

Intersectionality in Sociology

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Introduction

Intersectional approaches arose from feminist scholarship, which recognized that there were important differences among women and men rather than simply between them. Feminist scholars argued that gender, race and class are interconnected as “intersecting oppressions” (Crenshaw 1989). While attention to intersectionality has increased over the last several decades, it is not clear how much of an impact this has on mainstream sociological scholarship. This fact sheet explores the presence of intersectional research in sociology journals, based on our coding of intersectional research in articles published in top sociology journals in 2009. At the most basic level, we are interested in where intersectional research appears, and how frequently it appears, in order to provide a mapping of the conceptual terrain of the discipline.

We find that intersectional research is being published in sociology journals, but is limited to a few journals and a few topic areas. While many mainstream journals, including *Social Problems*, *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS) and *American Sociological Review* (ASR) do publish intersectional work, intersectional scholarship is less visible in many journals and topic areas where an intersectional analysis might seem relevant, such as *Sociology of Education* and *Work & Occupations*. Intersectional scholarship is also most often displayed in empirical research but we believe that more theoretical and methodological scholarship that examines the challenges and rewards of intersectional scholarship would be a fruitful avenue for further development.

Did you know?

In the top twenty journals in sociology, *Gender & Society* contained the most intersectional articles (sixty-nine percent of the articles it published in 2009). Other journals with high rates of intersectional articles include *Ethnic & Racial Studies* (thirty-three percent), *Journal of Marriage & Family* (twenty-five percent), and *Social Problems* (twenty-five percent).

Defining Intersectionality

Before coding the articles, we needed to define intersectionality. Race, class and gender, have been the traditional triumvirate of intersectional studies, but we took a broad approach and also included studies that examine the intersections of any social statuses including sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and age. In addition, authors did not need to define their research as “intersectional” for us to code it as such.

Because intersectionality is practiced in a variety of ways by sociologists (McCall 2005; Prins 2006; Walby 2009; Choo and Ferree 2010), we coded for these different approaches. There are at least three different intersectional approaches that can be identified in the literature, and we identified articles as intersectional when they used any of these three approaches.

1. **Inclusion/Voice Models:** Intersectionality may refer to a sharp focus on a disadvantaged group – such as low-income disabled African-American men – to give voice to their experiences and perspectives. As Choo and Ferree (2010) argue, this approach is meant to focus on inclusion of previously marginalized groups. McCall (2005, 1780) defines this approach as “intracategorical,” which is “typically either a single social category at a neglected point of intersection of multiple master categories or a particular social setting or ideological construction, or both.” For example, Adia Harvey Wingfield’s (2009) research has examined the experiences of minority men in nursing. Although earlier research by Christine Williams had shown how men in fields dominated by women tended to ride a “glass escalator” rather than confront a glass ceiling, Wingfield’s study shows how race and gender intersect to limit the upward mobility available to minority men through the “glass escalator.” The inclusion approach argues that a particular social group is concurrently constituted by multiple statuses. This work can also break down simplistic notions of status categories by pointing to substantial heterogeneity within groups.

2. **Relational/Process Models:** As Choo and Ferree (2010, 134) note, a “structural type process-centered analysis” considers the transformations that occur when different statuses meet. Rather than seeing gender and race as additively affecting a person’s experience, they consider both how gender is raced, and race is gendered. Many scholars who take this approach, defined as “intercategorical” by McCall (2005), focus on categories to identify patterns of relations between them. For example, studies may explore how two statuses interact, as in research that shows how a felony record may have dramatically different effects on employment opportunities for black men in comparison to white men in entry-level jobs (Pager 2003). Here, felony records (among men) interact with race to create different, intersectional experiences. These relational models also see privilege and disadvantage as related – whiteness itself needs to be theorized to understand why a felony record has much less of an effect on white men's employment chances. In a relational/process approach, race is able to simultaneously have its own effect on employment chances, as well as a separate effect in interaction with felony status. (The possibility that race or any status could have its own, separate effect differentiates relational/process from the systemic approach described below.) Relational-process models may also attempt to identify whether certain categories are more or less salient in a given situation, and even while this approach is often adopted with the strategic aim of liberation (McCall 2005), it may ultimately tend to reinforce categories, rather than breaking them down.

