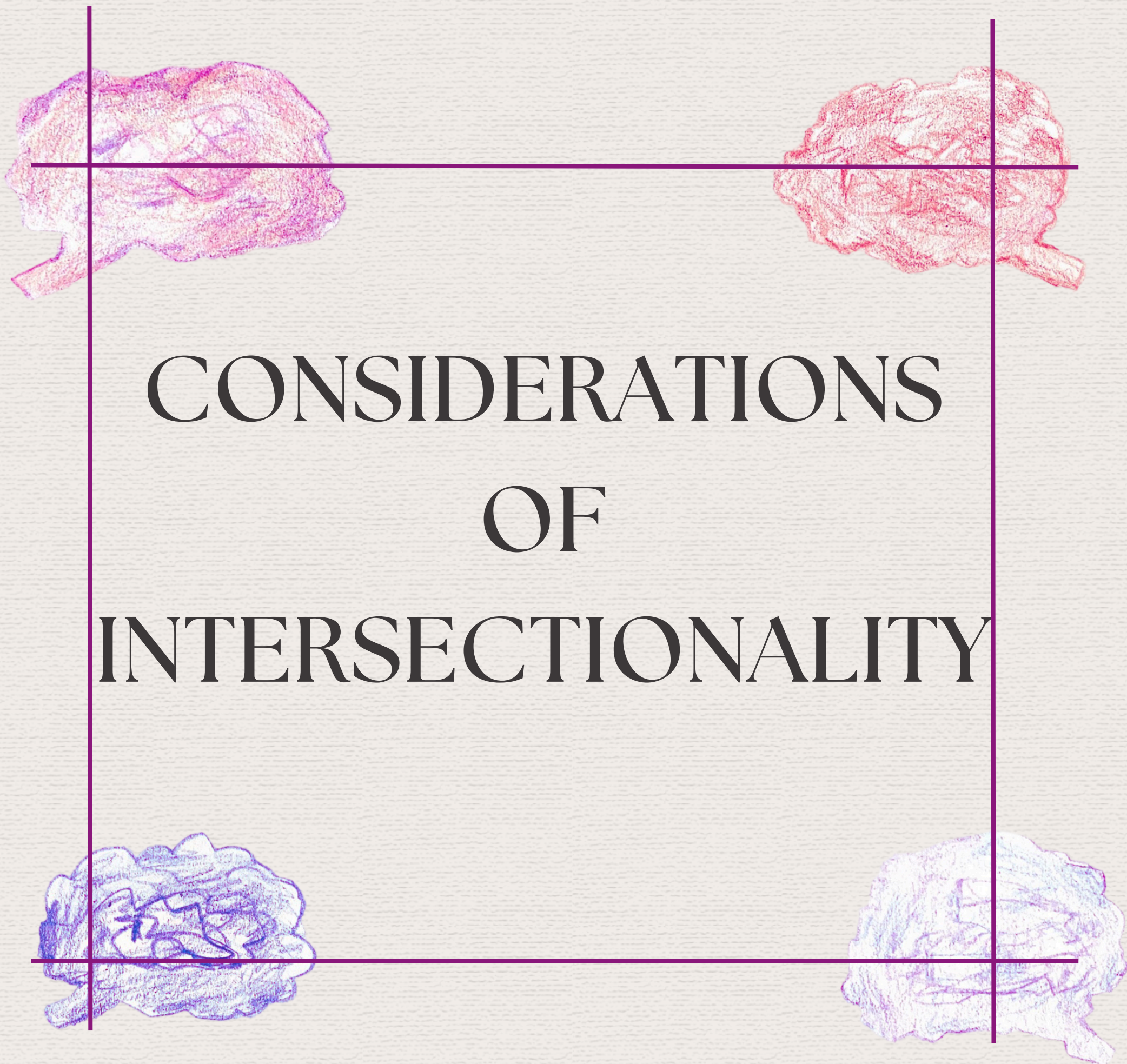


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BY ABIGAIL NICOLL



CONSIDERATIONS  
OF  
INTERSECTIONALITY

*In Psychological Research*

ARTWORK BY DAISY MARSH

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### **Introduction to Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a critical, theoretical, and analytical framework which emerged in the literature around the 1970s. The Combahee River Collective, a group of African American feminists, published a radical statement articulating how the struggles of Black women could not be appreciated by mainstream feminist or racial equality movements (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2018). Their statement advocated for a more inclusive approach to activism and called for the complete dismantling of existing oppressive power structures in the name of social justice. Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the term 'intersectionality' in the late 1980s as part of her pioneering work on the unique discriminatory experiences faced by individuals with intersecting social identities. Crenshaw postulated that existing frameworks addressing gender and race inequalities did not adequately account for the experiences of Black women because they experience a complex combination of interlocking oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Her work rejected the traditional single-axis approach to discrimination, which analyses each dimension of identity in isolation and overlooks the compounding effects of multiple forms of oppression. Crenshaw supported the view that identities and group memberships are fluid, socially constructed, and vary across contexts, rather than being fixed or objective attributes.

Intersectional frameworks provide a more nuanced understanding of individual outcomes, for example experiences with prejudice or disparities in access to opportunities. According to intersectionality, such outcomes are a consequence of the convergence of multiple identities and the social positioning of individuals and groups within systems of power and inequality.

The intersectional approach requires an understanding of the interconnected nature of group memberships and how they are constructed and

maintained within systems of inequality (Cole, 2009; Hurtado & Sinha, 2008). The development of an individual's identity is situated within historical and cultural contexts (Fine, 2018) and involves the construction and reconstruction of narratives through social experiences (Azmitia et al., 2023; Erikson, 1968; Hammack, 2008). The intersectional perspective also involves consideration of the varying levels of power held by each identity that constructs an intersectional position (Dhamoon, 2011). In order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between group membership and oppression, the power structures that perpetuate inequalities must be acknowledged (McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). It is also important to recognise that the concept of intersectionality is not exclusively applicable to members of multiple marginalised groups; privileged identities are also part of intersectional positions (Knowles & Marshburn, 2010). Most individuals possess both marginalised and privileged identities, resulting in fluid and nuanced experiences of power that are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression and privilege (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014). For example, a White lesbian experiences a disadvantaged intersectional position relative to men and heterosexual women, but is advantaged relative to non-white lesbians (Shields, 2008).

