Where Is Social Structure in Personality Research? A Feminist Analysis of Publication Trends

Lilia M. Cortina¹,², Nicola Curtin¹,², and Abigail J. Stewart¹,²

Abstract
For decades, feminist scholars have argued that to understand a person’s behavior, one must understand not only that individual but also the social structure in which she or he is embedded. Has psychology heeded these calls? The authors investigated this question using the subfield of personality as an exemplar. Based on a systematic analysis of publication trends in nine prominent journals, the authors found that social-structural analyses rarely appear in highly cited journals specifically devoted to personality research. Instead, these analyses appear in journals that focus on certain social structures (gender and race/ethnicity), while still neglecting others (social class and sexual orientation). To illustrate how greater attention to social structure can advance the scientific understanding of individuals, the authors then identified specific research programs that look closely at both personality and structure. The article concludes with specific recommendations for research and teaching in personality psychology, gender and race psychology, and beyond.

Keywords
personality, social structure, social groups, sex roles, racial and ethnic groups, sexual orientation, social class, methodology, experimental subjects, teaching

For decades, feminist and other scholars have argued for greater attention to social structure in the scientific study of individual psychology (e.g., House, 1981; Inkeles, 1959; Ryff, 1987; Sherif, 1979/1987; Stewart, 1998). To understand a person’s behavior, they reasoned, we must understand not only that individual but also the social context in which she or he is embedded. Has psychology heeded these calls? Critical reviews of the field and its treatment of gender since the 1970s have indicated that, in many cases, psychology has been slow to respond to feminist critiques when it comes to the incorporation of gender into the field (e.g., Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Riger, 1992; Stewart, Cortina, & Curtin, 2008).

We investigated the degree to which the discipline has attended to social structure more recently and more broadly (not only gender but also race/ethnicity, social class, and sexuality) using the subfield of personality as an exemplar. A recent review we conducted (Stewart et al., 2008) revealed that, well into the new millennium, research and curricula on gender in personality psychology still suffer from many of the problems feminists chronicled in the 1970s through 1990s. We wondered how other important dimensions of individual social location were faring—still including gender but also expanding to race, class, and sexuality.

We selected the subfield of personality for numerous reasons. The first is that the three authors all teach or research personality psychology. Further, personality psychology is, at its core, the psychology of the individual person, which is often illuminated by locating the individual within social structures such as gender, class, and race/ethnicity (see, e.g., Franz & Stewart, 1994; Romero & Stewart, 1999; White, 1966). In addition, personality psychologists often focus on the issue of individual differences; thus, it seems more open to identification of phenomena that might not be universal (and therefore might be socially structured) than some subfields of psychology (see Stewart, 1998). Finally, in both psychology and sociology, “personality and social structure” has historically been a recognizable area of specialization (e.g., House, 1981; Ryff, 1987; Veroff, 1983). What we found, however, was a stunning neglect of social structure in contemporary personality research—a neglect suggesting that psychologists may find it very difficult to respond to recent developments.

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA
² Department of Women’s Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Corresponding Author:
Lilia M. Cortina, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA
Email: lilia@umich.edu
calls for attention to the intersections of these structures (see, e.g., Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008).

We define personality psychology quite broadly as the study of factors (e.g., traits, motives, goals, emotional styles) that differentiate individuals from one another, as well as of ways in which intrapersonal characteristics are organized and structured (Stewart, 1998). The term social structure refers to patterns of social relations between individuals and groups that organize and structure the broader society. Most societies attach social meanings, including social roles and institutions, to certain groupings or categories—most commonly gender and sexuality, race/ethnicity, and social class. Often these meanings derive from a hierarchy that accords some groups more social value and others less. Thus, social life is organized into roles, groups, and institutions that both connect and divide people from one another (Merton, 1968; Smelser, 1988), as well as form the basis of their identities and sense of place in the world (Gurin, Miller, & Gurin, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In this article, first we review theory about the importance of social structure to personality and raise questions about whether social structure is getting the attention it deserves in contemporary research. To address these questions, we then present a systematic analysis of publication trends, both in personality psychology journals and in journals dedicated to gender and race/ethnicity; our goal here was to determine whether, where, and how psychologists study “personality and social structure.” Next, we explore specific examples of research that look closely at both personality and structure in order to illustrate how social-structural perspectives can advance the scientific study of individuals. We conclude with a set of recommendations for researching, publishing, and teaching.

