

# Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities

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**Abstract** The hypothesis that possessing multiple subordinate-group identities renders a person “invisible” relative to those with a single subordinate-group identity is developed. We propose that androcentric, ethnocentric, and heterocentric ideologies will cause people who have multiple subordinate-group identities to be defined as non-prototypical members of their respective identity groups. Because people with multiple subordinate-group identities (e.g., ethnic minority woman) do not fit the prototypes of their respective identity groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women), they will experience what we have termed “*intersectional invisibility*.” In this article, our model of intersectional invisibility is developed and evidence from historical narratives, cultural representations, interest-group politics, and anti-discrimination legal frameworks is used to illustrate its utility. Implications for social psychological theory and research are discussed.

**Keywords** Intersectionality · Race · Gender · Sexual orientation · Multiple identities · Double jeopardy · Social dominance theory

If the most violent punishments of men consisted of floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped. (Davis 1981, p. 7)

Without in any way underplaying the enormous problems that poor African American women face, I want to suggest that the burdens of African American men have always been oppressive, dispiriting, demoralizing, and soul-killing, whereas those of women have always been at least *partly* generative, empowering, and humanizing. (Patterson 1995 pp. 62–3)

## Introduction

The politics of research on the intersection of social identities based on race, gender, class, and sexuality can at times resemble a score-keeping contest between battle-weary warriors. The warriors display ever deeper and more gruesome battle scars in a game of one-upmanship, with each trying to prove that he or she has suffered more than the other. In intersectionality research the debate has centered on whether people with *multiple* subordinate-group identities (e.g., ethnic minority women, white lesbian women, black gay men) are worse off, that is, experience more prejudice and discrimination, than those with *single* subordinate-group identities (e.g., ethnic minority heterosexual men, white gay men).

On one side of this debate are scholars who support the double jeopardy model which claims that disadvantage accrues with each of a person’s subordinate-group identities. For example, in the quote above, Davis claims that black women are worse off than black men because they bear all of the burdens of racial subordination along with the distinctive burdens of sexual subordination. On the other side of the controversy are scholars who claim that people with a single subordinate-group identity are relatively more disadvantaged than people with multiple

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subordinate group identities. Orlando Patterson's vivid commentary about the experiences of black men represents this perspective. The controversy about whether a person with multiple subordinate-group identities will tend to be more or less oppressed than a person with a single subordinate-group identity has raised important questions and stimulated interesting theory and research on the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. However, empirical evidence can be marshaled to support either side of this controversy and the question of who is more oppressed may be ultimately unanswerable.

The purpose of this article is to develop an alternative model for research on intersectionality that attempts to move beyond the question of "whose group is worse off" to specify the distinctive forms of oppression experienced by those with intersecting subordinate identities. Our central argument is that androcentrism—the tendency to define the standard person as male—ethnocentrism—the tendency to define the standard person as a member of the dominant ethnic group (i.e., White Americans in the U.S.)—and heterocentrism—the tendency to define the standard person as heterosexual—may cause people who have intersecting identities to be perceived as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups. Because people with multiple subordinate identities (e.g., African-American woman) do not usually fit the prototypes of their respective subordinate groups (e.g., African-Americans, women), they will experience what we have termed "*intersectional invisibility*."

This article is divided into four sections. The first section summarizes the two dominant theoretical frameworks used to investigate whether people with multiple subordinate-group identities or those with a single subordinate-group identity experience greater societal prejudice and discrimination. Its purpose is to provide an intellectual context for the next section where we explain the specific problems and challenges associated with this score-keeping approach. In the third section, the intersectional invisibility model is developed and evidence from historical narratives, cultural representations, interest-group politics, and anti-discrimination legal frameworks are used to illustrate the utility of the intersectional invisibility model. In the final section, implications for social psychological theory and research are discussed.

### **"Which Group Suffers the Most?": Multiple vs. Single Subordinate Group Identities**

#### **Double Jeopardy and the Cumulative Nature of Disadvantage**

The term "double jeopardy" is traditionally used by scholars who emphasize the cumulative disadvantage that accrues to people with multiple subordinate-group identities (Almquist

1975; Cortina 2001; King 1988; Epstein 1973; Reid 1984). As research on racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and disability has advanced, critics have argued that isolating any single one of these identities for study overlooks the experience of individuals with multiple subordinate identities (Reid and Comas-Diaz 1990; Smith and Stewart 1983). To correct this oversight, double jeopardy theorists explicitly focus their studies on people with more than one devalued identity (Browne and Misra 2003).

"Double jeopardy" was introduced in the early 1970's to characterize dual discrimination based on racism and sexism (Beale 1979). According to the double jeopardy hypothesis, minority women suffer the effects of both gender and ethnic prejudice in their society (Beale 1979; Reid 1984). Later theorizing called for a third "jeopardy" based on class and a fourth based on sexual orientation (King 1988). Scholars who study double or multiple jeopardies seek to understand and explain how disadvantage accumulates to shape the experience of discrimination for people with intersecting subordinate-group identities (see Hancock 2007 for complete review).

Two general models outline how double jeopardy research is conceptualized: *the additive model* and *the interactive model*. Researchers advocating an additive model argue that a person with two or more intersecting identities experiences the distinctive forms of oppression associated with each of his or her subordinate identities summed together. The more devalued identities a person has, the more cumulative discrimination he or she faces (Almquist 1975; Epstein 1973). Alternatively, researchers advocating an interactive model argue that each of a person's subordinate identities interact in a synergistic way. People experience these identities as one, and thus contend with discrimination as a multiply marginalized other (Crenshaw 1993; Carbado 2000a; Reid and Comas-Diaz 1990; Smith and Stewart 1983; Settles 2006).

Early models highlighting both the additive and interactive nature of multiple identities were grounded in the experience of African-American women and thus emphasized the co-existence of race and gender in American society (Smith and Stewart 1983). Insights gleaned from this approach have more recently been applied to the study of other groups such as Asian-American women (Lien 1994), Asian-American sexual minorities (Chung and Katayama 1998), African-American sexual minorities (Bowleg et al. 2003; Carbado 2000a), Latino immigrant women (Salgado de Synder et al. 1990), and Native-American lesbians (Witt 1981). Other models claim that a person's class status inextricably defines their race and gender and thus must be included in double jeopardy scholarship (Jeffries and Ransford 1980; Ransford and Miller 1983; see also Carbado 2002; McLeod and Owens 2004 for intersectionality and class).

