

Assessment *in* Practice

Assessing Intersectional Experiences: Where to Begin?

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Given increasing diversity in higher education and a move towards more critical frameworks for understanding experiences in higher education, researchers and assessment professionals have started to use intersectional lenses to frame their work (Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Intersectionality can be viewed as a scheme to critically interrogate multiple aspects of a person's identity within structures of inequality. Depictions of intersectional frameworks, such as Núñez's (2014) multilevel model of intersectionality or Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity vaguely resemble the orbits of atomic systems with swirling, independent and dependent aspects of social identities housed within larger societal systems. Understanding the complexities of such structures is both exciting and daunting. This Assessment in Practice outlines three typical challenges assessment professionals face when starting to use an intersectional lens to quantitatively understand higher education experiences.

JUST GETTING STARTED

Taking the first steps in doing intersectional quantitative research can be the most difficult. Thinking about the different ways that demographics and educational characteristics intertwine can quickly complicate our understanding of experiences. Give yourself permission to start small. Choosing two variables that can be thought of on a binary (such as tenured faculty or not, and a STEM or non-STEM disciplinary field) can be analyzed together to give a broad understanding of a basic intersection. Do resist, however, the urge to stop your work at a series of collapsed variables. Limiting your work to looking at students of color and white students, for example, can mask the hugely varied experiences within these groups and can further marginalize subgroups of students of color who researchers frequently bury within an aggregate.

The next step would be to begin breaking out one aspect of your intersection at a time, by looking at gender identity and racial/ethnic identification for example. You could first look at the experiences of Latinx students by various gender identifications: gender, men, non-binary, women, etc. Next, select another racial/ethnic category, Middle Eastern or North African, and look across the same gender identifications. After examining the experiences of students across gender identities within racial/ethnic categories, swap your variables to look across racial/ethnic categories within gender identifications. This will result in a multitude of analyses and results, but a picture of varied experiences should start to form with patterns that researchers might use to re-categorize students based on trends (e.g., Harris & Brckalorenz, 2017; Harris, BrckaLorenz, & Nelson Laird, 2018). If the data allows, more sophisticated analyses and modeling can benefit from the inclusion of effect coding so that all subgroups can have representation in the results (Mayhew & Simonoff, 2015) or interaction terms (e.g., BrckaLorenz, et al., 2019) to highlight the unique contribution of intersecting variables to outcomes.

DIFFICULT DATA

A challenging aspect of conducting more sophisticated analyses is working with disparate data sources and different types of data. A key component of intersectionality is accounting for the macro-level systemic inequities in higher education as well as the micro-level experiences (Bowleg, 2008; Duran & Jones, 2019; Harris & Patton, 2019; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Ideally, our data are collected in a way that will allow for this differentiation, but for typical assessment methods, such as student surveys, it is not uncommon that outside data sources will need to be incorporated. For instance, including the racial demographics of an institution—as a macro-level variable—can help to explain students' engagement in diverse discussions (e.g., Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017). It is also important to inspect these outside sources of data as important identities can be missing (i.e., Middle Eastern or North African in U.S. census data) that warrant inclusion at the institution-level.

Once data are collected, there are additional challenges related to types of data that require detailed considerations. As previously alluded, there are many situations in which a binary variable does not appropriately represent an identity. Moreover, quantitative data comes in many forms, and it is important to acknowledge that dealing with identity data is not simple—there is not a perfect way to measure intersectionality quantitatively (Bowleg, 2008). One temptation is to incorporate “check-all-that-apply” or write-in questions to inclusively honor varied identities, but this should be done with caution and pre-planning for data use. Check-all-that-apply data are difficult to use because it serves as an additive lens, it is unclear which identities are most salient, and it is challenging to properly incorporate in statistical tests. Additionally, a write-in option is taxing because responses must still be coded into categories, and coders will inevitably find inappropriate responses (i.e., mocking the notion of fluid gender identity). Generally speaking, it is best practice to strive toward providing greater fluidity, within reason, for identity questions (Torres et al., 2009), but discrete and continuous data are more manageable and are still able to represent intersecting identities if questions are asked in thoughtful and inclusive ways.