The Importance of Social Structure to Personality

Feminist psychologists have for years led discussions of the importance of social structure—particularly gender—in psychological research. They have provided both theoretical arguments and empirical evidence about how gender and other social structures and identities contribute to psychological phenomena, ranging from gendered self-understanding or identity to achievement, leadership, career choice, responses to immigration, reactions to schooling, adolescence, emotion, and many other topics (Bem, 1994; Deaux & Stewart, 2001; Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eccles & Jacobs, 1986; Espin, 1997; Fine, 1992; Heilman, 1995; Holland & Yoder, 1980; Hurtado, 1996; Hyde, 1990; Riger, 2000; Shields, 2002; Yoder, 2001; see Stewart & Dottolo, 2006; Stewart & McDermott, 2004, for reviews). They have also offered critiques of routine practices in mainstream psychology, including over-reliance on experimental methods to study social phenomena that are difficult to “bring into the laboratory”; reliance on sexist assumptions in the framing of research questions; inappropriate extrapolation from all-male samples to “people”; the absence of necessary and important controls and comparisons in research; and decontextualized tests of sex differences rather than theoretically motivated analyses of how gender might inform psychological processes (Cole & Stewart, 2001; Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Morawski, 1994; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Sherif, 1979/1987; Unger, 1981; Weissstein, 1968; Yoder & Kahn, 2003). More recently, feminist psychologists have addressed the importance of considering intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class when seeking to understand and explain psychological phenomena (e.g., Cole, 2009; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Shields, 2008; Stewart & McDermott, 2004; Unger, 2001). All of these arguments apply to the subfield of personality, and many of these arguments actually focus on personality phenomena specifically. For example, feminist and other personality psychologists have argued for the importance of considering how personality motives and traits are expressed differently depending on one’s access to power or one’s vulnerability (see, e.g., Stewart, 1998, 2003).

Feminists have not been alone in their emphasis on the importance of social structures for the study of individual psychology. Perhaps inspired by the psychological impact of the Depression, the scrambling of gender roles during World War II, and the Great Migration of African Americans, social scientists in the 1940s and 1950s emphasized the value of combining attention to social structure and personality in theory and research. Influential sociologists like Alex Inkeles (1959, 1960), David Riesman (Riesman, Glazer & Denney, 1950), and Talcott Parsons (1964) discussed the importance of personality as both a product and a determinant of social structures. Equally prominent psychologists like Erikson, Dollard, Sherif, and Kardiner explored the impact of gender (Erikson, 1951), class (Davis & Dollard, 1940; Sherif & Cantril, 1947), and race (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1951) in the development of personality. More recently, important sociologists (House, 1981) and psychologists (Ryff, 1987; Veroff, 1983) repeated the call for research into the personality—structure link. Simply put, they reasoned that individuals occupy different locations within the social structure, and those social locations are consequential for personality (Stewart & McDermott, 2004).

For example, social class position and race/ethnicity often define relative access to resources, which in turn shape self-esteem and traits reflecting mastery, agency, and dominance (see, e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2002). Equally, a child’s gender influences teachers’ and parents’ expectations for that child’s abilities and future achievements. These expectations in turn shape children’s own developing motivations and expectancies (see Eccles & Jacobs, 1986; Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). In adulthood, some relationships between social structure and personality persist, and some new ones emerge. Adult role expectations for women and men, poverty and affluence, and racial/ethnic stereotypes enhance some and limit other experiences and opportunities; these in turn influence both the development of personality traits and
stage-related personality developmental accomplishments such as identity, intimacy, and generativity.

These are just a few examples of how social structure influences personality, and vice versa. It is critical that structural considerations like these find their way into not only our laboratories but also our classrooms. We depend on research that pays attention to the complexities of social structure, in order to generate and teach a rich account of how personality operates in the social worlds we inhabit. So, how are we doing as a field?

**The State of the Field**

A cursory perusal of the literature might suggest that psychologists are heeding the call to investigate personality in the context of social structure, because one frequently encounters structural variables (especially race and gender) in contemporary psychological research. Several characteristics of this work, however, limit our understanding of relationships between structure and personality. When psychological scientists analyze variables such as race and gender, they often do so in an exploratory, atheoretical manner. Reports of group differences, in the absence of theory or hypotheses, are not uncommon.

In a recent study (Stewart et al., 2008), we analyzed the extent to which gender was addressed in contemporary personality research (focusing on the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and the *Journal of Personality*). We found that the bulk of the articles in these journals had included mixed-sex samples, but 56–67% had simply reported the sex breakdown of participants without providing any gender-related analysis. Another quarter of these mixed-sex articles either tested for sex differences without hypothesizing them or formulated and tested sex-difference hypotheses without framing them in theory. Rarely did this research develop and test hypotheses based on fully theorized connections between gender and personality. One could argue that a similar pattern characterizes a great deal of the psychological research on race/ethnicity: exploratory tests of racial-group differences, without supporting theory, abound (Cole & Stewart, 2001). There are many ways to understand and analyze relationships between social structure and personality, but an undertheorized group-difference paradigm misses the spirit of Cole (2009), House (1981), Ryff (1987), Stewart (1998), and Veroff (1983).

