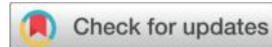


# *Sexual Orientation Through an Intersectional Lens : Multiple Oppressions, Identity Construction, and Psychological Well-being*



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## **Abstract:**

This paper examines sexual orientation through the lens of intersectionality theory, emphasizing it as a complex construct shaped by emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction within systems of power, and highlighting its implications for mental health under conditions of structural inequality. Intersectionality, originally formulated by Crenshaw, this study aims to analyze how overlapping identities—such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation—interact to produce distinctive patterns of oppression and privilege, and how these patterns can translate into psychological stress and distress. Using qualitative case-based methods, this paper examines cases of Black lesbian women in South Africa, who face extreme, compounded violence such as “corrective rape” due to interlocking racism, patriarchy, class inequality, and homophobia, despite legal protections. It also examines asexual youth, showing that identity disclosure can intensify discrimination and generate psychological distress, as sexual orientation intersects with gender identity in everyday social settings.

The findings indicate that sexual orientation cannot be adequately explained through single identity dimensions, as multiple social identities interact within systems of power to produce distinct forms of marginalization. The case analyses show that intersectional oppression operates not only at structural and social levels but also manifests in psychological stress and identity-related distress among sexual minorities. These results highlight the importance of intersectional analysis for understanding how

structural inequalities shape lived experiences and inform more inclusive social policies.

However, existing research remains limited by a frequent focus on single identity dimensions and a reliance on Western contexts, lacking fully dynamic and contextualized analysis. The study identifies key challenges for future inquiry: understanding the dynamic interactions of multiple identities, uncovering the mechanisms of multi-layered oppression across different societies, and improving the integration of intersectional theory with practical realities faced by sexual minorities. Consequently, this analysis advocates for an intersectional approach to reveal the nuanced oppression within multidimensional power systems and to inform more inclusive social policies that address compounded inequalities.

**Keywords:** Sexual orientation, intersectionality, multiple oppression, identity, marginalization, mental health

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Research Background**

Sexual orientation is a crucial concept describing an individual's emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction patterns. It not only pertains to personal identity but also reflects the dynamics of social power relations **Error! Reference source not found.** In recent years, intersectionality theory has emerged as a vital analytical framework for examining sexual orientation by focusing on how multiple social identities—such as gender, race, and class—interact to form systems of oppression and inequality [2]. First proposed by Crenshaw to explain the multiple marginalizations experienced by Black women, intersectionality emphasizes the interconnected and mutually constitutive nature of different identity categories [3].

Empirical research further demonstrates the analytical significance of intersectional perspectives in understanding sexual orientation.

For instance, Black lesbian women in South Africa face multiple forms of oppression arising from the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, including extreme violence such as “corrective rape” [4]. Concurrently, research on asexual youth reveals that the interaction between sexual orientation and gender identity intensifies discrimination and psychological stress during identity disclosure **Error! Reference source not found.** These cases demonstrate that the complex interplay between sexual orientation and multiple identities necessitates in-depth analysis through an intersectional perspective.

However, existing research continues to exhibit limitations at both theoretical and practical levels. On one hand, many studies focus on single or limited identity dimensions—such as gender or race—thereby failing to fully capture the dynamic relationships among multiple identities. On the other hand, research on sexual minorities predominantly draws from Western societal contexts, resulting in insufficient contextualized analysis across diverse social settings [6].

This paper therefore explores the multiplicity and complexity of sexual orientation from an intersectional perspective, aiming to provide new insights into the understanding of social inequality.

## 1.2 Research Questions

Although intersectionality theory provides an important analytical framework for sexual orientation research, several unresolved issues remain insufficiently addressed in existing studies and require further exploration in practice.

(1) Dynamic Interactions: How does sexual orientation manifest unique forms of complexity through the dynamic interplay of multiple identities such as race, gender, and class?

(2) Multiple Oppression Mechanisms: How do power relations perpetuate the marginalization of sexual minorities through intersectional mechanisms across different social contexts? For instance, despite the legalization of same-sex marriage in South

Africa, Black lesbians continue to face extreme violence such as “corrective rape,” revealing the persistence of structural and cultural inequalities [7].

(3) Theory–Practice Integration: To what extent can intersectionality theory be effectively applied in sexual orientation research?

