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Introduction to the Special Issue

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SPECIAL ISSUE

**At the Intersections:
Equity, Advocacy, and Activism Across
the Life Span**.....

Introduction to the Special Issue

**Christian D. Chan, Adrienne N. Erby,
and Matthew C. Fullen, *Guest Editors***

The framework of intersectionality has become a mainstay of counseling research and practice, given its theoretical underpinnings in social justice (see Chan et al., 2018; Chan & Erby, 2018; Mitchell & Butler, 2021). As the framework becomes more visibly mainstreamed into the counseling profession, intersectionality promulgates a social justice ethos (Collins & Bilge, 2020) that links cohesively with its intentions of an active social justice agenda and underscores grassroots efforts for activism and advocacy (Collins, 2019). Although embedded in the philosophical foundation of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015), the use of intersectionality requires a massive effort to effectively synthesize the entirety of its framework and move beyond a reductive mention of multiple identities or diverse identities (Grzanka, 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). This notion has been especially pressing for the counseling profession to take up intersectionality in an explicit manner, enact the promises of its analysis, and attend equally to theory and practice (Chan et al., 2018; Chan & Erby, 2018; Singh et al., 2020). A failure to understand its genealogy (Bilge, 2013; Collins, 2015; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017), prioritize its analysis of power (Bowleg & Bauer, 2016), or map an active social justice agenda (Collins & Bilge, 2020) would diminish its premise to a passive and perfunctory gesture (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2020, 2021). The imminent danger of trivializing intersectionality in this capacity reflects much larger problems of using intersectionality in superficial ways or co-opting specific components of the theory for unethical misuses (Chan & Howard, 2020; Settles et al., 2020). Settles et al. (2020), in particular, elaborated on the disciplinary domains of power that attempt to delegitimize intersectionality by confining its critical viewpoints or dismissing it altogether.

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At the heart of its philosophical underpinnings, intersectionality draws from a significant body of theory to undergird its history in Black feminism (Bilge, 2013; Cole, 2020; Collins, 2019; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Although Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (1986) served as visible forerunners in the intersectionality movement, pundits of intersectionality should consider the works of several women of color and queer women of color who were instrumental in foregrounding intersectionality's theoretical foundations (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). As *power* has become a central crux for intersectionality (Bowleg & Bauer, 2016; Overstreet et al., 2020), this component highlights the policies, conditions, and environments that create access and equity for multiple marginalized communities. Power also augments other core tenets of intersectionality. For example, *social context* provides the backdrop for how privileged and marginalized groups are organized and how the environment (e.g., school, community, neighborhood) might reflect inequities (Singh et al., 2020). *Social inequality* shows how specific cultural and social groups can experience the exclusion of cultural values and access to community resources, which are rooted in overlapping forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, genderism; Collins & Bilge, 2020). *Relationality* and *complexity* are two core tenets of intersectionality that expand the conceptualization of equity, multiculturalism, and social justice efforts. Similar to locating multiple overlapping forms of oppression, relationality represents the connections among social identities as a mirror for interpersonal experiences that result from interlocking forms of oppression (Chan & Howard, 2020; Collins, 1986). Collins and Bilge (2020) identified relationality as a pivotal construct that embraces a richer analysis of equity and power by understanding the relationships among social identities. Complexity indicates that interpersonal experiences of social identities and their corresponding forms of oppression may appear differently based on the environment (Erby & White, 2020; White et al., 2020). Additionally, complexity attends to unique lived experiences within the categorization of social identities (Cho et al., 2013) and yields more intricate strategies to unsettle complex problems affecting marginalized communities (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Finally, *social justice* prioritizes which actions will be meaningful in dismantling such inequities (Bowleg, 2017; Hankivsky et al., 2014; Ratts et al., 2016). We ask readers invested in this special issue and the extensive body of intersectionality literature to reflect these tenets in their research and practices while tethering their praxis to the contributions of Black feminists, women of color, and queer women of color.