When not testing for differences by race or gender (or, on rare occasions, social class or sexual orientation), psychologists are often attempting to eliminate these influences altogether. The practice of controlling or covarying sociodemographic variables is an important means of statistically accounting for the influence of confounds; indeed, each of the authors of the present article often includes such control variables in her quantitative research. Problems arise, however, when gender, race, social class, and sexuality are routinely relegated to the marginalized status of “nuisance variable” and are rarely the focus of the project. How can we advance psychology’s understanding of relationships among personality and gender, race, class, and sexual orientation unless we place these structural variables center-stage?

These criticisms notwithstanding, certain kinds of social contexts are central in some personality research. Prominent personality psychologists have established respected lines of inquiry into the context of the lifespan or generation (e.g., Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Nelsen, Stewart, & Ostrove, 1995; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). There has also been considerable attention to personality in the context of national culture, such as cross-cultural and intracultural research into personality traits (e.g., Benet-Martinez & John, 1998; Paunonen, Jackson, Trzesniewski, & Forsterling, 1992; Yang & Bond, 1990). Others have addressed the structure and impact of personality, especially traits, in the workplace (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Stevans, 2005; Mount, Barrick, Scullen, & Rounds, 2005; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). These lines of research on personality in the context of work, culture, and life span development have made important contributions to psychology. However, many of these research programs have not foregrounded gender, race/ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation in the study of persons in context. When we focus on some aspects of context, but not on social structure, we miss the ways in which relative power and privilege, access to resources, and social status and recognition relate to the development and expression of personality.

Still, in the absence of empirical data showing otherwise, some researchers might not be persuaded that personality psychology is neglecting gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and social class; they would see no need for course corrections in the field. To bolster our argument with empirical evidence, we conducted a systematic analysis of publication trends in contemporary personality psychology. We conceptualized “contemporary personality psychology” to include studies of personality published not only in personality journals (our focus in Study 1) but also in journals dedicated to gender and race/ethnicity (Study 2).

**Study 1: Personality Psychology in the Personality Journals**

**Method**

Does personality research published specifically in personality journals attend to social structure in meaningful ways? To address this question, we took a snapshot of contemporary personality research by coding all empirical articles published in a 2-year period in three journals: *The Journal of Research in Personality* (JRP; 82 articles), *The Journal of Personality* (JP, 99 articles), and *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology—Personality Processes and Individual Differences* section (JPSP—PPID, 90 articles). Leading the field of personality psychology, these journals are highly
selective; their rejection rates at the time of our sampling were 67–70%, 79%, and 83%, respectively.

We retrieved all articles published in these journals in 2005 and 2006, identified those that were empirical in nature (e.g., excluding review articles), and divided them among the three authors for independent coding. We developed our coding scheme through multiple discussions among the authors, continuing to make refinements until each of us was satisfied that the scheme was clear and consistent with the goals of our project. The final coding rubric appears in Table 1. To check the reliability of our coding, each author also coded the same random subset of articles. Our rates of interrater reliability averaged .95, which is excellent (Boyatzis, 1998).

Once we established a high level of reliability, each author coded articles from at least one journal from each of three categories (those focused on personality in Study 1; and focused on either gender or race/ethnicity in Study 2). We coded whether and how each article addressed the social-structural variables of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. For each dimension of structure, articles could receive one of the following two codes: The social-structural variable was (a) fully theorized; that is, it was part of the theoretical framework, hypotheses, data analyses, and discussion. Alternatively, the authors (b) reported some measure of that social-structural variable, and perhaps even tested its effects in a limited way; the variable, however, was not central to the authors’ framing or understanding of the main issue under study. Articles making no mention of the social-structural variable received neither code.

We also coded every article for whether its main focus was some aspect of personality, using the broad definition provided at the beginning of the present article. This could include an emphasis on traits, motives, goals, emotional styles, identities, dispositions, internal states, internalized social experiences, or the structure of personality. More details about all codes appear in Table 1, including examples of the types of articles that received each code.

Results and Discussion

Results of our journal analyses appear in Table 2 (for additional gender coding results, see Stewart et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, virtually all articles appearing in JPSP—PPID, JP, and JRP had a primary focus on some feature of personality. Analyses of social structure, however, were more limited.

Of our four social-structural variables, gender received the most attention, but in over 90% of these articles, this reporting was limited to identification of participants’ sex. Only 4–8% of the studies in these three journals incorporated an analysis of gender into either the theoretical framework or the analysis of the research question. In other words, although it has become customary to report the sex of participants, we found that fully theorized connections between sex/gender and personality are rare in contemporary research published in personality journals.

