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Intersectionality as researchers' and participants' resource: a commentary on the contributions to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this commentary is to relate the papers contributing to this special issue to the broader directions and orientations of psychological research on intersectionality. It is argued that, in common with existing psychological research, the contributions to the current issue either explore how social actors stereotype others in light of their intersecting social identities or focus on the potential psychological and social implications of holding intersecting subordinate identities (including gender). It is also maintained that while intersectionality has mainly constituted the researcher's concern and analytic lens, a future research agenda, as it is indicated by some of the contributions, should involve the study of intersectionality as participants' concern and resource and the investigation of the (proximal and distal) implications of its use in different social and rhetorical contexts.

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Although the term 'intersectionality' was coined by Crenshaw in the late 1980s, the idea that particular groups, such as Black women, face multiple exclusions by systems of domination had been put forward earlier. Crenshaw's (1989) account of intersectionality was actually a systematic rearticulation of insights already formulated by authors such as Davis (1981) and Lorde (1984) who criticized the tendency of public representations and institutional discourses to represent middle-class white women and black men as the typical victims of the systems of sexism and racism, accordingly. During the last decades intersectionality has become an increasingly popular issue in books, articles, conferences, and symposia, and apart from an academic topic and/or analytic approach, it has also constituted a political tool used in activism and advocacy (Bilge, 2013; Michos & Figgou, under review; Michos et al., 2021).

Academic psychology has been relatively slow in using intersectionality as a central theoretical and analytic tool. According to Condor (1989), this is rather expected, since the core psychology approaches to identity (including the highly influential social psychological Social Identity Theory) adopt methodologies (such as experimentation) that necessitate the exploration of one single aspect of identity at a time, while holding all others constant. That being said, the present special issue of the Journal of the Hellenic Psychological Society is particularly topical and welcome.

Gender, psychology and intersectionality as the researchers' concern and analytic lens

One strand of existing social psychological research influenced by the concept of intersectionality explores how social actors stereotype others in light of their intersecting social identities (Cole, 2009; Goff & Kahn, 2013; Rattan et al., 2019). Empirical findings in this field demonstrate the potential, as well as the tensions and contradictions, of social stereotyping. For example, research focusing on White participants' stereotypes shows that, when social actors engage in ethnic stereotyping, the male category is treated as prototypical. This means

that stereotypes of ethnic groups are most similar to the stereotypes of men, rather than the stereotypes of women of the same groups (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Research has also indicated that research participants exhibit poorer memory regarding the contributions of Black female targets compared to White women and men, but also Black men (Sesko & Biernat, 2010, 2018). This phenomenon -which is known as *intersectional invisibility* of non-white heterosexual women- may have, according to scholars, opposing effects in certain contexts since it may protect women who belong to ethnic or racial minorities from becoming targets of pejorative stereotypes (e.g., Pittinsky et al., 2006). The study by Daoultzis & Kordoutis (this issue) can be located within this strand of research. Although its principal aim is to provide psychometric data on the self-report measure, labelled Male Identity Scale (MIS) and its dimensions, it serves to increase our understanding of the ways in which heterosexual identity and behaviours may be related to pejorative stereotypes and attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ and women. By doing so, the study casts light on factors that prevent particular men from adapting to social change at a period of dramatic changes in gender role representations in many social/cultural contexts.