3. **Systemic/Anticategorical models:** A final approach may be a fully intersectional model, which does not see any category as more salient than another. Rather, the statuses and their relationships with each other are problematized under the assumption that they continually and mutually constitute each other (Ken 2010). Many of these scholars reject the language of "intersection," even while they make use of race, class, and gender and investigate their relationships. Scholars take a complex and historically grounded approach to understanding intersections as always co-constructing race, gender, class, and other statuses as systemic inequalities (Choo and Ferree 2010). There are no effects of race alone in such an approach, since race must always be read as gendered, classed, sexualized, etc. This approach may also relate to McCall’s (2005) “anti-categorical” approach – in which categories are understood as artificial and exclusionary. Therefore, performances and understandings of statuses change based on context. For example, Nikki Jones’ (2009) research focuses on how young women of color in the inner-city manage their interactions in different situations by drawing on different race, gender, and class performances. These young women illustrate how gender, race and class are accomplished during situated interactions while simultaneously being shaped by structural factors. Such an approach may undermine the relational/process models, which may depend on fixed categories.

Table One: Frequency of Intersectional Research in Top Sociology Journals, 2009.	
Any Intersectional	16.7
Inclusion	6.4
Relational	9.3
Anticategorical	2.6
Controls for multiple statuses	12.0
Total articles: n=700	

As shown in Table One, we found that approximately seventeen percent of articles published in sociology journals in 2009 were intersectional; the majority of these were relational, and the fewest use anti-categorical models. We define intersectional research as different from research that is purely additive in its use of different statuses. Many sociologists are now more aware that experiences may be shaped by different statuses. Scholars may even use the term “intersectionality” to refer to the inclusion of members of different races or ethnicities, class backgrounds, and genders in their research samples. While diverse

samples allows scholars to consider how these different statuses may shape the experiences of people, we did not count such scholarship as intersectional if the authors had not conceptualized how these statuses *intersect* to create different experiences. For example, gender and parenthood may have a different impact on employment among middle class whites than among middle class African-Americans, since labor force participation rates among women in these groups vary. A study that explored differences between middle class African-American mothers and middle class white mothers would be counted as intersectional; one that simply “controlled” for race, would not be, in our definition; we consider such models to be “additive” rather than intersectional. As shown in Table One, approximately twelve percent of articles published in sociology journals in 2009 were additive in this way.

Methods

In order to assess the impact of intersectionality on the discipline of sociology, we carried out a content analysis of articles appearing in top-ranked sociology journals published in 2009¹. Examining publications over one year allowed us to examine trends within each journal while also allowing for a manageable amount of coding. Our sample includes 18 of the top-20 journals in the field of sociology, as calculated by the ISI Web of Knowledge, using the 5-Year Impact Factor². These journals include: *Annual Review of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Sociological Methods & Research*, *Social Networks*, *Journal of Marriage & Family*, *Sociology of Education*, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, *Social Problems*, *Economic Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Gender & Society*, *Population and Development Review*, *Sociological Methodology*, *Work & Occupations*, *Youth and Society*, *Sociological Theory*³. We also decided to include the slightly lower-ranked journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, as we wanted to include a specialty journal that focused on race and ethnicity as well as gender. We were also curious how different specialty journals would engage with intersectional analysis in their publications, as compared to mainstream journals. We were particularly interested in how *Gender & Society* compares to other journals in its publication of intersectional analyses, given the centrality of intersectional perspectives to feminist scholarship.

For each article we first identified three main topic areas, which were derived from the list of ASA sections⁴. Each article was additionally coded as primarily theoretical, methodological or empirical, as well as what type of method was used (quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods). We then coded whether the authors identified themselves as using an intersectional analysis; only articles that explicitly called their work intersectional were coded as “self-defined intersectional.” We coded each article for the statuses it focused on, including: Race/Ethnicity, Class, Gender, Sexuality, Age, Disability, Nationality/Citizenship, and a category for other statuses. If present, each status was coded as to whether it was of primary or secondary focus to the main argument of the article. (The centrality of the status is not analyzed here). We then coded the types of intersectional analysis used: Inclusion/Voice, Relational/ Process, or Anti-categorical. Articles that were only coded as Additive were not coded as Intersectional in the final analysis, even if they identified themselves as such. Previous research has similarly argued that that these types of additive approaches are not truly intersectional since they do not make an effort to explain or understand how statuses interact (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1993).