Despite their differences in modeling the nature of intersectional oppression, both the additive and interactive models of double jeopardy predict that people with multiple subordinate identities will be subjected to more prejudice and discrimination than those with a single subordinate identity. The double jeopardy thesis is typically supported by findings demonstrating that on many economic and social indicators such as wages, job authority, and occupational status, people with intersecting subordinate identities (e.g., Black women, Latinas, and some groups of Asian-American women) are at the bottom, falling below White women and ethnic minority men (Almquist 1975; Epstein 1973; King 1988; Landrine et al. 1995). For example, in the domain of domestic work, ethnicity, gender, class, and citizenship are compounded so that poor immigrant ethnic minority women encounter greater degrees of disadvantage (King 1988). More recently, Berdahl and Moore (2006) found that women experienced more sexual harassment than men, minorities (African-American and Latino) experienced more ethnic harassment than whites, and minority women experienced more frequent and severe harassment overall than white males, minority males, and white females.

Research studying the experience of discrimination from the subject's own perspective has also uncovered evidence of cumulative disadvantage for intersectional subordinates. For instance, black women report that employers expect them to be paid less in comparison to black married males and white females (Settles 2006). Moreover, black lesbians who were interviewed about stressors associated with their triple subordinate identity status claimed that racism, sexism and heterosexism were each significant sources of stress in their lives (Bowleg et al. 2003). Finally, using a stereotype threat paradigm, Gonzales and colleagues (Gonzales et al. 2002) provided support for the notion that the compound effect of stereotypes about Latino intelligence *and* stereotypes about women's intelligence lowered Latinas test performance relative to white females, Latino males, and white males when these stereotypes were simultaneously activated.

#### Social Dominance Theory and the Subordinate Male Target Hypothesis

The other side of the “whose group is most oppressed” debate is occupied by scholars who claim that group members with a single devalued identity often bear the brunt of discrimination targeting their group. The most powerful and theoretically rich statement of this position is rooted in social dominance theory (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sidanius and Veniegas 2000). Specifically, social dominance theory's subordinate male target hypothesis (SMTH) provocatively claims that subordinate men are the focus of oppression primarily implemented by dominant men. Consequently, oppression directed at subordinate groups will cause

subordinate men to experience more direct prejudice and discrimination than subordinate women.

Social dominance theory claims that societies are structured as group-based hierarchies out of which group conflict and oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, nationalism) arise (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Within these hierarchical systems, dominant groups have a disproportionate share of economic resources and social and cultural capital, while subordinate groups suffer stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Social dominance theory emphasizes three qualitatively different types of social hierarchy: age-based, gender-based, and arbitrary-set hierarchies (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). In age-based hierarchies adults are dominant over children, in gender-based hierarchies men are dominant over women, and in arbitrary-set hierarchies locally defined dominant groups, such as certain ethnic or religious groups, have privileged access to resources over locally defined subordinate groups.

One assumption specifically relevant to the SMTH is the notion that arbitrary-set hierarchies are the product of competition among men over access to material and symbolic resources (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Because resource-competition is largely an intra-male phenomenon, men from dominant groups oppress men from subordinate groups to maintain their own social power and resource control. For these reasons the oppression directed at ethnic minorities should have more severe effects on minority males than minority females. Of course by including patriarchy in its analysis social dominance theory recognizes that ethnic minority women are the targets of both gender and ethnic oppression. However, the theory emphasizes that ethnic prejudice against minority males is typically more extreme than that which is directed at minority women. The SMTH agitates the “Whose group suffers most?” debate relevant to intersectionality research. People with a single devalued identity, in particular ethnic minority men, are posited to experience more prejudice and discrimination than people with multiple devalued identities, in particular ethnic minority women.

Social dominance researchers have amassed impressive empirical evidence across a number of different domains and cultures to support their claim that men bear the brunt of discrimination targeted at subordinate arbitrary-set groups, such as ethnic minorities (for complete review see Sidanius and Pratto 1999). For example, in a study of incarceration rates in the English criminal justice system, researchers found that even after controlling for differences in legally relevant variables black men were still incarcerated at higher rates than white men, while the differences between black and white women were eliminated (Simmons et al. 1991). A meta-analysis of employment discrimination auditing studies conducted in several different countries revealed that the bias favoring domi-

nant over subordinate men was greater than the bias favoring dominant over subordinate women (Sidanius and Pratto 1999).

Not only should ethnic minority men bear the brunt of ethnic discrimination, the SMTH also suggests that ethnic minority men should often be worse off overall than ethnic minority women, despite the fact that ethnic minority women also suffer from oppression based on gender. Self-report studies support this claim. For instance, in Sweden, male immigrants report more experiences of discrimination in the workplace than female immigrants (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Similarly, in the United States, black men are more likely than black women to report experiencing workplace discrimination within the past 30 days (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Finally, an audit study of car sales revealed that while black women are forced to pay approximately \$446 more than white men for a new vehicle, black men are forced to pay \$1,133 more than white men (Ayres and Siegelman 1995). Cumulatively, these results offer strong support for social dominance theory's prediction that prejudice against arbitrary-set subordinate groups is largely targeted at the men within those groups, which often causes minority men to be worse off overall than minority women, contrary to both conventional wisdom and the double jeopardy hypothesis.

### Limitations of the Score Keeping Approach

Given that evidence can be cited to support both the double jeopardy hypothesis (Berdahl and Moore 2006; Gonzales et al. 2002) and the SMTH (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), the debate about whether members of multiple subordinate groups (e.g., African-American women, lesbians) are ultimately worse off or better off than members of a single subordinate group (e.g., African-American heterosexual men, gay white men) is likely to continue with each side attempting to keep score of the relative disadvantages for those with single versus multiple subordinate identities. However, due to fundamental problems with this approach, we believe that this score-keeping will prove increasingly futile.