Following gender, race/ethnicity was the social category most often reported. Still, less than half of the articles in the personality journals reported the race or ethnicity of research participants. Moreover, only 3% of the JPSP—PPID articles (and none of those coded in either JP or JRP) fully theorized and incorporated race or ethnicity into the framework and interpretation of the research. In other words, most articles published in these journals did not engage race/ethnicity in a meaningful way when developing hypotheses, analyzing data, or understanding findings. Many did not even mention race in a cursory way; that is, a majority of articles in JPSP—PPID, JP, and JRP omitted information about the racial and ethnic makeup of the sample under study, making it impossible for readers to infer how race/ethnicity might be affecting the results.

Compared to race, considerations of social class were even less common. We coded for any mention of class, including reports of participants’ income or any other variable that researchers explicitly described as a marker of class or socioeconomic status (SES; e.g., own education, parents’ education). Of the three journals, JPSP—PPID included the most articles that at least reported a class-related variable (21%), followed by JP (12%) and then JRP (11%). Almost no articles in any of these journals fully theorized class by addressing it in the theoretical framing, hypotheses, analyses, and interpretations.

Of our four social-structural variables, sexual orientation received the least attention in the personality journals. Few articles in any of these journals even reported the sexual orientation of participants. Only 1% of articles in JPSP—PPID and JRP fully theorized and incorporated sexual orientation into the research; no articles in JP did so.

These three journals—JPSP—PPID, JP, and JRP—present the theories and findings that are most widely cited today in personality psychology. From these analyses, it appears that social structure plays a minor role in that scholarship. Does the same pattern apply to personality research that appears in journals specifically focused on gender and race/ethnicity? This question inspired our second study.

Study 2: Personality Psychology in Gender and Race/Ethnicity Journals

Method

After finding that journals specifically devoted to personality psychology rarely emphasize social structure, we turned our attention to publications that have a particular focus on social structure—specifically, gender and race/ethnicity. Given the virtual absence of sexual orientation and social class in the personality journals, we did not survey outlets specializing in these aspects of structure.

Using the same criteria outlined above (e.g., focusing exclusively on empirical articles published in the same
Table 1. Coding Rubric Used for All Journals