### **Why Intersectionality is Important in Psychological Research**

At the forefront of the increasingly popular intersectionality agenda in psychology is the wellbeing of individuals. The British Psychological Society states that a key principle of psychological research is to "consider societal benefits" and "contribute to the common good" (BPS, 2021). There is an abundance of evidence on the harmful outcomes of negative intergroup relations and systemic oppression on marginalised individuals. For example, marginalised groups often experience educational and economic disadvantages

(Porter, 2011) alongside both physical and mental health disparities (English et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2021; Stevens-Watkins et al., 2014).

Consequently, psychology as a discipline should prioritise advocating for a more equitable society.

Intersectional perspectives facilitate a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour and mental health within specific social and historical contexts, thus improving the accuracy and inclusivity of psychological research across diverse populations. For example, research suggests Black women experience higher rates of depression and anxiety than their White counterparts yet are less likely to seek psychological help due to cultural barriers, stigma, and widespread distrust in healthcare systems (Ward et al., 2013). While these challenges are likely rooted in systemic racial discrimination and gender-based oppression, an intersectional approach advocates that Black women face unique stressors inexplicable by race or gender in isolation, rather the impact of the complex interplay of multiple identities. As social categories play an integral role in individual mental health and life outcomes, adopting an intersectional approach in psychological research and services is essential to ensure the mental wellbeing of all individuals and the development of effective and inclusive interventions.

### **Limitations of Traditional Psychological Frameworks**

Thus far, intersectionality has been largely neglected in social psychological research (Bowleg, 2017) as social identities are often assumed to be immutable and distinct from one another (Cole, 2009; Yoder & Kahn, 2003). Previous research has examined individual group memberships in isolation, through either a categorical or additive lens, and often limits analyses to a single axis (Goff & Kahn, 2013). However, social identities must be studied in conjunction with one another to achieve a

truly comprehensive understanding of an individual's experiences (Rosenthal, 2016), as group memberships are mutually reliant on one another for meaning (Shields, 2008). Previous research also demonstrates that individuals with multiple marginalised identities feel more 'invisible' than individuals who experience stigma based on just one aspect of their identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Remedios & Snyder, 2018). Therefore, it is important to consider the unique intersectional position held by individuals to understand how subgroups within marginalised communities experience varying levels of structural stigma.

