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## I-O at a Crossroad: The Value of an Intersectional Research Approach

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The focal article written by Bergman and Jean (2016) draws attention to a critical void in the industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology domain: the study of low- and medium-skill workers. Although segmenting employees based on their job status may provide new conceptualizations of employee work experiences, this approach may not provide the nuanced view necessary to fully comprehend the many ways in which employees differentially experience the workplace. Within this category of workers, experiences may vary based on employees’ race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), or other identity-defining characteristics, and these person-specific identities may interact with one another. An intersectional research approach provides a foundation on which researchers can more fully understand how individuals’ multiple social identities interact to affect their workplace experiences. In the commentary that follows, we provide an overview of intersectional research and describe how such a perspective would lead to meaningful developments within I-O psychology.

### **Intersectionality Defined**

Intersectionality refers to the multiple identities an individual holds and the ways in which these identities interact to influence an individual’s life across domains (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989). The complex intersection of social identities, such as gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, SES, age, religion, disability, and gender identity, lead to markedly different experiences

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for individuals both within and between social groups, mainly due to there being a dominant majority and a minority group for each of those dimensions. Intersectional research provides a microanalysis of individuals and elucidates how the interaction of multiple social identities influences their attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and experiences.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) was originally coined as a term to describe how Black women uniquely experienced employment discrimination in the decades following the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. On the basis of how the law was interpreted in court, Black women were not eligible for legal protection due to a lack of sufficient evidence of race-based (i.e., Black men were not discriminated against) or gender-based (i.e., White women were not discriminated against) discrimination (see Crenshaw, 1989, for further detail on the court cases). Crenshaw articulated how a focus on the more privileged groups within a social identity (i.e., Black men due to their gender and White women due to their race) led to a marginalization of the less privileged groups (i.e., Black women) who were disadvantaged on the basis of concurrent identities. Indeed, privilege refers to special advantages or entitlements that are granted to individuals within a dominant group due to their status within society (Black & Stone, 2005). Privilege, and its corresponding phenomenon disadvantage (i.e., for one group to be privileged, another is disadvantaged; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007), exists on various dimensions. For example, a person may be a Native American, heterosexual, disabled man and therefore privileged on his sexual orientation and gender but disadvantaged due to his race and disability status. Thus, intersectionality research is dependent on understanding how social identities contribute to the extent to which one maintains social privilege as well as disadvantage.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) proposed an extension of this idea, intersectional invisibility, whereby individuals with multiple subordinate-group identities (e.g., ethnic minority woman) are perceived as nonprototypical members within their respective identity groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women) and subsequently are rendered invisible. Thus, the value of intersectional research is the ability to examine how intersecting identities create both privilege and disadvantage, yielding benefits and hindrances (or both) depending on the particular identity groups that comprise the individual as well as the social context in which certain identity groups are made salient (Collins, 1990). The broader psychology domain has only recently acknowledged the utility of intersectional research despite its prevalence in other related research domains. Across the social sciences, the intersection of identities has been shown to influence sexual harassment perceptions (Welsh, Carr, MacQuarrie, & Huntley, 2006), gender and racial stereotypes (Sesko & Biernat, 2010; Steinbugler, Press, & Dias, 2006), learning and

work experiences (Kvasny, Trauth, & Morgan, 2009), as well as disparities in mental health status (Rosenfield, 2012). Despite these findings, the existing I-O psychology literature has largely overlooked how intersecting identities critically affect employees' workplace experiences. In illustration of this point, a PsycINFO search for the terms "intersectional" or "intersectionality" in published abstracts yields nearly 1,000 results; yet, fewer than 20 are in journals that are directly related to the organizational sciences. Still, this is not to disparage or discount these cases, as they lay the foundations for the present discussion (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Derous, Ryan, & Serlie, 2014).

Thus, we agree with Bergman and Jean about the need for increased research on low-status jobs, but we believe research that examines job status may prove detrimental if that call is heeded without an intersectional focus. Although job status is one mechanism that may explain variability in employees' work experiences, it cannot be assumed that employees segmented into similar jobs will have identical or even comparable experiences. Rather, an individual's social identities are likely to influence the way he or she perceives and occupies the workplace. *Increased attention to job status alone, used as a grouping variable, may continue to mask the influence of these identity intersections on social phenomena and lead to intersectional invisibility among lower status workers from nonprototypical worker backgrounds.* Below, we discuss why intersectional research is integral to the study of workers and how ignoring such nuanced differences negatively affects psychological science. We conclude with considerations for implementing intersectional research in I-O psychology.

### **Intersectionality Theory and I-O**

The foundation of intersectional research is rooted in uncovering how individuals uniquely experience and interact with their environments based on the power and status that their identity groups afford. Disregarding assumptions about similarity allows researchers to better understand how intersecting identities can lead to drastically different experiences that may be otherwise overlooked. Thus, job status may be one important identity to which an individual subscribes, but it likely is not the only one. Individuals also hold identities related to their gender, race, SES, and sexual orientation that are likely to shape their opportunities and experiences, especially in the workplace (Acker, 2006).