<p>| Coding Category                                      | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Examples From This Coding Category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <strong>Personality</strong>                                       | Articles receiving this code address topics in the broadly defined domain of personality, including motives, identities, traits, and dispositions. Also included are internal states (emotions, feelings) and internalized social experiences (such as trauma, harassment, body objectification, acculturation)                                                                                                                                  | To provide a specific example, an article would receive this code if attachment style and personality traits are used to predict relationship quality.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Main focus is some feature of personality            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <strong>Gender</strong>                                            | Several types of articles could receive this code: (1) men and women are included in the study, but no gender analyses are conducted; (2) gender analyses are conducted/reported, but no hypotheses related to gender differences are proposed; or (3) gender differences are hypothesized, but no contextualization or reasoning is provided for why or what the differences might mean                                                                 | For example, an article might state that participants included men and women, but report no statistical analyses by gender. Alternatively, authors may report the results of t tests by gender, but not hypothesize gender differences (or similarities) or present any rationale for comparing women and men. Another possibility is that an article includes hypotheses and statistical tests for gender differences, but fails to discuss the meaning of these gender differences, or the rationale for examining them. |
| Gender or sex are reported, but not fully theorized   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <strong>Race or ethnicity</strong>                                 | Race or ethnicity is discussed as a way to understand the problem or issue under investigation. This might include gender differences (e.g., in behavior, attitudes, beliefs) and their origins (social/biological), gender similarities, gender roles/stereotypes, or masculinity/femininity. There can be full theoretical discussions of gender even with single-sex samples, so long as gender is used in a meaningful way to understand the phenomena under investigation. [If an article hypothesizes gender differences, but gives no context for understanding those hypotheses, it would not receive this code.] | An author might provide in-depth discussion of how notions of gender variance as unhealthy persist within psychology, even as gender theorists both within and outside psychology argue that variation in gender expression is both “normal” and healthy. This discussion of gender provides background for the exploration of how young adults understand gender conformity and nonconformity. Other examples include extended discussions of gender norms, gender ideologies, and/or gender-related beliefs as a means of understanding the phenomenon under investigation, or the particular hypotheses being tested. This discussion typically appears in both the Introduction and Discussion sections. |
| Gender or sex is fully theorized: part of theory, hypothesis, analysis, and discussion |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Race or ethnicity is reported, but not fully theorized| Race or ethnicity is reported in the article, most often in the Method section (in the sample description). However, there is no theoretical analysis of race/ethnicity; even if racial or ethnic differences are reported, these differences are not an important part of how the issue or problem is framed, or how the results are understood.                                                                                                      | An article examining gender roles reports the racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample, but says little else about race. An article includes statistical analyses of a variable as a function of race/ethnicity, but there are no hypotheses about race/ethnicity, or there is no discussion of how race/ethnicity might help us understand the research question in a new or different way. |
| Race or ethnicity is fully theorized: part of theory, hypothesis, analysis, and discussion | Race or ethnicity is discussed as a way to understand the problem or issue under investigation. For example, the researchers could investigate racial/ethnic differences and explain why they are interested in these differences or why there might be such differences. Alternatively, they could study a specific issue or problem in terms of how race/ethnicity might act as context and/or affect it.                                                                                                      | An article may investigate racial ideologies among White people. A second example would be articles examining how gender or relationship dynamics work within a particular racial context.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples From This Coding Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A class-related variable is reported, but not fully theorized</td>
<td>A variable is reported as a marker of social class or socioeconomic status, most often in the Method section (in the sample description). This includes any mention of participants’ (or their parents’) income, education level, middle/upper/lower class, or rural/urban location—so long as the variable is described explicitly as a marker of class. However, there is no theoretical analysis of social class; even if class differences are reported, these differences are not an important part of how the issue or problem is framed, or how the results are understood.</td>
<td>Some articles report the income or educational breakdown of the sample as an indicator of class, but this information is not anticipated or followed by a discussion of social class or socioeconomic status, in either the Introduction or Discussion. Other articles compare findings across class categories (e.g., income levels), but do not address class-related findings in the Discussion section as a means of understanding the research question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class is fully theorized: part of theory, hypothesis, analysis, and discussion</td>
<td>Social class is discussed as a way to understand the problem or issue under investigation. This could involve the researchers analyzing class differences and explaining why they are interested in these differences or why there might be such differences. Another option is that the researchers look at a specific issue or problem in terms of how class might act as context and/or affect it.</td>
<td>Social class or socioeconomic status may be central to the research, such as a study of acculturation patterns of working-class immigrant children, with explicit attention to issues of class throughout. A second example would be articles that theorize that gender ideologies are shaped by class, and that subsequently examine class in the analyses and then interpret the class-related results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation is reported, but not fully theorized</td>
<td>Participants’ sexual orientation is reported in the article, most often in the Method section (in the sample description). However, there is no theoretical analysis of sexuality; even if differences are reported, these differences are not an important part of how the issue or problem is framed, or how the results are understood. This includes mention that all participants are heterosexual or, conversely, that sexual minorities were included in the sample.</td>
<td>In the Method section of the article, an article might mention that some participants identified as having sexual orientations other than heterosexual. An article might examine a particular phenomenon among heterosexual people only, but not discuss why heterosexuality might help us understand the research questions or findings. In other words, we come to know that the study included only heterosexuals, but we see no explanation for why this may be.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation is fully theorized: part of theory, hypothesis, analysis, and discussion</td>
<td>Sexual orientation is discussed as a way to understand the problem or issue under investigation. For instance, the researchers might compare people with different sexual orientations and explain why they are interested in these comparisons or why there might be differences or similarities. Alternatively, the researchers could look at a specific issue or problem in terms of how sexuality (including heterosexuality) may act as context and/or affect it.</td>
<td>Articles in this category might explore phenomena among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer (LGBQ) people that have previously only been examined among heterosexuals, with meaningful theorizing or discussion about how these phenomena might operate among LGBQ persons. Other articles compare sexual minorities and heterosexuals, or examine phenomena in the context of compulsory heterosexuality, including explicit attention to sexual orientation in all sections of the article.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personality Journals</td>
<td>Gender Journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JPSP</td>
<td>JP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of articles reviewed</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main focus is some feature of personality</td>
<td>89 (99%)</td>
<td>99 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender/sex</td>
<td>83 (92%)</td>
<td>95 (96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported gender or sex</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully theorized gender or sex</td>
<td>33 (37%)</td>
<td>30 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported race or ethnicity</td>
<td>19 (21%)</td>
<td>12 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully theorized race or ethnicity</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported a class-related variable</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2-year period), we coded the contents of three prominent gender psychology journals: Psychology of Women Quarterly (PWQ; 71 articles), Sex Roles (SR; 250 articles), and Feminism and Psychology (F&P; 66 articles). As with the personality outlets, these journals are highly selective: PWQ had a rejection rate of 88% at the time of our sampling, SR had a rejection rate of 80%, and F&P’s rejection rate was 79–80%.

In addition, we surveyed three publications that specialize in race/ethnicity (again coding all empirical articles published in the 2-year time window): Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology (CDEMP; 70 articles), The Journal of Black Psychology (JBP; 41 articles), and The Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences (HJBS; 55 articles). These journals also have high rejection rates: 80% for CDEMP and JBP and 75–80% for HJBS. For both the gender and race/ethnicity journals, we used the same coding scheme as in Study 1 (detailed in Table 1). As reported in Study 1, our rate of inter-rater reliability of coding was high, averaging .95.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents our journal analysis results. Although topically more diverse than the personality journals, approximately half of the articles in PWQ had a primary focus on some aspect of personality. This was also true of nearly half the articles in F&P and over three quarters of those in SR. A similar pattern emerged for the race/ethnicity journals: although these venues have a broader focus than just personality, we found that over three fourths of the articles in both CDEMP and JBP addressed personality, as did half of those coded in HJBS.