Current social psychological research tends to focus primarily on the personal outcomes of prejudice and discrimination, often overlooking the broader societal structures that maintain inequalities (Shellae Versey et al., 2019). Influential frameworks such as social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978) and social categorisation theory (SCT; Turner, 1999) have previously been criticised for underestimating the influence of historical, social, and cultural factors (Dashtipour, 2012; Sabik & Shellae Versey, 2023). SIT posits that individuals develop a sense of identity based on social group memberships, while SCT emphasises the cognitive processes underlying the categorisation of the self and others into social groups. Both theories depict social identities as unidimensional and do not adequately consider power dynamics or the interlocking nature of identities (Bowleg, 2017; Shields, 2008). Future research must consider identities within their broader contexts to provide more accurate and nuanced findings (Cho et al., 2013; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008).

Social psychologists have also historically tended to ascribe generalised findings about identity and group membership to entire cultures, disregarding variability within communities (Hammack, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

However, every individual within one social group will also identify with at least one other social group, meaning they each possess a unique intersectional position (Sabik, 2016). This position determines an individual's socially constructed experience of privilege or oppression, which necessitates research into diversity within groups (Cole, 2009). The consequences of seemingly irrelevant categories, such as height, can depend on an individual's intersectional position and the associated structural advantages or disadvantages (Zinn & Dill, 1996). For example, being tall is associated with dominance and success among White men, but results in heightened suspicion and fear towards Black men (Blacker et al., 2013; Hester & Gray, 2018). This highlights the unique experiences of privilege or prejudice that result from intersecting group memberships and power structures (Rosenthal, 2016). Considerations of intersectionality that overlook the effects of power dynamics may be considered 'ornamental' (Bilge, 2013). For instance, the concept of 'multiculturalism' is often criticised for attending to inequality without confronting the underlying power structures (Burman, 2005; Grzanka & Miles, 2016; McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). Incorporating intersectionality theory into psychological research practices can deepen our understanding of differences both between and within social groups (Sabik, 2016), while also considering the influence of hegemonic structures.

Psychologists have recently begun to recognise and rectify the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) sampling bias which has long existed in psychological research. The WEIRD bias frequently limits the generalisability of findings (Henrich et al., 2010) as research which relies on homogenous sample populations cannot accurately represent the experiences of diverse populations (Cole, 2009). The overrepresentation of WEIRD samples results in the overgeneralisation of context-specific experiences

and identities to non-WEIRD samples (Henrich et al., 2010).

The absence of marginalised groups in psychological research samples can significantly disrupt the reliability and generalisability of findings and have meaningful real-world implications. For example, mental health studies and interventions are typically focused on privileged groups, thus increasing the likelihood of misdiagnosis or ineffective treatments for marginalised individuals with mental disorders (Collins, 2017). This is particularly concerning as being a member of a socio-culturally marginalised group is already associated with higher incidence of poor mental health, which may be attributable to higher levels of stress or experiences of discrimination (Benet-Martínez & Hong, 2014; Klonoff et al., 2000). Our understanding of human behaviour is historically centred around dominant groups, therefore underestimating the needs of marginalised communities. Current policies and interventions may only be effective for certain groups, perpetuating systemic patterns of disadvantage and undermining the validity of the field of psychology (Bowleg, 2017). According to decolonial intersectionality frameworks, the WEIRD bias



prioritises Western-centric perspectives and research agendas while neglecting to consider the intersecting identities which shape the diverse human experience (Kurtis & Adams, 2016). To become more inclusive, research practices must also actively centre the diverse perspectives of marginalised communities to enrich current understanding of psychological phenomena and drive positive social change.

Notably, studies which do focus on marginalised groups regularly neglect an intersectional perspective and generalise the experiences of the most socio-politically dominant category of a particular identity to the entire group (Bowleg, 2012). For example, studies investigating higher rates of mental health issues among Black people often adequately reflect the perspective of a heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class Black man, but fail to represent the unique experiences of Black queer individuals, Black women, or Black working-class individuals (Griffith et al., 2011). Therefore, diversity within marginalised communities is often overlooked, resulting in biased studies that could potentially inform mental health interventions or policies which reinforce existing inequalities. This underscores the importance of an intersectional perspective in combination with a diverse sample population.

