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Intersectional Perspectives on Gender and Gender Identity Development

Claire K. Robbins, Brian L. McGowan

Over a relatively short time, college student development theories have evolved to reflect a significant shift in attention toward gender and other dimensions of social identity. Early research on college student development was conducted from a postpositivist perspective, included only men, and did not attend to or name social identity differences. In contrast, contemporary researchers use a range of perspectives, often include students of different genders in their studies, and explore dimensions of social identity development separately and intersectionally (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Intersectional understandings of gender, gender identity, race, and racial identity have significantly informed our individual research as relatively new scholars, including Brian's work exploring the intersectional realities of African American college cisgender men across differing institutional contexts and Claire's work on racial identity among cisgender White women graduate students. In this chapter, we want to transcend normative thinking on gender, honor the lived experiences of participants in our work, and echo and amplify the work of scholars before us who have troubled the notion that gender can be understood in isolation from other social identities. Our reflections on feminist scholars and frameworks that critically explore issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation led us to consider contemporary events and trends affecting higher education, including but not limited to:

- Police brutality against unarmed Black men and the #BlackLivesMatter movement
- Murders of unarmed trans* women of color
- Rape culture, sexual assault and rape cases, and student activism around the enforcement of Title IX on college campuses
- Persistent gendered and racialized inequities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields

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Fully understanding and responding to these issues requires a complex understanding of gender that is not part of traditional student development theories. Although gender is important to each of these issues, each issue is also inextricably shaped by class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation, among other social identities. Conceptualizing gender as an individual identity is inadequate without recognizing institutionalized oppression that perpetuates prejudice historically against cisgender women (sexism) and against trans* and gender nonconforming individuals (genderism). Those seeking to understand contemporary issues must acknowledge that gender, both as an individual identity and as a social phenomenon, is the product of an ongoing "interactional process" across many contexts (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 442). Some feminist sociologists refer to this phenomenon as *doing gender* or more generally describe it as the socially and culturally constructed meaning people assign to biological characteristics (Catalano & Shlasko, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

There are three insights we offer to situate gender as a social phenomenon: (a) gender cannot be understood in isolation from other social identities; (b) gender is inextricable from sexism, genderism, and their intersections with other social structural conditions; and (c) gender is a socially constructed, interactive process. Building on each of these insights, in this chapter we explore intersectional perspectives on gender and gender identity development. After an overview of gender, we situate our discussion within four philosophical traditions and introduce readers to intersectionality as an example of a critical and interdisciplinary perspective on gender and gender identity. We then offer a focused discussion of intersectionality and contemporary literature on cisgender men and women from our research. Next, we link this discussion to the three insights and we conclude with recommendations for practice and future research.

Conceptualizing Gender

Beginning in childhood, human beings learn to understand themselves in gendered ways. We make meaning of gender in social situations through ongoing interactions with parents, peers, and educators (Katz, 1986). Some individuals learn that when it comes to gender, there are many ways to identify (Nicolazzo, 2015; Stryker, 2008). However, most individuals are primarily socialized in environments that offer only two identifications: female and male (Gilbert, 2009). Increasingly, college educators are learning that this binary understanding of gender draws from and contributes to sexism, genderism, and homophobia (Gilbert, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2015). Too often, research on college student development conflates the study of gender and/or gender identity with the study of college women and/or college men. As a result, much of the literature guiding student affairs practice either includes only cisgender participants, or else groups trans* and

cisgender students together. Both approaches render trans* students invisible, conceal the privilege associated with cisgender identity and the oppression associated with trans* identity, and reinforce the gender binary.