Therefore, this paper adopts an intersectional perspective to explore the interplay between sexual orientation and multiple social identities. It aims to reveal the unique experiences of sexual minorities within multidimensional systems of oppression and provide theoretical support for diversity and inclusivity in social policy.

## **2. Literature Review**

Intersectionality theory serves as a crucial framework for analyzing multiple social identities and power relations. Tara C. Kershaw first introduced intersectionality theory while analyzing the multiple oppressions faced by Black women. She argued that identity categories such as race, gender, and class do not exist in isolation but interact to form specific systems of social oppression. Kershaw emphasized that these oppressions do not simply accumulate; rather, they impact individuals through intersecting and simultaneous dynamics. This theory transcends single-dimensional analysis, becoming the foundation for studying multiple identities and their complexities.

Subsequent scholarship has further developed intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological approach for examining how structural inequalities operate across institutional and everyday contexts. McCall identifies different methodological approaches to intersectionality, emphasizing the importance of analyzing social categories relationally rather than independently [8]. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall further argue that intersectionality provides an analytical framework for understanding how power structures organize social hierarchies through overlapping systems of inequality [9].

Collins further developed intersectionality theory, arguing that social identity

categories like race, gender, and class are interwoven within specific historical and cultural contexts. This interweaving not only shapes individuals' social experiences but also reflects power distributions within social structures **Error! Reference source not found..** Collins stressed that the interactivity of these multiple identities requires contextual understanding to better reveal the complexity of inequality.

Building on this perspective, later scholarship has emphasized the importance of examining intersectionality through lived experiences and everyday practices. Nash (2008) highlights the role of intersectionality in analyzing identity negotiation and embodied experiences of marginalization [10], while Hancock argues that intersectionality enables a more nuanced understanding of inequality by linking structural analysis with individual experience across social contexts [11].

In sexuality studies, intersectionality theory is particularly applicable to analyzing the social circumstances of sexual minorities. Sexual orientation, as part of social identity, interacts with factors like gender, race, and class to form unique patterns of oppression. For instance, Foucault's theory of power reveals how sexual orientation is disciplined and regulated within society, manifesting as the reinforcement of "normal" sexual behavior and the marginalization of "abnormal" sexual behavior **Error! Reference source not found..** Simultaneously, Butler's theory of gender performance further argues that both sexual orientation and gender identity are socially constructed, profoundly shaped and expressed through cultural norms and power structures **Error! Reference source not found.**

Recent research in sexuality and health studies has further demonstrated that intersectional marginalization is often associated with psychological stress and mental health disparities among sexual minorities. Meyer's minority stress model explains how stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create chronic stress conditions for sexual minorities [12], while Bowleg argues that intersectionality is essential for understanding how multiple marginalized identities shape both social exclusion and health-related outcomes [13].

Together, these theories provide a theoretical foundation for intersectional analysis of sexual orientation, revealing how multiple identities form complex systems of oppression and privilege within power relations.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that sexual orientation must be understood through the interaction of multiple identities and power relations within specific sociocultural contexts. The following case studies of Black lesbian women in South Africa and asexual youth further illustrate how intersectional dynamics operate in practice, revealing how structural inequalities are experienced through both social marginalization and psychological stress.

### **3. Research Methods: Case Study**

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how intersectional mechanisms operate in different sociocultural contexts. Case studies are employed not to provide generalizable conclusions, but to illustrate how multiple social identities and power relations interact in shaping the lived experiences of sexual minorities. The cases of Black lesbian women in South Africa and asexual youth are selected as illustrative examples to demonstrate how intersectional oppression manifests across distinct social and cultural settings.

#### **3.1 Case 1: Multiple Oppressions of Black Lesbian Women in South Africa**

The social circumstances of Black lesbian women in South Africa exemplify intersectional oppression, revealing how race, gender, class, and sexual orientation interact to form a complex system of oppression. Despite the South African Constitution explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and the country being among the first globally to legalize same-sex marriage, these legal advances have not altered the marginalized status of Black lesbian women in society. They frequently endure violence based on both gender and sexual orientation—such as "corrective rape"—while facing systemic neglect and exclusion that denies them effective legal protection **Error! Reference source not found.**

"Corrective rape" represents an extreme manifestation of heteronormative "hegemony" and patriarchy within South African culture. This violent act attempts to "restore" a woman's heterosexual identity through forced sexual intercourse, constituting direct discipline and violation of the female body. Simultaneously, research indicates victims often receive neither sympathy nor support from law enforcement agencies after experiencing such violence. Police may exhibit shaming and contempt toward victims, questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. This phenomenon reflects a stark contradiction between law and culture: while legislation explicitly protects sexual minorities, societal norms and law enforcement practices remain deeply entrenched in patriarchy and racism.

