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WAVES AND RIPTIDES

Mapping intersectionality's currents in feminist psychology

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10.1 Introduction: the uptake hypothesis

In the past 15 or so years, a particular framing of the origins of intersectional inquiry has taken shape in the psychological literature: one in which intersectionality was developed by scholar-activists outside the discipline, and then imported, seemingly whole-cloth, to be deployed by psychologists in research and practice. Often this narrative describes the concept of intersectionality in spatial terms, invoking metaphors that emphasize the distance between intersectionality and the discipline. Intersectionality “travels” from Black feminist activism (Del Rio-Gonzalez et al. 2021, 33), or “represents a new frontier” (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016, 155) where empirical approaches have “lagged behind” (Shields 2008, 301). Even those who observe that intersectionality offers a necessary critique of research and practice in psychology discuss limits to how the concept can be “incorporated” into the discipline (Overstreet et al. 2020, 785) as though a theory can come to be absorbed into a larger whole.

In what we're calling the “uptake narrative,” intersectionality arrived in psychology and began to be subsumed into the discipline starting in the 2000s and is marked by special issues of psychology journals and attendant controversies over the uses (and sometimes abuses) of intersectionality in and beyond feminist psychology (e.g., Grzanka 2018; McCormick-Huhn et al. 2019; Rutherford and Davidson 2019). This account has some empirical validity. Indeed, the term intersectionality did not start to appear in psychology's academic journals until the late 1990s (e.g., Henderson 1997) and then exploded particularly in response to the 2008 special issue of *Sex Roles*, which was interdisciplinary in scope but dominated by feminist psychologists, and the 2009 paper on intersectionality in *American Psychologist* (Cole 2009). The uptake narrative is consistent with what Nash (2018) called “the intersectionality wars,” including concerns about how intersectionality has traveled across disciplinary boundaries and been met by opposition from various political orientations (King 2015), defensiveness over its perceived dilution and misappropriation (Carbado 2013), and the displacement of Black women as both producers of intersectionality scholarship and the subjects of intersectional inquiry (Alexander-Floyd 2012). In psychology, the uptake narrative has been calcified by high-profile publications and critiques that have identified psychological research as especially ripe for the reduction of intersectionality into a methodological quagmire rather than a substantive epistemic critique

(Warner et al. 2016), political project (Grzanka 2020), and far-reaching paradigm for transformational psychological inquiry and activism (Cole 2008; Overstreet et al. 2020).

But what does the uptake narrative reveal and obscure? Critical social and political psychologists have noted that narrative plays an important role in the construction of identity (including disciplinary identities) and reveals “the ideological and experiential content of memory, as well as the *motivational anchor* for a set of social practices” (Hammack and Pilecki 2012, 77, emphasis added). If the uptake narrative is functional, what work does it do to tell the story of intersectionality in psychology? “Uptake” denotes, on the one hand, the arrival of intersectionality into psychology at a particular moment in time and suggests that intersectionality is not *of* psychology but from *elsewhere*. On the other hand, the semantic implications of the uptake narrative are consistent with Collins’s (2019) critique of intersectionality’s treatment by scholars as a kind of proprietary object: a thing to be known, used, and even profited from, instead of a critical social theory intended to support anti-subordination projects or an intellectual-activist movement.

What if we imagined psychology’s uptake narrative to be more of a hypothesis than historical truth? Foucault’s (1978) classic treatment of Victorian repression in the history of sexuality is a useful precedent for such an analytic move. The “repressive hypothesis” argues that the history of sexuality in the West is one of progressively intensive and culturally pervasive silencing, prohibition, and restriction of sexuality. Foucault ultimately rejected the hypothesis. Instead, he advocated for an understanding of the discourse on sexuality in Western modernity to be one of multiplication: a veritable explosion of sex and sexualities through institutions of education, medicine, criminal justice, and psychology, among others. The repressive hypothesis, Foucault argued, is a diversionary tactic, one that aids in a simple narrative construction in which power functions unilaterally and negatively. It is not that sexuality has not been repressed, according to Foucault, but that it has also been produced, expanded, compelled, and spoken about ad infinitum, particularly by those who seek to know it and control it. The inconvenient truth is a bit more complicated.

Accordingly, we suspect that the uptake hypothesis may be a reductive account of intersectionality’s relationship to, with, and in psychology (cf. Rutherford and Pettit 2015). What does mapping the terrain of intersectionality in psychology look like if we think beyond its early formal articulations and citations of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and instead take Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall’s (2013) advice that intersectionality scholarship is best characterized and evaluated by what it does rather than what it calls itself? How do a range of narrative practices, including the proprietary logic described by Collins (2019) and the defensive stance taken by those Nash (2016) called feminist originalists, obfuscate a nonlinear and multifarious narrative of intersectionality in psychology?