As Sidanius and Pratto (1999) point out, the first problem with score-keeping is that it neglects to take into account the many complex ways that people with intersecting identities are interdependent with those who share one or more of their disadvantaged identities. For example, ethnic minority women are emotionally, socially, and economically interdependent with the ethnic minority men who are their husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers. Thus, if ethnic minority men are the targets of prejudicial attitudes and exclusionary practices, then the effects of this oppres-

sion will reverberate in the lives of ethnic minority women who both care for and depend upon these men.

A more fundamental problem with the score-keeping approach is that the various types of oppression that people experience are incommensurable. It is not possible to translate qualitatively distinct forms of oppression into a single measure. How does one quantify suffering in a way that would permit comparisons among rape, unjustified incarceration, chronic poverty, racial profiling, hate-crime victimization and social exclusion? Given that there is no consensual, summary metric of oppression, the question "Whose group suffers most?" is one that science ultimately cannot answer.

We propose that the study of disadvantage might benefit from reframing key questions using an intersectionality perspective. Rather than asking who is more disadvantaged, we should instead ask how the forms of oppression that people with intersecting disadvantaged identities experience differ from the forms of oppression that people with a single disadvantaged identity experience. By recognizing that people with intersectional identities experience distinctive forms of oppression, we can shift the focus away from score-keeping to a richer analysis of the complex field of oppressive forces in which people with intersectional identities are situated. To illustrate this approach in the next section we develop a general model of *intersectional invisibility* that attempts to specify the distinctive forms of oppression experienced by those with intersecting subordinate-group identities.

### Towards a Model of Intersectional Invisibility

Our model of intersectional invisibility draws on the concepts of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism to explain why people with intersecting identities will tend to be defined as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups. The proposed model draws on social psychological work on ideologies and identity prototypicality to develop this argument. We then explain how being a non-prototypical member of a social group results in an experience of social invisibility that is linked to a distinctive mixture of advantages and disadvantages that people with intersecting identities should be more likely to experience compared to the more prototypical members of their social groups.

#### Ideological Bases of Perceived Prototypicality

Androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism are three ideologies in which a dominant group's perspective and experience achieves hegemony, becoming defined as the



societal standard. Androcentrism is the tendency to define men as the prototypical exemplars of a given group and women as non-prototypical exemplars of that group (Bem 1994). As Bem (1994) clearly states it,

[A]ndrocentrism is the privileging of male experience and the ‘otherizing’ of female experience; that is, males and male experience are treated as the neutral standard or norm for the culture or the species as a whole, and females and female experience are treated as a sex-specific deviation from that allegedly universal standard (p. 41).

Androcentrism is prominent in Judeo-Christian theology, Greek philosophy, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and American law (Bem 1994). Androcentrism is also implicated in the tendency for people’s explanations of gender gaps to focus on the distinctive attributes of women rather than the distinctive attributes of men (Miller et al. 1991) and the tendency of people to apply group stereotypes more strongly to male than to female exemplars of a given group (Eagly and Kite 1987).

Ethnocentrism emphasizes the tendency to define the norms of one’s own social group as the universal, human standard, and the norms of outgroups as a deviation from this standard (Sumner 1906). In a pluralistic society, the socially dominant group will often have the power to define its ingroup norms as the standard for society as a whole. Since white people have been the socially dominant ethnic group in the modern Western context, whiteness tends to define the societal norm in most Western nations (Bonilla-Silva 2000; Sue 1999). In the U.S., the ethnocentric definition of white people as prototypical citizens and non-white people as non-prototypical citizens is revealed in the tendency to automatically associate symbols of American identity more strongly with white Americans and symbols of foreignness more strongly with black Americans and Asian-Americans (Devos and Banaji 2005).

Finally, heterocentrism refers to the definition of heterosexuality as the normative standard of human sexuality, with homosexuality and bisexuality defined as deviant sexualities. The assumption that heterosexuality is biologically natural while homosexuality and bisexuality are unnatural “lifestyle choices” is perhaps the clearest expression of heterocentrism. Heterocentrism is more subtly expressed in the tendency to explain differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals by focusing on the unique characteristics of homosexuals rather than the unique characteristics of heterosexuals (Hegarty and Pratto 2004), and the tendency to explain a straight person’s discomfort in a gay bar by focusing on the characteristics of the setting rather than the person, while explaining a gay person’s discomfort in a straight bar by focusing on the characteristics of the person rather than the setting (Hegarty et al. 2004).

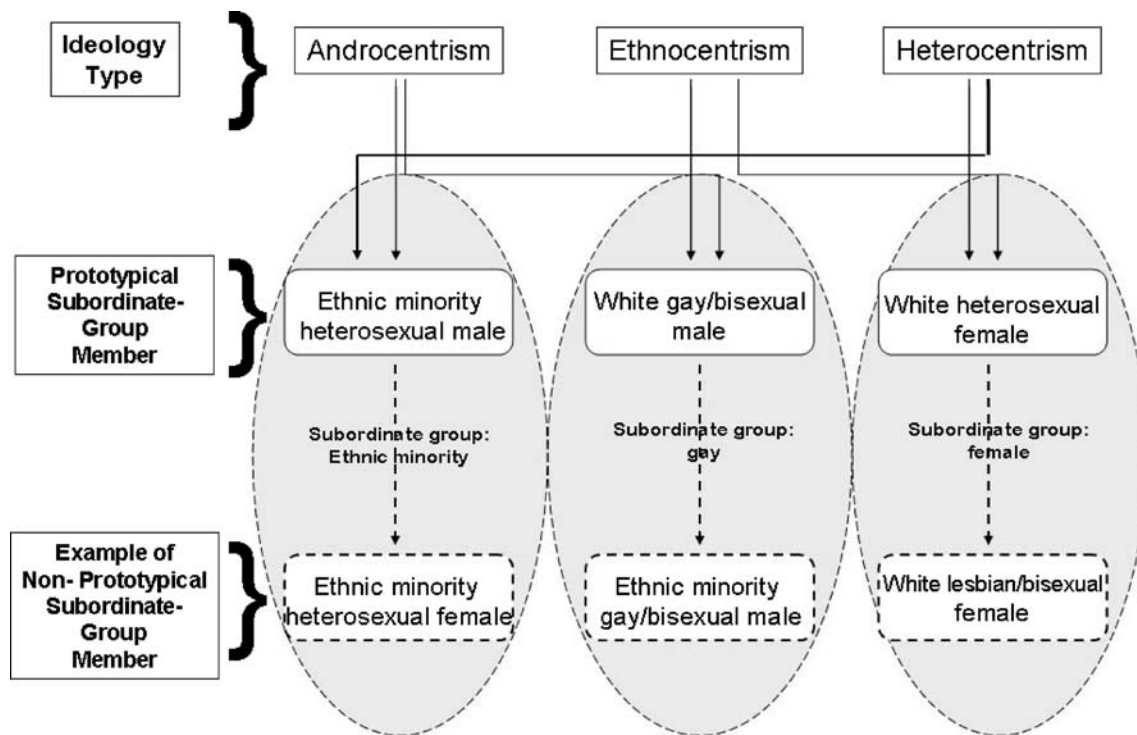
Working together, we suggest that these ideologies of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism will cause people who have intersecting subordinate-group identities on these dimensions to be defined as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups. This model is illustrated in Fig. 1. The influence of androcentrism (i.e., men as prototypical) and heterocentrism (i.e., heterosexuality as prototypical) will cause the prototypical member of a subordinate ethnic or racial group to be defined as a heterosexual man. The influence of heterocentrism (i.e., heterosexuality as prototypical) and ethnocentrism (i.e., white as prototypical) will cause the prototypical woman to be defined as straight and white. Finally, the influence of ethnocentrism (i.e., white as prototypical) and androcentrism (i.e., men as prototypical) will cause the prototypical gay person to be defined as a white man.

