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# Operationalizing Intersectionality in Social Work Research: Approaches and Limitations

Sara Matsuzaka, Kimberly D. Hudson, and Abigail M. Ross

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Despite intersectionality's relevance to social work, scholars have raised concerns that its misguided applications place it "in danger of being co-opted, depoliticized, and diluted." This scoping review examined the use of intersectionality in empirical social work research, specific to the extent, contexts, and degree of responsibility with which it has been applied. Using the search term convention ["social work" OR "social services"] AND ["intersectional" OR "intersectionality"], 22 databases were searched for peer-reviewed research published between 2009 and 2019, yielding 153 articles. The 33 studies meeting inclusion criteria were examined according to two frameworks: (1) typologies for intersectional conceptual approach and (2) intersectionality responsible use guidelines (RUG). Most studies used an intracategorical approach ( $n = 24$ ), while fewer used an intercategory approach ( $n = 7$ ) or a mixed intra- and intercategory approach ( $n = 2$ ). On average, studies met approximately half of the RUG. Studies most frequently ( $n = 29$ ) aligned with the guideline "Recommend ways to promote positive social transformation and justice through research, teaching, and practice." Studies least frequently ( $n = 3$ ) conformed to the guideline "Credits Black feminist activist roots of intersectionality." Responsible stewardship is recommended to address power in knowledge production, researcher positionalities, and social justice action.

KEY WORDS: *guidelines; intercategory approach; intersectionality; intracategorical approach; social work research*

Intersectionality has been an important lens for interrogating how positionality shapes experience since its introduction into academic discourse by Kimberlé Crenshaw nearly 30 years ago—and before then, for over a century through the contributions of Black women and other women-of-color feminist-activists contextualized within converging systems of domination (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008; Hill Collins, 1990). While offering significant contributions to the social sciences, intersectionality has been critiqued for its inconsistent and incomplete application. For example, scholars have varied in their characterization of intersectionality as a theory, framework, or perspective (Carastathis, 2014), with little consensus on its methodological considerations (Bowleg, 2013; Hulko, 2009). In addition, there is little guidance for conducting intersectional research (Else-Quest & Shibley Hyde, 2016; Nash, 2008). Moreover, critics suggest that intersectional scholarship may be more preoccupied with investigat-

ing social identities and categories than systemic inequalities (Bilge, 2013). Moradi and Grzanka (2017) discussed this misguided application as placing intersectionality "in danger of being co-opted, depoliticized, and diluted" (p. 501).

Despite these conceptual challenges, two frameworks have been introduced to categorize, implement, or evaluate intersectional research (McCall, 2005; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). McCall (2005) introduced three typologies of intersectional research: (1) an intercategory approach, which examines inequities across social categories; (2) an intracategorical approach, which explores the diversity of experiences among individuals with similar positionalities; and (3) an anticategory approach, which asserts that the construct of identity has no basis in reality. Moradi and Grzanka (2017) introduced seven guidelines for the responsible use of intersectionality, organized by three formulations: (1) intersectionality as a field of study (guidelines 1 and 2), (2) intersectionality as an analytic

strategy or disposition (guidelines 3, 4, and 5), and (3) intersectionality as a critical praxis for social justice (guidelines 6 and 7).

This scoping review examined the application of intersectionality in empirical social work research published in peer-reviewed journals over the past 10 years, guided by three questions: (1) To what extent and in what contexts is intersectionality applied in social work research? (2) How has intersectionality been conceptualized in social work research? and (3) To what degree is social work research responsibly applying intersectionality?

## METHOD

We used Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage scoping review framework.

### Identification of Research Questions (Stage 1)

The research questions guiding this scoping review aimed to do the following: estimate the use of intersectionality in empirical social work research; describe empirical social work research using intersectionality (for example, aims, populations, approaches); and assess the extent to which empirical social work research is responsibly using intersectionality.

### Identification and Selection of Studies (Stages 2 and 3)

We searched two metadatabases (OneSearch, ProQuest) drawing from more than 22 databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO and other EBSCO databases, Social Science Abstracts, and Social Work Abstracts. The search term convention included ["social work" OR "social services"] AND ["intersectional" OR "intersectionality"], specifying for search term presence in title, subject, or abstract. Searches were restricted to peer-reviewed articles in English within the previous 10-year period. Three reviewers classified studies based on inclusion/exclusion criteria.

The search yielded 153 unique records published between 2009 and 2019, of which 43 abstracts (28.1%) met the criteria for full text review: (a) Referenced "social work" in the title, abstract, author degree, or author affiliation; (b) included "intersectional" or "intersectionality" in the title or abstract; and (c) used a data set with more than one participant. Full text review eliminated 10 articles that either lacked the required information or could

not verify institutional review board or ethics committee approval. The final sample contained 33 unique studies.