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1. We discussed the coding with one another, and all three of us coded all of the articles appearing in *Gender & Society*, *American Sociological Review*, and *American Journal of Sociology*, to see whether there were discrepancies in how we were coding them. We found relatively few discrepancies (originally, ninety-five percent agreement), and were able to discuss and develop decision rules, which allowed us to apply consistent rules for coding for the remainder of the coding. During 2009 *Gender & Society* published a symposium on West and Zimmerman's “Doing Gender”, which accounts for 24% of the articles in 2009. If the symposium pieces are removed from the sample, there would be a 76% intersectional rate; in other words, the symposium makes the journal less intersectional rather than more.
 2. This list is similar to one that focuses on the current impact factor, but is somewhat more reliable as it is based on a longer period.
 3. We dropped two journals that are less central to the field of sociology: *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* and *Annals of Tourism Research*.
 4. We defined subfields by the sections of the ASA in 2009. The only proviso to this is that because we had categorized articles as “theory” through a separate measure, we did not code articles as fitting into the “theory” subfield. With each article, we studied the keywords, the abstract, and read the body of the article to determine which three subfields were central to the argument in the article. Thus an article that focused on Latino families and the gendered division of household labor would be coded for Latino/as, Family, and Sex & Gender.

Which Journals are Intersectional

Table Two shows that among the top-20 sociology journals *Gender & Society* published the highest percentage of intersectional articles in 2009. More than two-thirds of the articles published in *Gender & Society* were coded as intersectional. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* appears next, with one third of the articles they published in 2009 being intersectional. One fourth of the articles published in both *Journal of Marriage & the Family* and *Social Problems* were intersectional in 2009. A few journals - *Annual Review of Sociology* and *Economy and Sociology* - did not publish any intersectional articles in 2009. Intersectional research remains a minority in top-ranked sociology journals, with the exception of *Gender & Society*.

Did you know?

The majority (61%) of all intersectional articles published in top-ranked sociology journals in 2009 were published in one of only three journals: *Gender & Society*, *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, and *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.

Table Two: Journals By Number of Intersectional Articles.

	Intersectional (n=117)
Gender & Society	69%
Ethnic & Racial Studies	33%
Journal of Marriage & Family	25%
Social Problems	25%
American Journal of Sociology	17%
Youth & Society	16%
American Sociological Review	15%
Social Forces	10%
British Journal of Sociology	10%
Sociology of Health & Illness	9%
Sociological Theory	8%
Population & Development Review	7%
Work and Occupations	7%
Sociology of Education	6%
Journal of Social Networks	4%
Annual Review of Sociology	0%
Economy & Society	0%
Sociological Methods & Research	0%
Sociological Methodology	0%

* Chi-square=124.62, p<.01

We were pleased to find that more mainstream sociology journals such as *Social Problems*, *AJS* and *ASR* all published a fair amount of intersectional scholarship in 2009. Twenty-five percent of the articles published in *Social Problems* were intersectional, as were seventeen percent of the articles in *AJS* and fifteen percent of the articles in *ASR*. However, two journals in particular stood out because of their low percentages of intersectional articles. Seven percent of *Work and Occupations* articles and six percent of *Sociology of Education* articles published in 2009 were intersectional. Because social statuses such as race, class, gender, sexuality all clearly impact work and education, we found it surprising that these journals did not publish more intersectional work.

The majority of intersectional articles that we coded for 2009 appeared in three journals: *Gender and Society*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Twenty-one percent of all intersectional articles in 2009 appeared in *Gender & Society*, and another twenty-one percent appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*⁵. An additional nineteen percent of the intersectional articles of 2009 appeared in *Journal of Marriage & the Family*.

