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Why Developmental Research on Social Categorization Needs Intersectionality

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Abstract

Children develop rich concepts of social categories throughout early and middle childhood. Whereas much is known about the development and consequences of many social categories individually, less is known about the development of representations at the intersection of multiple categories—for instance, how children think about race and gender together. This is a critical issue because every person a child meets holds membership in multiple social categories. Thus, overlooking how children integrate information about multiple categories causes a major gap in our understanding of the development of social cognition. An intersectional framework, which considers both how group-based bias is expressed towards people with one vs. multiple minoritized identities and also how power structures shape these processes, can help to address this issue. Using research on children’s use of race and gender, we describe how an intersectional framework can address gaps in knowledge and advance both equity and theory.

Keywords: intersectionality, social cognition, race, gender

From infancy, social categories structure how children make sense of the social environment. But much of what we know about how social categories shape development comes from research that has considered one category at a time (e.g., gender, Maccoby, 1988; Martin & Little, 1990; race, Hirschfeld, 1995; Mandalaywala et al., 2019; language, Kinzler & Dautel, 2012). Whereas a variety of theoretical perspectives address how and when children might prioritize certain categories over others (e.g., Kinzler, Shutts, & Correll, 2010; Shutts, 2015), there has been less attention to how they interact to shape social perception and cognition across development. Whereas isolating the role of single categories has revealed much about how social categorization shapes early social cognition and behavior, focusing on one category at a time may also result in overlooking unique phenomena that exist at the intersection of multiple social categories and thus replicate system of inequality within developmental science itself. We suggest that an intersectional framework can help address these gaps.

By intersectionality, we refer to the idea established by Black feminist scholars that systems of oppression interact and can result in unique consequences for those who are multiply subordinated (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Although intersectionality is applicable to many axes of subordination (e.g., heterocentrism, ableism), we primarily focus on the nexus of race and gender for both historical and theoretical reasons. First, doing so builds on the theorizing of Black scholars who pioneered the idea of intersectionality (e.g., Crenshaw, 1989), focusing on how racism and sexism intersect to shape the experiences of Black women. Second, gender and race are arguably two of the most salient and meaningful social categories to emerge in early childhood (Shutts, 2015) – the developmental period of focus in this article.

Scholars across areas have recently called for a more intersectional lens to developmental science, including for identity development (e.g., Ghavami, Katsiaficas, & Rogers, 2016) and marginalization (see the special issue edited by Santos & Toomey, 2018). These approaches have yielded important insights into, for example, how adolescents wrestle with and integrate multiple aspects identities and how these processes affect their overall well-being (Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015), as well as how, as another example, queer people of color experience marginalization differently than their White queer counterparts (e.g., Balsam et al, 2011).

We build on this previous work on two main ways. First, we argue for the importance of adopting an intersectional lens even during early childhood. This is because an intersectional lens allows us to critically examine whether children’s representations are susceptible to systemic biases during the developmental window during which these representations are being formed. Second, whereas most previous work integrating intersectionality into developmental science has focused on the *target* side (i.e., the experience of multiple marginalization), here we focus on the *perceiver* side. Thus, similar to previous work that uses an intersectional lens to critically evaluate existing models of identity development, here we use an intersectional lens to highlight how existing theories and models might fall short of accounting for how children develop and engage in social categorization and intergroup biases. In doing so, we hope to help shape a more robust and equitable approach to understanding of the development of social categorization.

**A few caveats**

There are two important caveats for readers to keep in mind when thinking about the adopting an intersectional framework: the psychological process and the cultural context. For example, in competitive intergroup contexts, people may be less likely to account for multiple identities and instead maximize between-group differences and within-group similarities (Brewer, 1979). Thus, if a child is situated within one group and there is a salient outgroup that stands in competition, then it is less likely that the child will attend to an outgroup member’s multiple social categories. This sort of outgroup homogeneity effect is evident in basic face-processing starting in infancy and extends through childhood (for a review, see Quinn, Lee, & Pascalis, 2019). Additionally, although we focus primarily on the nexus of race and gender in the United States because of historical and theoretical reasons, we note that this imposes cultural limitations. Researchers who might consider adopting an intersectional lens in other cultural contexts should carefully consider how sociohistorical forces shape which categories are salient and likely interact in early childhood and tailor their question to fit the local social environment (e.g., Moffitt, Juang, & Syed, 2020).