### Analysis (Stages 4 and 5)

We used a "descriptive-analytical" method grounded in the narrative tradition to chart data (stage 4). As reported in Table 1, the research team extracted data from each primary study and subsequently used two analytical frameworks: (1) McCall's (2005) intersectional research typologies, with categories for this scoping review, including intercategory, intracategory, anticategory, or intra- and intercategory, and (2) a modified version of Moradi and Grzanka's (2017) responsible use guidelines (RUG). We expanded on Moradi and Grzanka's (2017) guidelines by introducing operationalizations per guideline (see Figure 1). A guideline was considered met if at least one operationalization was fulfilled. These processes were used for analyzing and reporting results (stage 5).

**Reliability.** Two raters (Sara Matsuzaka and Kimberly D. Hudson) classified studies based on intersectional approach (McCall, 2005) and on alignment with the RUG (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). The classifications involved first rating a subset of 30% ( $n = 10$ ) of the 33 articles based on intersectional approach, achieving a kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) of 0.86. The same raters classified a subset of 36.3% ( $n = 12$ ) of the articles based on the RUG, yielding a kappa coefficient of 0.99. Together, coefficients indicate substantial to almost perfect levels of interrater agreement (McHugh, 2012).

**Reflexivity.** The research team consisted of three U.S.-based social work scholars with doctoral-level social work degrees: a Japanese American queer cisgender woman, a mixed-race queer cisgender woman who benefits from White privilege, and a White heterosexual cisgender woman. The practice of reflexivity acknowledges the dynamics between researcher positionalities and analytical and interpretive processes (Gilgun, 2008). The authors considered how their positionalities and related assumptions might affect the analytical and interpretive processes by using strategies to reduce bias, ranging from self-examination and the use of multiple raters to systematic procedures for study selection.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Included in Scoping Review (N = 33)**

Author	Year	Study Population	Study Aims	Study Location	Study Design	McCall Typology	Guidelines Met (range: 1-7)
Clark et al.	2009	N = unspecified; aboriginal and nonaboriginal university faculty, students, and elders	Program-specific evaluation; social work education	Canada	CBPR	Intracategorical	6
Vakalahi & Hardin Starks	2010	N = 16; women-of-color social work educators	Identity-driven experiences	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	6
Bowie & Dopwell	2013	N = 30; TANF-reliant Latina female adults	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems	USA	Mixed methods	Intra- and Intercategorical	2
Vervliet, De Mol, Broekaert, & Derluyn	2014	N = 20; unaccompanied refugee mothers in Belgium	Identity-driven experiences of specific population	Belgium	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	2
Ashley & Paez	2015	N = 50; MSW students	Social work education	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	4
Hudson & Mehrotra	2015	N = 12; queer and mixed-race adults	Identity-driven experiences	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	5
Matsuoka	2015	N = 8; Japanese Canadian older adult workshop participants	Program-specific evaluation; identity-driven experiences	Canada	Mixed methods	Intracategorical	3
Nadal et al.	2015	N = 16; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer adults	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems; identity-driven experiences	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	4
Nadal, Quintanilla, Goswick, & Sriken	2015	N = 15; Israeli undergraduate social work students	Social work education	Israel	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	2
Sangalang & Gee	2015	N = 466; Cambodian American adolescents	Examination of disparities; identity-driven experiences	USA	CBPR	Intercategorical	6
Selseng	2015	N = 23; counselors working for Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration	Provider perception of population-specific needs	Norway	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	4
Bubar, Cespedes, & Bundy-Fazioli	2016	N = 12; MSW students in an Advanced Practice class	Social work education	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	6
Craig, Iacono, Pacleoy, Dentato, & Boyle	2017	N = 1,018; lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender BSW or MSW students	Social work education; identity-driven experiences	Canada	Cross-sectional survey	Intracategorical	3
Mantler & Wolfe	2017	N = 10; women's shelter service providers and shelter residents	Program-specific evaluation	Canada	Case study	Intracategorical	2
Kattari, Walls, & Speer	2017	N = 6,456; transgender or gender-nonconforming adults	Examination of disparities; identity-driven experiences	USA	Cross-sectional survey	Intercategorical	3

(Continued)

**Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Included in Scoping Review (N = 33) (Continued)**

Author	Year	Study Population	Study Aims	Study Location	Study Design	McCall Typology	Guidelines Met (range: 1–7)
Lusk, Terrazas, & Salcido	2017	N = 390; social workers	Social work education	USA	Cross-sectional survey	Intracategorical	3
Cage, Corley, & Harris	2018	N = 429; adolescents in the child welfare system	Examination of disparities	USA	Longitudinal survey	Intercategorical	5
Chiang, Fleming, Lucassen, Fouche, & Fenaughty	2018	N = 8; therapists (medical practitioners, counselors, psychotherapist, social worker)	Provider perception of population-specific needs	New Zealand	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	2
Garcia, Garcia, & Ailshire	2018	N = 164,616; Latino adults age 50 and older	Examination of disparities	USA	Cross-sectional survey	Intercategorical	3
Giesbrecht et al.	2018	N = 119; adults with structural vulnerabilities on palliative trajectory, support persons, and service providers	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems	Canada	Ethnography	Intracategorical	6
Melboe	2018	N = 31; disabled Sami people and next of kin	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems; identity-driven experiences	Norway	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	3
Kothari et al.	2018	N = 315; foster care youths	Examination of disparities	USA	Longitudinal survey	Intercategorical	2
Rice et al.	2018	N = 76; adult women living with HIV in the Women's Interagency HIV Study	Identity-driven experiences	USA, Canada	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	5
Walls et al.	2019	N = 9,352; youth from 2015 Healthy Kids Colorado Study	Examinations of disparities; identity-driven experiences	USA	Cross-sectional survey	Intercategorical	3
Chaudhry	2019	N = unspecified; disabled people, family members, self-help group staff	Program-specific evaluation	India	Ethnography	Intracategorical	6
Glick, Lopez, Pollock, & Theall	2019	N = 17; transgender and gender-nonconforming adults	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems	USA	Ethnography	Intracategorical	4
Meyer	2019	N = 3,042; adults age 60 and over	Examinations of disparities	USA	Cross-sectional survey	Intercategorical	2
Padgett & Pnyam	2019	N = 10; homeless women	Identity-driven experiences	India	Ethnography	Intracategorical	2
Kayama, Johnstone, & Limaye	2019	N = 25; youths and adults with disabilities	Identity-driven experiences	India	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	1
Logie et al.	2019	N = 1,367; adult women living with HIV	Examination of disparities; identity-driven experiences	Canada	Longitudinal survey	Intracategorical	4

(Continued)

**Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Included in Scoping Review (N = 33) (Continued)**

Author	Year	Study Population	Study Aims	Study Location	Study Design	McCall Typology	Guidelines Met (range: 1–7)
Sullivan, López-Zerón, Bomsta, & Menard	2019	N = 11; housing advocates for intimate partner violence survivors	Provider perception of population-specific needs	USA	Qualitative unspecified	Intracategorical	2
Tadele & Amde	2019	N = 100; lesbian, gay, bisexual adults	Identity-informed perceptions of service systems	Ethiopia	Mixed methods	Intra- and Intercategorical	5
Wendt & Fraser	2019	N = 15; incarcerated women in a healthy relationships program	Program-specific evaluation	Australia	Case study	Intracategorical	1

Notes: CBPR = community-based participatory research; TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

