

Intersectionality as a Forward-Thinking Approach in Disaster Research **FREE**

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Summary

Disaster researchers, policymakers, and practitioners are confronted with the pressing need to understand and address how and why certain individuals and groups of individuals experience inequities leading up to, during, and postdisaster. These efforts must consider how to address such inequities through collaborative efforts toward intentional and systemic change. The use of intersectional approaches supports better analyze and critique of discriminatory and oppressive practices that disproportionately impact historically marginalized peoples, especially in the face of hazards and disasters. Intersectionality calls for understanding how different forms of privilege, power, and oppression interact and compound to create unequal socioeconomic outcomes across individuals and groups of individuals based on their identities (e.g., age, race, sexuality, and gender) and conditions (e.g., housing composition, immigration, and marital status). A review of inter- and multidisciplinary terrains of disaster studies shows that there are multifaceted utilities, capabilities, and advantages of adopting an intersectional approach. By considering historical discriminatory practices and the root causes of vulnerability, intersectionality highlights the systemic and institutionalized patterns that create precarious situations for some people while simultaneously protecting others. Intersectionality is also well suited to support insight into individuals' capacities that affect their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disastrous events, as well as assist them in avoiding or reducing risks that make them susceptible to disaster in the first place. However, intersectional approaches within disaster studies remain underutilized and, sometimes, superficially applied. Simplistic representations, the unequal attention given to certain intersections, and the domination of Western epistemologies must be attended to in order to challenge, disrupt, and diligently undo the interactions of systematic privilege, power, and oppression that render unequal disaster experiences and outcomes.

Keywords: disaster, vulnerability, hazards, intersectionality, marginalization, power, privilege, oppression, disaster risk reduction policy and practice

Subjects: Risk Management, Vulnerability, Climate Change

Introduction

Historically, disaster researchers and those engaged in emergency management have tended to homogenize “vulnerable groups” or “access and functional needs populations,” thus generalizing their experiences and not taking into account the structural causes that place people in precarious situations. Although disaster scholarship, specifically literature focused on vulnerability (i.e., social, political, geographic, economic), has contributed to understanding of the implications and outcomes of vulnerability, such scholarship has often fallen short of

addressing the “why” behind what makes certain individuals and groups of individuals more susceptible to the negative effects of disasters—not to mention solutions for these inequities. Increasingly, societies are having to contend with the compounding challenges of human-caused climate change exacerbating natural hazards (e.g., flooding, disease), widening human disparities (e.g., health and socioeconomic), and increasing individuals’ and groups of individuals’ proximity to areas with heightened hazard risk (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021; United Nations, 2022). Here, intersectionality provides a necessary and valuable way of comprehending the varied lived experiences of individuals living in historically marginalized spaces, especially in the face of hazards. This framework can likewise serve as a tool for conceptualizing and addressing the structures and systems of oppression that create and reproduce vulnerability, building on existing frameworks of social vulnerability.

The purpose of this article is threefold: first, to function as a review of intersectionality literature within disaster studies, specifically through examples of ways that intersectionality can advance understanding of vulnerability and recognition of capacities, both through examples of existing literature within the disaster field and identification of key underpinnings guiding intersectional work; second, to clearly articulate and make intersectionality more digestible and accessible so as to encourage its use more broadly, including within disaster risk reduction; and finally, to show the radical potential of intersectionality within the disaster research space, highlighting examples from current literature and its potential as gleaned through assessment of disaster scholarship.

This article begins with an overview of intersectionality theory, including its origins, noted critiques, and application in studies outside the disaster field. It then examines the varied uses of intersectionality in disaster scholarship, explicitly emphasizing the various interpretations, findings, and usages of intersectionality. The article concludes by highlighting directions for future intersectional disaster research, policy, and practice, identifying the potential of intersectionality for radical change when attending to the root causes of vulnerability. Notably, this article is not an exhaustive historical and academic review of how intersectionality has evolved in research and practice. Instead, the focus is on highlighting and providing examples of the ways that intersectionality, as a theory and analytical framework, has the potential to advance understanding of disaster experiences and disaster vulnerability, including the causes thereof, as well as serve as a tool for addressing systems and practices that vulnerabilize and marginalize. It is noted, here and throughout, that the framing of intersectionality theory has varied depending on the author’s conceptualization and methodological application. Beginning with its conception as a theory and analytical tool, it has since been conceptualized as a framework, heuristic device, and an approach for practical application. Therefore, in this article, different terms are used to describe intersectionality according to how it is used in scholarship, but also how the authors interpret and envision its application and potential.

Intersectionality: What Is It?

Historically, scholars have constructed their own interpretations of intersectionality theory (Collins, 2019). In 1989, Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” which underscored the level of inequities that Black women experience—particularly as it relates to the intersection of race and gender. Crenshaw proclaims that “intersectionality was a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren’t being appreciated by the courts” (Crenshaw quoted in Coaston, 2019). According to Crenshaw (1989), this framework helps to uncover how forces of power, privilege, and oppression produce unequal and varied lived experiences based upon, but not limited to, such identities as race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, geography, and immigration status. Built largely upon the work of prominent Black feminist scholars, intersectionality asserts that various forms of discrimination exist for specific individuals who identify with, or belong to, groups that occupy marginalized or disenfranchised spaces (Bow et al., 2017; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981, 2011; Taylor, 2017). These discriminations then create distinctive experiences for these individuals, thus increasing their vulnerability to social, economic, and political harm through policies and practices, such as those that create barriers to safe and affordable housing, stable employment, education, and healthcare, which limit their quality of life and life outcomes.

