type of thinking was apparent in Ross's narrative (Luna and Ross 2006) of how the March for Women's Lives was organized. The organizers who approached her conceived of their march as addressing women's reproductive choice, but her response made clear that their version of the universal "woman" assumed a subject whose reproductive decisions were not constrained by her social class or by punitive social policies that disparately affect members of minority ethnic/racial groups.

Poran's work (2006) illustrates how resisting the impulse to normalize can improve social science research. She noted that the literature on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders has consistently found that White women's body esteem is lower than Black women's. Much of this literature has then concluded that "Black culture" must confer some protective factor on Black women. However, Poran noted that popular measures of body image were conceptualized and developed based on White women's experience. Consequently, Black women's scores on "these measures are essentially being compared to those of White women as the normative gauge for behavior and psychological response" (p. 741). Poran's focus groups with Black women suggested widely-used measures do not assess the form that their body concerns typically take. Her work also suggests, as does Ross's narrative (Luna and Ross 2006), that inclusion of diverse groups, even when they share a common identity such as women, necessitates a reconsideration of how problems are framed theoretically. Historic and contemporary hierarchies of power and resources have constructed these categories; careful attention to these processes will lead us to hesitate before attempting to generalize "universal'" models developed from studying members of privileged groups.

Conceptualize Social Categories Not Only as Identities or Characteristics of Individuals but Also in Terms Individual and Institutional Practices

Crenshaw's concept of political intersectionality highlights the ways that the interests of social identity groups defined by multiple axes of subordination may be overlooked by institutions and organizations that frame their agendas based on the experience of those who, but for one type of disadvantage, are otherwise privileged. This concept addresses the ways that race, class and gender are not only identities, but also social processes that often create and maintain inequality. Smith's description (Cotera and Smith 2003) of the opportunities that resulted from moving beyond agreement or common history as grounds for building alliances, to a vision of coalitions motivated by shared relationships to power, illustrates the usefulness of this insight. When Smith's colleague urged her to think in terms of long-term common interests her group might share with people who appeared to be the enemy, he challenged her to transcend the easy categorization based on "us–them" to see larger connections based on shared relationships to power. Such reflection offers an opportunity for psychologists to theorize about categories such as race and gender not only as characteristics of individuals but also as axes of inequality patterned in a matrix of domination. Naber's (2002) recounting of the decision of the Japanese American organization to publicly stand in solidarity with Muslim Americans after September 11, 2001 provides a striking example of the way that social identity categories "are not a fixed aspect of the human condition but are a focus for argument precisely because of their world-making consequences" (Reicher 2004, p. 921). By taking this political stance, the Japanese American organization resisted some meanings (e.g., "model minority," "assimilated American citizen") for their ethnic group while actively constructing new meanings.

This lesson from the activists' work also underscores the importance of employing intersectional analyses even when

studying privileged populations (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals, etc.). The utility of this insight to social scientists is well illustrated by the essays in Fine, Weis, Pruitt and Burn's edited volume, *Off-White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance* (Fine et al. 2004). Although these authors attend to the ways the meaning of Whiteness has shifted over time in response to social and economic change, their work also suggests that a constant in this process of racial formation is privilege. For example, in a qualitative study, Weis et al. (2004) found White working-class men claimed and maintained a raced and gendered identity as a way to manage their feelings of vulnerability on multiple fronts: in the economy, in their gendered domestic arrangements, and in their increasingly diverse neighborhoods. In this example, it is evident that the respondents actively shape their social identities, and also that a different construction might reveal sites of common experience, and potentially common cause, with other members of the working-class. This research suggests that for psychologists who wish to understand how race, gender, class and other social categories depend upon each other for meaning, we must attend to the ways participants understand their social identity group membership in relation to other groups.

Conclusions

Like the quotation by Reagon (1983) that opened this article, many of the activists we interviewed argued that an inclusive perspective is the only way to create far-reaching social change. For such a broad agenda to be effective we must struggle to recognize social categories as specific, historically based, contextualized, intersecting and constructed through power while simultaneously remembering that our common heritage is that we share the experience of life within this web of intersections. As Ross observed:

> I also don't think we're going to build successfully the women's movement if we don't spend a lot of time talking about the role of men. Because we're not going to make this revolution by ourselves. Just like Black folks could not end racism without the participation of White folks. You know, we've got to figure out how to build movement in which everybody's included and nobody's left out. And so I think we've got to go beyond identity politics and really focus on our commonality as human beings. But not as a little namby-pamby, color-blind way. I like you to notice that I'm Black and I think you're crazy if you don't. But at the same time, you know, I am not defined by my oppressions so nobody should be (Luna and Ross 2006, p. 217)

Concretely, what would it mean for psychologists to be open to the recognition of human commonalities—and differences—without resorting to essentialism, false universalism, or obliviousness to historical and contemporary patterns of inequality, approaches that Ross described as the "namby-pamby, color-blind way"? Based on the insights of activists building coalitions across diverse groups, I argue that our understanding of intersectionality cannot be limited to identifying differences between social identity groups. We must also employ the analytic tool of political intersectionality in order to understand race and gender as social processes, and to find and make use of similarities arising from these social and historical processes that cross-cut identity groups. Such a shift demands that we reconsider our methods at each stage of the research process.

In terms of design, researchers should consider how race, gender and other social categories operate as social processes in relation to the research topic, rather than simply treating them as independent variables describing their participants. As Ross emphatically argued, "I like you to notice that I'm Black .... But at the same time....I am not defined by my oppressions so nobody should be" (Luna and Ross 2006, p. 217). Practically, this might mean using variables that aim to capture experiences, behaviors and attitudes related to membership in social identity categories, such as "experiences of discrimination," or "feminist consciousness," rather than race or gender, per se. In some cases, taking such an approach will reveal important differences within groups that might initially seem homogenous (e.g., people classified as "Asian American" trace their ancestry to nations with diverse cultures and histories; diversity within the category "women" includes race and sexual orientation). Such sensitivity to the meanings and social processes associated with categories of identity, difference and disadvantage at the conceptual level will also influence sampling decisions.

Perhaps the most important implication is at the level of interpretation. Psychology's reliance on the use of null hypothesis testing can lead us to presume that only differences between groups "count" as scientific findings. Research framed by this approach can be used to confirm the belief in the essential difference between the groups, particularly when criteria for group membership have not been clearly rationalized *a priori*. In contrast, Ross's statement (Luna and Ross 2006) describes inequality linked to group membership as a shared systemic problem demanding collective solutions. In this analysis, she draws our attention away from categorical group membership (i.e., Black/White, men/women) to urge us to attend to dynamics of power and inequality. Psychologists might benefit from this insight at the level of interpretation when considering null findings: a failure to find significant differences between groups' mean scores need not suggest that group members' experiences are equivalent, particularly when measures are based on the experience of only

one group. In the case that significant differences between groups' mean scores are found, the concept of political intersectionality suggests that we attempt to understand these findings in light of the ways that multiple social identities differentially position groups in relation to power and privilege (Hurtado 1989).

Making sense of such findings will demand that psychologists who study these social categories develop a more sophisticated and interdisciplinary understanding of historical and sociological aspects of the social construction of race, gender, class and other categories of identity, difference and disadvantage. The activists' narratives might also be interpreted to suggest that this extra effort may be rewarded with work that has a broader, and even, perhaps, a more visionary impact.

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