To simplify the exposition of our model we focus on the intersection of ethnic, gender, and sexual identities because there is a deeper existing literature to draw on when analyzing these forms of intersectionality. However, the model of intersectional invisibility should apply to other intersecting subordinate identities that we do not explore in the present paper. For example, the prototypical disabled person is a white, male, heterosexual and thus the experiences of nonwhite, female, or gay/lesbian disabled persons should tend to be relatively marginalized in cultural representations of disability.

### Non-Prototypicality and the Experience of Invisibility

We argue that because people with two or more subordinate identities do not fit the prototypes of their constituent subordinate groups, they will experience *intersectional invisibility*. By intersectional invisibility we mean the general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups. Intersectional invisibility also refers to the distortion of the intersectional persons’ characteristics in order to fit them into frameworks defined by prototypes of constituent identity groups. According to our model, ethnic minority gay men, ethnic minority women, and white lesbian women are examples of people with intersecting subordinate identities. Such individuals tend to be marginal members within marginalized groups. This status relegates them to a position of acute social invisibility.

The social invisibility that people with intersecting identities experience by virtue of their non-prototypicality gives them a mix of advantages and disadvantages compared to prototypical members of their groups. By emphasizing that intersectionality is associated with a mix of advantages and disadvantages our model looks past the traditional focus on whether people with intersectional



**Fig. 1** Ideological sources of prototypicality.

identities are ultimately better off or worse off than those with a single subordinate identity and refocuses on a detailed examination of the different forms of oppression that people with multiple versus single subordinate-group identities face. We explore the hypothetical advantages and disadvantages of intersectional invisibility in the following two sections.

#### Advantages of Intersectional Invisibility: Eluding Active Forms of Oppression

The benefits of social invisibility are illustrated in the TV series *Six Feet Under* in an episode in which two female characters in their fifties go on a shoplifting expedition at the jewelry counter of an expensive department store. To calm her accomplice's anxieties about being arrested, the bolder of the two remarks, "Fortunately women of our age are invisible, so we can get away with murder." Just as social invisibility allowed these characters to elude detection of their crime, the social invisibility of people with intersectional disadvantaged identities may allow them to more easily escape many of the actively discriminatory practices that target their groups compared to members who more closely fit the prototypes of these groups. Active forms of prejudice and discrimination should be primarily directed at the group's more prototypical members, allowing non-prototypical members to

be relatively less directly affected by these more active forms of oppression.

Our claim that prototypical group members are more direct targets of prejudice and discrimination than less prototypical members is supported by research demonstrating that anti-black prejudice and racial stereotypes are more likely to be applied to targets with more stereotypically black features (Blair et al. 2002; Eberhardt et al. 2004; Maddox 2004). The gravest example of this bias is the finding that black defendants in capital murder cases are more likely to receive a death sentence to the extent that their appearance is more stereotypically black (Eberhardt et al. 2006).

Our hypothesis that people who are more *prototypical* subordinate-group members will be more direct targets of oppression compared to people who are less prototypical subordinate-group members suggests revisiting the subordinate male target hypothesis (SMTH). Findings demonstrating that the greater oppression of subordinate males compared to subordinate females, which has been cited to support the SMTH, can be reinterpreted as an outcome of the non-prototypicality of subordinate females. For instance, ethnic minority women and white lesbian women, by virtue of their non-prototypicality, may escape the more active forms of discrimination ethnic minority men and gay men face.

As we explained above, androcentrism will tend to cause the male members of subordinate social groups to be

defined as prototypical group members. Thus, from the perspective of intersectional invisibility, *subordinate men* will more often be the victims of active forms of oppression directed at their groups because of their greater prototypicality compared to subordinate women. For example, this notion that their relative invisibility shields people with intersectional identities from the brunt of oppression directed at their groups can explain the well-documented finding that attitudes toward male homosexuality are more negative than attitudes toward lesbianism (Kite and Whitley 1996). This interpretation is clearly expressed by Bem (1994) who writes, “This abhorrence of homosexuality implicates males even more than females. Female sexuality in an androcentric society is so defined from a male perspective that the lesbian herself is all but rendered invisible” (p.166). Interestingly, a great deal of empirical data marshaled to support the SMTH focuses on active forms of oppression.

The difference between our interpretation of evidence demonstrating greater disadvantages for subordinate men and the interpretation put forward by social dominance theorists lies in the nature of our conceptualization of androcentrism. The SMTH in a sense naturalizes androcentrism. The oppression of subordinate group men is the product of psychological dispositions that evolved as males competed for resources in the human ancestral environment (Sidanius and Kurzban 2003). By contrast, our model views the oppression of subordinate group men as a reflection of the general tendency in an androcentric society to view all men—both those of dominant groups and those of subordinate groups—as more important than women (see also Bem 1994). It is this marginalization of women in an androcentric society that causes subordinate women to be relatively ignored as direct targets of oppression compared to subordinate men.