Although “intersectionality” was coined by Crenshaw, intersectional arguments and theoretical propositions, even if not explicitly stated as such, preceded the use and popularization of the term. Early descriptions of intersectional thought emerged as far back as Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” given at the Women’s Convention in Ohio (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2014). This declaration of her lived experience as an enslaved Black woman illustrated the violent, racist, and sexist discourse and actions employed under the purview of White supremacist, patriarchal philosophies to justify women’s, and specifically Black women’s, disenfranchisement (Crenshaw, 1989; Ochefu, 2021). Over 100 years later, a group of Black feminist lesbians known as the Combahee River Collective wrote a 1977 proclamation stressing the need to interrogate sociopolitical dimensions of power that prevent the equitable liberation for all members of society, such as those who are historically marginalized (African American Studies Center, 2009; see also Collins, 2015; Ochefu, 2021). Both statements exposed the injustices and varied lived experiences present among historically marginalized groups such as the Black, Indigenous, and people of color community; women; and LGBTQIA+ in the face of power, privilege, and oppression.

Although the popularization of intersectionality is often discussed within the context of North American scholarship, this, unfortunately, overlooks the history and application of intersectionality among scholars and thought leaders from outside this narrow context. For instance, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1985) essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” her discussion of the colonial subject as “other” pushes readers to consider how certain ways of knowing have been subjugated under colonial and Western ideological hegemony. It incorporates an intersectional approach in acknowledging the various tools of power, oppression, and discrimination that suppress other ways of knowing, in this case through justification and

prioritization of Western science ideals over forms of traditional or Indigenous knowledge. Such a dismissal of other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing is but one example to illustrate how “marginalized groups” have been silenced and subjugated based on their non-Western identities.

We can apply Spivak’s argument to critically examine agendas undertaken by international entities such as the World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF) that have been critiqued for (re)producing political and economic inequities in non-Western countries. Scholars have noted that the World Bank, IMF, and WTO not only prioritize Western, neoliberal ideals and interventions, but also provide avenues for elites and elite nations to promote neoliberal values and goals at the detriment of other ways of knowing, governing, and being (Campbell, 2016; Downey, 2015; Goldman, 2005). For example, the World Bank and IMF initiate projects and programs that claim to serve countries in need of economic reform but instead have actually proven to benefit international capitalists, multinational corporations, and other state and nonstate elites, often at the detriment of low- and middle-income countries (Bello, 1999; Downey 2015; Goldman, 2005).

These examples not only highlight the ways in which intersectionality, whether explicitly or implicitly, has been discussed in various literatures, but also how it can be used as a tool for identifying the powerful actors and processes that produce and reproduce inequities. Ultimately, in applying an intersectional framework, it is vital to understand its origin while also recognizing the importance of remaining dedicated to its intended formulation—as an emancipatory tool to address interlocking systems of oppression that breed discrimination rather than solely an analytical technique for characterizing differential outcomes in the absence of discussions of power. Recognition of power is essential when employing an intersectional approach.

Utilization of Intersectionality

While comprehensively mapping the evolution of intersectionality is beyond the scope of this article, it is nevertheless crucial to expand on the ways that, and for what purpose, intersectionality has been utilized within science, policy, and practice. Since Crenshaw’s (1989) initial conceptualization, there has been proliferating use of intersectionality within the humanities and social science research (Al-Faham et al., 2019; Clarke & McCall, 2013; Valentine, 2007). Scholarship employing intersectional approaches has spanned multiple disciplines, including, *inter alia*, feminist and gender studies (Al-Ali, 2005; Smith, 2013–2014; Yacob-Haliso, 2016), economics (Brewer et al., 2002), sociopolitical geography (Valentine, 2007), sociology (Jean & McCalla, 2020), sociolegal studies (Vakulenko, 2007), queer studies (Davids & Matebeni, 2017), postcolonial studies (Arondekar, 2004; Mohanty, 2013), political science (Hawkesworth, 2015), urban planning (Jacobs, 2018), and public health (Bowleg, 2021).

Fundamentally, intersectionality is recognized as a heuristic device rather than a categorical one (Cho et al., 2013), meaning intersectionality’s value is rooted in how and what it enables those employing such an approach to consider. As such, across scholarship, there have been varying and sometimes contrasting applications of intersectionality. Scholars have applied intersectionality in their work as a concept (e.g., Carastathis, 2014), research paradigm (e.g.,

Collins, 2015; Dhamoon, 2011; McCall, 2005), knowledge project (e.g., Collins, 2015), and an ideograph (e.g., Alexander-Floyd, 2012). Likewise, others apprehend intersectionality as a metaphor (e.g., Acker, 2012), an analytical framework (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2015; Hancock, 2016), an epistemological practice, an ontological framework (May, 2015), and a verb (Carbado et al., 2013). Such a plethora of conceptualizations attests to Carbado and colleagues' (2013, p. 312, emphasis added) assertion that "intersectionality is what intersectionality *does*," whereby the flexibility, breadth, and even complexity of intersectionality actually allow comprehension of what intersectionality is and its interminable limits. Here, the authors acknowledge how intersectionality can be all of these things because of its vast philosophical foundation, which shows its flexibility but also the difficulty in defining and operationalizing it—a tendency that Western scholarship tends to favor. The evolving nature and fluidity of intersectionality facilitate it to transcend diverse research fields and hold potential significance in currently uncharted terrains.