Gender and Language. One of the most concrete manifestations of the gender binary is also among the most resistant to change: the words we use to talk about gender and gender identity. Every college educator can choose to use language consistent with people's understanding of their gender identity and expression. In the words of Ballou (2015), "if you care enough about someone to talk about them, then you care enough to use their pronouns" (para. 44). A full glossary of terms related to gender is beyond the scope of this chapter, in part because these terms are constantly emerging (Dennis, 2015). Still, we offer the following definitions to invite readers to use language in ways that dismantle rather than reinforce the gender binary:

- ***Gender*** is a social construction that involves "the interactional process of crafting gender identities that are then presumed to reflect and naturally derive from biology" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 442). The American Psychological Association defines biological sex as the chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics categorized as male, female, or intersex. Gender and biological sex are often incorrectly used and interchanged (https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf).
- ***Gender identity*** is "a person's internal self-concept with regard to gender categories" (Catalano & Shlasko, 2010, p. 424). Constantly in flux, these identities include agender, cisgender, transgender, man, woman, gender nonconforming, genderfluid, and genderqueer, among many possible identifications (Nicolazzo, 2015; Stryker, 2008).
- ***People of all/no genders*** acknowledges that gender-based oppression exists and affects all people socialized under the male and female binary. Well-intentioned individuals may use the phrase "all genders," but the term "all" marginalizes individuals who identify as agender, or having no gender (Ballou, 2015).
- ***Trans**** goes beyond the word *transgender* to encompass "a wide array of identities, expressions, and embodiments that continues to grow and expand" (Nicolazzo, 2015, p. 13). Nicolazzo (2015) described *trans** as "an open question pointing toward the instability of the assumed gender binary, recognizing trans* people as comprising a community of difference" (p. 16).

For additional definitions and resources, refer to the citations included in this section.

Gender in College. Students bring their understandings of themselves and of gender to college environments. For example, cisgender students may encounter the word "cisgender" for the first time in college.

College environments also reflect gendered assumptions that reflect the larger society and limits those who identify outside of the gender binary (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). For example, most residence halls offer two kinds of bathrooms: one for male-identified students and one for female-identified students (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). State legislators in Florida recently attempted to criminalize trans* individuals' use of sex-segregated public bathrooms (Ennis, 2015).

College and universities are in a unique position to be inclusive and welcoming for people of all/no gender identities and expressions. Higher education scholars increasingly recognize that gender has a profound influence on college students' developmental journeys. In fact, over the past few decades, student development scholarship on gender and gender identity has increased significantly (among others, Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). Scholars from distinct philosophical traditions conceptualize gender in different ways. By describing how each tradition has framed the study of gender and gender identity among college students, we seek to differentiate the unique contribution of intersectional perspectives.

Situating Gender and Gender Identity Within Four Philosophical Traditions

Among student development researchers, understandings of gender and gender identity are based on different philosophical traditions (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). By "philosophical," we are referring to *epistemology* ("assumptions about the acquisition of knowledge") and *ontology* ("assumptions about the nature of reality") (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 10). Although a thorough explanation of epistemological and ontological perspectives is beyond this chapter's scope, we provide a summary of four philosophical traditions, using college student development literature to illustrate how each conceptualizes gender and gender identity.

Positivist Tradition. Positivists believe that through systematic observation, scientists can make claims about absolute truth. A more contemporary tradition is postpositivism, which holds that although observation is a subjective process, researchers should strive for neutrality and come as close to objectivity as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Postpositivist social science researchers typically conceptualize gender as a dichotomous, independent variable. Researchers create survey instruments with a demographics section in which students are asked to check either "male" or "female." Then, researchers use students' responses to test hypotheses about whether or to what extent gender (biological sex) is associated with differences in one or more dependent variables. For example, Foubert, Nixon, Sisson, and Barnes (2005) used quantitative data from Winston, Miller, and Prince's (1987) Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory to explore gender (biological sex) differences in students' degree of development.