**Considering how hierarchical systems produce variability within groups**

There are two key elements to an intersectional framework. First, that there is variability within groups and second, that these within-group differences must be considered through the lens of systems of inequality. For example, an intersectional perspective holds that the discrimination that Black women experience cannot be understood simply by “adding up” the racism experienced by Black people and the sexism experienced by women, but is instead of its own unique form, in which racism and sexism are completely intertwined to create fundamentally distinct experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

This explicit attention to within-group variability and the hierarchical systems that produce these differences is a departure from the majority of theoretical and empirical work on social cognitive development, which often considers one social category at a time. For example, theoretically, Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2006) focuses on the factors that make one category salient over others in particular contexts, which then allows researchers to test the consequences of category activation on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The goal of making one category salient at a time has guided much empirical research. For example, when examining how children think about gender, stimuli are often matched on race in order to make gender the most salient characteristic (e.g., Bian, Leslie, & Cimpian 2015; Rhodes & Gelman, 2009; Waxman, 2010). Similarly, when examining how children might use race as a social category, stimuli are often matched on gender in order to ensure race is the most salient characteristic (e.g., Killen, Kelly, Richardson, & Jampol, 2010; Kinzler & Spelke, 2011). These studies have yielded important insights into how race- and gender-based biases emerge, allowing for clear causal inferences about the role of these social categories in shaping how children navigate the social world. However, they also miss how social biases may be expressed differently towards different members of a group. That is, we may be only examining how children develop sexism in the context of evaluating one particular racial group (often White people) and racism only in the context of one gender, ignoring unique phenomena that occur when considering both racism and sexism simultaneously.

Consistent with the possibility that considering one category at a time overlooks important phenomena, developmental research on implicit bias has largely been taken to support the conclusion that implicit pro-White and anti-Black biases emerge in early childhood at rates that remain stable across development (Dunham, Baron, & Banaji, 2008). But recent work from an intersectional perspective calls the nature of this bias into question. In particular, in an affect misattribution test, predominantly White children showed more immediate negative affective reactions to neutral stimuli following Black boys’ faces versus White boys’ faces but did not show differentiated affective reactions to stimuli following Black girls’ faces vs. White girls’ faces (Perszyk, Lei, et al., 2019), suggesting that race and gender information interact to shape the early development of racial bias. Similarly, the early development of gender stereotypes about *brilliance—*where boys are more likely than girls to think of members of their own gender as brilliant—appears to be unique to how children think about *White* people (Bian et al., 2015). When children are instead asked to think about Black men and women; if anything, children are more likely to associate Black women with brilliance than Black men (Jaxon, Lei, et al., 2019). Theoretical approaches that focus on the consequences of activating one category at a time (e.g., Bigler & Liben, 2006; Kinzler et al., 2010) cannot explain these findings; here, children’s attitudes and beliefs can only be understood by considering how they integrate information about multiple categories together.

An intersectional perspective prompts us to consider not only whether some groups experience more bias than others, but how bias might be manifested differently for different groups. For example, Lei and colleagues (2020) traced the early development of a unique form of bias in children’s representations of Black women—that of intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Intersectional invisibility emerges when someone is not seen as prototypical of the social categories to which they belong. In the case of race and gender, then, this can manifest as Black women as less prototypical of their gender category. Indeed, by early childhood, children were slower to identify Black women as members of their gender, and more likely to mis-categorize the gender of Black women, relative to White and Asian women (Lei et al., 2020). Children were also less likely to ascribe stereotypically feminine traits such as nice or empathetic to Black women relative to White and Asian women. The authors found no affirmative evidence that these racialized gender prototypes differ by the child’s own racial background, despite having White, Black, and Asian children in the sample.

These studies highlight the need to explicitly acknowledge the variability in how bias is expressed towards groups (e.g., in this case, that Black men and women might experience discrimination differently) and that our understanding of social inequality is incomplete without this acknowledgment. As noted above, power structures are a key force that gives rise to this variability and shapes how bias is manifested and experienced for different members of a group (e.g., Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Roberts & Rizzo, 2020; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Consideration of power structures asks us to think about not only what social categories emerge (e.g., boy, girl), but more importantly how these categories are organized hierarchically (e.g., boy > girl) to both reflect and perpetuate ideologies such as androcentrism (centering men), ethnocentrism (centering dominant racial groups) and heterocentrism (centering straight people).

This consideration of systems of inequality, drawn from an intersectional perspective, allows us to build on prior theoretical models in new ways. For example, DIT posits that four main inputs (explicit labeling, implicit use, proportional group size, and perceptual discrimination) all contribute to making a category salient (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Although DIT recognizes that these factors likely interact in some way, there is less consideration of how exactly that interaction happens, whether the inputs differ in relative strength or importance, and how different environmental factors might shape the nature of the interaction between inputs. Below, we highlight two of the inputs DIT identifies as important for making categories salient—labeling and implicit use—and note how an intersectional perspective helps us better understand not only why some groups are marginalized, but also why others are privileged.