The value of intersectionality has been well-documented. Gopaldas's (2013) paper "Intersectionality 101," which discusses the ontology, methodology, and axiology of intersectional research, presents the significance of an intersectional approach as being three-fold. First, an intersectional approach acknowledges the multiple identities and lived experiences of oppressed individuals and groups. Here, an intersectional approach challenges the conception of inequalities operating in distinct silos for individuals by, for example, gender, race, age, (dis)ability, but rather effectively articulates how different inequalities intersect, compound, and are mutually constitutive (Emmett & Alant, 2006; Gopaldas, 2013; Jean & McCalla, 2020). Secondly, an intersectional approach works to expose the historical and structural processes of domination (i.e., power, privilege) that render oppression and reproduce the status quo (Collins, 2015; Gopaldas, 2013; Jacobs, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2016). Thirdly, Gopaldas (2013) contends intersectional research is often positioned as "critical" or "transformative" in that intersectionality offers "value-laden" rather than "value-neutral" contributions to science and, therefore, frequently put forth proposals for social change.

The transformative nature of intersectional research is realized when it's "re-radicalise[d]" (Liu, 2018, p. 82) by combining theory and practice to "uncover and transform systems of domination" (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017, p. 507; Steinfield et al., 2019). As such, scholars have made efforts to clarify, and provide guidance for, integrating intersectionality into diverse spheres of policy and practice (see, for example, Hankivsky, 2012; Hankivsky et al., 2012; Jordan-Zachery, 2017; Wilson, 2013). Intersectional policy and practice do not call for a "one-size-fits-all" approach, but rather attend to the unique needs and intersecting identities of marginalized groups of individuals through calls for more intentional policy that is reflective of diverse needs and capacities while actively exposing and actively undoing the interlocking systems of power and oppression that breed inequities. This might include, for instance, justice-oriented policy frameworks for affordable housing that prioritize the perspectives of individuals experiencing or having experienced housing precarity, recognize and work to address the structural and localized causes of housing precarity, and create inclusive spaces for the co-development of policy solutions that take into account the varying needs and capacities of individuals seeking stable,

affordable, and safe housing. This framework may not look the same across contexts but represents an action-oriented approach that is cognizant of the capabilities, needs, resources, and priorities of individuals affected by structural causes of everyday precarity.

Critiques of Intersectionality

While scholarship referencing intersectionality and its focus on understanding adverse or disproportionate outcomes across and within groups has grown, it has resulted in intersectionality becoming a “fast travelling concept” (Knapp, 2005), at risk of becoming a “buzzword” (Davis, 2008, p. 67). This is due in part to misunderstandings, misapplications, and different interpretations of intersectionality within scholarship (Collins, 2019). Indeed, a range of critiques has been put forward about the utility and applicability of intersectionality, disputing the rigor and application of the term given that it has been differentially conceptualized, defined, and applied. These critiques have been well documented and described elsewhere (e.g., Hopkins, 2019; Lewis, 2009; Nash, 2017). For instance, while varying interpretations and applications of intersectionality make it more accessible and able to be widely applied in scholarship, this is often considered its shortfall. A central question or issue put forward by scholars and those attempting to move intersectional thought into practice includes methodological concerns of how intersectionality is operationalized and measured (Hopkins, 2019; Nash, 2017). As Hopkins (2019, p. 938) notes about the lack of a specific method or methodology used in intersectionality scholarship:

One criticism is that there is not a specific method or methodology associated with intersectionality (Nash, 2008; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006) . . . Researchers using intersectionality are urged not to adopt an additive approach and instead to look at how specific forms of inequality are mutually constitutive; yet sometimes the methods used result in an additive approach being used.

(Jordan-Zachery, 2007; Lewis, 2009)

This critique raised by Hopkins (2019) points not only to a lack of consistent methodological and analytical application of intersectional approaches to research but in fact highlights the concern that some studies claiming to be “intersectional” contradict intersectional thought by employing methods and analytical approaches that “add together” oppressions rather than disentangling or confronting how different forms of oppression and privilege intersect.

Yet another central critique concerns the depoliticization of intersectionality (Buchanan & Wiklund, 2021; Davis, 2020; Hopkins, 2019), suggesting that applications of intersectionality often ignore or neglect the original intent of the concept’s political power and potential for fostering “deep political coalitions and decolonial feminist work” (Nash, 2017, p. 125). Intersectionality’s shift from its social justice origins not only reproduces misapplications or superficial use of intersectionality, but effectively reduces the potential of intersectionality for fostering transformative change. Further, as others have argued, this misapplication largely reflects a “whitening” of intersectionality. Bilge (2013) characterizes this whitening as a:

grim irony: a tool elaborated by women of color to confront the racism and heterosexism of White-dominated feminism, as well as the sexism and heterosexism of antiracist movements, becomes, in another time and place, a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialised women at bay. (p. 418)

Some scholars have asserted intersectionality has lost its critical edge (e.g., Salem, 2018) in that there has been less emphasis on the role of power imbalances and marginalization in understanding the varied lived experiences of individuals; that it has become “colonized,” “commodified,” and “appropriated” (Bilge, 2013; Nash, 2019). Here, such debates demonstrate how epistemic whiteness acts as a politics of inclusion and exclusion and commercializes diversity. Arguably, what began as a framework or concept originating from Black women’s lived experience has become diluted and performative instead of transformative—both in scholarship and practice. For example, this dilution and erasure of the experiences and voices of Black women and women of color have been critiqued in present-day sociopolitical movements, such as the global Women’s March and #MeToo movement. These movements continue to be criticized for their lack of meaningful attention to the intersectional experiences of women, overwhelmingly centering and prioritizing white women’s experiences (Brewer & Dundes, 2018; Onwuachi-Willig, 2018; Williams, 2021).

Intersectionality has also received critiques within Marxist scholarship, suggesting that while intersectionality can indeed describe the “effects” of multiple oppressions, “it does not offer an adequate explanatory framework for addressing the root causes of social inequality in the capitalist socioeconomic system” (Foley, 2018, p. 11; also see Mojab & Carpenter, 2019; Salem, 2018). Further, it has been suggested that “intersectionality is less valuable as an explanatory framework than as an ideological reflection of the times” (Foley, 2018, p. 12). While using an intersectional approach necessitates the inclusion of various forms of identity for understanding marginalization, many Marxist perspectives on intersectionality contend that class remains a key consideration under the structure and hegemony of capitalism and should not be analyzed as secondary or equal to other identities (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019; Salem, 2018).