Constructivist Tradition. Constructivist researchers seek understanding through the interpretation of individual experience (Jones et al., 2014). Informed by several disciplines, including psychology and sociology, constructivist researchers believe that knowledge is coconstructed by social actors, including participants and researchers (Jones et al., 2014). The constructivist tradition guided most of the earliest scholars who studied the gendered experiences of college women. Again, these studies did not distinguish among sex, gender, and gender identity. Josselson's (1987, 1996) longitudinal study generated a conceptual model of four identity pathways among women. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) identified five distinct "ways of knowing" among women, including a distinction between "connected" and "separate" knowers, who approached knowledge from distinctly different positions. Gilligan (1993) was among the first to study moral and ethical development among women, finding that women were more likely than men to view moral decision making processes as contextually dependent (rather than absolute) and to rely on an ethic of care (rather than justice). Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) illustrated the intersections between and shifting salience of multiple social identities among college women. Baxter Magolda originally used a positivist perspective in a model of epistemological reflection that foregrounded women's experiences, but this study led to a constructivist understanding of self-authorship among both women and men (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Each of these theorists used a constructivist perspective that foregrounded college women's meaning making.

Critical Tradition. Scholars in the critical tradition center their analyses on inequitable social structural conditions (Tierney & Rhoads, 2004). Many theoretical perspectives draw on the critical tradition, including critical race theory (CRT), Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), and Critical Trans Politics. One example is the work of Nicolazzo (2015), who used Critical Trans Politics to guide hir critical collaborative ethnographic study of resilience among trans* college students in the contexts of gender binary discourse (language perpetuating the gender binary) and compulsory heterogenderism (misconceptions "rooted in sexuality-based stereotypes that [dictate] one's sexuality as a direct result of gender presentation" [p. 89], when in fact sexuality and gender presentation are not the same thing). Intersectionality is also a theoretical perspective that is part of the critical tradition, and is discussed more fully later in this chapter. Overall, critical approaches to gender shift the focus from cisgender women's individual meaning making to the inequitable systems that constrain individual experiences among students of all/no genders.

Poststructural Tradition. The poststructural philosophical tradition deconstructs binaries that constrain thought and action (Jones et al., 2014). St. Pierre (2014) described poststructuralism as one of the "posts" (with others including postmodernism and posthumanism), arguing that

these theories can be used to deconstruct or "work the ruins" of everyday circumstances in social life. Whereas scholars use the critical tradition to *illuminate* inequitable conditions, the poststructural tradition *deconstructs* these inequities, often at the level of discourse (a term that refers to how language and social practices regulate power and knowledge). For example, Denton (2014) used a poststructural theory—queer theory—in his study of gay college men living with HIV/AIDS. This study deconstructed problematic discourses that link HIV/AIDS to gay cisgender men and render invisible cisgender women, trans* people, and heterosexual cisgender men living with HIV (M. Denton, personal communication, July 9, 2015). Deconstructing discourses about gender allows theorists and researchers to pinpoint the harmful consequences of these discourses in students' everyday lives.

Each philosophical tradition offers different perspectives on gender and gender identity among college students. That is, gender and gender identity look different when viewed through the lens of each tradition. We now describe intersectionality and illustrate how intersectional research has contributed to the evolution of student development theory in relation to gender identity.

Intersectionality

Although U.S. Black feminist and womanist activists and scholars had long highlighted the intersections of racism, sexism, and classism, Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to use the term *intersectionality* in scholarly publications (Mitchell, Simmons, & Greyerbiehl, 2014). A critical legal studies scholar and one of the founders of critical race theory, Crenshaw (1991) wrote in a groundbreaking article that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). Among many who have contributed to intersectional scholarship across multiple disciplines, Dill and Zambrana (2009), Museus and Griffin (2011), Strayhorn (2013), Mitchell et al. (2014), Jones (2009), and Pérez Huber (2010) have drawn on intersectionality to illuminate and respond to inequities in higher education.

Along with scholars in other fields, higher education scholars illuminate three important characteristics of intersectional scholarship. First, intersectionality rejects the postpositivist assumptions of an additive approach to social inequality, in which oppression is measured by adding together the effects of identifying with more than one marginalized group (for example, identifying as Black, a woman, and a lesbian) (Bowleg, 2008). Instead, from an intersectional perspective, one's identity is the product of a social location defined by the convergence of ability, class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social identities.