#### Disadvantages of Intersectional Invisibility: The Systematic Distortion of Intersectional Experience

The struggle to be recognized or represented is the most distinctive form of oppression for people with intersectional subordinate-group identities. They face a continuous struggle to have their voices heard and, when heard, understood. For instance, social identity research finds that non-prototypical group members are less likely to achieve leadership status within their groups and they are less likely to exert social influence on other members of their group compared to those who are more prototypical (Hogg 2001). The link between prototypicality, leadership, and social influence should contribute to the relative marginalization of those with intersecting subordinate-group identities. Accordingly, people with intersectional subordinate-group identities should be underrepresented as leaders

of their ingroups and less influential over other ingroup members compared to more prototypical subordinate-group members. From this perspective it is for instance not so surprising that black women’s contributions to both civil rights and feminist activism have been so marginalized.

According to our model of intersectional invisibility, the challenges associated with misrepresentation, marginalization, and disempowerment will tend to be prominent features of the experience of people with intersectional subordinate-group identities. In the following section we illustrate how historical narratives, cultural understandings, interest group politics, and legal frameworks render the intersectionally subordinate person socially invisible.

#### Rendering the Intersectionally Subordinate-Group Member as Invisible: Illustrative Cases

##### *Historical Invisibility*

Historical invisibility concerns the marginalization of intersectional experiences in historical narratives (Crenshaw 1991, 1992). The intersectional invisibility model predicts that the experiences and historical narratives of people with intersectional identities will tend to be deemphasized or misrepresented in the mainstream historical record. To the extent they are discussed, their intersectional identity in particular should be deemphasized. Such historical invisibility should occur for both representations of groups and individual historical figures.

The problem of historical representation is illustrated by a scenario that we call “the librarian’s dilemma.” Imagine a librarian who receives a single copy of a book about black women’s history. The librarian must decide whether the book should be shelved in the Women’s Studies section or the African-American Studies section. If she chooses to shelve the book in the Women’s Studies section it is unlikely that casual browsers interested in African-American Studies will come across the book. Alternatively, if she shelves the book in the African-American Studies section the casual browsers of Women’s Studies are going to miss the book. Either way, the story of African-American women’s experiences will be missed by a whole group of potential readers.

In an alternative universe where women define the human standard and men are represented as deviations from this standard, the librarian’s dilemma would still exist but the books that raise this dilemma would be different. In this alternative universe, African-American history would be seen as primarily a black woman’s story and black men’s experiences would be seen as a specialized story within the African-American narrative. If black women were seen as the chief protagonists and black men were seen as the bit players of African-American history then our hypothetical

librarian would face a dilemma in deciding whether books about black men's experiences should be shelved in the African-American studies section or the Men's Studies section.

Intersectional invisibility in the historical record is demonstrated by evidence of the relative neglect of the narratives and experiences of African-American women in both mainstream African-American history and women's history (Collins 1999; Crenshaw 1992; Davis 1981; King 1988; Sims-Wood 1988; Smith and Stewart 1983). Commenting on this neglect, black feminist author bell Hooks (1989) asserts,

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or a present part of the larger group 'women' in this culture... (p. 7).

Black feminist theorists have long argued that scholars, policy makers and lay people implicitly associate race with African-American males and gender with white females (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, African-American history tacitly implies African-American male history, rendering African-American women historically invisible. Indeed, relative to African-American men, African-American women's prominence in Civil Rights activism, contributions to African-American historical scholarship, and role as abolitionists is less articulated in historical documents and texts (Crenshaw 1991, 1995; Davis 1981; King 1975).

While the intersection of race and gender marginalizes black women's historical contributions, the intersection of race and sexuality marginalizes the historical contributions of black gay men. The story of Bayard Rustin (1910–1987), a black gay man who was one of the key strategists of the Civil Rights movement but whose contributions have, until recently (Carbado and Weise 2004; D'Emilio 2004), been dramatically underrepresented in the historical record, illustrates the invisibility of an individual historical figure because of his intersectionality. Long before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. involved himself in the struggle for civil rights, Rustin founded the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), a group deeply influenced by theories on how to use nonviolent resistance to achieve social change. Rustin became one of Dr. King's main political advisors and was instrumental in deepening King's conceptualization of non-violence. Rustin and King, together, formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Rustin was the chief architect of the historic 1963 March on Washington.

Carbado and Weise (2004) summarize Rustin's many contributions to modern Civil Rights history, writing, "Few African-Americans engaged in as broad a protest agenda as did Rustin; even fewer enjoyed his breadth of influence in virtually every political sector of American life" (pp. 1134–1135). Yet, Rustin's homosexuality has, for many years,

caused him to be represented as a historical footnote rather than a key protagonist in the Civil Rights movement. The few historical texts that describe Rustin's role in the Civil Rights movement often fail to mention his sexual orientation.

Interestingly, black gay men are invisible not only in the popular history of African-American civil rights advocacy but also in the history of gay civil rights advocacy. For instance, Perry Watkins, an African-American army sergeant who was the first openly gay serviceman to successfully challenge the United States military's exclusion of gay people from military service was not mentioned by gay activists who later challenged the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy, despite the obvious relevance of his historic case to that cause (Bérubé 2001; Carbado 2000a). The marginalization of Bayard Rustin in African-American history and Perry Watkins in gay history reinforces the point that in our culture to be African-American is to be heterosexual, and to be homosexual is to be white, thus rendering African-American gay men invisible through the influence of heterocentrism and ethnocentrism, respectively.

### *Cultural Invisibility*

Cultural invisibility refers to the failure of cultural representations to capture the distinctive experiences of intersectionally subordinate groups. Cultural schemas and narrative tropes are interpretive tools that we use to make sense of other people and ourselves and explain human behavior and experiences. To the extent that these schemas and tropes are organized around androcentric, ethnocentric, and heterocentric prototypes, they will do a particularly poor job representing people who have intersectionally subordinate identities. As a consequence, such people will often be mischaracterized and misunderstood.