## RESULTS

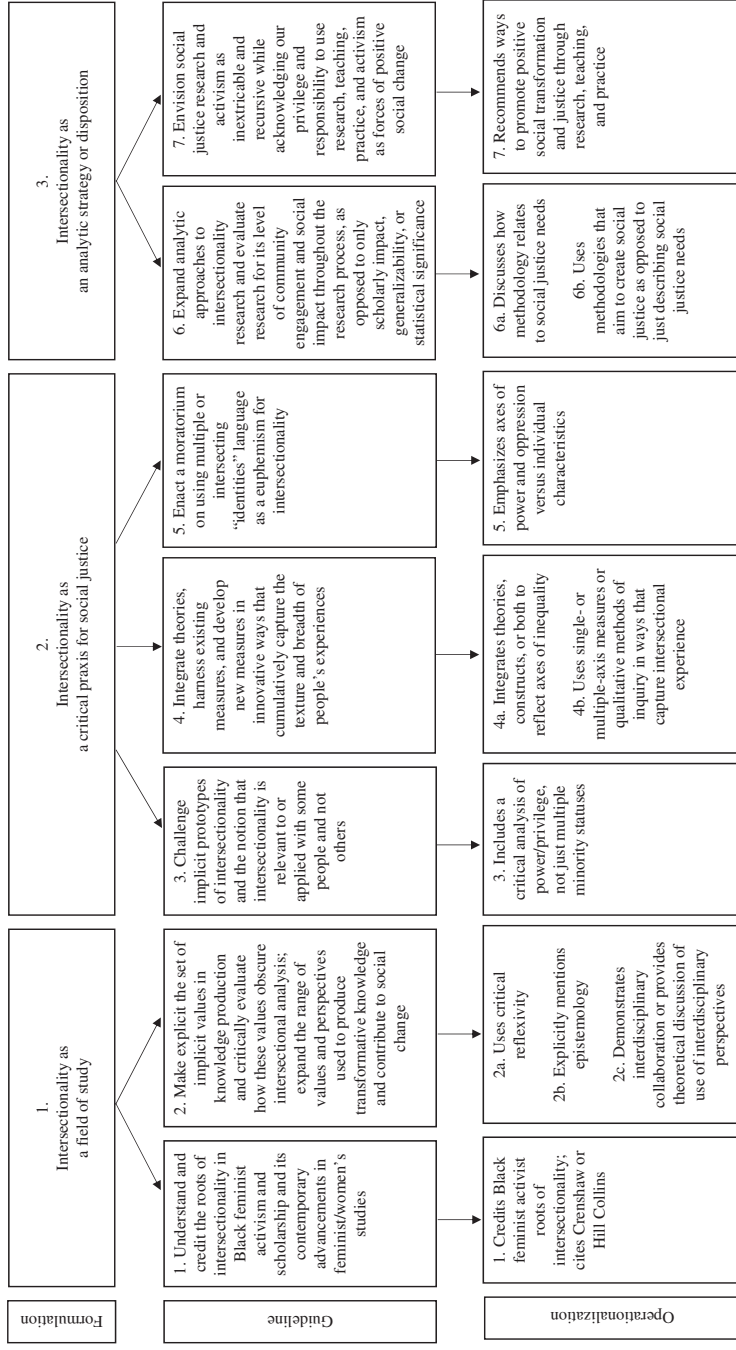
Of the 33 articles that met all inclusion criteria, 29 (87.9%) were published between 2009 and 2019. Studies were organized into six non-mutually exclusive categories: positionality-based experiences of specific populations ( $n = 18$ ), positionality-based perceptions of service systems ( $n = 6$ ), provider perceptions of population-specific needs ( $n = 3$ ), program-specific evaluations ( $n = 5$ ), examinations of disparities ( $n = 8$ ), and social work education ( $n = 6$ ). Approximately 75% ( $n = 25$ ) of reviewed articles were authored by North America-based researchers, with 48.5% ( $n = 16$ ) of the studies conducted with U.S.-based samples. The majority of the studies involved adult populations. The following study designs were used: qualitative (57.6%,  $n = 19$ ), quantitative (27.3%,  $n = 9$ ), mixed methods (9.1%,  $n = 3$ ), and community-based participatory research (CBPR) (6.1%,  $n = 2$ ) (see Table 1).

### McCall Typology of Approaches

The results found that the sampled studies used three intersectionality approaches: intracategorical (72.3%,  $n = 24$ ), intercategorical (21.2%,  $n = 7$ ), or mixed intra- and intercategorical (6.1%,  $n = 2$ ). No studies used an anticategorical approach.

**Intracategorical Approach.** Eleven (45.8%) studies aimed to capture the positionality-based experiences of participants. Five studies conducted program evaluations (Chaudhry, 2019; Clark et al., 2009; Mantler & Wolfe, 2017; Matsuoaka, 2015; Wendt & Fraser, 2019); five studies explored social work educational topics (Ashley & Paez, 2015; Bubar, Cespedes, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016; Clark et al., 2009; Craig, Iacono, Pacey, Dentato, & Boyle, 2017; Lusk, Terrazas, & Salcido, 2017); four studies explored the positionality-based perceptions of service systems (Giesbrecht et al., 2018; Glick, Lopez, Pollock, & Theall, 2019; Melbøe, 2018; Nadal, Quintanilla, Goswick, & Sriken, 2015); three studies explored provider perceptions of population-specific needs (Chiang, Fleming, Lucassen, Fouche, & Fenaughty, 2018; Selseng, 2015; Sullivan, López-Zerón, Bomsta, & Menard, 2019); and one study examined disparities between subpopulations (Logie et al., 2019). Nineteen (79.2%) of the studies using an intracategorical approach used a qualitative design.

**Figure 1: Intersectionality Formulations, Guidelines, and Operationalizations**



Notes: Formulations and guidelines were introduced by Moradi and Grzanka (2017). Authors contributed operationalizations per guidelines.

**Intercategorical Approach.** All seven of the studies that used an intercategory approach sought to examine disparities in outcomes by subpopulations. Two studies examined outcome disparities specific to social services use patterns by gender (Meyer, 2019) and morbidity by age (Garcia, Garcia, & Ailshire, 2018). Two studies examined outcome disparities specific to partner violence by sexual identity and gender identity (Walls et al., 2019), and social services access discrimination by ability (Kattari, Walls, & Speer, 2017). Three studies examined outcome disparities specific to racial discrimination and depression by gender (Sangalang & Gee, 2015); educational attainment by race, gender, and the intersections of race and gender (Cage, Corley, & Harris, 2018); and school discipline by gender, race, and ability (Kothari et al., 2018). Six of the seven studies (85.7%) adopting an intercategory approach used quantitative methods. One used a CBPR methodology (Sangalang & Gee, 2015).