At the same time, intersectionality has become increasingly politicized. Accompanying frameworks like critical race theory, intersectionality has been weaponized into a divisive tool to appeal to certain sociopolitical leanings. For example, in 2018, Ben Shapiro, a conservative American political commentator, released a video garnering 6.2 million views asserting that intersectionality is “a form of identity politics in which the value of your opinion depends on how many victim groups you belong to. At the bottom of the totem pole is the person everybody loves to hate: the straight white male” (Shapiro, 2018). Such rhetoric is not solely a U.S. phenomenon. For instance, there is ongoing political and cultural pushback in other Western contexts, namely France, toward decolonization, gender and race-related conversations, and intersectionality. In fact, in 2021 the French minister of higher education launched an investigation into academic institutions regarding such topics as feeding into identity politics, which they purport endangers societal cohesion, leads to segregation, and “pose[s] the risk of nu[r]turing ‘self-hatred’ against France” (Colak & Toguslu, 2021). Such discourse effectively stymies productive conversation

surrounding equity; it suggests that by calling for equality and facilitating the empowerment of marginalized groups, there must simultaneously be disenfranchisement or “punishment” of others who hold enormous amounts of power and privilege.

Intersectionality as a Knowledge and Liberation Tool

For thought leaders like Sojourner Truth, Barbara Smith, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and other prolific scholars existing in marginalized spaces, intersectionality has served as a resistance knowledge tool or “knowledge project” in fighting for liberation (Collins, 2019). A knowledge project is an analytical and philosophical understanding of the actual material conditions of oppressed people that emphasizes resistance to invoke tangible, social change (Collins, 2019). Collins (2019) argues that

viewing intersectionality as a resistant knowledge project highlights the political dimensions of knowledge. Just as critical race theory as a resistance knowledge project may aspire to resist racism, intersectionality as a knowledge project may resist the social inequalities within intersecting systems of power. (p. 96)

For example, consider the role of rap, grime, and drill music within the Black community in the United Kingdom. As a knowledge project and through the mechanism of music, artists have highlighted and continue to acknowledge how racial, economic, health, and employment inequities are connected to racist structures such as the criminal justice system, thus provoking calls for challenging policies and politicians perpetuating their subordination. For instance, Stormzy, a prominent U.K. grime artist, has frequently vocalized his criticisms of inequalities surrounding race, the housing system, and the U.K. government response following the 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire in his music and performances (e.g., at the 2018 “Brit Awards,” when headlining Glastonbury in 2019; Lewis, 2020).

As a resistance knowledge project, intersectionality incorporates perspectives from various disciplines and social theories, including, but not limited to, liberation theory, critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial scholarship, and other social theories, which provide a broader philosophical landscape in understanding social phenomena (Collins, 2019). This framework likewise employs approaches drawn from feminist, antiracist, and decolonial projects where theorizing resistance and praxis are intricately tied. These foundational pieces provide intersectionality the breadth needed to conceptualize liberation in a way that is not only inclusive but historically rooted and intellectually equitable—both in terms of the epistemologies (ways of knowing) represented and in the production and dissemination of knowledge.

As a tool, intersectionality validates various forms of knowledge building and gives deference to knowledge accrued through personal experiences and epistemologies that exist outside of Western schools of thought. For example, knowledge gained from an individual who has never received formal education and from those who have received higher education (e.g., PhD, Masters, MD) are validated equally in weight and importance. This point is significant as knowledge and theory building are mainly validated when rooted in Westernized ideologies that

frequently perpetrate intellectual, social, racial, and economic hierarchies that subjugate other forms of knowledge, such as traditional ecological knowledge, and methodological techniques such as oral history, photovoice, storytelling, and arts-based methods (Hawkins, 2013; Mahn et al., 2021; Nagamatsu et al., 2021; Paton et al., 2017; Rae, 2016). Further, in taking an intersectional approach, this calls upon researchers to recognize, value, and incorporate scholarship from “non-Western” countries and support shifts toward pluralism within research (Gaillard, 2021).

Liberation refers to removing oppressive forces, freeing individuals to live without unjust limitations, prejudice, harm, and state-sanctioned violence (Collins, 2019; Davis, 2016; Fanon, 1963). However, to remove or do away with the discriminations proliferated by those with power, and privilege, means that it must first be acknowledged as it has historically existed, as well as to dissect its contemporary evolution and concretization. Collins (2019) calls for conceptualizing intersectionality as an element of critical social theory. Such a shift is necessary for moving intersectionality beyond a visionary space to one that interrogates current methodologies and epistemologies that breed inequality and actualizes intellectual and social progress for addressing the root causes of vulnerability. It is both this potential for influencing real change as well as intersectionality’s intellectual application that renders it a significant contribution to disaster scholarship, especially when grappling with a changing climate that is set to continue to have disproportionate impacts on individuals and groups of individuals with limited power or agency to improve their circumstances.

Recollecting Disaster Scholarship

Theoretical developments and empirical findings in disaster scholarship have grown significantly over the years. While realist and event-based perspectives of disasters persist within disaster research, alternative perspectives have challenged, and continue to challenge, long-held notions of what constitutes a disaster, causes of disaster, and how individuals and groups of individuals are affected differentially by hazards and disasters (Kelman, 2020; Perrow, 2007; Tierney, 2007, 2014). One of the first notable shifts within disaster research occurred when scholars began to understand that the causes of disaster events are socially constructed and human-induced as opposed to solely “natural” (Ball, 1975; Hewitt, 1983; Perrow, 2007; Tierney, 2014; Wisner et al., 1977).