Not surprisingly, the three gender journals demonstrated relatively comprehensive coverage of gender, including a number of articles that addressed personality and gender (for additional gender coding results, see Stewart et al., 2008). In contrast, articles in CDEMP, JBP, and HJBS tended not to address gender in great depth.

Again, as one might expect, the race/ethnicity psychology journals included the largest percentages of articles that addressed race or ethnicity. For example, all of the articles in JBP used race/ethnicity as a theoretical framework with which to consider their empirical questions; 95% of the articles in HJBS did the same, as did 74% of the articles in CDEMP. In contrast, when race/ethnicity came up in the gender psychology journals, more often than not it was only to describe the racial or ethnic breakdown of participants.

Both the gender journals and the race/ethnicity journals had a substantial number of articles reporting class-related variables. However, neither type of publication had many articles that deeply engaged with issues of class. For example, although nearly half of the articles coded from JBP reported indicators of class, none used class as a meaningful lens through which to consider individual differences.

Sexual orientation received the most attention in the gender journals, although this was far from universal. For example, 10% of PWQ articles reported sexual orientation, and an additional 17% fully theorized and incorporated it. In contrast (and similar to the personality journals), few articles in the race/ethnicity journals mentioned sexual orientation.

Although one may not be surprised at the more comprehensive consideration of social structures in these specialty journals, it is notable that these venues also publish a fair bit of research on personality. Psychologists publishing in outlets devoted to race/ethnicity and gender are asking empirical questions about personality and individual differences, and they are using social structure as an important means of contextualizing those questions. In addition, the gender and race/ethnicity journals are paying more attention than personality journals to the social context, with notable gaps with respect to social class and sexual orientation.

General Discussion

Our systematic analysis of publication trends gives rise to (at least) three broad conclusions. First, it is clear that contemporary studies of personality psychology routinely neglect issues of social structure. This is particularly true in journals specifically devoted to personality research; psychologists publishing in these outlets often limit their consideration of structure to a brief mention of participants’ sex. More than half of the personality journal articles we surveyed did not even provide participants’ race or ethnicity (perhaps a side effect of heavy reliance on non-Latino White student samples). Mentions of social class and sexual orientation were even fewer and farther between.

We found that social-structural analyses more commonly arise in gender and race/ethnicity journals, but even there, the great majority of articles ignore social class and sexual orientation—important aspects of social structure. Within each specific context (e.g., gender studies vs. race/ethnicity studies), personality researchers focus mostly on whatever particular structure that subdiscipline has been created to address. This might not seem terribly surprising, and some might argue that this is as it should be. After all, one cannot adequately address every aspect of social structure within every study, and this is not our suggestion. There may well be times when it makes sense to focus specifically on the role that race plays in personality, for example, without attending to gender or class. However, there are surely times when more nuanced analyses, taking into account multiple aspects or intersections of social location are both fruitful and necessary to advance our scientific understanding of individuals (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008; Stewart, 1998; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). We discuss this point further below.

A third conclusion that emerges from our analyses is that social structure matters to personality. Within certain arenas, research is demonstrating important ways in which our personalities affect and are affected by our social locations. This scholarship often appears in publications that are not specific
to personality psychology, but in venues that are no less selective than personality journals. In the following section, we outline some examples of research that illustrates how attention to social structure can enrich the scientific study of individual psychology.

Social-Structural Perspectives on Personality: Research Examples

In this section, we offer examples from a variety of research programs that pay careful attention to gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and social class while investigating different aspects of personality. All of the work reviewed here emerged from methodologically and theoretically sophisticated studies—some published in personality journals; others published outside the specific subfield of personality. Taken together, these studies illustrate how social-structural considerations can advance the science of individual psychology.

Veroff (1983) argued that contexts within particular cultures (which he referred to as subcultural contexts) such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class may affect the ways in which different groups both experience and manifest particular personality traits and processes. Along these lines, feminist research has demonstrated the importance of both gender and sexuality to features of personality related to the body (e.g., body dissatisfaction, esteem, objectification). Many studies have investigated the role of gender in women’s self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), showing that, although both women and men engage in self-objectification, that process has more destructive consequences for women (Citrin, Roberts, & Fredrickson, 2004; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998).

Research has also shown that sexuality is an important moderator of women’s self-objectification and feelings about their bodies (Hill & Fischer; 2008; Kozee & Tylka, 2006; Striegel-Moore, Tucker, & Hsu, 1990).