**Mixed Approach.** Two studies used mixed-methods designs with a combined intra- and intercategory approach to examine perceptions of the employment system by welfare-reliant African American and Latina heads of households (Bowie & Dopwell, 2013) and the health care system by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in Ethiopia (Tadele & Amde, 2019).

### Responsible Use Formulations, Guidelines, and Operationalizations

Of the 33 articles, 117 instances of intersectionality were found, based on our operationalizations of Moradi and Grzanka's (2017) guidelines. Of these total instances, 22.3% represented formulation 1: intersectionality as a field of study (guidelines 1 and 2). Nearly half (48.7%) represented formulation 2: intersectionality as an analytic strategy or disposition (guidelines 3, 4, and 5). Almost one-third (29.1%) represented formulation 3: intersectionality as critical praxis for social justice (guidelines 6 and 7).

On average, the articles in this sample met approximately half of the seven guidelines ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ), with a range of 1 to 6. Of the 15 studies that met more than half of the guidelines, 80.0% ( $n = 12$ ) used an intracategory approach. Two studies (13.3%) used an intercategory approach, and only one (6.7%) used a mixed intra- and intercategory approach.

Overall, CBPR studies ( $N = 2$ ) met the greatest average number of guidelines, with both studies meeting six of seven guidelines. Qualitative studies ( $n = 19$ ) met an average of 3.5 (1.8) guidelines [range: 1–6], slightly higher than that of mixed-methods studies ( $n = 3$ ), which met an average of 3.3 (1.5) guidelines [range: 2–5], and quantitative studies ( $n = 9$ ), which met an average of 3.1 (0.9) guidelines [range: 2–5]. There were no discernable patterns related to geography. The following sections further detail these findings, offering illustrative examples. Table 2 summarizes the sample's alignment rates to each of the RUG.

**Formulation 1: Intersectionality as a Field of Practice.** Formulation 1 (guidelines 1 and 2) emphasizes crediting the Black feminist roots of intersectionality and making explicit the values related to knowledge production. Three studies (9.1%) met guideline 1 and guideline 2 (Bubar et al., 2016; Cage et al., 2018; Sangalang & Gee, 2015).

Three studies (9.1%), all U.S.-based and published between 2015 and 2018, met guideline 1 (see Table 2). This included one CBPR study examining Cambodian American adolescent experiences (Sangalang & Gee, 2015), one longitudinal study examining educational attainment among adolescents in the welfare system (Cage et al., 2018), and one qualitative study exploring narratives about power among social work students (Bubar et al., 2016).

The majority of studies (69.7%,  $n = 23$ ) met at least one of the operationalized criteria for guideline 2 (see Table 2). Two studies (Clark et al., 2009; Rice et al., 2018), both of which used an intracategory approach, met all three criteria. Eleven studies (33.3%) met criterion 2a, "uses critical reflexivity," including 47.4% of qualitative studies ( $n = 9$ ), 50% of CBPR studies ( $n = 1$ ), and 33.3% of mixed methods studies ( $n = 1$ ). For example, in a qualitative study, Nadal et al. (2015) were explicit about how their positionalities and experiences with the criminal justice system might affect the research process.

Five studies (15.2%), all using an intracategory approach, met criterion 2b, "explicitly mentions epistemology," including half of CBPR studies ( $n = 1$ ) and 21.2% of qualitative studies ( $n = 4$ ). For example, in an ethnographic study describing perceptions of the palliative care system, Giesbrecht et al. (2018) highlighted how their approach to



**Table 2: Articles Adhering to Operationalizations of the Responsible Use Guidelines (N = 33)**

	Guideline 1		Guideline 2		Guideline 3		Guideline 4		Guideline 5		Guideline 6		Guideline 7
	2a	2b	2c	4a	4b	4a	4b	6a	6b	6a	6b	7	
Operation-alization	Credits Black feminist roots of intersectionality; cites Crenshaw or Hill Collins	Explicitly mentions epistemology	Demonstrates interdisciplinary collaborations or provides theoretical discussion of use of interdisciplinary perspectives	Integrates theories, constructs, or both to reflect axes of inequality	Uses single- or multiple-axis measures or qualitative methods of inquiry in ways that capture intersectional experience	Emphasizes axes of power and oppression versus individual characteristics	Discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs	Uses methodologies that aim to create social justice as opposed to just describing social justice needs	Discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs	Discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs	Discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs	Discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs	Recommends ways to promote positive social transformation and justice through research, and teaching, and practice
% of total articles adhered to per operation-alization	9.1	15.2	54.5	57.6	51.5	63.6	15.2	9.1	15.2	15.2	15.2	15.2	87.9
% of total articles adhered to per guideline <sup>a</sup>	9.1	69.7	36.4	72.7	36.4	63.6	15.2	15.2	15.2	15.2	15.2	15.2	87.9

<sup>a</sup>Met at least one operationalization per guideline.

knowledge production involved making observations of the experiences of structurally vulnerable populations with palliative care as contextualized within health care spaces.