One major challenge to the uptake hypothesis is a recent citation analysis of transdisciplinary intersectionality studies (Moradi et al. 2020), which showed that psychology constitutes the second largest cluster of intersectionality scholarship in terms of highly influential publications. More than simply taking up intersectionality, psychologists (and those who publish in psychology journals) have engaged intersectionality through the production of an enormous amount ($n = 3,895$) of (widely cited) scholarship (Moradi et al. 2020), including ideas about what it is (e.g., a paradigm, a framework), what it is not (e.g., a heuristic, a testable theory), and how to realize its potential for generating knowledge in the service of social change toward equity and justice. Citations of papers in the psychology cluster of publications cut across virtually all the other clusters, suggesting that psychological discourse on intersectionality is not marginal or closed, but better characterized as expansive, inclusive, and influential beyond the boundaries of disciplinary psychology. Thus, it’s worth taking a closer look at how intersectionality has taken shape within psychology.

In this chapter, we adopt the longstanding and contested metaphor of waves (Hewitt 2010) and their study to trace early instantiations of intersectionality theory through contemporary understandings of the concept throughout psychology, albeit with a focus on feminist psychology. We acknowledge that the image of waves as it has been used to describe feminist movements is an imperfect fit with intersectionality's development in psychology. In our reading, we do not view the use of intersectionality as surging and later receding, for example. And we do not invoke the imagery of waves to imply they represent sequential or mutually exclusive eras of intellectual or activist thought. Indeed, the image of (ocean) waves has been critiqued for its limitations as a way to describe feminist movement and the way this framing obscures the work of multiracial feminists (Thompson 2002). However, we believe the wave metaphor, with its attention to periodization, zeitgeist, and coalescence of political priorities, can facilitate a critical genealogical examination of intersectionality's travels and transformations in psychology, as well as in other disciplines. We invoke the various meanings of waves as metaphors purposefully here, thinking about oceanic waves, riptides, and acoustics—specifically the branch of physics devoted to the study of sonic waves, the principles of which can be applied to waves of all kinds. Rather than ossify a specific metaphorical framework for envisioning intersectionality's movements in psychology, as if various epistemologies can be characterized simply as building, cresting, crashing, and receding in succession, we want to think about waves as a critical heuristic for examining how intersectionality has been used to produce intersectional projects (i.e., things that are worth approaching intersectionally) over time and, more specifically, the subjects of intersectional analyses. Our project here is accordingly twofold. First we aim to “recast” (Thompson 2002) feminist accounts of intersectionality in psychology in the interest of destabilizing the uptake hypothesis and thus uncovering what ideas, publications, and authors it conceals. Second, we hope to invite critical reflection on how the epistemic wakes of these waves influence how psychologists and other practitioners of intersectionality studies conceptualize, deploy, and change intersectionality to meet disciplinary and political goals in the study and contestation of social inequality.

10.2 Psycho-acoustics

Scholars have offered cartographies or genealogies of intersectionality's movement beyond the foundational publications (Grzanka 2019; Hancock 2016; May 2015). Analyses of citation networks demonstrate that as intersectionality moved into academic disciplines, it “did not spread like an oil stain, evenly and outward from a single center. Instead the trail shows multiple centers and local webs” (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021, 364). Separate analyses of citation networks (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021; Moradi et al. 2020) showed that within the network of psychology scholars, the psychological scholarship cluster is characterized by questions of methodology and empirical investigations, with particular attention to the experience of minoritized and stigmatized identities. Based on her own readings, Collins (2015) identified six themes characterizing the scholarship that uses intersectionality as an analytic strategy, including questions of identity and methodology, themes that emerged in the network analyses as preoccupations of the psychology cluster. These explorations suggest that rather than directly “taking up” intersectionality from writings in other disciplines and interdisciplines, psychologists have cultivated a vibrant and relatively large body of intersectional scholarship linked by flows of citation and conversation. Yet these analyses do not address how the understanding and deployment of intersectionality have evolved over time within this community.

Narrative reviews, content analyses, and systematic analysis of the state of intersectionality studies in psychology today produce a fairly sobering account of intersectionality's place in the

discipline of psychology. Whether lamenting intersectionality's almost complete absence in a subfield (Santos and Toomey 2018) or documenting its facile deployment in a given area (Shin et al. 2017), prominent feminist psychologists tend to assess the ways intersectionality has been invoked—including both its popularity and its marginalization—with a sense of disappointment, if not exactly the defensiveness of Nash's (2016) so-called “originalists.” An “invisible college” (cf. Ansara and Hegarty 2012) of citation networks and call-and-response is traceable across the past decade among feminist psychologists who advocate increased adoption of intersectional perspectives but simultaneous concerns about its dilution (Warner et al. 2016), misappropriation (Bowleg 2008), and mischaracterization (Grzanka 2018), not to mention the erasure of Black women in intersectional psychology (Cole 2020). We (the authors) are both members of this invisible college, though we occupy different and overlapping social positions (one a Black biracial straight woman and one a white queer man, both cisgender, able-bodied, and tenured, although of two different generations). Just as important to the present discussion, we routinely critique the field we publish in and our work can also be understood, at times, to be engaging and producing the prevailing themes we identify here (e.g., Grzanka 2020) and, at other times, resisting them (e.g., Cole 2008). The intellectual contributions of this invisible college—more accurately, the discourse produced by this group of scholars—highlights the contemporary currents that perhaps constitute recent waves of intersectionality in psychology and offer a bridge back to earlier works that might undermine the tidiness of the uptake hypothesis.