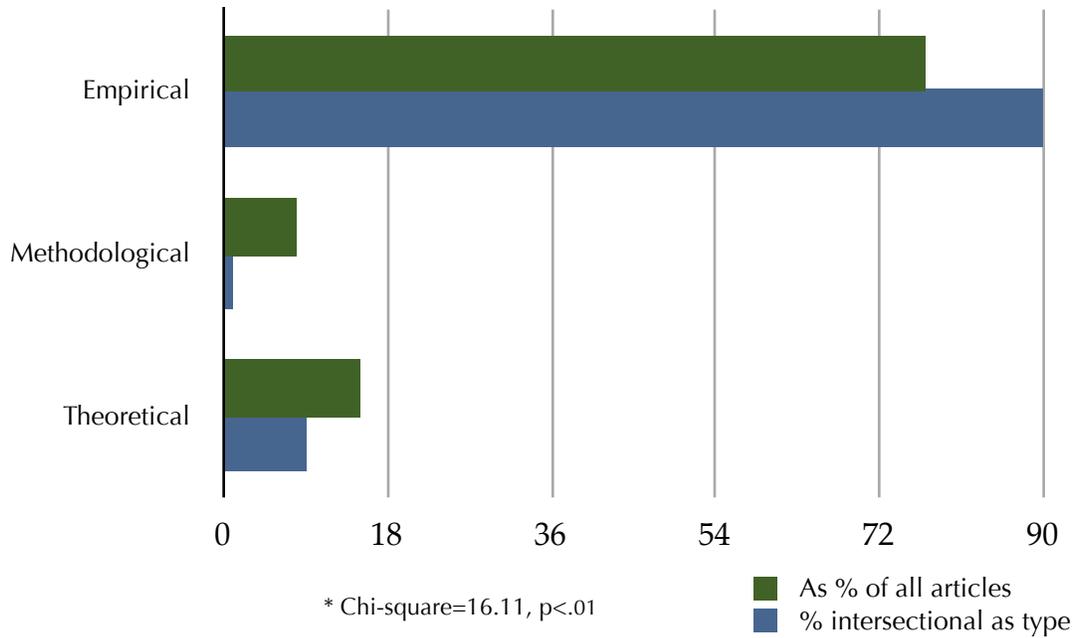
Types of Research

As Figure One shows, the majority (ninety percent) of intersectional articles were empirical. Given that seventy-seven percent of all articles published in 2009 were empirical, this suggests that empirical articles may be somewhat overrepresented among intersectional research. While an intersectional analysis is clearly useful in empirical work, our findings suggest that the intersectional perspective may be underutilized in both theoretical and methodological work. Theoretical and methodological work could benefit from scholars taking intersectionality seriously as a tool for theory building and as methodological puzzle to be addressed⁶.

5: The discrepancy here is because both *Journal of Marriage & Family* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies* publish more articles each year than *Gender & Society* does; therefore, though a smaller percentage of *Ethnic & Racial Studies* were intersectional, *Ethnic & Racial Studies* contributes an equal number of intersectional articles to the overall total number of intersectional articles.