Status characteristics theory, for example, posits that individuals will be judged as less competent and effective in their work based on their status characteristics (e.g., gender, race, social class, etc.; Berger, Ridgeway, & Zelditch, 2002). The extent to which individuals possess multiple characteristics that may be deemed inferior could also influence the extent to which

these evaluations influence career progression and well-being. Theories that explicitly hypothesize about the experiences of members in multiple subordinate groups have also been proposed. The double jeopardy hypothesis accounts for the increased prejudice and discrimination that ethnic minority women may face and has been extended to account for “third” and “fourth” levels of jeopardy based on social class and sexual orientation (Beale, 1979; King, 1988). Similarly, the subordinate male hypothesis is rooted in social dominancy theory and argues that competition for resources among men may lead to ethnic minority men facing more difficulties due to their direct competition with White men (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These theories do not serve to tally levels of disadvantage or argue who has it worse (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) but rather serve to articulate how multiple category memberships that vary with regard to levels of privilege and disadvantage influence worker experiences. We believe that considering worker status in addition to these other variables will inform our knowledge of the experiences of all forms of people within worker categories.

Organizational scientists often make concerted efforts to theorize about the influence of individual diversity on psychological and organizational phenomena in the workplace. Examples can be found in nearly all subsets of organizational research; leadership (Hooijberg & DiTomaso, 1996), recruitment (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1993), and emotions and well-being research (Fox & Stallworth, 2005) are particularly salient areas. However, as we become aware of the potential benefits of intersectional perspectives in organizational research, it is useful to identify ways in which our current understanding of phenomena may be enhanced by applying an intersectional lens. Indeed, to ignore the possibility that substantive differences exist among the experiences and perspectives of more constrained groups of individuals (e.g., Black women and White men vs. general Black/White differences) is to imply that the most individually held differences are not inherently meaningful to the organization. As psychologists and social scientists, we must reject this premise as antithetical to the purpose of our discipline and the impact it is intended to have on workplaces and those that work within them. Below we briefly discuss three key areas in which intersectional approaches may generate a more holistic view of employees’ individual work experiences.

### **Gender Intersections**

I-O research is replete with examples of how men and women have markedly different workplace experiences driven in part by pay and status inequalities (AAUW, 2015) as well as stereotypes that prescribe gendered job roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 1983; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989). For example, an examination of employees clustered in jobs characterized by nonstandard working hours (e.g., cashier, janitor, food service)

revealed that men and women had different motivations for pursuing such jobs (Presser, 2003). Women were more likely to report familial-personal reasons (e.g., better childcare arrangements) as the motivation for working nonstandard hours than were men, who were more likely to report perceptions of inflexible job constraints (e.g., the nature of the job requires nonstandard hours). This illustration suggests that generalizing work motivations across job context may overlook critical gender differences that predict important future outcomes, such as job satisfaction or turnover intentions. Gender identity may also intersect with personal and environmental factors to predict important organizational phenomena, such as sexual harassment. Berdahl and Moore (2006) demonstrated that women with more masculine personalities and those who worked in male-dominated organizations were more likely to experience sexual harassment than were less masculine women or those in female-dominated organizations. These findings demonstrate the complexity of workplace sexual harassment, a phenomenon characterized by both gender and job context and likely to be at least somewhat misunderstood in situations when such intersections are not examined.

### **Race Intersections**

I-O psychologists have long studied the disparate workplace experiences of White and non-White employees. However, such studies typically treat race as an explanatory variable, thereby failing to consider constructs that may explain *how* or *why* an employee's race/ethnicity would contribute to understanding the phenomena of interest (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). Here, an intersectional approach can advance the literature by more fully considering how race intersects with other identities (e.g., job status) to impact employees' attitudes and behaviors.

Take, for instance, the phenomena of work–family conflict, which has been shown to be particularly pernicious for nonprofessional workers (Heymann, 2000). Such findings suggest that professionals and nonprofessionals would differentially report work–family conflict, with those in low-status positions experiencing higher levels of conflict. However, an intersectional research approach such as the one employed by Grzywacz et al. (2007) revealed that race/ethnicity and job status intersected in an important way for immigrant Latino poultry workers. These individuals reported work–family conflict as a rare occurrence because stable employment was perceived as a family benefit, not a hindrance. Also, women experienced significantly higher levels of work–family conflict than did men, which was attributed to the way men and women were differentially affected by physical job demands. Taken together, these results demonstrate that job status alone cannot predict work–family conflict and that an intersectional approach more accurately elucidates the nuances of this phenomenon.