What proceeds is our identification of intersectional waves in psychology and is driven by what we are calling a “feminist acoustic analysis.” Though colloquially associated with sound waves audible to the human ear, acoustics refers more broadly to the branch of physics devoted to the study of mechanical waves as they move through gases, liquids, and solids. Acoustics provides analytic substance to the visual metaphor of waves, because acoustics are concerned with how waves *affect the mediums through which they travel*. Inspired by Ahmed's (2006) ethnography of texts, in which one “follows around” texts as they move through discourse, our investigation of whether and how intersectionality's construction in psychology formed coherent, structured/structural movements can be understood as a *feminist acoustic analysis*. Like a mechanical wave, how have waves of intersectionality propagated energy in specific domains of psychology, and have these effects been harmonic and/or chaotic?

As we began working on this project in 2020, we contacted over 15 feminist psychologists to ask them their thoughts on our formulation of the waves and for insight on influential works about intersectionality in psychology that preceded Crenshaw's earliest papers on the topic. We did this to increase the fidelity and validity of our work, because any accounting of these waves should understand them in the context of conversations taking place in a community. Just as traditional acoustic inquiry reconciles the simultaneous coexistence of multiple mechanical waves, our analysis works nonlinearly at times to highlight the extent to which dominant themes in intersectional psychology have overlapped, repeated, and diverged over the past 30 years. We work backwards, purposefully, from the prolific and vibrant state of the subfield today, in order to trace the vibrations of the uptake narrative back to their source, identifying the themes that were precursors to the preoccupations of scholars in this, the fourth decade after Crenshaw's foundational paper (1989) put a name to this area of inquiry and analysis.

10.3 The methods wave (2008–present)

The most recent wave of intersectionality discourse in psychology was marked by the 2008 special issue of *Sex Roles* on intersectionality (edited by social psychologist Stephanie Shields) and signified a preoccupation with methods. Despite earlier attention to intersectional methods

and methodology both within and outside the discipline (Dill 1979), this special issue became a widely referenced milestone in the disciplinary conversation about how psychologists should use intersectionality. Although Bowleg (2008) warned in that issue about the perils of applying positivist principles to intersectional questions, especially the search for an allegedly “perfect” intersectional question, much of the past dozen or so years of intersectionality research in psychology reflects a dogged focus on methods to measure, test, and quantify concepts and questions related to intersectionality. On the one hand, this is unsurprising. Psychologists are mostly quantitative scientists and they convert constructs into variables which can be measured (i.e., behaviors, thoughts, feelings). On the other hand, some of the discourse on intersectional methods reveals assumptions about intersectional phenomena that are orthogonal to earlier theorizing about intersectionality by scholars working in other disciplines and contexts and even, as we will discuss later, foremothers working in psychology.

First, the methods wave subtly displaces the strong social constructionist thrust of canonical intersectionality scholarship (Collins 2000, 2000; May 2015) and suggests that the “complexity of intersectionality” (McCall 2005) can be captured by sufficiently sophisticated scientific tools, including those inherited from positivist traditions (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016). For example, quantitative social scientists often attempt to capture differences among groups defined by multiple axes of identity by testing whether the effect of one identity on an outcome differs according to another identity (e.g., does the salutary effect of gender on salary differ for men depending on whether they are white or of a minoritized race?) This testing for statistical *interaction effects* to compare groups defined by social identities is prevalent in psychology yet some contest whether it is a legitimate form of intersectional analysis, because many approaches to testing interactions position social identities as variables as having discrete and independent effects (e.g., testing for whether gender has an effect that is *independent* of race, as though any individual has a gender without also having a race) rather than as mutually constituted (Lewis and Grzanka 2016). However, psychologists have struggled to identify alternatives to interactions (and their cousin, moderation analysis) even as myriad advanced tools and procedures have been proposed (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016; Hankivsky and Grace 2015). This focus on methods almost always is in lieu of attention to capturing the social practices that construct difference and create inequalities associated with identities. To paraphrase Bowleg (2008), the notion that perfecting methods will yield greater dividends in intersectional analyses suggests that the job of intersectional psychology is to “reveal” rather than construct or co-create the empirical world.