A second research strand of psychological research focuses on the (multiple) subordination because of intersecting marginalised identities and explores the psychological and social implications of holding intersecting subordinate identities (Remedios & Snyder, 2018; Berdahl & Moore, 2006). Empirical findings have supported the formulation of the *double jeopardy hypothesis* by showing that membership in more than one disadvantaged group entails a higher risk of health and academic-related problems (e.g., Garnett et al, 2014; Niwa et al., 2014; Udry et al, 2003) in comparison to those belonging to one such group. Most of the studies participating in this special issue confirm the double jeopardy hypothesis and contribute to the relevant scientific dialogue by providing further empirical evidence. Ziliaskopoulou and Avdi (this issue) cast light on the implications of the intersection of dominant representations of the feminine body with the experience of mastectomy for women with breast cancer. The study by Psalti & Antoniou (this issue) showcases the consequences of the recent health crisis on working mothers in Greece. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced women to “work from home” -a place which in line with the ‘intensive motherhood’ ideology is predominantly related to family care-giving- they had to deal with the demands of the intersecting roles of the ‘good’ mother and the ‘good’ worker (Whiley et al., 2021). They had to deal, in other words, with the demand of becoming super-heroines. Sakka and Papazoglou (this issue) explore the ways in which adolescents from diverse groups in terms of gender, ethnic background, religion, and social status plan their future family and professional life in Greece. Their findings reveal that participants’ views concerning their prospects are shaped by their intersecting marginalized and/or privileged identities. They also indicate that the multiple intersecting stigmatized identities of the Roma-Muslim adolescents influence not only their views on their (restricted) professional prospects but also their dreams and ambitions concerning different aspects of their lives. Corpez, Augoustinos & Due (this issue) draw on intersectionality as a critical tool in analyzing the ways in which CALD and ATSI women leaders in Australia attend to and make sense of their complex identities in a specific discursive context (speeches delivered at a series of forums organized by a think tank in Australia). Corpez et al., however, do something more than assume that intersectionality may be an important means to account for potential discrimination against women leaders from minority groups. They focus on intersectionality as a participant’s own resource.

Intersectionality as participants’ resource

According to recent critiques (Phoenix, 2022; Figgou et al., 2023), a great deal of existing research on intersectionality has not managed to avoid some sort of identity essentialism. Although “in theory” authors may explicitly express their commitment to the socially and historically constructed nature of categorization (including gender), “in practice” they pay service to category essentialism. This is often a (not necessarily intended) effect of using methods (e.g., scales or questionnaires) that presuppose the existence of a more or less stable entity (“identity”) behind participants’ discourse. As Phoenix (2022) points out this is paradoxical in light of the extended work in social constructionist critical psychology, in general, and discursive psychology in particular which emphasizes the action-oriented nature of categorization and identity construction.

Introducing a discursive approach to intersectionality, Figgou et al. (2023) maintained that the discursive construction of intersecting identities may be treated as a resource and accomplishment within talk-in-interaction, oriented to social accountability concerns and other rhetorical objectives. Using concepts provided by discursive/rhetorical psychology in analyzing lay discourse on the murder of Zak Kostopoulos, a LGBTIQ+ activist in Greece, these authors indicated that the rhetorical occasioning of intersecting identities may

accomplish important positioning work for the speakers. Specifically, the intersecting identities of the victim were used to constitute the moral profile of the perpetrators from which the speakers *distanced* themselves. As the perpetrators were constructed as un-enlightened bigots and servile (towards the powerful), the speakers' identity came off (by rhetorical implication) as rational and tolerant. This rhetorical distancing had some important ideological implications since it discursively reproduced historical and culturally familiar narratives on Greek national identity and ideologically loaded binaries, such as occidentalism vs orientalism (Andreouli et al, 2017; Bozatzis, 2016; Kadianaki et al., 2022).

Corpez et al. (this issue) by focusing on the ways in which participants attend to intersectional identities in talk cast light not only on the contingent and constitutive nature of identity but also on the potential ideological implications of using interesting identities as a resource. They indicate, for example, how CALD and ATSI women leaders mobilize their intersecting exclusion experience (as women and as members of minority groups), in order to challenge unequal access to leadership roles and to claim visibility. To put it in the words of a woman of Middle Eastern origin *“you cannot be what you cannot see”*. However, this is only part of the story. The picture becomes more complicated as CALD and ATSI women leaders use intersectional subordination as a means of constructing one's success as a product of personal effort and struggle against all odds. Such an emphasis on the individual experience as a product of multiple memberships can potentially serve to reproduce a (neo)liberal individualized approach to intersectionality (see also McCormick-Huhn et al., 2019). Similar unintended consequences can also be traced in the ways in which women participants position themselves vis-à-vis other women in interviews conducted in the context of the study by Flouli & Athanasiades (this issue). In this study, stereotypical pejorative representations of intersecting identities (gender+sexuality) were used (amongst others) by participants as a paradigmatic example of everyday spoken sexism (*“you are a lesbian”, “what kind of woman are you”*). Participants represent themselves as prepared to resist gendered power structures and to answer back at these comments (but also at benevolent subtle sexist rhetoric, which may be prima facie received as well intended) and to defend not only themselves but also other, less resistant subjects who endure sexism. By constructing themselves as aware of all forms of sex-based oppression (including forms of subtle sexism) and as resilient subjects, participants in the aforementioned study explicitly or implicitly position other women as less aware and prepared to resist. Therefore, they individualize agency and responsibility by mainly locating them in a knowledgeable subject.