Under the social vulnerability paradigm, disasters have been further understood as social events in which political and institutional actors and institutions have considerable power over how disasters unfold and are constructed (Kelman, 2020; Perrow, 2007; Tierney, 2007, 2014). Disastrous events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, the 2013 North India floods, the 2019/2020 “Black Summer” Australian bushfires, and the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire exposed preexisting inequalities rooted in intersecting forms of oppression that systematically marginalize and make vulnerable certain groups over others (Akter & Grafton, 2021; Luft, 2016; Rodriguez et al., 2006). These events unfortunately highlight the ways that preexisting social, economic, and political conditions and inequities are perpetuated and exacerbated by extreme events.

Even post-disaster, disenfranchised groups continue to be marginalized throughout the recovery process. Black and lower-income residents who evacuated New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina experienced barriers returning and were disproportionately (and arguably intentionally) excluded from participating in local voting engagements since they were no longer considered residents—a move which largely benefited the more affluent, white residents who were able to return sooner to influence policies that prevented or stymied the return of lower-income, largely Black residents (Bullard & Wright, 2009). Moreover, following the Black Saturday 2009 bushfires and 2010–2011 floods in Queensland and Victoria, economic recovery targeted relief funds to male-dominated employment and public work projects (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016; Hazeleger, 2013; Parkinson, 2011; Shaw et al., 2013). Here, women employed in casual, part-time, and low-paid jobs received little benefit from economic recovery plans. While supporting the economic recovery of men, these government-funded projects, therefore, failed to provide equitable financial recovery assistance and income support to women, thus damagingly altering their recovery process (Dominey-Howes et al., 2016; Hazeleger, 2013; Parkinson, 2011; Shaw et al., 2013). As these examples demonstrate, the social vulnerability paradigm has become foundational to uncovering how and why certain individuals and groups are unequally affected by disaster (Morrow, 2008; Thomas et al., 2020; Wisner et al., 2004; Yoon, 2012).

Intersectionality in Disaster Scholarship

Over the last decade, in particular, scholars have put forward critical examinations of *who* is vulnerable to disaster and *why*, and how there is a need to build upon and challenge previous conceptions of vulnerability to more appropriately capture and contextualize the disaster experiences of individuals and groups of individuals. Historically, disaster vulnerability scholarship held a tendency to perceive certain groups of individuals as static and homogenize them under blanket categorizations of, for example, “vulnerable,” “at-risk,” and “access and functional needs.” These labels result in the treatment of marginalized groups as a monolith, coupled with assumptions that they experience discrimination and disaster outcomes similarly. This also highlights the problematic tendency of current mitigation and recovery practices (e.g., disaster risk reduction policy assessments) that often apply generalized determinants of vulnerability to specific hazardous places as opposed to systems that create and proliferate undue risk (Carr et al., 2015). Static and homogenizing approaches to understanding social vulnerability are problematic as they overlook the diversity present within and across localities and groups of individuals (Carr et al., 2015; Vickery, 2018). By extension, such approaches neglect the opportunity to identify, understand, and attend to the nuanced processes (i.e., historical and structural) that produce disaster vulnerability (Chaplin et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2018; Kadetz & Mock, 2018).

However, as many disaster vulnerability scholars have come to recognize, not all characteristics are static and they often compound and intersect with one another over space and time (Every et al., 2019; Gaillard et al., 2019; Kuran et al., 2020). For example, Vickery (2018, p. 136) noted that during extreme flooding that occurred in Colorado in 2013, people experiencing homelessness were “frequently homogenized in practice without regard for . . . intersecting traits and contextual factors.” This can reinforce an “othering” effect that dehumanizes individuals’

experience and “encourages erroneous negative stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudices” (Lurie et al., 2015, p. 50). Static and homogenizing approaches also disregard the varying attributes and capacities individuals possess, which affect their ability to prepare, respond to, and recover from disastrous events, as well as assist them to avoid or reduce risk that makes them susceptible to disaster in the first place (Kadetz & Mock, 2018; Kotsinas, 2020; Vickery, 2018). The terms, “vulnerable,” “at-risk,” and “access and functional needs” have also been critiqued for attributing certain groups of people as passive, weak, and incapacitated, compared to their “normal,” less vulnerable counterparts (Bankoff, 2001; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Jacobs, 2019). When disaster scholarship refers, implicitly or explicitly, to these groups as inherently “vulnerable,” it often takes a muted approach that stops short of calling out the actors, institutions, and systems of oppression that made these individuals vulnerable in the first place (Bullard and Wright, 2009; Jacobs, 2019).

Signaling a shift away from this historical tendency to label groups of individuals as inherently vulnerable, there has been increased, yet varying, application of intersectionality for disentangling the causes of vulnerability (Chaplin et al., 2019; Kuran et al., 2020; Luft, 2016; McKinzie, 2017; Tierney, 2019). Within disaster scholarship, intersectionality has been characterized as a “framework” (Arora, 2020; Fletcher, 2018), a perspective (Kuran et al., 2020), or an approach (Chaplin et al., 2019), though some reference it as a theory or concept (Raza, 2017). This is reflective of the diversity in how intersectionality is characterized and employed more broadly. Through this research, scholars emphasize how people are made vulnerable to disaster as a result of interlocking systems of oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism. Such studies have used multiple methods to disentangle and uncover the ways that varying identities combine and intersect to inform particular outcomes following a disaster (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups, narrative inquiry, ethnographic fieldwork, thought pieces, and surveys). For example, Raza (2017) employed a mixed-methods approach of survey interviews and focus groups to examine the experiences and impacts of the 2014 floods in Pakistan on the intersection of income, gender, (dis)ability, education, disaster type, and land ownership. Such a study highlighted the challenges present for those occupying more vulnerable spaces, the prolonged recovery they endured compared to their more privileged counterparts, and the strength of employing a qualitative approach with the support of the intersectionality theory when grasping the nuances of one’s disaster experience.