### **Class Intersections**

In comparison with other social identities, there is a dearth of I-O research that examines employees' class identities despite the meaning individuals afford to class, especially as they move between contexts (Frable, 1997). For example, the diminished status of both women and ethnic minorities in the workplace has been discussed at length across research domains (Morrison & von Glinow, 1990), yet rarely is class considered in these studies as more than a control variable. Investigating how these identities (e.g., low SES, Latino, female) influence outcomes such as occupational choice, career advancement, and job satisfaction has the potential to highlight definitive cultural and perceptual differences that drive individual and group experiences in the workplace.

The intersection of class identities in conjunction with job status may lead to significant advancements in the literature. Research by Greenhaus, Parasuraman, and Wormley (1990) demonstrated that African American managers were less likely to have supervisors consider them eligible for advancement and reported lower career satisfaction than did White managers. This effect mirrors what would be expected given our understanding of the proverbial "glass ceiling" that impedes the advancement of nonmale, non-White individuals in the workplace (Maume, 1999). However, an intersectional perspective that categorizes these experiences by both ethnicity and socioeconomic identity may provide interesting context to these results. For example, the career satisfaction of African American managers from low SES backgrounds may be greater than their high SES counterparts, given that status as a manager alone may defy the expectations laid out by the individual's initially lower economic station (Whitely, Dougherty, & Dreher, 1991). Thus, one's identity as originating from a lower "class" may fundamentally change the way organizational processes are interpreted, even when compared with individuals who share another aspect of that individual's identity (e.g., race, gender). Although the above is speculative, it serves to emphasize the detail that is left out of research reports when identity intersection is not considered.

### **Conducting Research Through an Intersectional Approach**

As with any empirical research process, an intersectional approach should be strongly rooted in theory. Intersectional research goes beyond simply testing the extent to which individuals in groups are different from one another by considering the historical, social, and cultural implications associated with an individual's multiple identities. This allows for inspection of how social identities are positioned in relation to one another, leading to differential attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals within those groups. Theory-driven hypotheses should predict when and why intersecting iden-



tities stipulate meaningful differences across workplace experiences and require researchers to have a deep understanding of the individuals they wish to study. Intersectional research questions include accounting for power and resource differentials between groups and for institutional factors that systematically privilege and disadvantage certain groups (Hancock, 2007; Özbilgin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011). This ensures that differences are understood in light of systematic institutional and societal factors.

Researchers have sometimes tested the impact of intersecting identities through additive (i.e., main effects) or multiplicative combinations (i.e., interaction effects). However, using these approaches may not yield informative results, especially as multiplicative studies (e.g., three and four-way interactions) can produce complex, uninterpretable findings that do not further our true understanding of how identities interact with one another (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). Thus, researchers may need to forgo analyses that assume a majority versus minority perspective (i.e., between group differences) and instead dissect within-group differences, requiring researchers to focus hypotheses and processes on the needs of a specific population. Consequently, hypotheses should evolve beyond using social identities as predictors of phenomena and instead explicate how such identities constitute contextual or criterion-based variables (Parent et al., 2013).

In addition to the above-mentioned analytical strategies, it may be necessary for researchers to adopt a phenomenological approach to understanding intersecting identities. Intersectional research necessitates that researchers understand how multiple identities shape the meaning and experiences related to work, and qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups) provide a mechanism through which rich content can be collected. Although qualitative research can be time intensive, it can provide a holistic examination of organizational processes and phenomena that may not be represented in quantitative research methods. Of note, qualitative methods do not lend themselves to making predictions or comparing the extent to which differences exist. This does, however, come with the benefit of uncovering additional results that have previously gone unnoticed but may extend theory (Maracek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997; Warner, 2008).

We do not prescribe that researchers rely on either quantitative or qualitative methodologies but instead suggest that the most meaningful research contributions may be yielded via mixed-methodology designs (Lee, 1998). The qualitative component allows researchers to identify and understand how complex social phenomena are shaped by individual identities, whereas the quantitative component allows the relationships among such processes to be tested statistically. The complexity inherent to intersection-driven re-

search questions may require multiple methods to uncover a holistic representation of the relationships in question (Hancock, 2007).

At first glance, it may appear overwhelming to consider multiple identities at a time given the complexity and specificity of the research questions and processes. However, this approach is exactly what is needed to truly understand the human experience and advance research within the I-O psychology domain. As a closing note, it is important to recognize that researchers cannot feasibly address the totality of social identities in every research study. However, understanding how more than one identity intersects may alter the ways in which research questions are proposed, hypotheses are written, and analyses are conducted.

### Conclusion

As I-O psychologists, it is our responsibility to identify and understand the workplace issues critical to employees. According to Bergman and Jean, researchers can meet this obligation by expanding the job domains in which I-O psychology research is focused. We extend their argument by proposing the importance of intersectional research and by explicating the benefits associated with adopting an intersectional approach. Thus, studying employees' multiple social identities, of which job status may be one, can lead to both theoretical and practical advancements that ultimately improve work experiences for all individuals.

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