Second, the methods wave is characterized by a multiplication of instrumentation and specific analyses by which to measure particular intersectional phenomena and particular multiply marginalized groups that focus almost exclusively on the measurement of inter-group differences, rather than similarities (e.g., Scheim and Bauer 2019). Certainly this approach is indispensable for identifying inequities, a critical first step toward mitigating them. However, the fact that this approach dominates this most recent wave of intersectional psychology scholarship is especially meaningful given that other intersectional work, particularly in the Black feminist tradition, underscores the importance of identifying common interests to form coalitions (Cole 2008) and of identifying similarities across groups (Cole 2009; Cole and Stewart 2001). The reduction of intersectionality to a question of methods and measurement within the paradigmatic context of early 21st-century psychology means a search for differences that privileges analyses and tests over politics and justice (Bowleg and Bauer 2016; Grzanka and Cole 2021), or at least imagining the political and justice implications of intersectionality are just that: *implications*, rather than motivations or aims in and of themselves. This is what Grzanka and Miles (2016) called psychology’s “epistemic riptide.” They argued that psychologists’ attempts to create

and use knowledge based on intersectionality frameworks are always pulled back to psychology's key unit of analysis: the individual.

We extend this notion and observe that the implications of such a riptide are multifaceted, particularly when talking about waves of intersectionality. Another key element of the riptide is its capacity to drag intersectional inquiry back toward a focus on dominant groups, i.e., college student samples at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). So even when minoritized or stigmatized populations are studied, psychologists tend to articulate their mattering in terms of comparison to dominant groups; for example, in Grzanka and Miles's study, the extent to which LGBT people of color *are different* from prototypical LGBT people (i.e., white cisgender gay men). Intrinsically tied to the emphasis on differences is the impulse to categorize. As such, psychology's epistemic riptide privileges categorization as a way of knowing because categorization—including social categories (e.g., “at-risk” or “underprivileged”) constructed by researchers rather than inductively or empirically derived from communities—is necessary to implement the mandate of comparing groups. From this perspective, intersectionality's deployment as a tool for intercategory analysis (McCall, 2005) is not incidental but rather the predictable outcome of the way intersectionality has come to be understood in the discipline.

McCall's tremendously cited 2005 paper¹ serves as a useful bridge for thinking about the relationship between what we have identified as the methods wave and its predecessor, which was focused on identities. As many readers will undoubtedly be familiar, McCall famously distinguished intersectional analyses in terms of how they treat categories. Her tripartite framework—published in *Signs*, arguably the flagship women's studies journal—differentiates between intersectional analyses that identify and destabilize social categories (*anticategorical*); approaches that look within categories for variations and similarities (*intracategorical*); and analyses that provisionally adopt categories and examine differences between them (*intercategorical*). Reception of McCall's model across the disciplines warrants its own treatment for what it reveals about academic approaches to intersectionality. Here, we offer a limited observation from psychology about how McCall's work mirrors currents in psychology and the privileging of quantitative methodology throughout most social sciences. It is unfair to attribute problems in intersectional psychology to McCall's work, but her influential paper is helpful for considering how methodological investments in certain kinds of analyses come to influence not only what designs are valued and which tests are conducted, but the kinds of participants and groups that come to constitute the corpus of published research on intersectionality.

McCall's (2005) intercategory analyses facilitated a rediscovery and claiming of what was already known, something we might call “epistemological Columbing” when it comes to intersectionality. Because quantitative psychologists are quite adept at measuring interactions among independent variables, including membership in various social groups and positions, intercategory intersectionality—which goes by a variety of different names (e.g., “interactional”; see Lewis and Grzanka 2016)—provided a way of talking about intersectionality that made it seem like psychologists had been “doing” intersectionality all along. Further, since most psychologists are not trained in epistemology, much less postmodern or poststructural theory² (Warner et al. 2016), McCall's delineation of anticategorical analysis is essentially meaningless to those who use categories to conduct virtually all their analyses. Consequently, McCall attributes the development of anticategorical approaches to humanities scholars and philosophers, such as Judith Butler, whose work may influence certain strands of psychology but has little to no bearing on how even psychologists of gender might conduct quantitative inquiry.

Finally, intracategorical analysis, that is, investigations of within-group complexity among a multiply marginalized group, is perhaps the most important part of the paper. Intracategorical inquiry focuses on the experiences of intersectionality within (non-prototypical) categorical

groups, such as Black women, and as such facilitates understanding of these groups on their own terms, rather than relying on constructs originating in the study of hegemonic groups. Although this approach is especially useful for helping psychologists think beyond what Cole and Stewart (2001) called “invidious comparisons,” intracategorical analysis appears to be largely marginalized in the psychological literature that represents its conceptual framework as explicitly intersectional. For example, among the 15 published papers that use the word intersectionality in the top-ranked *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* as of July 2021, none took an intracategorical approach. The marginalization of intracategorical inquiry is not politically neutral or inconsequential. Among McCall’s three approaches, intracategorical analyses look within social categories for dimensions of oppression and privilege, rather than against categories (anticategorical) or between them (intercategorical). Ultimately, the sidelining of intracategorical work in psychological research on intersectionality comes to reproduce what Alexander-Floyd (2012) called a disappearing act: with the failure to take up and refine psychological analyses beyond multi-group comparisons, noncomparative studies of multiply marginalized social groups are deprioritized. The implication, once again, is that, ironically, intersectionality is not a tool to study the experiences of Black women, or even that they are unworthy of study on their own if there isn’t a group with which to compare them.³

In and of themselves, inter-group comparisons reveal nothing about how inequities—in resources, power, and even epistemological credibility (Settles et al. 2020)—associated with gender, sexuality, and race and other axes of difference act in concert to construct lived experiences within minoritized groups (cf. Sabik et al. 2021). In other words, comparative approaches misunderstand intersectionality as describing who people *are*, when it was intended as a way to conceptualize what meaningful social distinctions *do* (Collins 2019). Intersectionality was never just or even principally a theory of identities (Carbado 2013; MacKinnon 2013). And yet as Crenshaw recently observed, some strands of intersectionality’s applications today look like “identity politics on steroids” (qtd. in Steinmetz 2020). This brings us to themes that took precedence earlier in this literature, which we call the “identities wave.”