Combining attention to gender and sexual orientation, some researchers examining the effects of sexuality on body satisfaction have focused on the differences (or similarities) among lesbians, heterosexual women, gay men, and heterosexual men (e.g., Brown & Graham, 2008; Siever, 1994). Finally, some studies have investigated the combined effects of sexuality and race/ethnicity. For example, Thompson (1994) argued that disordered eating and body dissatisfaction among lesbians of color may be more complex than problems with self-objectification. Rather, they may be related to trauma, internalized racism, or attempts to manage expectations of heterosexuality. Again, findings such as these point to the importance of considering different structural (or subcultural) locations in studies of personality.

In a similar vein, King and Smith (2004, p. 968) examined how the process of identity development unfolds when one is lesbian or gay, and they argued that in this context “issues common to all developing individuals are brought very much to the fore.” Specifically, they examined how lesbians’ and gay men’s narratives of future selves were related to personality development and well-being. They found that lesbians and gay men who were more invested in a gay possible future self showed positive concurrent well-being, as well as lowered long-term distress; those who were more preoccupied with a heterosexual possible future showed poorer well-being and more regrets. However, increased ego development was more strongly related to an elaborated heterosexual possible self, versus a gay possible self; in other words, the ability to consider deeply a “path not taken” was associated with positive personality development. Not only do King and Smith (2004) focus on a group of people who are commonly ignored in the literature, but they also argue that their results increase our general knowledge about identity, well-being, and personality. These findings underscore that well-being is related to the pursuit of identity-consistent goals and that one cost of considering alternate possible selves may be increased regret, even as one benefit may be a better-developed sense of self. These findings also have implications for the personality and well-being of other “nonnormative” groups of people; for example, women or men who follow normative career paths or make nontraditional life choices.

Research has also demonstrated how attention to race/ethnicity and experiences directly related to race/ethnicity (e.g., discrimination, religiosity, racial socialization) can advance our understanding of personality. For example, studies of motives for alcohol use have identified different motivational pathways among Black and White drinkers (e.g., Cooper et al., 2008). Specifically, coping motives (desires or needs to reduce or avoid negative affect) fuel alcohol use and abuse in Blacks more than in Whites, whereas enhancement motives (aiming to attain or maintain positive affect) predict problem drinking more in Whites than Blacks. To explain these patterns, Cooper and colleagues (2008, p. 497) pointed to “unique aspects of the social cultural milieu” in which Blacks and Whites transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Although the prior example pertains to race and a pathological aspect of personality (i.e., motivation for substance abuse), other personality researchers have focused on positive personality outcomes of racial/ethnic minority group membership. For example, Ryff, Keyes, and Hughes (2003) found evidence of higher eudaimonic well-being (e.g., psychological growth, sense of mastery, life purpose) among African Americans and Mexican Americans compared to Whites.
They interpreted this pattern as evidence of “psychological strength in the face of race-related adversity” (p. 275). Importantly, neither this nor the previous research example took the purely descriptive approach of reporting racial/ethnic group differences without careful attention to theory and social context. Moreover, analyses and discussions took into account not only race but also SES/education and gender.

Despite the rarity of attention to social class and personality, the importance of class to personality is evident in several research programs. Studies have shown that social class directly predicts important personality characteristics. For example, Birndorf, Ryan, Auinger, and Aten (2005) found that self-esteem was significantly higher among adolescents whose families’ incomes were above poverty level. Lockenhoff et al. (2008) asked a more complicated question about the relationship between social class and personality, finding that Big Five traits show lower levels of rank order (ipsative) and mean level stability over time among people with less education. They proposed that this greater personality plasticity among less-educated individuals may result from either greater exposure to stressful life events that produce demands for adaptation, or lesser access to buffers that might cushion the impact of those demands, or both. Finally, studies of particular traits have examined how those traits are differentially expressed by individuals from different social-class backgrounds. An example of this trend is Napier and Jost’s (2008) research, which demonstrated that social class shaped the kind of authoritarianism individuals developed, which in turn defined its correlates differently in two socioeconomic strata across 19 democratic countries.

In a different kind of research program focused on social class as a factor in health, Matthews and Gallo and their colleagues have drawn on personality variables as mediators between stress associated with lower social class position and health outcomes (e.g., hostility and impulsivity, Matthews, Flory, Muldoon, & Manuck, 2000; see also Gallo, Smith, & Cox, 2006). Gallo and Matthews (2003) hypothesized that individuals have a bank of resources they use to cope with stress; these resources include aspects of their social world (supportive others, positive relationships) and personality characteristics (especially self-efficacy, mastery, and sense of control). Having these resources available permits individuals to solve problems and to experience positive emotions; lacking them has opposite effects. Several studies support this model as a way to understand how social class–related health disparities arise and persist (Gallo, Bogart, Vranceanu, & Matthews, 2005; Matthews, Raikkonen, Gallo, & Kuller, 2008).