The majority of studies (54.6%,  $n = 18$ ) met criterion 2c, “demonstrates interdisciplinary collaborations or provides theoretical discussion of the use of interdisciplinary perspectives.” In addition to two CBPR studies, 66.7% ( $n = 6$ ) of quantitative studies and 53.8% ( $n = 7$ ) of qualitative studies met this criterion. In a qualitative study, Rice et al. (2018) combined the experiences of a social work educator and a team of biomedical and social science researchers to explore perceptions of intersectional stigma among women living with HIV.

**Formulation 2: Intersectionality as an Analytic Strategy or Disposition.** Formulation 2 (guidelines 3, 4, and 5) highlights the importance of three actions: challenging assumptions about who or what is intersectional (and who or what is not), integrating contextual and nuanced research measures, and distinguishing intersectionality from merely a study of positionalities. Six studies (18.2%), five of which used an intracategorical approach, met all four operationalizations within this formulation (Chaudhry, 2019; Clark et al., 2009; Hudson & Mehrotra, 2015; Rice et al., 2018; Tadele & Amde, 2019; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010).

Twelve studies (36.4%) met guideline 3 (see Table 2). This includes 47.4% of qualitative studies ( $n = 9$ ) and one quantitative study. All studies that met Guideline 3 used an intracategorical approach, with one study using a mixed intra- and intercategory approach. For example, Ashley and Paez (2015) conducted a qualitative study using an intracategorical approach to understand the impact of a critical race theory conference on social work students’ perspectives of power as related to practice.

The majority of studies (69.7%,  $n = 23$ ) met at least one of the criteria for guideline 4 (see Table 2). The majority of studies meeting full criteria for guideline 4 used intracategorical approaches (58.3%,  $n = 7$ ), followed by two studies using an intercategory approach (16.7%) and one study using a mixed intra- and intercategory approach (8.3%). Most studies (41.7%,  $n = 5$ ) that met full criteria for guideline 4 used qualitative methodologies, with all of the CBPR ( $n = 2$ ) and mixed-methods studies ( $n = 2$ ) included in this category.

Most studies (57.6%,  $n = 19$ ) met criterion 4a, “integrates theories and/or constructs to reflect axes of inequality.” For example, in a longitudinal study using an intracategorical approach, Logie and colleagues (2019) tested the pathways between multiple constructs of stigma and HIV-related health outcomes. In a qualitative study using an intracategorical approach, Glick et al. (2019) explored experiences of housing insecurity among women living with HIV contextualized within interlocking axes of oppression.

Seventeen studies (51.5%) met criterion 4b, “uses single- or multiple-axis measures or qualitative methods of inquiry in ways that capture intersectional experience.” In addition to all CBPR studies, seven quantitative studies (77.8%) met criterion 4b, all of which aimed to examine disparities in outcomes across subpopulations. On balance, 66.7% ( $n = 2$ ) of mixed-methods and 31.2% ( $n = 6$ ) of qualitative studies met criterion 4b. For example, in a quantitative study using an intercategory approach, Cage et al. (2018) examined how the varied positionalities of Black, White, and Hispanic youths in the U.S. child welfare system related to educational attainment. In their mixed-methods study, Tadele and Amde (2019) discussed how heteronormativity and classism affect the health care experiences of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in Ethiopia. In a qualitative study using an intracategorical approach, Hudson and Mehrotra (2015) explored positionality-based experiences of queer and mixed-race adults.

The majority of studies (63.6%,  $n = 21$ ) met guideline 5 (see Table 2), including 63.2% of qualitative studies ( $n = 12$ ), 44.4% of quantitative studies ( $n = 4$ ), and all CBPR ( $n = 2$ ) and mixed-methods ( $n = 3$ ) studies. In a qualitative study using an intracategorical approach, Chiang et al. (2018) explored Western therapeutic perspectives on the experiences of Chinese sexual and gender minority youths. In an ethnographic study using an intracategorical approach, Chaudhry (2019) explored the effects of neoliberalism on rural disability in India.