With this premise on social movements and attention to power (Bowleg & Bauer, 2016; Carbado et al., 2013; Collins, 2019), professional counselors can draw from intersectionality to advance the field by locating multiple overlapping forms of oppression. This approach engendered the special issue as a method to embody intersectionality research in light of developmental practices and

science. Given the context of counselor professional identity and the principles of the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015), intersectionality offers a platform to critically analyze structural barriers that influence the profession’s understanding of developmental practices (Singh et al., 2020). Intersectionality instills a call to professional counselors to think more boldly in addressing structural forms of power that contextualize health inequities in counseling. More important, the framework allows professional counselors to map power relations among social identities (e.g., race, gender identity, age) that dictate interpersonal experiences of inequity and oppression. With this mindset, professional counselors can utilize intersectionality to firmly locate inequities across the life span and strengthen coalitions, initiatives, and efforts that dismantle inequitable structures.

With the prevalence of COVID-19 and racial violence in 2020 and 2021, intersectionality has recapitulated these efforts to urgently address the detrimental effects of oppression. These events are not mutually exclusive or exceptional. Rather, they illuminate a litany of health disparities that exist within U.S. society, community resources, neighborhoods, and health care systems (Fortuna et al., 2020; Liu & Modir, 2020). COVID-19 and racial violence often conflate to demonstrate that racism does not exist in isolation but frequently exists in tandem with ageism, classism, genderism, ableism, and heterosexism. In the height of the pandemic, COVID-19 precipitated a more urgent response to the confluence of ageism and racism, given that older adults of color are subject to underlying medical conditions and mental health issues (Fullen et al., 2020; Litam & Hipolito-Delgado, 2021). To this end, intersectionality recenters efforts that cultivate activism, advocacy, and community partnerships as intricate approaches to systematically address social, policy, and mental health implications.

The four articles in this special issue highlight timely topics on advancing the science and practice of counseling as a developmental approach. Built in conjunction with intersectionality, the call for the special issue produced a massive response of submissions for consideration, which reflects the urgency of adopting this approach explicitly for professional counselors. Given the response, we expanded the special issue to a double-issue to broaden the promising avenues for merging research, theory, and practice. Additionally, the special issue provides a platform to advance the lens of intersectionality as a valuable enterprise for equity, advocacy, and activism efforts. The articles in this first special issue amplify the structural domains of power that connect the effects of oppression with health disparities, trauma, and access and equity across the life span. Notably, the first two articles in this issue shed light on the ongoing conditions that raise alarming concerns for communities of color based on discrimination, social determinants of health, and glaring gaps in the U.S. health care system. Litam and Oh (2021) identify a multitude of COVID-19-related discrimination faced by Chinese communities during the pandemic. The empirical data from their research show that COVID-19-related discrimination has major effects on Chinese Americans, in particular, a statistically significant

interaction effect between gender and age among the samples. Using a historical and intersectional analysis, the research study by Mingo (2021) highlights the effects of trauma on underlying medical conditions and navigating anti-Blackness in the U.S. health care system.

Additionally, this first special issue includes two conceptual articles that complement an understanding of institutional conditions shaped by multiple overlapping forms of oppression. Wood et al. (2021) address the prominent intersection of racism, ageism, and ableism by linking the practices of professional counselors working with African American couples navigating prostate cancer. To close this special issue, Blueford and Adams (2021) provide an important reflection for practice, given the confluence of racism, ageism, COVID-19, and racial violence. Blueford and Adams outline trauma-informed practices that underpin grief counseling for older Blacks, Indigenous peoples, and people of color.

We would like to thank the contributors to this special issue. Your work continues to cultivate an intentional level of praxis, undergird the complexity of social justice efforts, and highlight health disparities tied to structural domains of power. We are especially grateful to the editor of *Adultspan*, Dr. Suzanne Degges-White, and the incoming editor, Dr. Kaprea F. Johnson, for sharing this space of community and solidarity.

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