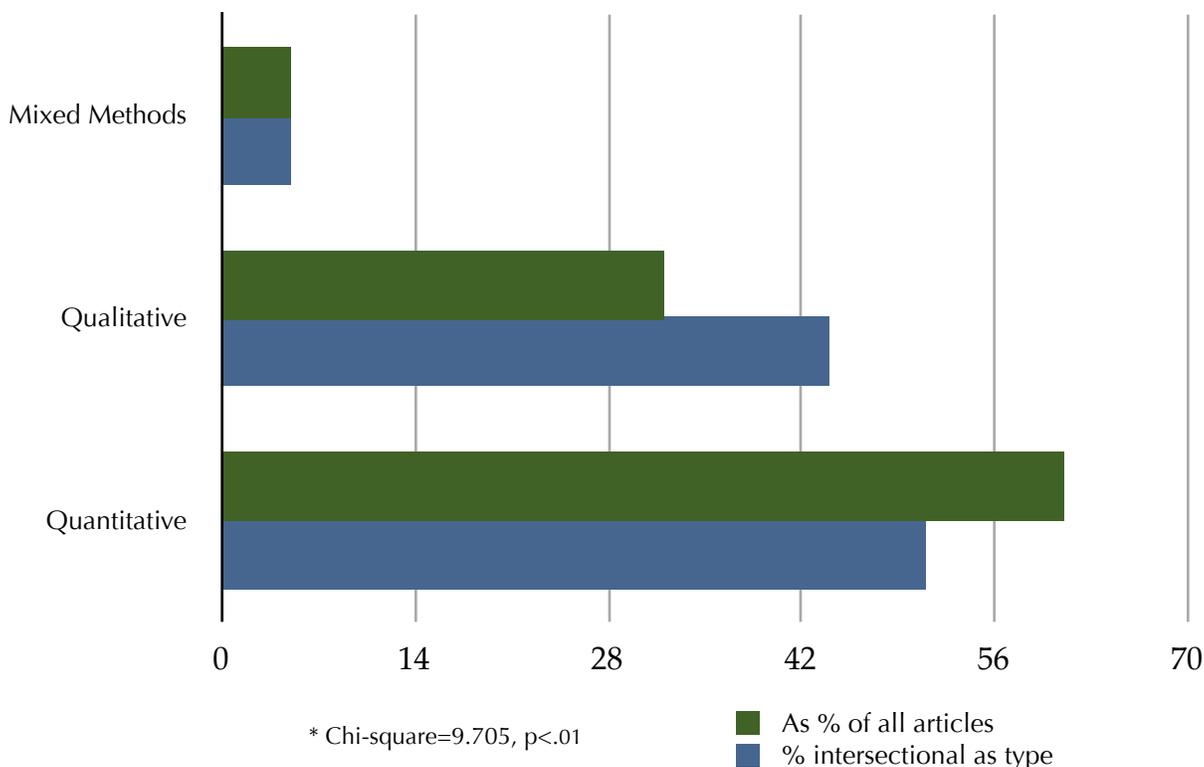
6: The only methodological article that was coded as intersectional appeared in *Gender & Society*.

Figure One: Association between Type of Article and Intersectional Research.



As Figure Two shows, intersectional analysis is also marginally more common in qualitative work than in quantitative. In 2009, fifty-one percent of all intersectional articles were quantitative, while sixty-one percent of all articles published were quantitative. At the same time, forty-four percent of all intersectional articles were qualitative, while only thirty-two percent of all articles published were qualitative. It appears that scholars using intersectional approaches, as opposed to approaches that are not intersectional, may be somewhat more likely to use qualitative methods. However, more than half of all papers using intersectional perspectives were quantitative, suggesting that an intersectional framework is accepted among scholars using both methods.

Figure Two: Association between Method of Empirical Article and Intersectional Research.



Intersectionality of Topic Areas

Table Three summarizes both the number of articles in each subfield as a percent of all articles published, and the percent of all articles in a subfield that were intersectional. It is clear that intersectional research is not equally represented in all areas of sociology. For example, sixty-five percent of the articles that dealt with the subfield of Sexualities were intersectional. This was the highest percentage of all topic areas. Fifty-nine percent of the articles that focused on Latino/as were intersectional. Thirty-seven percent of the articles focusing on Sex & Gender were intersectional. Twenty-nine percent of the articles that dealt with Migration were intersectional, as well as twenty-four percent of those that focused on The Family. Compare this to only three percent of Comparative Historical Articles, four percent of articles on Labor, and two percent of the articles focusing on either Methods or Social Psychology. Among the subfields that are largest, and most highly represented in journal publications, Sex & Gender, Race & Ethnicity, and The Family all stand out also representing intersectional research. This may reflect these subfields, and it may also reflect our sample of top journals, which includes *Gender & Society*, *Racial & Ethnic Studies*, and *Journal of Marriage & Family*.

Table Three: Subfield as Percentage of All Articles (articles can be categorized as more than one subfield) and Intersectional Research as Percentage of All Articles in Subfield (significance levels refer to intersectional research).