To illustrate what we mean by cultural invisibility, consider how dominant cultural models of sexual orientation misrepresent women's experiences of non-heterosexuality. Lisa Diamond's influential research to the study of sexual orientation demonstrates how androcentric models of sexuality have been a poor fit to women's experiences (Diamond 2003a, b). Androcentric models of human sexuality have emphasized relatively fixed, stable patterns of attraction that can be labeled exclusively heterosexual, exclusively homosexual, or bisexual. Diamond's longitudinal research documents a surprisingly high amount of temporal flux in women's sexual attractions. This suggests that the presumption that sexual orientation is a relatively fixed attribute of the person fits the experience of men much better than it fits the experience of women (Diamond 2003a). Consequently, women's experiences of non-heterosexuality are likely to be misunderstood by the culturally dominant models of sexual orientation.



Diamond's recent theoretical work argues that women experience a pattern of sexuality that has been completely ignored by the culturally dominant models of sexual orientation (Diamond 2003b). Specifically, Diamond argues that women can develop a sexual attraction to a specific individual that grows out of a romantic infatuation with that person even though that person is not a member of the gender category to whom the woman is otherwise exclusively attracted. For example, an otherwise heterosexual woman can develop a romantic crush on her female roommate and that crush can eventually become sexualized, but this sexual attraction will be exclusive to her roommate and will not generalize to other women. There are no available models of sexual orientation in our popular culture that capture the relationship-specific forms of sexual attraction that Diamond describes. Thus, a woman who has a sexual experience of this kind is likely to be misunderstood both by others and by herself. She may be labeled a bisexual or a lesbian who has "come out of the closet," but neither of these labels accurately captures the relationship-specific nature of her sexual attraction to another woman.

Another example of cultural distortion is the failure of the mainstream gay community's "coming out" narrative to represent the distinctive experiences of economically marginal black gay men. The normative model of "coming out" has become an identity imperative within the mainstream gay community, and "closeted" gay people who do not follow this model are seen as a political problem. From this perspective, gay people who do not "accept" their homosexuality and do not live an "openly gay" lifestyle are pathologized in various ways, such as being diagnosed as suffering from "internalized homophobia." We suggest that this normative "coming out" model may do a fair job representing the experiences of relatively affluent, white gay men and lesbians, but the model encounters serious problems when applied to the lives of economically marginal black gay men. In particular, this normative model of "coming out" pathologizes black men who claim a "down low" identity.

"Down low" was a term traditionally used to describe men who live virtually heterosexual lives but engage in secret sexual relationships with men (Denizet-Lewis 2003). But recently African-American gay males have begun to redefine "down low" (abbreviated as DL) as a meaningful label that includes sexual relationships with men but also an assertion of masculinity, an affirmation of racial identity, and a distancing from prototypical white gay culture (Denizet-Lewis 2003). Interestingly, the process of coming out for men who claim the DL identity is markedly different from the normative coming out experience. No public claim to sexual identity is necessary, neither is a declaration to friends, families and co-workers. In short, sexual identity remains a private affair as there is nothing or no one to whom one can "come out."

When viewed through the perspective of the mainstream gay community's "coming out" model, DL-identified men are seen as problematic "closet cases" whose internalized homophobia prevents them from accepting and publicly affirming their gay identity. However, this characterization of the DL phenomenon fails to take into account the situation of many black gay men. For one thing, such men may be more likely to be dependent on economic support from heterosexual family members to make ends meet, and thus they may not be able to risk alienating their relatives by publicly proclaiming an identity that might elicit disapproval from those relatives. Glenn Ligon, a gay black visual artist, makes this point effectively, saying, "The reason that so many young black men aren't so cavalier about announcing their sexual orientation is because we need our families... We need our families because of economic reasons, because of racism, because of a million reasons" (quoted in Denizet-Lewis 2003).

The imperative to maintain racial solidarity with other non-gay black people is another important reason that many black gay men may adopt the DL identity. As one DL-identified man put it,

If you are white, you can come out as an openly gay skier or actor or whatever. It might hurt you some, but it's not like if you're black and gay, because then it's like you've let down the whole black community, black women, black pride (quoted in Denizet-Lewis 2003).

The failure of the mainstream gay community to understand these and many other reasons that black gay men have for rejecting the dominant "coming out" imperative may lead them to unfairly pathologize DL-identified men.

### *Political Invisibility*

Political invisibility refers to the neglect by allegedly inclusive advocacy groups of the issues that predominantly affect people with intersecting subordinate identities. The leaders of groups advocating for the rights and welfare of politically marginalized communities including ethnic or sexual minorities, women, and the poor, often claim to represent the needs and concerns of *all* their constituents, including those with intersecting subordinate identities (Strolovitch 2007). However, despite these good intentions, advocacy groups often wind up devoting proportionately less attention and resources to constituents with multiple subordinate identities than they do to their more prototypical constituents who have only a single subordinate identity (Strolovitch 2007). Issues that primarily affect the lives of these singular subordinate members are more easily framed as issues that affect the group as a whole than are issues that primarily affect members with two or more

intersecting subordinate identities (Cohen 1999; Strolovitch 2007). Illustrating this phenomenon in the context of issues affecting the black community, Cohen (1999) writes,

In actuality, both inside and outside of black communities, certain segments of the population are privileged with regard to the definition of political agendas. For example, issues affecting men are often presented as representative of the condition of an entire community and thus worthy of a group response. Recently in black communities the troubling and desperate condition of young black men, who in increasing numbers face homicide, incarceration, and constant unemployment as their only “life” options, has been represented as a marker by which we can evaluate the condition of the whole group. The similarly disturbing and life-threatening condition of young black women, who confront teenage pregnancy, state backlash, and (increasingly) incarceration, however, is not portrayed as an equally effective and encompassing symbol of the circumstances of black communities. (p. 11)

The fact that advocacy groups can more easily frame issues that affect subgroups with a single subordinate identity as being important for the group as a whole has concrete consequences for the allocation of attention and resources. For instance, in a survey of the officers of advocacy groups, Strolovitch (2007) found that these organizations are relatively inactive when it came to issues affecting intersectionally subordinate subgroups compared to issues that affect members with a single subordinate identity. To justify this unbalanced allocation of resources, officers of advocacy organizations often claim that benefits targeted at constituents with a single subordinate identity ultimately “trickle down” to help intersectionally subordinate constituents (Strolovitch 2007). Advocacy groups also often assume that issues that primarily affect intersectionally subordinate constituents will be attended to by other organizations (Strolovitch 2007). For example, gay advocacy groups may assume that issues specifically affecting lesbians will be taken up by women’s groups while women’s groups in turn may assume that these issues will be taken up by gay advocacy groups and thus the issues of lesbians are neglected by both of the groups that claim to represent them.