How Intersectionality Supports Disaster Research

Integration of intersectionality, both explicitly and implicitly, in approaches to disaster scholarship has enabled scholars to understand how privilege and oppression are intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022; Osborne, 2015; Ryder, 2017), including how people benefit from systems of oppression that simultaneously deprive others of access to resources like food, water, housing, healthcare, and voting. Such an integration has shown the versatility of intersectionality and an advanced understanding of the ways that individuals and groups should not be homogenized, that vulnerability is not static, and has shown the radical potential for applying intersectional approaches in practice to address or alleviate inequities. For

instance, by considering intersecting contextual factors and processes, intersectional research lessens “the risk of being reduced to a metaphor by simply pointing out the most vulnerable” (Djouidi et al., 2016, p. 254). It enables scholars to highlight unequal power relations entrenched within social structures and institutions, which repeatedly surface during disastrous events and exacerbates social vulnerability (Jacobs, 2019; Weber & Hilfinger Messias, 2012). Here, intersectionality holds purchase, assisting scholars to engage with the root causes of disasters, which often are understood as being situated within the unequal distribution of power and access to resources (Hewitt, 1983; Tierney, 2014; Wisner et al., 1977, 2004).

Although seemingly counterintuitive, intersectionality’s flexible application in disaster research does not preclude such approaches from contributing to a richer, systematic understanding of the experiences of marginalized groups. For example, Chaplin et al. (2019, p. 1) advocate for scholars to address the lack of approaches and methodologies that enable measurement and observation by disaggregating data and analyses “relating to the circumstances of vulnerable, marginalised, and at-risk people” and by conducting more context-specific and qualitative research to “fully understand how inequalities intersect and affect people in different contexts.” Here, it is not necessarily to suggest that intersectionality must have strict, uniform measurement, but rather its application must be rigorously and clearly articulated, with its value in uncovering one’s lived experience, either on a micro or macro level, demonstrated. An intersectional approach would support Chaplin’s call for context-specific research to understand the complexities present within groups of individuals, considering the varying historical, social, environmental, cultural, and political spheres that result in unequal exposures to hazards and outcomes from disasters (see, for example, Chaplin et al., 2019; Jacobs, 2021; Vickery, 2018).

To highlight how intersectionality improves understanding of disaster vulnerability, consider LGBTQIA+ groups—diverse in race, socioeconomic status, gender, expression, and sexuality. Research has shown that Black and Brown transwomen have vastly different experiences than white, gay, cis-gendered men who benefit from certain privileges (e.g., being white and male) in that they are more likely to experience homelessness, incarceration, violence, and health-related discrimination because of their race, gender identity, income, sexuality, and often age, which results in barriers accessing food, water, healthcare, and housing (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014; Goldsmith et al., 2021; Human Rights Commission, 2012; Nadal, 2013). These struggles are often exacerbated following a disaster, negatively affecting and slowing their recovery and producing disproportionate suffering (Dominey-Howes et al., 2014; Goldsmith et al., 2021; Human Rights Commission, 2012; Nadal, 2013). Intersectionality provides a framework for recognizing such disparities by exposing problematic, homogenizing, and simplistic representations of LGBTQIA+ people through the validation and understanding of the nuances present in their identities and experiences while simultaneously acknowledging how patriarchy, white supremacy, and other power structures produce and reproduce vulnerability.

Moreover, intersectionality underscores the “need for disadvantaged groups to have access to subjectivities that cast them in active roles rather than as either victims or villains in responding to environmental change” and disastrous events (Eriksen et al., 2015, p. 526). Intersectionality does well at capturing these often-overlooked capacities while challenging dominant narratives of vulnerability; for example, Walking and Haworth (2020) utilized intersectionality to

investigate older adults' coping capacity in a North Wales coastal town with heightened flood risk. In this article, they highlighted the repeated conception of vulnerability in older adults as a "collective vulnerability," treating them "as a uniform group" where "individual needs are often not well-considered" (Walking & Haworth, 2020, p. 2; also see Campbell, 2019). Attending to the capacities of older adults, they identified how these individuals showed a significant ability to support one another during response and recovery, thus enhancing their capacity to cope with flood risk.

Indeed, intersectional approaches within disaster vulnerability scholarship are well-positioned to identify and resist simplistic representations of so-called "vulnerable groups," "at-risk populations," and "access and functional needs" as they expose the historical and structural processes entangled with such representations. To highlight concisely the value-add of intersectional approaches within disaster research, Table 1 outlines intersectionality's capacity for a deeper understanding of conceptualizations of vulnerability, as compared to historically dominant views of disaster vulnerability. Importantly, this table is not meant to be exhaustive but illustrative.

Table 1. A Comparison Between Nonintersectional Disaster Research and Intersectional Disaster Research Surrounding Conceptualizations of Vulnerability

Conceptualizations of Vulnerability	Nonintersectional Disaster Research	Intersectional Disaster Research
Demographics	Race, gender, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, and so on are assumed to be independent demographic variables.	Race, gender, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, and so on are conceptualized as interdependent and compounding. An intersectional approach challenges the homogenization of individuals and groups by demographic characteristics. For example, highlighting nuances present among and historical influences on low-income, Black, and transgender people (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2021).
Representations of vulnerability	Vulnerability presented as a condition. Can overgeneralize and homogenize. For example, gender is often framed to reinforce "the feminisation of vulnerability" (Djoudi et al., 2016). Includes the lived experience of so-called vulnerable groups, though often lacking nuance.	Vulnerability presented as a process. Vulnerability shown as context-specific, relational, dynamic, and as a direct product of existing power relations (Djoudi et al., 2016). Challenges essentialist beliefs. For example, by moving away from binary notions of gender (Enarson & Pease, 2016; Kotsinas, 2020; Lykke, 2010). Highlights the lived experience of multiplicatively oppressed groups.