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For example, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) found a compromise that allows for rigorous statistical uses of the data as well as inclusively allows for all variations of identity expression with its questions about gender identity and sexual orientation. Asking *What is your gender identity?* with discrete response options *Man*, *Woman*, and *I prefer not to respond* allows for most individuals to select their identity. The additional response option *Another gender identity* with a write-in text box allows for people to identify with any variation in the gender spectrum; Garvey et al. (2019) provide a thorough discussion of other options in higher education surveys. Analyses and reporting that require large sample sizes can use these aggregate categories without dropping non-binary identified individuals from the process, but more nuanced assessments can benefit from coding the write-in responses to explore the experiences of those identifying with non-binary identities such as gender, androgynous, gender-queer, or trans. Similarly, NSSE and FSSE ask about sexual orientation with a write-in option. As smaller groups increase in prominence, these options can be added to the list of discrete choices such as was done for those identifying as *Queer* in 2017. Although including all identities as discrete options would be ideal, it is largely impossible due to the quickly changing landscape of terminology and the difficulty in capturing fluid and complex notions of identity and self-expression within a closed-ended survey item. Finding the right balance between categories and freedom of expression varies depending on your purpose and intended use of resulting data.

We do not need to generalize students' stories to larger groups, we just need to listen to what they have to say. Descriptive data can help to tell students' stories, allowing us to understand their experiences and provide scaffolding to support not only the students in our small sample, but others as well.

SMALL POPULATIONS

Quantitative research depends heavily on the ability to generalize results, necessitating a focus on large sample sizes. Examining the experiences of people through multiple lenses of identity or characteristics can result in small groups. One solution would be to work towards increasing the sample size by merging multiple years of data or focusing recruitment on specific populations for future data collections. Triangulating the findings from small sample sizes with other sources of information is another way to add validity to your results. These traditional methods for dealing with small populations can be useful but are not always practical regarding time and resources.

Another approach involves re-thinking our need to generalize results, to let go of statistical significance. When a student raises their hand to ask a question in class, we do not wait until enough students have that same question to achieve some level of significance before we respond. We can think about examining the experiences of small populations similarly; we do not need to generalize their stories to larger groups, we just need to listen to what they have to say. Simple descriptives can help to tell their story, allowing us to understand their experiences and provide scaffolding to support not only the students in our small sample, but others as well. If groups are especially small or you have concerns about confidentiality, person-centered approaches (Malcom-Piqueux, 2015) that focus on disaggregation based on experience or behavior instead of demographics or characteristics can help to mask student identity (e.g., BrckaLorenz, Fassett, Hurtado, 2020/in press).

CONCLUSION

Higher education professionals have good intentions for incorporating intersectional experiences in their research and assessment practices. In practice, however, intersectionality can be misused as a popular buzzword or a way to “feel good” about the work we are doing to study experiences in higher education (Harris & Patton, 2019). We must not forget that intersectionality focuses on identifying structures of power and inequality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), and we should be careful that intersectional work does not stop at the examination of experiences based on social identities. It is important to accompany intersectional analyses with discussions about how a person’s intersecting identities are located within structures of dominance in order to use intersectionality at its fullest capacity.

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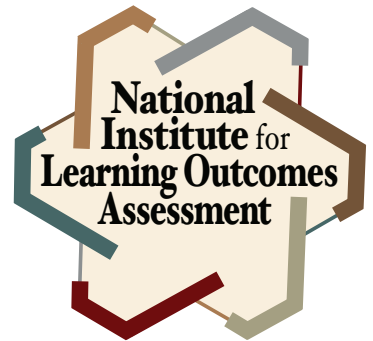
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