One could argue that the solution to this problem is to create groups that specifically represent people with intersecting subordinate identities (e.g., lesbian advocacy groups, black women’s advocacy groups, Asian gay and lesbian groups). However, the important point is that existing advocacy groups claim to represent everyone with a given subordinate identity but in fact primarily represent the needs of constituents who have a single subordinate identity. Thus, for example, a group can claim to be a

broadly inclusive gay advocacy group when it actually functions as an advocacy group for white gay men. People with intersecting subordinate identities (e.g., white or nonwhite lesbians, nonwhite gay men) face the burden of forming groups that are explicitly concerned with their particular needs while those with a single subordinate identity already have their particular needs represented by allegedly inclusive advocacy groups. This illusory inclusivity of advocacy groups that primarily focus on the issues of constituents with a single subordinate identity likely gives them many advantages in the competition for resources and attention compared to advocacy groups that represent the seemingly more narrow interests of intersecting subordinate identities.

### *Legal Invisibility*

Legal invisibility is a special type of cultural invisibility that centers on the mismatch between intersectional subordinate-group identities and dominant legal anti-discrimination frameworks. In the United States, legal anti-discrimination frameworks tend to privilege people with a single disadvantaged identity and it remains unclear whether people with more than one disadvantaged identity can successfully claim what is termed “compound discrimination” (Carbado 2000b). The intersectional invisibility model predicts that the distinctive experiences of prejudice and discrimination that people with intersectional subordinate identities face should be a relatively poor fit to existing anti-discrimination law. A person with multiple subordinate-group identities becomes legally invisible when the court cannot provide the same legal protections as it provides for people with a single subordinate-group identity.

Title VII is a federal statute prohibiting private and public discrimination on the basis of an employee’s “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin” (Carbado 2000b). Yet courts have historically viewed claims alleging race and sex discrimination as independent claims. For instance, in *Degraffenreid vs. General Motors Assembly Division* (1976), a group of African-American female employees alleged that General Motors’ seniority system disproportionately undermined an African-American woman’s chances of promotion. In response, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri held that plaintiffs may argue race discrimination *or* sex discrimination separately, but cannot argue for discrimination based on race *and* sex. Although more recent court decisions have accepted limited compound discrimination arguments (Carbado 2000b) the most well-defined legal frameworks continue to privilege people with a single disadvantaged identity.

While one side of legal invisibility focuses on the law’s ability to protect intersectional victims of discrimination, the other side of legal invisibility emphasizes who is

perceived to be a credible and convincing victim. The fact that intersectionally invisible accusers will be less credible because they fail to fit existing legal frameworks is particularly well-illustrated in Crenshaw's astute analysis of the ideological processes that turned public opinion against Anita Hill, an African-American law professor, when, in 1991, she accused US Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of repeatedly sexually harassing her when she worked for him at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Crenshaw 1992). Emphasizing Anita Hill's intersectional invisibility as a black woman, Crenshaw writes,

[I]t was no "Twilight Zone" that America discovered when Anita Hill came forward. America simply stumbled into the place where African-American women live, a political vacuum of erasure and contradiction maintained by the almost routine polarization of 'blacks and women' into separate and competing camps. Existing within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and in the empty spaces between, it is a location whose very nature resists telling. This location contributes to black women's ideological disempowerment in a way that tipped the scales against Anita Hill from the very start. (p. 403).

Crenshaw argues that Anita Hill was misunderstood and thus disbelieved by the American public because the only cultural frameworks available to comprehend her claims of sexual harassment were frameworks that were organized around the prototypical white female victim, and, as a black woman, Anita Hill's experience was a poor match to this prototype. For instance, one of the most unconvincing aspects of Hill's story from the perspective of the Senate Judiciary committee and much of the general public was the fact that she waited so many years before making any charges against Thomas. Crenshaw argues that Hill's hesitation was hard to understand from the perspective of a prototypical white victim of harassment but her delay is more easily understood when you consider norms within the black community which impose a "code of silence" on black women, forbidding them from taking actions that would sully the reputation of a successful black man. Indeed, Crenshaw points out that this code of silence was evident in black media coverage of Anita Hill, much of which criticized her for violating this taboo. The disbelief of Hill's story may thus represent a failure to appreciate that this extra burden of coming forward that black women face may have delayed Hill's decision to bring accusations.

It is important to note that people underestimate the situational pressures that would inhibit any woman from reporting a sexual harasser (Woodzicka and LaFrance 2001). However, Crenshaw's analysis suggests that the public was even less equipped to understand the unique situational pressures that inhibit black victims of sexual

harassment because existing frameworks for understanding the sexual harassment situation have been mostly defined from the perspective of the typical white victim. If cultural frameworks for understanding harassment were organized around a black woman's experience rather than a white woman's experience, then the taboos that silence black female victims would have been more readily recognized as a factor that may have delayed Hill's coming forward.

### Implications for Social Psychological Theory and Research on Intersectionality

We have argued that people who possess intersecting subordinate-group identities tend to be defined and perceived as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups. Because people with two or more subordinate identities do not fit the prototypes of their identity groups they will experience what we have termed "*intersectional invisibility*." Our model is grounded in the social psychological literatures on identity prototypicality and group-based ideologies and emphasizes the processes that determine when intersectional subordinate identities will offer advantages and disadvantages compared to a single subordinate identity.