10.4 The identities wave (2000–present)

In 2017, in the pages of the top-ranked journal of counseling psychology, Grzanka and Moradi (2017) called for a moratorium on the phrase “intersecting identities.” The term had become so ubiquitous in counseling psychology that one would think intersectionality research was the new hegemonic norm. And yet, as Shin and colleagues (2017) found, the vast majority of intersectionality research in counseling psychology—or, more accurately, research that purported to take an intersectional approach—was what Dill and Kohlman (2012) had termed “weak intersectionality,” or the uncritical analysis of multiple dimensions of identity, that is, without attention to power, exclusion, or inequality. But how did psychology get there, to the point at which “intersecting identities” had become such a vacant phrase as to drive experts in the field to advocate for its wholesale abandonment? Although part of the reason for the arrival of the methods wave was the “problem” of identities in intersectional psychology (as if methods would help us figure it out), the answer lies as much in epistemology as it does in methods (Warner et al. 2016).

At the turn of the 21st century, Deaux and Stewart (2001) published a notable invocation of intersectionality in the agenda-setting *Handbook of the Psychology of Women*. In “Framing Gendered Identities,” they extended an ongoing conversation in feminist social psychology about the necessity of considering the role of race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of inequality when studying gender. They posited “gendered identities” as encompassing three

key principles: “historical and cultural context, intersectionality, and negotiation” (Deaux and Stewart 2001, 85). Consistent with Fassinger and Arseneau’s (2007) elaboration of identity “enactment” as a model for thinking about the intersectionality of sexual and gender minority identities in the *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, Deaux and Stewart’s proposal reflected several established principles of intersectionality (Collins 2019): an emphasis on context, the co-constitution of systems of inequality, and the dynamic nature of both these systems and their attendant identities (i.e., race, class). However, in the years that followed, intersectionality’s interpolation in psychology came to emphasize less the contextual and dynamic nature of intersecting systems and more the multidimensional nature of social identities that had previously been largely neglected in psychological inquiry.

Several critics have documented and theorized the prevalence of an identitarian shift in intersectionality discourse in psychology, including its epistemic and political implications. As we noted above, Shin and colleagues (2017) systematically accounted for intersectionality research in the two top journals of counseling psychology through 2016 and found a dramatic rise in the number of papers invoking intersectionality was not actually accompanied by an intersectional analysis. In these journals, intersectionality was invoked to denote that participants and/or clients possessed multiple social identities—typically multiple marginalized identities (Shin et al. 2017). Fewer papers took Dill and Kohlman’s (2012) “strong” intersectionality approach, that is analyses which treat identities and systems in relation to each other, and even fewer took a “transformative” intersectional approach, expressly considering social justice a goal or outcome of research activities.

Ten years after Fassinger and Arseneau (2007) implored LGBT psychologists to consider intersectionality and cultural context as central to the experiences of sexuality and gender expression, Moradi (2017) similarly observed that intersectionality had largely become—at least among psychologists—a way of talking about identities, rather than axes of difference and systemic inequity. As Balsam (2017) observed, “This gentrified framing of intersectionality erodes its power to help us transform our research, our practice, and ultimately our society.” Grzanka and Miles (2016) studied psychotherapy training videos for therapists working with LGBT clients and found that the construction of LGBT issues in professional psychology turned, at least in these videos, upon an understanding of intersectionality as foremost an issue of identity. Within the larger context of neoliberalism, “intersecting identities” emerged as an *intersectionality-lite* way of thinking about LGBT people in social context: mental health issues were framed as issues of multiple social identities, and the key to improving LGBT mental health was to understand these issues in terms of identity. Of course, social identities are important elements of social life and can be especially salient for those situated at various axes of oppression; this focus on identities is not in and of itself reflective of “weak” intersectionality. But Grzanka and Miles situated these training videos in the context of paradigm shifts in psychology, including what they documented as the rise of LGBT-affirmative therapy that privileged identity affirmation above and beyond structural analyses of how LGBT identities come to matter (i.e., through processes including marginalization, stigma, discrimination, violence), much less the social and historical forces that produce certain things as “LGBT issues.” In this decontextualized framing, it is no surprise that the concerns of the most privileged group members, in this case those who are white, affluent, and cisgender, are at the center. Returning again to Balsam (2017), “as we have progressed, we have done so at a cost to those who are more marginalized. Our communities have moved toward an assimilationist, rather than a radical, view of sexual and gender identity. We have whitewashed and gentrified ‘LGBTQ.’” Such an individualizing and anti-structural approach reflects psychology’s epistemic riptide (Grzanka and Miles 2016).

