Promises and Pitfalls in the Integration of Intersectionality with Development Science

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Abstract

In this commentary, we use the chapters in this volume as source material from which to highlight what we view as critical issues in integrating intersectionality with developmental science. In reading and meditating on the chapters, we abstracted two key themes that were evident, to some extent, in all of the chapters: 1) the disciplinary use of intersectionality as a theory and 2) the nature of development for an intersectional developmental science. These two themes reflect the current state of the integration of intersectionality with developmental science, in that they represent both areas of strength and success, but also areas of challenge and weakness.

Towards the end of the second wave women's movement in the United States, many women of color challenged the construal of womanhood as an exclusionary practice of white, middle class, heterosexual women (McCann & Kim, 2003). In one of the earliest articulations of intersectionality, the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black feminists, asserted their commitment to "struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" and tasked themselves to develop "integrated analysis and practice based on the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (1977; p. 164). From its roots in Black feminist thought, the concept of intersectionality has impressively traversed academic disciplines, including psychology and human development. Within the last decade, numerous scholars have propagated the value of intersectionality for psychological science—as a theoretical and analytical tool for understanding how social location (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation) and systems of power and privilege (e.g., racism, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism) are simultaneously experienced and associated with psychosocial outcomes (Cole, 2009; Bowleg, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013).

In this context, the current volume on integrating intersectionality with developmental science is timely and important. Although interest in intersectionality has increased among developmental scholars over the last decade, it still remains a concept that is not widely used, and even less widely understood. And yet incorporating intersectionality into our work has the potential to push our thinking in new directions as we ask new questions and revisit old assumptions. This is clearly evident in the papers in the current volume, all of which break new ground in a number of critical areas, such as the conceptualization of context, the importance

of history for development, the dynamics of oppression and privilege, power and vulnerabilities, and dominance and marginalization.

Despite the impressive nature of this work, there are substantial challenges that are clearly evident. In this commentary we use the chapters in this volume as source material from which to highlight what we view as critical issues in integrating intersectionality with developmental science. In reading and meditating on the chapters, we abstracted two key themes that were evident, to some extent, in all of the chapters: 1) the disciplinary use of intersectionality as a theory and 2) the nature of development for an intersectional developmental science. These two themes reflect the current state of the integration of intersectionality with developmental science, in that they represent both areas of strength and success, but also areas of challenge and weakness. We refrain from getting into the weeds on the various chapters in this volume and instead offer these big picture themes to motivate interested scholars to pay due attention to what we argue are essential prerequisites for a successful integration.

Disciplinary Challenges to Integrating Intersectionality and Development Science

There is much hand-wringing among intersectionality scholars about whether or not current uses of the concept are true or faithful to the original formulation (e.g., Choo & Ferree, 2010; Moradi, 2017). We were struck by the fact that the authors of the current volume largely acquiesced to demands of faithfulness and shied away from engaging with the challenges of interdisciplinarity. In our view, this lack of engagement is a major barrier to a successful integration of intersectionality with developmental science, a point that we have made several

times over (e.g., Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008; Juan, Syed, & Azmitia, 2016; Syed, 2010), yet bears repeating once again.

In the wake of ever growing interest in this concept, the contribution of this special issue highlights that the field of psychology still has some work to do regarding clarifying what intersectionality means for developmental science and how it can be integrated, theoretically and methodologically¹. At this point, however, we have reached some consensus about what does *not* represent intersectionality in developmental science. Intersectionality acts as something of a trap in psychology and human development. A surface level understanding of the concept allows it to be easily assimilated into the dominant quantitative way of thinking, in which intersectionality can be captured through statistical interaction terms of categorical assessments of race and gender (e.g., Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010; see also Cole, 2009, for the pros and cons of this approach). Moreover, intersectionality has been easily assimilated into the study of multiple identities, wherein individual differences in two or more identity domains are examined for patterns of interactions. We refer to intersectionality as a trap because these examples of assimilation have been so smooth, yet are quite inconsistent with core aspects of intersectionality (Marecek, 2016; Moradi, 2017; Syed, & McLean, 2016).