We believe that our intersectional invisibility model provides important contributions to the social identity, and prejudice and discrimination literatures in social psychology. By specifying the ideological sources of prototypicality, our model contributes to social identity theory. Past research in the social identity tradition has explored group processes that influence prototypicality primarily in lab groups (Hogg 2001; Mummendey and Wenzel 1999). Intersectional invisibility provides a framework for studying the ideological sources of prototypicality within real-world groups and the affects of non-prototypicality in the lives of people with intersecting subordinate identities. To accomplish this goal, we draw on previous social psychological research on androcentric, ethnocentric, and heterocentric ideologies to explain which members of subordinate groups will tend to be seen as non-prototypical. Situating prototypicality in this real-world ideological context provides a basis for examining how and why intersecting subordinate-group identities affect people's lives, an analysis that has been understudied in social identity research.

In addition, our intersectional invisibility model highlights the importance of broadening prejudice and discrimination research beyond the more overt practices of oppression that target subordinate groups. As the title of the model implies, intersectional invisibility includes more extensive investigations of the often subtle practices that marginalize subordinate group members by excluding their experiences and perspectives from prevailing social repre-

sentations and discourses (*cf* Cuddy et al. 2007). While the literatures on androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism have begun to illuminate how the experiences and perspectives of those with singular subordinate identities are marginalized in society, there have been few systematic psychological studies of the ways that these “centrisms” combine to situate people with intersectional subordinate-group identities in an especially marginal position within the discursive fields of their culture. For researchers investigating prejudice and discrimination, answering the question of “Which group is ignored?” may be as critical to understanding the nature of prejudice and discrimination as answering the question “Which group is the target?”

### Testing Intersectional Invisibility

We believe that social psychologists have largely neglected the topic of intersectionality because it seems to require a highly particularistic research agenda to study the specific experiences of narrowly defined groups (for exceptions see Levin et al. 2002). For instance, in the past, a social psychologist interested in intersectionality might first study the specific intersectional experiences of black women and then attempt to generalize to all intersectional subordinate groups. Unfortunately, this particularistic research strategy often prevents the kind of generalizations that social psychologists view as contributions to theory-development (McCall 2005). In contrast, our intersectional invisibility model provides a starting point for testing generalizable hypotheses and predictions about intersectional groups. While we appreciate the insights that can be gained from in-depth, ethnographic studies of the experiences of particular intersectional groups, it is possible to study general social psychological processes that apply to most intersectional groups. By emphasizing the potential generalizations that can be made about intersectional groups we hope to convince social psychologists that the topic of intersectionality is worthy of serious and sustained attention.

The field of social cognition offers a variety of tools that can be adapted to test the critical prediction that people with intersecting subordinate identities tend to be seen as non-prototypical members of subordinate groups. For instance, the “who gets explained” method (Hegarty and Pratto 2004; Miller et al. 1991) can be used to test whether intersectional subordinates tend to be seen as non-normative members of each of the subordinate groups to which they belong. As an example, black women should tend to be the primary focus of explanations both when people try to explain differences between black men and women and when they try to explain differences between black and white women. Similarly, lesbian women should tend to be the primary focus of explanations both when people try to explain differences between gay men and lesbians and when they

try to explain differences between lesbians and heterosexual women. This method determines who is seen as a less prototypical member of a group by asking participants to explain differences between two members of a group and then measuring which of the parties is foregrounded in the explanation. If people with intersecting subordinates identities are widely seen as non-prototypical members of their subordinate groups, then they will be the person who stands out in any comparison within a subordinate group.

Other methods from the fields of social cognition and judgment and decision-making could be adapted to test whether intersectional subordinates experience the forms of social invisibility summarized in previous sections. For instance, it should be possible to test predictions derived from the experience of political invisibility. When study participants are asked to prioritize political issues facing both members of subordinate groups and members of subordinate groups with intersectional identities, problems that primarily affect intersectional subordinates should be relatively trivialized and ignored. Take for example, the measurement of people’s judgments about change in the well-being of a particular subordinate group (e.g., Eibach and Ehrlinger 2006; Eibach and Keegan 2006). The model of intersectional invisibility predicts that when people judge such change over a specified period of time, their judgments should be more strongly influenced by information about how conditions have changed for prototypical members of the group and less influenced by information about how conditions have changed for members with intersecting subordinate identities. Thus, when people judge the overall magnitude of change in the economic well-being of black Americans, information about change in black men’s wages should be weighted more heavily than information about change in black women’s wages. Furthermore, information about change in white women’s wages should be weighted more heavily than information about change in black women’s wages when people judge the overall magnitude of change in the economic well-being of American women. Thus, information about black women’s welfare should be relatively neglected when people formulate judgments about conditions for both women and black people.

### Limitations and Issues for Future Research

It is worth noting two limitations in the present theory. First, our model of intersectional invisibility relies heavily on the assumption that ideologies of androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism determine who will be defined as the prototypical person in most everyday life domains. However, it is important to recognize that prototypicality is a mutable quality of social categories that varies depending on the immediate context (Haslam et al. 1995; Turner 1985). For



example, the influence of androcentrism may ensure that men define the prototypical person in most domains of public life (Bem 1994). Nevertheless, the prototypical person is a woman in stereotypically feminine domains. Indeed, people generally consider men to be prototypical voters and college professors, but they consider women to be prototypical grade school teachers (Miller et al. 1991), perhaps because looking after young children is a stereotypically feminine task. Accordingly, intersectional invisibility should only occur in contexts in which subordinate identities are viewed as non-prototypical.

Another important limitation of the current formulation of the intersectional invisibility model is its narrow focus on the intersection of ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. The experience of intersectional invisibility should apply to many other intersecting subordinate identities that were not explicitly examined in this paper (e.g., religious minorities, immigrants, undocumented workers, oppressed social classes, the elderly, disabled people). However, we are cautious in generalizing the model to the intersection of other subordinate identities because there is less existing social psychological research on which to draw. As research on these identities accumulates, it should be possible to test the implications of the intersectional invisibility model for these other groups. Ultimately the success of this model will depend on how well it generalizes to explain the experiences of the many diverse types of intersectional groups.

## Conclusion

Intersectionality challenges us to contemplate what it means to have a marginalized status within a marginalized group. The model of intersectional invisibility outlined in this paper attempts to understand the doubly marginalized experience of people with intersectional subordinate-group identities by drawing insights from social psychological research on ideologies and identity prototypicality to predict who will be socially defined as an intersectional subordinate and with what consequences. Ultimately, the development of more general models of intersectional experience has the potential to at least demarginalize the study of intersectionality within the field of social psychology.

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