Cole's (2009) *American Psychologist* paper on intersectionality was published in the thick of what we have traced here as the identities wave. The paper, which functioned both as a primer on intersectionality for unfamiliar readers and as a framework for conducting intersectionality research in psychology, became the most widely cited paper on intersectionality in psychology (Moradi et al. 2020).⁴ Reference of the paper joined Bowleg (2008) and Shields (2008) in a small pantheon of expected citations for intersectional work in psychology, which Grzanka (2020) observed to be a kind of bait-and-switch for foundational intersectionality texts and, in some cases, actual engagement with intersectionality theory, literatures, intellectual traditions, etc. While Cole's 2009 paper devotes significant space to explaining intersectionality in terms of Black feminist thought, ironically, citations of the paper sometimes reference Cole's work without any mention of racism or Black feminism.⁵ In the paper's wake, we see two currents emerge. One strand involves business-as-usual psychology with rhetorical intersectionality, the flavor of which Shin et al. (2017) found dominant in counseling psychology research that invokes intersectionality primarily as a demographic or variable-focused concern (i.e., we have men, we have women, we have Black people, we have white people, and some of these groups overlap). Discussion of so-called "multiple social identities," used to refer to the consideration by analysts of more than one identity at a time, is often equated then with intersectionality by way of Cole's paper. In fact, as experienced by individuals, social identities are always already multiple.

In the second strand, various versions of what Nash (2016) called feminist originalism coalesce into protracted resistance of intersectionality's cooptation in the discipline, particularly those projects that seek to move intersectionality to the center of the discipline (in social, developmental, and counseling contexts) by depoliticizing it and erasing Black women (Cole 2020). These kinds of papers in the second strand (e.g., Buchanan and Wiklund 2020; Grzanka 2020; McCormick et al. 2019) are not identical in methodological form or content—and not all are written by members of the invisible college we noted above—but they tend to share in common: insistence that intersectional work be situated in Black feminist and women of color intellectual and activist traditions; criticisms of psychologists' use of intersectionality theory in what are perceived to be apolitical and/or postpositivist projects; critiques of perceived misuses or misunderstandings of what intersectionality is (e.g., treating any two things that cross as an example of intersectionality); and arguments about the centrality of structural inequalities in intersectionality theory, as opposed to social identities.

Thus, it is imperative to understand the identities wave not only as encompassing the promotion of an identitarian paradigm in psychology but about the resistance of such a paradigm that persists today. Equally important, we suggest, is recognizing that the structural critique of identity-focused versions of intersectionality discourse in psychology does not derive solely from ideas outside of psychology but from within, as we explain below.

10.5 The first wave: Black feminist psychology and structural analysis (1983–2003)

The year 1983 marked the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues (JSI)* on racism and sexism in Black women's lives edited by Althea Smith and Abigail Stewart. As with many of the most cited and influential papers in intersectionality studies (see citation analyses above), it is unsurprising that these articles were collected in a special edition and published in the journal of the APA division on social issues, rather than as standalone manuscripts in more mainstream, "general" journals, such as *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* or *Psychological Review*. *JSI* is a historically important journal and one that has published research and theoretical papers very much at the vanguard of the discipline, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s

incisive critique of the role of the behavioral scientist in combating anti-Black racism (King 1968). Smith and Stewart's special issue was published fully six years before Crenshaw (1989) first named intersectionality in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. One of the most remarkable elements of their introductory essay is the elaboration of a perspective on Black women's psychology that is easily mistaken for Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality in both 1989 and 1991's classic "Mapping the Margins." For example, Smith and Stewart wrote:

It has become increasingly clear, though, that racism and sexism must be understood not merely as independent parallel processes, but as processes standing in a dynamic relation to each other. Thus, the forms of racism sometimes differ when directed at black men and black women. Moreover, even when attitudes, acts, or outcomes are the same, black men and black women may experience and respond to them differently. Similarly, the forms of sexism vary as a function of a woman's race, and so may her responses to it. The processes of racism and sexism, and the characteristics, race and sex, can be usefully compared for some purposes, but they must also be examined as they provide contexts for each other.

(1983, 1)

Their theorizing is characteristic of what we mark as the first wave of intersectionality in psychology. While preceding the formal academic articulation of the specific concept of intersectionality in the law (i.e., the erasure of Black women in antidiscrimination doctrine; Crenshaw 1989), this wave of scholarship is consistently defined by a number of features that would later be considered hallmarks of intersectional analysis (Cho et al. 2013; Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020): an emphasis on both structure and context, the non-derivativeness of intersecting forms of systemic inequality, and the centering of Black women and women of color more broadly. Smith and Stewart's contribution underscores the longstanding observation that while Crenshaw (1989) is credited with introducing the term intersectionality (in academic writing), she did not introduce the idea (Collins 2019; Grzanka 2019). However, rarely have psychologists been identified as precursors to Crenshaw's framing (for another contemporaneous example written by a psychologist, see Hurtado 1989).