Indeed, rather than assimilation, what is needed to integrate intersectionality with developmental science is some serious accommodation. Importantly, this must go both ways. As noted, it is not sufficient for developmentalists to simply explore statistical interactions of categorical social identities or examine intersections of multiple subjective social identities and

¹ In this chapter we opted to focus more on the theoretical challenges vs. the methodological ones, but this choice should not be taken as evidence that we do not believe the methodological issues to be important. See Bowleg (2008) for an excellent introduction to some of the methodological issues.

call that work intersectionality. If there is no analysis of social structures, no examination of the complex dynamics of multiple forms of oppression and multiple forms of privilege, then the work is not intersectionality. This level of analysis has not been a traditional strength of developmental science, which has historically been devoted to understanding individual developmental processes. Even when those individual processes are understood in context (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003), the focal unit of analysis remains on the individual. In some ways, intersectionality is somewhat antithetical to a developmental science that is primarily concerned with generalities and norms in an effort to explain and predict behavior and mental processes. Thus, bringing intersectionality to developmental science necessitates a change in how we think about the nature of this work.

At the same time, we feel there must also be some change in how we conceptualize intersectionality with respect to its use in developmental science. It is undeniable that the nature and use of intersectionality has altered as it has moved across disciplines (Knapp, 2005; Salem, 2016; Syed, 2010). Indeed, this is one reason for the focus on whether or not scholars are “faithful” to intersectionality, as we noted earlier. To understand this disciplinary tension requires an understanding of the different modes of theory. Iser (2006) makes a clear distinction between “hard-core” and “soft” theories. Hard-core theories are *scientific* theories, in that they are designed to make predictions that can be tested, refined, and ultimately developed into laws. In contrast, soft theories are *humanistic* theories that are designed to achieve understandings of observable patterns that can ultimately be developed into a representational metaphor.

Intersectionality in its original formulation is best characterized as a humanistic theory, whereas developmental science largely seeks to² rely on scientific theories. Humanistic and scientific theories have very different properties, motivations, and goals. Developmental science's reliance on scientific theories means that, ipso facto, intersectionality as a theory must be altered to be productive in this new context. Regardless of how much attention we give to conceptualizing and measuring contexts and social structures, ultimately developmentalists do want to know primarily about the individual--which can be clearly seen in the chapters in this volume. By conceptualizing and measuring structural inequities in human development, we acknowledge how group level variables such as disparities in income, education, and neighborhood resources may strongly affect individual-level variables that have historically been the focus in the field. Rather than being viewed as a weakness of the integration or of doing a disservice to the original concept of intersectionality, we should think about how the theory can be used productively. Moreover, to date, intersectional researchers have usually taken a one sided view of people's experiences of power, neglecting how dominant positionalities (e.g., whiteness, heterosexuality, wealth) are maintained and how privileged social locations may impact human development. Indeed, intersectionality is too often narrowly described as an analytical tool for understanding the interaction between systems of oppression (e.g., Weldon, 2008). This betrays the reality that social systems impact both dominant and subdominant groups. The methods and theories of developmental science

² Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to get into the details, we use this phrase "seeks to" because in practice most theories used in developmental science are a strange blend of humanistic and scientific.

can be productively used to better understand these processes as they play out in individual lives.

In this section we have barely scratched the surface of the major disciplinary issues that must be sorted out as we seek to integrate intersectionality with developmental science. Our intention is not to solve the problems, but rather to illustrate some of the questions that must be asked and issues that must be considered. Leaving these disciplinary conflicts unresolved and marching on with integrative initiatives will ultimately leave us in a state of frustration and dissatisfaction. One potential solution to the disciplinary quandary is to conceptualize intersectionality as a broader analytic framework that emphasizes systems of oppression and privilege—since this is really the core of the theory. Rather than being used as a theory of multiple identities, intersectionality can then be integrated with any existing developmental theory by adding a dynamic structural analysis of oppression and privilege. Important issues to then sort out are the necessary and sufficient conditions for such an integration. What are the properties of an *intersectional developmental science*, where both intersectionality and developmental science look different from what we might be accustomed? This question, which remains deeply unresolved, brings us to the second major theme inspired by this volume.

What is Developing in an Intersectional Developmental Science?