**Formulation 3: Intersectionality as a Critical Praxis for Social Justice.** Formulation 3 (guidelines 6 and 7) focuses on the use of intersectionality for social change. Two studies (Clark et al., 2009; Sangalang & Gee, 2015) (6.1%), both of which were CBPR studies, met all three criteria for formulation 3. For example, in a CBPR study, Clark et al. (2009) engaged a team of social work educators

and community members to identify ways to enhance social work field education in community health settings serving aboriginal Canadians (also known as indigenous Canadians, First Peoples, and native Canadians).

As captured in [Table 2](#), five studies (15.2%) met at least one of the criteria for guideline 6. Of these five, three studies ([Chaudhry, 2019](#); [Clark et al., 2009](#); [Sangalang & Gee, 2015](#)) met both criteria, including all CBPR studies and one ethnographic study. No studies using quantitative or mixed methods met either of the criteria for guideline 6.

Five studies (15.2%) met criterion 6a, “discusses how methodology relates to social justice needs,” including 15.8% of qualitative studies ( $n = 3$ ) and both CBPR studies ([Clark et al., 2009](#); [Sangalang & Gee, 2015](#)). For example, in their qualitative study using an intracategorical approach, [Vakalahi and Hardin Starks \(2010\)](#) used a narrative-based approach to illuminate the perspectives of women-of-color social work scholars in academia.

Three studies (9.1%) met criterion 6b, “uses methodologies that aim to create social justice as opposed to just describing social justice needs, thus actualizing intersectionality’s activist goals,” including both CBPR studies ([Clark et al., 2009](#); [Sangalang & Gee, 2015](#)) and one qualitative study ([Chaudhry, 2019](#)). For example, [Sangalang and Gee \(2015\)](#) engaged Cambodian American adolescents in the development of a novel measure of Cambodian racial discrimination, a scale the researcher-participant partnership identified as lacking in scholarship.

The majority of studies (87.9%,  $n = 29$ ) met guideline 7 (see [Table 2](#)). This includes 79.0% of qualitative studies ( $n = 15$ ), and all quantitative studies ( $n = 9$ ), mixed-methods studies ( $n = 3$ ), and CPBR studies ( $n = 2$ ). All studies meeting this guideline introduced recommendations in the Discussion, Implications, or Conclusion sections of their articles.

## DISCUSSION

This scoping review examined how intersectionality has been used in empirical social work research over the last 10 years. To our knowledge, this scoping review is the first of its kind to introduce operationalizations for the responsible use of intersectionality as set forth by [Moradi and Grzanka \(2017\)](#), to assess alignment with these guidelines within empirical social work research, and to explore the contexts in

which intersectionality has been applied in social work research. Our operationalized guidelines are intended to promote greater scholarly attention and adherence to the tenets of intersectionality ([Davis, 2008](#); [Nash, 2008](#)), including the use of methodological strategies (for example, self-reflexivity, explicit definition of epistemological assumptions, participatory research) that seek to address the role of power and oppression in knowledge production and specific policy- and practice-based pathways for social change.

Results indicate that our sample varied in alignment with [Moradi and Grzanka’s \(2017\)](#) RUG. The majority of studies were explicit about knowledge production (guideline 2), used research measures that capture the depth and breadth of people’s intersectional experiences (guideline 4), moved beyond an exclusive focus on positionalities (guideline 5), and recommended ways to promote social justice (guideline 7). In many ways, these more commonly used approaches to intersectionality are consistent with the broad aims of social work research, in particular, with the field’s interest in the lived experience of marginalized communities, underscoring how social inequity derives from structural disadvantage.

The sampled studies largely failed to credit the Black feminist roots of intersectionality (guideline 1); critically analyze power and privilege, along with oppression (guideline 3); and leverage intersectional methodologies to create social justice (guideline 6). This pattern calls attention to the explicit application of critical feminist frameworks in social work research, which extracts value from, but does not adequately acknowledge Black women and other women of color as theorists, scholars, and practitioners of intersectionality. This exploitative approach to knowledge production is not uncommon in social work research and in other fields and disciplines, and has been the topic of an emerging body of literature regarding epistemic and contributory justice ([Almassi, 2018](#); [Beltrán & Mehrotra, 2015](#); [Berenstein, 2016](#)). Furthermore, were social work scholars to more explicitly trace the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality, this might lead to innovation in intersectional research methods—an area where many of these studies also fell short.

Findings suggest parallels between researchers’ selection of intersectional approaches and corresponding study designs. For example, researchers

using qualitative approaches primarily applied an intracategorical approach to understand lived experiences at a distinct point of intersection (Else-Quest & Shibley Hyde, 2016). Quantitative researchers favored the use of an intercategorical approach to examine differences in outcomes among subpopulations. This might be due, in part, to the inclinations of researchers for using traditional quantitative designs for between-group comparisons. Given that most studies (80%) that used intracategorical approaches met at least half of the guidelines, it is possible that some guidelines may be more amenable to intracategorical approaches; however, such analysis is beyond the scope of this article and warrants further research. The finding that both CBPR studies met six of seven RUG reflects the compatibility of this research approach with intersectionality, as it emphasizes attention to power in knowledge production, critical reflexivity, and the promotion of justice through research.