Conceptualizations of Vulnerability	Nonintersectional Disaster Research	Intersectional Disaster Research
Recognition of resiliency and capacity to cope	Can overlook resilience and capacity of individuals and groups in the face of disasters. This can result in the portrayal of individuals and certain groups as passive, helpless victims.	Actively recognizes the resilience and capacity of individuals and groups in the face of disasters, especially of those historically recognized as vulnerable. Recognition of both exogenous and endogenous capacities. For example, by moving away from discourse and framing that people are inherently vulnerable (Campbell, 2019; Kotsinas, 2020; Lurie et al., 2015; Vickery, 2018).
Structural processes and contextual factors	Attends to individual variables of vulnerability and marginalization, without thoughtful acknowledgement of why people experience vulnerability. Might see privilege and oppression as exclusive processes.	Identifies the historical and structural contexts and processes that render vulnerability and marginalization. Makes connections between the processes and outcomes of power, privilege, and oppression. Explores contextual patterns of vulnerability and marginalization. For example, 17 principles of environmental justice were created by the Black, Indigenous, and people of color community (Ducre, 2018F), emphasizing the impact of colonialism and economic disenfranchisement regarding land, health, and labor.
Research outcomes	Value-neutral scholarship (Chaplin et al., 2019; Gopaldas, 2013) and scholarship produced without actionable outcomes or recommendations for alleviating vulnerabilities and challenging systems of oppression.	Value-laden scholarship that puts forth proposals for social change (examples below). Contributes to intersectional disaster policy and practice that attends to the diverse experiences of multiplicatively oppressed groups (Chaplin et al., 2019; Gopaldas, 2013; Kadetz & Mock, 2018). For example, by creating gender-sensitive policy and practice to situate women's knowledge, support emancipation, empower women, and create "disaster-resilient communities" (Enarson & Chakrabarti, 2009). Contributes to intersectional activism and coalition-building. For example, Leah Thomas's (2022) coining of the phrase "intersectional environmentalism" and founding of the

Conceptualizations of Vulnerability	Nonintersectional Disaster Research	Intersectional Disaster Research
		Intersectional Environmentalist platform to provide resources for climate justice with marginalized voices at the forefront.

Table 1 showcases examples of how intersectional approaches allow disaster scholars to move away from simplistic representations of vulnerability by recognizing the capacities, structural processes, contextual forces, and lived experiences of multiplicatively oppressed groups. Further, it encourages the research community to think more intentionally about the outcomes of research as being action- and/or justice-oriented instead of value-neutral scholarship that risks inadvertently maintaining the status quo and exploiting participants or subjects of disaster vulnerability research.

Interrogating the Western Gaze

Despite promising developments in how vulnerability is discussed and conceptualized, scholars have contended that such shifts have not effectively challenged the hegemony of Western scholarship and dominant epistemologies present within disaster studies (see Gaillard, 2019, 2021). In their book, *The Invention of Disaster: Power and Knowledge in Discourses on Hazard and Vulnerability*, Gaillard (2021) identified how disaster studies are still dominated by Western epistemologies and scholars. This results in research that, to some extent, constructs and reproduces pervasive and unproductive understandings of vulnerability that lack interrogation of global processes and power structures that reproduce vulnerability. Essentialism, Eurocentrism, and the reproduction of “the other” perpetuate an orientalist view of disasters, which further subjugates and marginalizes non-Western people (Gaillard, 2021; Kotsinas, 2020) and additionally renders certain intersections, like gender and sexuality, to be understood through Western norms and values (Goldsmith et al., 2021). Thus, such domination can ignorantly position individuals and localities as striving for these constructed “idealized” Western norms (Goldsmith et al., 2021; Lykke, 2010). Notably, regarding intersectional approaches, the preeminence of Western epistemologies and scholars can dilute intersectionality’s potential by either limiting understandings of other worldviews and perspectives and functioning as a counteractive force that opposingly views both privilege and oppression as exclusive processes (Baumann et al., 2022; Kotsinas, 2020; Windsong, 2018).

As an example of the effects of the pervasiveness of Western heteronormative values in disaster scholarship, policy, and practice, there is a tendency, even within intersectional disaster research, for simplification regarding gender and sexuality (Djouidi et al., 2016; Gaillard et al., 2017). Scholars often retreat to solely discussing “women” and “men” in static binaries without acknowledging other gender identities (e.g., nonbinary, gender nonconforming, transgender), thus reinforcing gender binaries and the effects thereof (Djouidi et al., 2016; Gaillard et al., 2017;

Kotsinas, 2020). Relatedly, when research discusses disaster-affected households only in terms of “women” and “men,” it inadvertently affirms the Western heteronormative tendency of only including (hetero-) and cisgender men and women as the default family arrangement, overlooking other types of family or household structures (Kotsinas, 2020). Kaijser and Kronsell (2014, p. 421) suggest binary thinking might “[e]xclude[s] those who do not fit in these static categories and den[y] social struggle, contestation and the complexity and fluidity of identities.”