If intersectionality is to be successfully merged with developmental perspectives, researchers must closely attend to this fundamental question: what exactly is developing in an intersectional developmental science? Although the chapters in this volume largely engage in substantive topics of interest to developmentalists (e.g., social engagement, stress and coping, identity), and are primarily concerned with the adaptation of children, adolescents, and

emerging adults, there was a surprising lack of attention to development in the theoretical sense, and most notably with respect to the question of *what is developing?*

As we move towards an integration of intersectionality with developmental science, researchers would do well to consider Wohlwill's (1973) classic articulation of a programmatic approach to lifespan development, which consists of five core features of developmental inquiry. The first feature, *the discovery and synthesis of developmental dimensions*, is more simply concerned with this question of *what is developing?* The subsequent four features--the descriptive study of development, the correlational study of development, the study of determinants of developmental change, and the study of individual differences in development--all tend to garner more attention from researchers, in part because such work is more attractive to academic journals and funding agencies. But the first feature--*what is developing?*--is the foundation, the necessary first step before other developmental questions can be asked. And yet, we have not done this. To be sure, this is not a problem that is unique to the current context of intersectionality, as descriptive and conceptual work is not generally valued in the field (see Syed, 2017). Nevertheless, it demands our attention if we are to move forward productively.

So the question: *what is developing?* We do not know. Are we primarily concerned with investigating the stability and change of intersectional dynamics across the lifespan? And if so, is the primary focus on individuals' experiences of the stability and change in these dynamics, or in the stability and change of the dynamics at the broader structural level, as they become differentially relevant at various points in the lifespan (e.g., the context of oppression and privilege at school vs. at work)?

Or perhaps our focus should be on how intersectionality might help us better understand patterns of typical and atypical development? How such normativity is defined, who seeks to benefit from the construction and maintenance of typical and atypical development, and so on. Such a perspective would be more in the vein of intersectionality as an analytical tool that can be integrated with other developmental theories, as discussed previously, rather than a developmental theory in its own right.

Or maybe integrating intersectionality with developmental science is about engagement in social justice action? This was a strong theme of the current volume, a topic of increased attention throughout the field, and an important aspect of the origins of intersectionality in Black feminist thought. Perhaps the developmental processes of interests are not in individuals' own understandings or experiences of multiple oppressions and privileges, but rather in the process of combating systems of oppression that may confer risk at various points in the life span. In this way, then, intersectionality would be a framework for praxis and intervening within a developmental context. This way of thinking about intersectionality and development may be the most uncomfortable for the field, because it raises questions about what motivates our work. From this perspective, writing about practical implications in journal articles simply will not do. Rather, the research must be more closely tied to social justice action with the communities of interest. This requires being open to a wider variety of methodological approaches (e.g., participatory action research; Langhout & Thomas, 2010) as well as modifying the incentive structure to not place premium value on top-tier journal articles and federal grants (see Syed, 2017). Clearly these are no small changes.

Another question that can be made central is whether all oppressive systems are equally relevant for development. Given the countless permutations of potentially influencing systems, which ones might be more relevant to developmental science? Should the historical roots of this approach (i.e., a focus on race, gender, and social class) serve as a guide? The focus on these systems, along with sexuality and immigration, might be warranted given the historical and institutional context of the U.S. Moradi (2017) wrote about the risk of creating prototypes with this research, and by so doing, marginalizing other experiences--as such, we need to remember that there are other intersections of identity and power beyond those related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and immigration that may matter for development.

All of these possibilities are perfectly plausible, and yet all could also be severely criticized and rejected as incomplete or insufficient. At the same time, there is a dire need for generating these ideas and having this discussion. While doing so, we must also recognize that the integration of intersectionality and developmental science (and psychology/human development more broadly) is still in its infancy, and we might be too eager to apply analytic tools that our field might not fully grasp or be able to properly integrate.

The astute reader will note that these questions of development are intimately tied to the disciplinary issues we raised in the first section. Indeed, thinking of them as closely linked may be helpful for developing productive solutions. Ultimately, however, we are not doing developmental work unless we can adequately explicate what this developmental theory must account for. *What are the developmental processes?* This is the question we must all ask.

Conclusion

It seems quite clear that developmentalists need to start thinking from a perspective that engages the systems that impact diverse youth. Moreover, such an analysis should endeavor to do more than just shed light on the experiences of marginalized youth, but also attempt to remain consistent with the activism tradition and priorities of intersectionality. This is largely what the chapters in the current volume accomplish, and interested readers could pick out any one of them to get a sense for the future of developmental science. For this is it: as a field we have increasingly moved away from universal models of development while also becoming increasingly inclusive of the experiences of diverse youth. There is no turning back. But as we make this progress, we simply must not lose site of the larger issues of the kind we raised here.

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