While often attributed to methodological considerations (McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008), the true disconnect between intersectionality and research methods may be more squarely attributed to differences in epistemological perspectives. Garneau (2018) discussed intersectionality's "dual epistemological filiations," including its "critical" Black feminist underpinnings contextualizing subjectivities within structural inequities—compared with intersectionality's "post" (namely, post-structural) explorations of social categories and subjectivities. In other words, there may be nothing specific about methodology that precludes holistic intersectional inquiry aside from implicit ontological and epistemological assumptions about the research, the researcher, and the researched. That being said, there is transformative potential in intersectional research that increasingly features varied paradigmatic underpinnings, methodological strategies, and areas of knowledge pursuit. The heterogeneity of intersectional research can, at best, contribute to the unveiling of new positionalities and structural inequities within diverse historical and socio-political contexts, while activating social justice action. At worst, scholars can contribute to epistemic exclusion (Dotson, 2014; Settles, Jones, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2020)—devaluing and diluting the contributions of Black, indigenous, and other scholar-activists of color, and privileging particular intersectional work (and the scholars and institutions that produce them).

## Limitations and Future Research

The present study was restricted to empirical social work research published in English during the last 10 years. Future studies should encompass non-English language published articles and a more expansive time frame to explore how the use of intersectionality has differed within various historical and political contexts. In addition, future studies should provide more in-depth analysis of existing intersectional scholarship, including exemplar cases in intersectional research per the RUG. Finally, our scoping review methods were not exhaustive; as such, a considerable body of scholarship was excluded. This exclusion includes conceptual and theoretical articles, as well as book chapters, theses, and other reports. Future research with different inclusion criteria might offer additional insights to the question of how intersectionality is and should be applied in social work research.

## Implications

At present, qualitative and intracategorical approaches to intersectional analysis appear to be the most prevalent within social work research. Many opportunities remain to increase the use of quantitative and intercategorical approaches to intersectional research. Bauer (2014) has attributed the dearth of intersectional approaches in quantitative research to both measurement difficulties and limitations in statistical analytic techniques, such as constraints on the number of variables that can be included in statistical computations, regression model interaction scaling, structuring of risk modification analyses, and inherent assumptions of equidistance. Else-Quest and Shibley Hyde (2016) outlined how intersectionality can be used in quantitative research methods, including framing social categories as both individually experienced and perceived by others; using between-groups analysis, stratified random sampling, and purposive sampling; and testing for conceptual equivalence and measurement invariance. The techniques are readily used within public health and psychology, but social work has been slow to adopt their use in intersectional research or to incorporate intersectionality within quantitative research trainings.

To be responsible stewards of intersectionality, social work researchers should do the following: consider whether social justice aims are woven throughout each stage of research, make explicit the values and assumptions that drive knowledge pro-

duction, and properly acknowledge intersectionality's Black feminist roots. Said (2000) pointed out that theories are susceptible to misuse based on their sociocultural, institutional, or historical context. Over the past three decades, academia has increasingly claimed intersectionality as a field of study (Bilge, 2013; Hill Collins, 2015). Without negating the contributions of feminist women's studies and other disciplines within which intersectionality has traveled, academia, as steward of the field, must confront its own positioning specific to power dynamics, including historically exclusionary practices toward women of color and other marginalized groups (Settles et al., 2020; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010). Furthermore, academia might consider how favoring the use of intersectionality as an analytical strategy, without equal emphasis on intersectionality's role as a critical praxis, suppresses social change. These points of introspection are critical. As Hill Collins (2015) emphasized, intersectionality (and we add all those who participate in its fluid definition and scholarship) "participates in the very power relations that it examines" (p. 3).

Social work scholars must resist positions and practices that do the following: (a) sustain ideologies and policies that marginalize Black, indigenous, and women of color in academia; (b) reproduce discursive processes through which knowledge (and related exclusionary practices) becomes a mechanism of domination; or (c) misappropriate "what intersectionality was intended to be" for "what intersectionality can best be for us." Social work scholars can seek to reinvigorate intersectionality in social work research for sociopolitical action. This effort may involve engaging entities outside of academia, such as artists, political groups, activists, and community organizers, within intersectional research. Intersectionality gives social work research ample opportunity to create social justice in both process and outcome. Increased attention to the responsible stewardship of intersectionality will clarify social work's commitment to that mission. **SWR**

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