	Subfield as % of All Articles	Intersectional as % of Subfield		Subfield as % of All Articles	Intersectional as % of Subfield
Sexualities (n=26) **	4%	65%	Mental Health (n=20)	3%	20%
Latino/a (n=17) **	2%	59%	Social Movements (n=32)	5%	19%
Marxist (n=2)	0%	50%	Education (n=57)	8%	19%
Alcohol (n=5)	1%	40%	Community & Urban (n=36)	5%	17%
Sex & Gender (n=153) **	22%	37%	Disability (n=6)	1%	17%
Race, Gender, & Class (n=26) *	4%	35%	Global and Transnational (n=41)	6%	17%
Asia & Asian Americans (n=3)	0.50%	33%	Communication & IT (n=45)	4%	16%
History of Sociology (n=6)	1%	33%	Crime, Law, and Deviance (n=45)	6%	16%
Race & Ethnicity (n=150) **	21%	33%	Children (n=71)	10%	15%
Inequality (n=112) **	16%	30%	Aging (n=35)	5%	14%
Migration (n=59) **	8%	29%	Bodies (n=14)	2%	14%
Religion (n=31)	4%	26%	Medical (n=82) +	12%	10%
Family (n=140) *	20%	24%	Work & Organizations (n=110) *	16%	10%
Culture (n=50)	7%	22%	Public Sociology (n=10)	1%	10%
Ethnomethodology (n=14)	2%	21%	Politics (n=73) **	10%	7%
Emotion (n=15)	2%	20%	Economics (n=58) **	8%	5%

+ p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Table Three (continued)

	Subfield as % of All Articles	Intersectional as % of Subfield		Subfield as % of All Articles	Intersectional as % of Subfield
Population & Demography (n=37) +	5%	5%	Human Rights (n=7)	1%	0%
Labor (n=26) *	4%	4%	Law (n=13) +	2%	0%
Comparative Historical (n=30) *	4%	3%	Mathematical (n=3)	0.50%	0%
Social Psychology (n=60) **	9%	2%	Peace and War (n=8)	1%	0%
Methods (n=66) **	9%	2%	World-Systems (n=3)	0.50%	0%
Morality (n=13) +	2%	0%	Knowledge (n=21) *	3%	0%
Animals (n=2)	0%	0%	Teaching (n=1)	0%	0%
Environment (n=5)	1%	0%	Development (n=13)	2%	0%
Sociobiology (n=4)	1%	0%			

+ p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01

Future Directions

While we were a bit disappointed by some of our findings – for example, how rarely intersectional research seems to make inroads in subfields like Politics, Social Psychology, and Methods, in journals like *Gender & Society*, intersectional scholarship made up the majority of articles published in 2009. *Ethnic & Racial Studies* and *Journal of Marriage & Family* also published a high percentage of intersectional scholarship. And more mainstream journals like *Social Problems*, *AJS*, and *ASR* also are publishing intersectional research. Yet, the majority of intersectional scholarship is limited to appearing in a few journals and a few topic areas such as Sex & Gender or Race & Ethnicity. Clearly, although there has been improvement, most sociology journals continue to publish relatively little intersectional work. It may be that these journals do not receive intersectional submissions; change occurs slowly, both from authors making submissions and from journal editors working to rethink how research is done, evaluated, and published.

We also found that a number of articles that identified themselves as intersectional actually took an additive approach rather than truly engaging with how social statuses intersect. Sociologists have clearly realized the importance of controlling for multiple statuses in their research but should be encouraged to take this analysis further by considering how these statuses intersect to create different experiences. Most intersectional work also tends to be relational, considering the transformations that occur when different statuses meet. It would be useful to have more intersectional scholarship across sociology, but particularly to expand the types of such analysis being published.

One way to both expand and improve intersectional research would be to encourage sociologists to tackle intersectionality in the areas of theory and methods as well as through publishing empirical work. Intersectional scholarship is often viewed as challenging because it must focus on multiple intersecting categories of analysis. Questions arise as to which statuses are most salient, or how to best operationalize these intersecting categories. These questions could make for interesting articles and provide advice for future scholars hoping to publish intersectionality research.

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