Language has long been identified as a key means by which children form social categories. For example, using gendered labels (e.g., “Good morning boys and girls”) results in greater gender stereotyping and gender discrimination in play behavior (Hilliard & Liben, 2010). From the DIT perspective, gender (broadly construed) is made salient through the use of explicit labeling. In contrast, an intersectional perspective asks us to also consider how other inputs may influence who children are thinking of when thinking of “boys” or “girls”. For instance, race is often implicitly used in many facets of a child’s world, from the racial demographic makeup of their neighborhoods, to the books, television, and other media they consume (Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). This implicit use of race is likely to shape how children’s representations of gender are constructed and consequently activated. For example, children who grow up in a majority White neighborhood are likely to have and use representations of *White* men and women. Similarly, when groups are described in *relational* ways that may plant the seeds of inequality (e.g., Chestnut & Markman, 2018), children may be influenced by the implicit use of race and thus have a constrained representation. For example, hearing that “girls are just as good as boys” communicates to children that boys are the default, higher status group (Chestnut & Markman, 2018), but this may only be activating the idea that *White* boys are higher status than *White* girls.

These examples highlight how intersectionality’s call for recognition of systems of inequality can be integrated with socio-ecological approaches to understanding development (e.g., Roy, 2018). As Roy (2018) notes, for example, understanding how the composition of neighborhood demographics both creates and reflect racialized and gendered power structures provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of developmental processes, such as identity development (e.g., Oyserman & Yoon, 2009). Thus, capturing neighborhood-level measures of inequality allows researchers to more critically examine what structural factors shape who is welcomed into certain spaces and who is kept out.

We build on this integration by considering how intersectionality and systems-level approaches can jointly serve as a framework for us to deepen our understanding of how categorization processes unfold over early childhood. More specifically, in the discussion on labeling and implicit use, adults’ explicit labeling (which occurs in the micro-system) is informed by how systems of inequality (i.e., their macrosystem) shape children’s environments and thus their implicit use. We believe that this type of integration strengthens the theoretical underpinnings of how children develop social categories, but also highlights the importance of structural inequalities in shaping basic cognitive processes.

**Adopting intersectionality to move developmental science forward**

An intersectional framework calls on us to ask new conceptual questions and re-examine older questions. We also recognize that new questions and ways of thinking beget new methodological concerns, which bring with them other challenges. Many of these challenges are inherent to all of developmental science: more trials, more participants, and more power—all of which are necessary to create a robust empirical literature. There are also specific challenges with respect to adopting an intersectional perspective. For example, Syed (2010) note that the translation of what intersectionality means exactly across disciplines (and sub-disciplines) is one of the main stumbling blocks.

This difficulty in translation can be challenging in multiple ways. For example, an emphasis on 2 x 2 designs has been criticized as an inadequate methodological framework for considering the complexity of human experience, including questions of intersectionality (e.g., Bowleg, 2008; Syed, 2021). Although this problem has been highlighted in research on identity development, it also applies to research on the conceptual development and use of social categories. At its core, the problem is that the constraints of a typical 2 x 2 design do not allow for either qualitative differences, or emergent properties (e.g., Kunda, Miller, & Claire, 1990). To illustrate, Perszyk, Lei, and colleagues (2019) asked children how they felt about Black men, Black women, White men, and White women and showed differential liking for Black men vs. Black women, but the structure of the design did not allow for participants to note other ways that Black women might experience bias. One way to address this challenge is to shift from broader operationalizations of bias (e.g., feeling thermometers) to better specify the construct of interest.

This shift to greater specificity is a way of not only encouraging researchers to read more broadly (to better understand what the specific construct might be), but also integrating qualitative research and quantitative research (a key challenge of bringing intersectionality into psychology). That is, by more fully considering the unique experiences of people with multiple minoritized identities (such as invisibility for Black women, Lei et al., 2020; or exoticization for Asian women, Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2019) and using that as the basis for the research design, researchers can conduct more focused hypothesis testing, instead of just testing for potential differences among an increasing number of experimental cells.

**Conclusion**

This is an exciting moment for researchers interested in how children come to conceptualize and represent the social world around them. However, in order to develop a robust and generalizable understanding of children’s social cognitive development, we must take efforts to ensure our science is as inclusive as possible. To this end, we join other developmental scientists who have called for diversifying the racial backgrounds of participant samples we recruit (e.g., Roberts et al., 2020) and for shifting away from thinking of social categories as binary (e.g., Dunham & Olson, 2016).

There is also more and more recognition among researchers who study cognitive development that our work has the potential to have a meaningful impact on addressing racial inequality. For example, perceptual individuation training for Black faces led Chinese children to express less anti-Black bias (e.g., Qian et al., 2017). These interventions focused on cognitive processes are clearly important; however, they may be amplified by also considering the systems of inequality that shape their usage, as well as whether they operate the same for all members of the stigmatized group. Ultimately, we believe that adopting an intersectional perspective is crucial to truly accomplish our goal of bringing science to bear on understanding and addressing social inequality.

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