Second, intersectionality has a systemic rather than an individual focus. Intersectional scholars examine not just the social identities of individuals (for example, race and gender), but what it means to "live at the crux of structural inequality based on intersections" (Bowleg, 2008, p. 323) of multiple systems of oppression (for example, racism, genderism, and sexism). Third, rather than passively approaching systems of oppression as neutral objects of study, intersectionality foregrounds activism, advocacy, and social movements (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Through these three tenets, intersectionality has allowed student development researchers to enhance the complexity of theoretical approaches to gender and gender identity. In the following section, we explore how intersectionality has influenced our own work as researchers. We do not intend to speak for other scholars or researchers, nor do we wish to perpetuate binary understandings of race and gender. Rather, we offer our recent projects as examples of work by student development theory researchers who increasingly are influenced by intersectionality and other critical perspectives on gender among college students. We share highlights from our research on cisgender men and women while taking in critical considerations of intersectionality, gender identity, and socialization.

The Evolution of Theory: Conceptualizing Gender as Intersectional

Intersectionality has strongly influenced emerging scholarship on gender and gender identity development among college students. In this section, we illustrate how intersectionality has informed our own thinking on gender identity.

The Gendered Realities of African American Cisgender Men: Brian's Research. In recent student development scholarship, investigations of gender identity have intentionally highlighted cisgender men as gendered beings (Harper & Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). Despite this focus on the connection between college cisgender men's conceptualization of masculinity and their gendered behavior, the experiences of cisgender men of color were often ignored in these studies. In response to these limitations, coupled with increased attention to identity intersectionality, newer scholarship advocates for intersectional approaches exploring the complex convergence of masculinities with other aspects of cisgender men's social identities (Harper, Wardell, & McGuire, 2011).

Brian's most recent work used intersectionality and explored the gendered realities of African American cisgender college men. Unknowingly, participants in this study described how their intersectional identities influenced not only their interpersonal relationships with other college men but also how they viewed themselves. For instance, when asked to describe how their gender identity influenced their interpersonal relationships on

campus, many participants could not solely reflect on gender without taking into account other salient factors constituting identity such as their race and sexuality. Employing an intersectional approach to identity in his work allows for recognition of multiple social identities while reflecting on experiences with privilege and oppression; doing so provides new insights into participants' gendered experiences (McGowan, 2013).

Racial Consciousness, Identity, and Dissonance Among White Cisgender Women: Claire's Research. Whereas Brian's research explored gendered realities among African American cisgender men in college, one of Claire's recent projects explored racial identity among White cisgender women in master's-level student affairs graduate preparation programs. Contemporary social identity theories recognize the inextricability of social identities, yet like gender identity, foundational theories of racial identity development considered only one social identity at a time (Stewart, 2009). Some White individuals struggle to understand and recognize White privilege because the concept is presented in a way that ignores the marginalization they experience in their subordinate identities (e.g., class, gender, and sexual orientation) (Gorski, 2011). Few studies have explored how White cisgender women navigate the intersection of racial privilege and gender oppression, particularly among graduate students in student affairs.

Claire did not initially frame the study from an intersectional perspective because using a perspective that originated in Black feminist scholarship and activism (Crenshaw, 1991) seemed problematic to her given her focus on White cisgender women. However, she reconsidered when participants began describing their social identities as inextricable from one another. Many of the participants shared that their sexual orientation, gender expression, social class (and college generational status), and religious identities all intersected with their racial identities in complex ways. Some participants recognized, in hindsight, times when they hid behind a marginalized identity (e.g., being Jewish) to avoid being seen as complicit in racism. Other participants still did not understand how they could have White privilege given experiences of marginalization (usually in relation to class). Findings offered implications for social identity development scholarship, as well as undergraduate and graduate education and student affairs preparation (Robbins, 2012).