Gaillard et al. (2017) presented case studies from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Samoa to question and highlight the dominant Western heteronormative discourse postulated in disaster risk reduction policy and practices. Binary conceptions of both gender and sexuality were found to render nonnormative and gender minorities especially vulnerable in disasters (Baumann et al., 2022; Dominey-Howes et al., 2016; Gaillard et al., 2017; Rushton et al., 2019; Yadav et al., 2021), compounding the effects of everyday stigmatization, discrimination, and harassment these historically marginalized groups experienced (Gaillard et al., 2017; similarly documented in Kotsinas, 2020). At the same time, such omissions further contribute to the (in)visibility of individuals who subscribe to sexual and gender identities outside of popularized and inequitably normalized doctrines and practices. As such, intersectional research employing solely Western epistemologies and methodologies may produce an incomplete understanding of experiences and ignore or suppress other ways of knowing that could otherwise enrich how vulnerability is discussed and addressed.

Future Terrains of Intersectionality in Disaster Research

This article, in reviewing intersectionality literature in disaster studies, has not only demonstrated the capacity of intersectional thought to afford deeper, more nuanced, and contextual understandings of the production and outcomes of processes and structures that make people vulnerable but ways forward beyond the identification of varied disaster-experiences.

First, there is a need for more in-depth, contextual research for understanding the effects of intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization on groups identified to be more at-risk to hazards and disaster (Andharia, 2020; Chaplin et al., 2019; Kadetz & Mock, 2018; Kuran et al., 2020). Specifically, there is a need, as others have contended, for research that disaggregates understandings of historically vulnerable or marginalized groups to situate their experiences in time and place, as well as develop greater understandings of capacities present within these individuals and groups (e.g., rough sleepers or people experiencing homelessness, older adults, and children). There is an urgency to push beyond homogenizing rhetoric within academic and popular discourse toward discourse that facilitates the empowerment of these individuals rather than perpetuating “helpless victim” or “deservingness” tropes. Additionally, within disaster scholarship, it is evident some “forms” of intersecting oppressions have received significantly less attention than others (Kotsinas, 2020). Specifically, the intersections of (dis)ability and sexuality are repeatedly given less consideration in relation to gender, family status, class, and occupation. This is problematic as disasters have been documented as having disproportionately negative effects on people with preexisting disabilities and sexual minorities (Alexander et al., 2012; Enarson and Pease, 2016; Ronoh et al., 2017; Stough & Kang, 2015; Ton et al., 2019). Going

forward, disaster scholarship, policy, and practice employing intersectionality must address the full extent of disaster experiences and processes that result in vulnerability among those who are marginalized or it risks becoming fragmented and reproducing the disenfranchisement it is in fact meant to challenge (Kotsinas, 2020).

Second, scholars should note not only how intersectionality (as outlined in its original conceptions) mandates action, but how this aligns with recent calls and efforts within disaster studies to directly challenge systems that produce risk and inequality. Disasters are inherently political (Kelman, 2020; Perrow, 2007; Tierney, 2007, 2014), and treating disaster research, particularly vulnerability research, as extra-political serves to maintain oppressive forces that go unchallenged. As disaster studies' witnesses increased calls for the ethical obligations of disaster researchers to initiate and carry out studies that center the needs of at-risk and disaster-affected individuals and localities (Pelling & Garschagen, 2019), disaster scholar contributors must also recognize the radical potential of intersectionality within disaster research, policy, and practice as an opportunity to challenge, disrupt, and diligently undo the interactions of systematic privilege, power, and oppression that render unequal disaster experiences and outcomes. This includes the need for awareness of intersectionality's origins and prevalence as an outcome of Black feminist and decolonial thought that mandates action and justice beyond the acknowledgment of inequities.

Finally, and building on the former, those engaged in disaster research, policy, and practice should consider the use of intersectionality as a liberation tool. This entails moving beyond problem identification (e.g., the social causes of risk and vulnerability) toward the development of policies and practices that are deeply reflective, just, restorative, and forward-thinking and that diligently challenge and disrupt the systematic oppressions and inequities that render individuals and groups of individuals vulnerable to disasters. While disasters pose significant challenges for localities, they can also facilitate meaningful action, such as grassroots coalition-building, inclusive long-term visioning, and the development of practices and policies that are restorative, just, and inclusive (Jacobs, 2019; Kotsinas, 2020; Moreno & Shaw, 2018).

Conclusion

This article asserts and advocates for the value of incorporating intersectional approaches within disaster research, policy, and practice. From a concept to a theoretical framework, intersectionality seeks to capture comprehensively the complexity of individuals and lived experiences by not treating individual identities such as race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, location, and immigration status as "exclusive" or "separable." However, this perspective is not only concerned with questions of identity and representation but also with the structural processes and root causes (i.e., power and privilege) that produce intersecting oppressions and inequalities.

Within disaster research, policy, and practice, intersectionality presents itself as an opportunity to challenge, disrupt, and diligently undo the interactions of systematic power, privilege, and oppression that render unequal disaster experiences and outcomes. By identifying how

intersectional approaches have been used in disaster scholarship, the utility and importance of intersectional approaches are highlighted as beneficial for understanding and addressing the root causes of disaster vulnerability.

Throughout this article, further attention has been brought forward about the radical potential of an intersectional approach within disaster research, policy, and practice when understanding and addressing the ways people are made vulnerable. With the negative effects of human-caused climate change increasing, efforts must be intentional and deeply intersectional to not cause undue harm to individuals that are anticipated to be most affected. This includes moving beyond homogenizing and victimizing rhetoric, recognizing the coalition-building potential of intersectionality in disaster risk reduction, and recognizing the role of scholars in facilitating positive change for individuals and groups at-risk to disproportionately negative effects of disaster. Going forward, simplistic representations, the unequal attention given to certain intersections, and the domination of Western epistemologies must be attended to in order to utilize what intersectionality affords scholars and practitioners in the field of disaster research to do. The evolving nature and fluidity of intersectionality mean there is unbounded opportunity for its future in disaster scholarship and practice.

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