The interplay of multiple identities further compounds the plight of Black lesbians. Racially, they face resource deprivation stemming from historical racism and economic exploitation. Gender-wise, as women, they endure multiple layers of patriarchal discipline. Regarding sexual orientation, as lesbians they face persistent exclusion from heteronormative standards. Class plays a pivotal role within this oppressive system: Black lesbians often concentrate in impoverished communities where resources are scarce and LGBTQ+ acceptance is notably absent. Research indicates a positive correlation between economic deprivation and heightened violence risks, further exacerbating their precarious situation.

Intersectionality theory provides a vital framework for explaining this complex oppression. Crenshaw argues that multiple identities do not simply accumulate but dynamically interact to create unique mechanisms of oppression. Empirical cases demonstrate that single-dimensional analysis fails to capture the reality of Black lesbian women. Examining "corrective rape" solely through the lens of gender or sexual orientation risks overlooking the critical roles of race and class. Similarly, focusing solely on race or class struggles fails to account for the gender and sexual orientation dimensions of this violence. These factors converge in specific contexts to impose a pattern of chained oppression on individuals. This intersectionality not only shapes their social experiences but also positions them at multiple margins within different power

structures simultaneously.

The experiences of Black lesbian women in South Africa demonstrate intersectionality theory's distinct advantage in analyzing multiple identities and chained oppression. Their experiences vividly illustrate how power dynamics perpetuate oppressive systems through the interplay of multiple social identities, serving as a crucial arena for the empirical application of intersectionality theory. This case deepens our understanding of the complex interweaving of multiple identities within sociocultural and power structures, offering profound insights for research on multidimensional social inequality.

### **3.2 Case 2: The Identity Dilemma of Asexual Youth**

Asexual youth constitute a relatively overlooked sexual minority group facing unique social challenges arising from the interplay of sexual orientation and gender identity. Research indicates that identity disclosure (outing) has complex effects on the social adjustment and mental health of asexual youth. On one hand, publicly acknowledging asexuality may reduce immediate stressors and foster more authentic relationships. On the other hand, disclosure can also lead to harassment, discrimination, and violence. Data shows that asexual youth are more likely to experience social exclusion after coming out and exhibit higher tendencies toward non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI).

This predicament reflects the reality of "chain oppression" within intersectionality theory. The interplay between asexual youth's sexual orientation and gender identity subjects them to both heteronormative discipline and further marginalization due to differences from other sexual minority groups. For instance, the lack of visibility for asexual identities within mainstream culture often leads to misunderstanding and discrimination against asexual youth within families, schools, and healthcare settings. Their identities are frequently labeled as "abnormal" or "pathological," perpetuating social prejudice. This chain reaction places asexual youth at heightened risk in developing mental health and self-identity.

The two cases above demonstrate the application of intersectionality theory in sexual orientation research from different dimensions. The case of Black South African lesbians reveals how multiple social identities interact to form complex systems of oppression. The case of asexual youth further illustrates that, under the intersecting influence of multiple mediating effects, identity disclosure may carry heightened mental health risks and social challenges. Together, these cases demonstrate that sexual orientation research must transcend single-dimensional analytical frameworks and integrate intersectionality theory to capture the dynamic relationships among multiple identities.

Based on these empirical analyses, the following insights emerge:

(1) Anti-discrimination policies require greater intersectional awareness to effectively address multidimensional oppression;

(2) Support services for sexual minorities should prioritize understanding the complex interactions of their multiple identities;

(3) Future research should further incorporate contextual analysis to explore the application potential of intersectionality theory within diverse societal contexts.

## **4. Research Reflections and Discussion**

### **4.1 Addressing Research Complexity**

#### **4.1.1 Complexity of Dynamic Interactions**

The case analyses in this study address how sexual orientation manifests complexity through the interplay of multiple identities. For instance, case studies of Black lesbian women in South Africa vividly illustrate how the interplay of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation creates a unique system of oppression. In this context, racism and patriarchy reinforce marginalization through cultural and economic structures, while “corrective rape,” as an extreme form of violence, reveals the depth of intersectional oppression. Similarly, the case of asexual youth suggests that interactions

between gender identity and sexual orientation can intensify psychological stress and social exclusion during identity disclosure. Taken together, these cases show how multiple identities dynamically interact to shape lived social circumstances and related psychological burdens.