A critical point of Smith and Stewart's (1983) inaugurating volume is that single-axis approaches to racism and sexism may produce some valid accounts of Black women's experiences of stress and discrimination, but these one-dimensional analyses also flatten experiences of racism and sexism and efface the realities of being a woman of color in a white-supremacist, patriarchal society. Deeply consonant with Crenshaw's (1989) critique of the law's erasure of Black women, Smith and Stewart likewise assert that psychology has empirically disappeared Black women. Specifically, they argue that the accumulated evidence of racial and gender discrimination (i.e., measures of dependent variables) in psychology seems to have contributed to the reduction of sexism and racism into parallel, deeply similar processes. They propose an integrative contextual model that foregrounds "groups" over "effects" and encourages the observation of empirical phenomena in context rather than always in laboratories imagined to function as a facsimile of everywhere/nowhere (cf. Haraway 1988). Smith and Stewart's integrative contextual model is expressly inspired by Black feminist theory and made exigent by research that observed race and sex differences in the study of sexism and racism, respectively. The significant attention they pay to historical and political contexts of racism and sexism and their relation to structural inequality is notable, particularly given hegemonic psychology's investment in constructs thought to be transhistorical, acontextual, and universal—namely behaviors, attitudes, and emotions.

Smith and Stewart's (1983) special issue was not alone in advancing a structural critique of interlocking oppressions in psychological science, though it does reflect a pattern in the psychology literature of major intersectionality papers being published in special issues (e.g., *Sex Roles* 2008, 2013; *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2017). When we reached out to our network of feminist psychologists (most of whom are members of the invisible college) for essential citations on intersectionality in psychology, they offered a litany of books and papers by feminist psychologists who built a foundation of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence of intersectionality throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Though most of these names were familiar to us, it was striking how few are regularly invoked in intellectual histories of intersectionality (e.g., Hancock 2016) or interdisciplinary accounts of intersectionality studies (e.g., Cho et al. 2013). Hope Landrine, Beverly Greene, Michelle Fine, Pamela Trotman Reid, and Lillian Comas-Diaz were influential scholars who had produced path-breaking intersectional work prior to Crenshaw's. And several scholars ancillary to psychology were also noted as particularly catalyzing of intersectional thought within the discipline, such as Frances Beal and Philomena Essed.

Aída Hurtado is an especially consistent contributor to this early wave despite her work's underrepresentation in institutional itineraries of intersectionality (e.g., she is cited just once, for example, in both May's [2015] and Hancock's [2016] histories of intersectionality). The marginalization of her work during this early structural wave is illuminating particularly given the trajectories of intersectionality we traced above. One of the primary contributions of Hurtado's work is demonstrating the consequences of social identities in terms of social positioning relative to systems of power, i.e., subordination (Hurtado 1989). Across a wide range of scholarship, Hurtado used the experiences of women of color to theorize how practices of subordination vary in complex and sometimes unanticipated ways when taking into account multiple forms of simultaneous subordination. In other words, she clarified the social psychological significance of identities in terms of what Collins (2000) [in sociology] called the matrix of domination, rather than framing identities as merely individual differences or cultural influences. What is evident from Hurtado's body of work and scholarship through the first wave is that intersectional theorizing in psychology (1) was inaugurated at least a decade before Crenshaw (1989), (2) was characterized by a range of scholarship across the discipline (i.e., in counseling, social, etc.) rather than isolated in one subfield, and (3) centered women of color as both the source and subjects of intersectional thought *in psychology*.

10.6 Stewardship and other currents

The uptake narrative from which we began our investigation is a hegemonic narrative about intersectionality. However, just as Foucault (1978) destabilized the dominance of the repressive hypothesis in the Western history of sexuality, our feminist acoustic analysis suggests that if we listen carefully to the history of intersectionality in psychology, the uptake narrative is little more than that—a legible story that has taken hold but which has only partial empirical merit. Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis did not mean that sexuality was never repressed; likewise, our troubling of the uptake narrative does not conclude that a substantive element of intersectional research in psychology is not characterized by the importing of intersectional ideas from beyond the formal boundaries of the discipline. Recent quantitative analyses of citation networks (Keucheni and Mügge 2021; Moradi et al. 2020) have confirmed an explosion of intersectionality work post-2008, much of which credits Crenshaw's early texts with inspiring intersectionality scholarship in psychology. But mapping the margins of intersectional psychology tells another important, complicating story of overlapping and nonlinear intellectual

currents grappling with how best to account for the psychosocial consequences of interlocking systems of oppression.