### **Potential Barriers to Implementing Intersectionality in Psychological Research**

The intersectional approach poses some challenges to psychological research. A common critique is the invisibility effect; individuals with multiple intersecting oppressed identities may be viewed as minority members even within their own marginalised groups (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). As researchers using an intersectional approach may still overlook less visible or less recognised forms of marginalisation, more obvious experiences of oppression receive

disproportionate attention. This effect may be attributed to androcentric, heterocentric, and ethnocentric biases in the context of discrimination (Sabik, 2016). For example, the common ethnocentric bias in Western sexism discourse often results in the invisibility of non-white female perspectives in gender-based discrimination research. Researchers must therefore make a conscious effort to attend to non-prototypical group members by reflecting on their own unconscious biases, prioritising participants' voices, and including critical analysis of existing power structures.

A paradigmatic perspective of social identity, which recognises the dynamic and multifaceted nature of individual identities within their broader social and cultural contexts, is being increasingly adopted by researchers (e.g., Azmitia et al., 2023; Lei & Rhodes, 2021). However, progress is slow, and most mainstream psychological research claiming to use an intersectional lens does not adequately address every core component of intersectionality (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021). Studies to date tend to examine the effects of multiple individual identities, such as gender and race, but fail to take systemic social inequalities into account or challenge dominant social paradigms (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Collins, 2017). The intersectional approach critiques this current narrative, as merely identifying the presence of intersecting identities does not adequately address the roots of deeply entrenched systems of inequality. For example, it is not sufficient to research disparities such as racial and gender inequality in leadership positions without also examining and challenging overarching issues and root causes such as institutional sexism in corporate policies or access to education. Moreover, intersectionality requires recognition of not just the most visible aspects of identity which dominate social psychological research (race and gender), but also factors such as sexuality, disability, or

socioeconomic status which contribute to individual experiences of oppression. Mennies et al (2020) claimed to have advanced the field, as they used a diverse representative dataset and considered systemic oppression when analysing disparities in mental health outcomes. However, it has been argued that their study cannot be classified as intersectional research because their definition of intersectionality was narrow and implied that only marginalised people are relevant to intersectionality theory (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021). Mennies et al (2020) also used an overly depoliticised approach, failing to include a call to action for social justice, a key component of intersectional psychological research. If researchers fail to attend to the need for radical structural change, intersectionality's social justice roots may be left behind (Collins & Bilge, 2020; May, 2015).

### **Future Directions for Considerations of Intersectionality in Psychological Research**

There remains a gap in the literature on how to apply a critical intersectional lens to effect social change and address discrimination (Al-Faham et al., 2019), in line with one of the integral aims of psychological research (BPS, 2021). A recent pragmatic framework called 'The 8 Inclusion Needs of All People' (Wilson, 2023) aimed to simplify the many potential combinations of intersectional identities and address the contextual implications of intersecting groups. These eight fundamental needs (access, space, opportunity, representation, allowance, language, respect, and support) collectively aim to address the complex lived realities of individuals with various intersecting identities. Each of these needs addresses an aspect of societal inclusion, providing broader scope for the analysis of context-dependent manifestations and implications of intersecting identities. Wilson's model builds upon Crenshaw's foundational work and operationalises the concept of intersectionality by translating the original theoretical framework

into methodological tools for empirical research and social change. The model proposes a practical solution for governments and organisations to incorporate the needs of diverse groups and create interventions which enhance inclusivity and mitigate discrimination. However, Wilson's framework is yet to be empirically tested and may be overly reductionist due to the simplification of complex intersectional identities and individual inclusion needs. Moreover, the model may not adequately address the structurally embedded nature of discrimination and inequality. In order to address these potential limitations, Wilson's framework should be empirically tested across a wide range of cultural, social, and institutional settings and could include metrics to assess systemic barriers and the institutional structures that perpetuate inequality.

To conclude, the integration of effective intersectional frameworks within psychological research has the potential to yield more nuanced and representative findings, ultimately reducing systemic biases in mental health care, interventions, and social policies, while advancing equality. Studies may improve public understanding of the complex interplay of identities and systemic power structures, therefore driving social change and combatting ignorance. More effective and inclusive specialised assessments and treatments could be developed to address the diverse needs and experiences of various intersecting identities. Furthermore, psychological research must actively challenge the status quo (systems deeply entrenched in systemic oppression) to facilitate progress towards a more equitable society and gradually dismantle stringent power structures which maintain inequalities. Such a radical shift demands a greater consideration of intersectionality and social justice in psychological research methodologies, implications, and practical applications, with the aim of improving general wellbeing and mental health outcomes.

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