#### **4.1.2 Power Mechanisms of Multiple Oppressions**

These cases allow a multidimensional interpretation of how power mechanisms sustain multiple oppressions, particularly through institutional and cultural structures that reproduce racial and gender discrimination. For instance, the phenomenon of "corrective rape" reflects the gender discipline imposed on women by men, while simultaneously deepening the oppression of Black women through racialized power relations. However, this phenomenon represents a specific manifestation within particular social contexts and cannot serve as a universal explanation for the power mechanisms of multiple oppressions. To advance this line of inquiry, future research should examine how multiple oppressions operate in other sociocultural settings—for example, through economic exploitation, institutional exclusion, or cultural regulation in globalized or regional contexts.

#### **4.1.3 Integrating Theory and Practice**

While existing literature extensively applies intersectionality theory at the theoretical level, its integration into practice remains notably limited. Theoretically, studies effectively reveal oppression through case studies examining the interplay of multiple identities, such as the experiences of Black lesbians and asexual youth. Practically, however, research often remains descriptive, offering limited guidance on how policies or social interventions might improve the circumstances of sexual minorities. For instance, while South Africa's legalization of same-sex marriage provides legal protections, studies have not evaluated its actual impact at the sociocultural level. This gap suggests that more work is needed to translate intersectional analysis into actionable frameworks that can inform policy and intervention.

## **4.2 Recommendations and Outlook**

Given these gaps, future research may address the following areas:

### **4.2.1 Expanding Cultural Contexts**

Apply intersectionality theory to more non-Western societal contexts, exploring the interplay between sexual orientation and multiple identities across diverse cultural, religious, and historical backgrounds. For instance: How do family values and religious norms influence the experiences of sexual minorities in Asian societies? How does the oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals by religious courts in the Middle East manifest intersectionality?

### **4.2.2 Combining Research Methods**

Integrate quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a more comprehensive analysis of intersectional oppression. For instance, develop quantitative indicators to measure the degree of multiple oppressions and combine them with individual narrative analysis to reveal how multiple identities dynamically interact across different contexts. However, quantifying the pressures and circumstances of multiple identities remains a significant challenge that requires careful consideration.

### **4.2.3 Practical Application**

Incorporate intersectionality analysis into social policies and interventions. For instance, anti-discrimination legislation should address not only sexual orientation but also intersecting dimensions of race, gender, and class. Community support programs should provide tailored services for specific groups—such as Black lesbians or asexual youth—to address unique challenges arising from their multiple identities. Yet contextual specificity remains paramount. For instance, while racial issues are relatively less pronounced in China, countries like the United States—where such issues are more severe—must prioritize the intersectional role of race.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study employs an intersectionality framework to explore complex oppressive phenomena arising from the interplay between sexual orientation and multiple social identities. It demonstrates how race, gender, class, and sexual orientation collectively constitute a multidimensional system of inequality within intersecting power relations. Particularly through case studies of Black lesbian women in South Africa and asexual youth, it demonstrates the unique value of intersectionality theory in sexual orientation research. However, the study also identifies limitations in existing literature regarding practical application, as theoretical findings have yet to be fully translated into concrete social interventions or policy frameworks. Research scope remains predominantly Western-centric, with studies in Eastern contexts requiring further development. Future research should focus on intersectionality manifestations across multicultural settings, diversify methodological approaches, and deepen the integration of theory and practice.

This study further suggests that intersectionality in human identity should not be understood as a simple accumulation of social categories, but as a dynamic and relational network shaped by interacting structures of power. Each individual's circumstances mirror power structures, embodying both "the sum total of all social relations" and our pursuit of fairness and justice. Beneath the seemingly personal realm of sexual orientation lie deeper sociocultural logics. Understanding intersectionality reveals not only oppression but also how individuals navigate multiple identities to find themselves and transcend boundaries. While this study remains limited in scope, it contributes to ongoing discussions on intersectionality, sexual orientation, and social inequality. It is hoped that continued intersectional research may contribute to more inclusive understandings of social diversity and to the pursuit of greater social equity.

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