Lessons from Intersectionality

We resonate with recent concerns about using intersectionality in ways that depart from its original focus on multiple oppressions (Anders & DeVita, 2014) and Black women's lives (Crenshaw, 1991). However, as our own research projects illustrate, intersectionality is influencing the literature on gender and gender identity among college students. Still, with so many theoretical perspectives and philosophical traditions, why highlight intersectionality?

Our reasoning resonates with Collins's (1998) description of intersectionality as a "heuristic device" (p. 205), or teaching tool, for thinking about how inequities are produced and maintained in social institutions, including higher education. The following section serves as a heuristic device to illustrate what can be learned from an intersectional perspective on gender and gender identity development, concentrating on the three insights identified at the beginning of the chapter.

Gender and Other Social Identities Are Inextricably Connected. Although early theorists conceptualized gender as a single dimension of difference, intersectional scholars view gender as intersectional with and shaped by other social identities, including race, social class, and sexual orientation. The African American cisgender men in Brian's study (McGowan, 2013) and the White cisgender women in Claire's study (Robbins, 2012) all spoke about their identities intersectionally, highlighting gender and race along with sexual orientation, class, and religion, among others. By using theories that recognize the inextricability of social identities, researchers may generate findings that resonate with college students' experiences, and educators may create and sustain environments in which all students experience success and a sense of belonging.

Gender and Other Social Identities Are Shaped by Social Structural Inequities. Intersectionality highlights the structural inequities in which gender identity are embedded. For example, Pérez Huber (2010) used intersectionality to elucidate how racist nativism, classism, and sexism converged in the lived experiences of undocumented Chicana college students. Unlike constructivists, who primarily emphasize individual meaning making, intersectional researchers center lived experiences for the purpose of illuminating inequitable social structures. College educators can use intersectional research to guide their efforts to dismantle inequities (for example, racialized and gendered disparities in academic outcomes).

Gender Is a Socially Constructed, Interactive Process ("Doing Gender"). Gender is not solely a developmental phenomenon (Robbins & Jones, in press). With their emphasis on development, constructivist studies sometimes overlook gender as a socially constructed process. Brian's research, along with Nicolazzo's (2015), incorporates intersectionality while also foregrounding the collaborative "doing" of gender among college students. Understanding how students "do" gender intersectionally may help researchers and educators move beyond best practices (Nicolazzo, 2015) and dig deeper in their efforts to create safe environments, facilitate learning, and promote success among all students.

Overall, scholars who use intersectional perspectives to explore gender identity development among college students are offering vital new insights for theory, research, and practice. These studies demonstrate how postsecondary students are constructing gender identities and resisting structural inequities. Students' identity construction and resistance, in turn, has much

to offer educators who seek to create and sustain inclusive college environments for students of all/no genders.

(Re)conceptualizing Gender in Higher Education: Recommendations for Practice

Working toward creating inclusivity for people of all/no gender identities requires educators to look beyond binary perspectives and explore inclusive and intersectional conceptualizations of gender. We pose the question, how does higher education practice look different when informed by intersectional perspectives on gender identity development? Focusing on curriculum and institutional policies and procedures, the following examples provide a starting place for educators committed to reducing gender inequities, becoming more gender-conscious, and transgressing binaries in higher education practice. This list is not intended as best practices, but instead as possibilities for college educators and institutional leaders to consider:

- Creating curriculum that is welcoming to people of all/no genders
- Empowering students from dominant populations to recognize and ally themselves with students from marginalized backgrounds
- Creating intentional opportunities for students to come together and reflect on identity conflicts
- Revising the language of institutional websites and publications to be more inclusive of gender diversity
- Using inclusive language that does not gender individuals without their consent
- Advocating for and creating nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies that include gender identities and expressions

Conclusion

Students enter college with varying levels of understanding of themselves and gender that may be validated or challenged in the college environment. Reconceptualizing gender through an intersectional lens creates a new direction for creating inclusive communities for people of all/no genders.

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