Intersectionality did not *only* come from outside psychology and get taken up. Feminist psychologists were theorizing intersectionality before Crenshaw's key publications, but those works are little recognized, at least in terms of citation practices (Moradi et al. 2020).⁶ Certainly, it is now common for those narrating the history of intersectionality (e.g., May 2015) to identify precursors to Crenshaw who were developing intersectional frameworks that predate the term itself (e.g., the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, Anna Julia Cooper's writing in the late 19th century). But even in psychology-based explanations of intersectionality's history, it is less common to see early contributions of feminist psychologists credited with the development of intersectional concepts and ideas. Thus, much of the foundational scholarship that we locate in the first wave (i.e., Black feminist structural analysis) is effaced even as, ironically, this scholarship was largely about the erasure of Black women in science and society.

There are likely many forces that contribute to the sustenance of the uptake narrative and the missing contributions of the first wave. Smith and Stewart's 1983 special issue, as well as the bulk of the scholarship in the first wave, focused on Black women and other women of color—that is, *intracategorical* work in McCall's (2005) typology. As we noted, *intracategorical* work is perhaps the least epistemically compatible with mainstream psychology, which is more invested in the testing of differences between groups (i.e., *intercategorical* analysis). And given the dominance of mainstream psychology, it is unsurprising that scholars in the humanities and other social sciences might not look to the feminist psychology of the 1970s and 1980s for some origins of intersectional thought. But what if psychologists had begun their understanding of intersectionality from Smith and Stewart's (1983) "integrative contextual model" or Hurtado's (1989) framing of multiple subordination and positionality? Perhaps the genealogy of intersectionality in psychology would be fundamentally different, particularly if we think about these various waves as mechanical in the acoustic sense of the term: able to transport energy across time and space. Perhaps such a structural and *intracategorical* foundation would have made the shift to the prioritization of *intercategorical* analysis (i.e., the methods wave) and the avoidance of structure (i.e., including much of the identities wave) much more difficult. Might intersectional psychology have arrived someplace else—somewhere more transformative and more explicitly political?

But as we have also attempted to establish here, psychology's epistemic riptide is a powerful force (Grzanka and Miles 2016). Feminist psychologists have argued that much of psychological training and the processes by which we discipline ourselves is organized around anti-intersectional thought: universality, discreteness, parsimony, individuality (Case 2017). Riptides are distinguished by their capacity to overcome even the most strenuous resistance. Indeed, guidance on how to survive being caught in a riptide is simply to stay afloat and not swim against it. Though a somewhat sobering metaphor, psychology's epistemic riptide is extraordinarily powerful if we consider how even those of us who have pursued intersectional projects and advocated for intersectional approaches in psychology are disciplined epistemically and methodologically by the very forces we seek to resist. Moreover, the political consequences of this current means that psychological research is pulled back toward individuals and toward the most prototypical, privileged groups.

Imagining alternative currents is indeed a disciplinary project that implicates all aspects of psychological training and practice. Elsewhere, we have promoted "responsible stewardship" as one way of changing how psychologists conduct intersectional research by attending to foundational texts of intersectionality scholarship. We have routinely emphasized that psychologists should engage early intersectionality texts outside of psychology (Cole 2009; Moradi and

Grzanka 2017). Rather than taking a defensive or proprietary posture (*à la* feminist originalism; Nash 2016), responsible stewardship involves the promotion of fidelity to intersectional genealogies and politics. Our analysis here suggests responsible stewardship should also involve more reading and responding to authors in the first wave of intersectional psychology. Destabilizing the uptake narrative with these earlier texts might allow for new narratives to emerge and new currents to coalesce around generative intersectional concepts and approaches. As Foucault's (1978) rejection of the repressive hypothesis contributed to the re-envisioning of the history of sexuality and ushered disruptive paradigms for doing sexuality scholarship and activism (i.e., queer theory), the waves we have identified here are intended to open up rather than foreclose the history of intersectionality in psychology. Ultimately, there are no permanent waves (Hewitt 2010), and currents can and do shift, sometimes quickly and often unpredictably.

Notes

- 1 Over 7,000 citations as of June 2021, according to Google Scholar.
- 2 Else-Quest and Hyde (2016) are an exception, for example, in as much as their argument for the use of quantitative methods in intersectional psychology is prefaced by a discussion of epistemology. Nonetheless, they see intersectionality as potentially compatible with a range of epistemic assumptions, including those descended from traditional positivism (e.g., feminist empiricism).
- 3 May (2015) noted a similar, albeit even more transdisciplinary trend in intersectionality studies whereby increasing the number of intersections in a given analysis came to constitute superior forms of intersectional inquiry, as if examining the intersection of race and gender were not enough to sufficiently represent intersectionality.
- 4 According to Google Scholar, Cole (2009) has been cited 2,681 times, compared to 1,687 for Bowleg (2008) and 1,875 for Shields (2008).
- 5 Rather than invoke specific papers that engage in this practice, we encourage readers to conduct a search in PsycINFO for the words "Cole" and "intersectionality" to see the diverse ways in which the 2009 paper is used.
- 6 Stewart and Smith's (1983) introduction to the special issue on the psychology of Black women has been cited 293 times, according to Google Scholar as of August 2021, compared to the thousands of citations of the texts we highlighted in the methods and identities waves.

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