Intersectionality and psychology: critical points and future agenda

The brief reflection on the potential unwanted and not necessarily intended implications of the use of intersectionality in lay social actors' discourse does not mean to undermine the analytic and explanatory potential of the construct. On the contrary, such a reflection may constitute a basis on which to ground the need for more research on the constructions, uses, and consequences of intersecting identities in different contexts. As other authors have put it, the broad reach of the concept of intersectionality in recent decades made it necessary to engage with its complexity, ambiguities, and potential inconsistencies (Nash, 2018).

Future research, for example, needs to pay attention to different (distal and local) discursive contexts, in order to explore when lay social actors use intersecting identities as a relevant explanatory resource and the implications of doing so. An interesting research question also concerns the absence of intersectionality as a lens for analysing social inequality and social change. In the study of Figgou et al (2023), for example, participants who accounted for the murder of the LGBTQI+ activist Zak Kostopoulos through recourse to his intersecting (class and sexuality) identities, grounded collective action and claims for justice and on a common human identity (independent of class and sexuality). A similar “sexuality-blind” way of accounting that promotes equality for “everyone” (including the non-human) has been identified in a recent study of the discourse of LGBTQI+ activists in Greece (Michos & Figgou, under review). Such a way of accounting depoliticizes activism (Bilge, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2020; Puar, 2013) by likening the needs and claims of the LGBTQI+ community with those of any other social category in contrast to activist voices which construct intersectionality and ally activism as radical alternatives to “identity politics” (see Bilic, 2016; Chan & Mak, 2020; Earle et al., 2021).

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Η διαθεματικότητα ως απόθεμα των ερευνητριών και των συμμετεχουσών/όντων: σχολιασμός των συνεισφορών στο Ειδικό Τεύχος

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ	ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ
<p>Διαθεματικότητα, Φύλο, Απόθεμα των ερευνητριών, Απόθεμα των συμμετεχουσών/όντων</p>	<p>Ο στόχος αυτού του σχολίου είναι να συσχετίσει τις εργασίες που συνεισφέρουν σε αυτό το ειδικό τεύχος με τις ευρύτερες κατευθύνσεις και προσανατολισμούς της ψυχολογικής έρευνας για τη διαθεματικότητα. Υποστηρίζεται ότι, από κοινού με την υπάρχουσα ψυχολογική έρευνα, οι συνεισφορές στο παρόν τεύχος είτε διερευνούν πώς οι κοινωνικοί φορείς αναπαριστούν στερεοτυπικά τις/τους άλλους υπό το πρίσμα των διασταυρούμενων κοινωνικών ταυτοτήτων τους είτε επικεντρώνονται στις πιθανές ψυχολογικές και κοινωνικές επιπτώσεις της υπαγωγής σε υποτιμημένες διαθεματικές κατηγορίες και ταυτότητες (συμπεριλαμβανομένου του φύλου). Υποστηρίζεται επίσης ότι ενώ η διαθεματικότητα αποτελεί κυρίως μέλημα και αναλυτικό φακό των ερευνητριών, η μελλοντική ερευνητική ατζέντα, όπως υποδεικνύεται και από ορισμένες από τις μελέτες που συνεισφέρουν, θα πρέπει να περιλαμβάνει τη μελέτη της διαθεματικότητας ως μελήματος και αποθέματος των συμμετεχουσών/όντων και τη διερεύνηση των (εγγύς και απομακρυσμένων) επιπτώσεων της χρήσης της σε διαφορετικά κοινωνικά και ρητορικά πλαίσια.</p>
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