Reviewing these examples of personality studies that attend to one or another dimension of social structure, we can see benefits to the research program within a particular content area—be it objectification theory, substance abuse, self-esteem, or health psychology. One benefit is the recognition of overlooked features of relevant experience, such as the role of trauma and discrimination in the experience of objectification. Another is the development of understanding of mechanisms that underlie relationships, such as when it becomes clear that personality traits are expressed differently by people with different kinds of experiences or resources. This kind of knowledge facilitates the development of better, more complete theories, as is exemplified by the proposal of reserve capacity resources as crucial mediators and moderators of the personality-health relationship. Thus, attention to social structural factors enriches the scientific understanding of personality, while often also pointing to the contexts in which findings do and do not apply.

**Recommendations for Research and Publication Practices**

In this section, we offer recommendations for incorporating more of a social-structural perspective into the scientific study of people. We make these recommendations in the service of both improving our understanding as scholars of personality psychology and providing a more complete picture to students of how personality operates in a socially structured world. Our recommendations focus on the subfield of personality, including not only personality journals but also other outlets that feature personality work, such as feminist, clinical, and social psychology publications. In fact, many of these recommendations apply just as well to research that addresses aspects of human psychology beyond personality (e.g., research in organizational behavior, human neuroscience).

At the very least, journal editors can require that all psychological studies involving human participants detail the sex and racial/ethnic breakdown of each sample. (We had thought this to be a universal practice, but our journal analyses suggest otherwise). In addition, editors can encourage the inclusion of information on social class and sexual orientation. This would bring the articles in line with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010), which instructs researchers to describe samples in enough detail to facilitate the understanding of generalizability, comparison across studies, and the use of the research in meta-analyses (p. 29):

- Detail the sample’s major demographic characteristics, such as sex; age; ethnic and/or racial group; level of education; socioeconomic, generational, or immigrant status; disability status; sexual orientation; gender identity; and language preference as well as important topic-specific characteristics (e.g., achievement level in studies of educational interventions).

The prior edition of this manual contained similar instructions, although less detailed (American Psychological Association, 2001). Thus, since at least 2001, the American Psychological Association has advised researchers to include these “major demographic characteristics” in reports of human research. What we are suggesting, then, is that the
field follows its own publication guidelines. This is hardly a radical proposal.

Psychologists should not stop, however, at mere description of the “major demographic characteristics” of research participants. We encourage colleagues to take this work further by looking to the social structure—and the advantages, opportunities, constraints, and barriers that come with one’s location in that structure—to enrich their understanding of individual psychology. In fact, like other social scientists before us, we suggest that personality research that fails to engage carefully with structure is incomplete. Meaningful structural analysis should be the rule, not the exception, within our discipline.

A meaningful consideration of social structure requires that a structural variable figure into the theoretical framework, hypotheses, analyses, and interpretations of the research. The research examples above provide models for how to do this, showing that a structural perspective can yield important insights into a range of personality phenomena. Note that we are not recommending that psychologists frame their questions merely in terms of differences between groups that vary in social location (e.g., gender, race, class, age differences). Research emphasizing intergroup differences can be appropriate and meaningful, but it can also be pointless and offensive (see Cole & Stewart, 2001). The important task for psychologists is instead full articulation of how an individual’s social-structural location might matter for the development or expression of personality, broadly defined. This understanding requires use of existing theories about how individuals and social systems impinge on each other (e.g., House, 1981; Ryff, 1987; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Veroff, 1983), as well as development of new ones.

An even more sophisticated approach to research on personality and social structure is to take into account multiple structural variables. This expansion would align with theories of intersectionality, which “simultaneously consider the meaning and consequences of multiple categories of identity, difference, and disadvantage” (Cole, 2009, p. 170). Emerging from feminist and critical race theories, intersectional perspectives recognize that people concurrently occupy numerous social locations (based on gender, race, class, etc.) which vary in the degree of privilege and power they afford. Psychologists have struggled with how to capture membership in multiple social categories using traditional (often quantitative) techniques, but new methodological insights and recommendations are emerging (e.g., Cole, 2009; Stewart & McDermott, 2004; see also the special issue on intersectionality in Sex Roles: Shields, 2008). We are also starting to see feminist pedagogical tools and techniques for bringing intersectional perspectives into the psychology classroom (e.g., Lee, 2012; Ostrove, 2007; Rios, Stewart, & Winter, 2010; Sharp, Bermudez, Watson, & Fitzpatrick, 2007). Intersectionality is, in a sense, a specific variant of the social-structural perspective, and it promises to bring important new advances to the science and teaching of personality.

When researchers engage particular social-structural variables in depth, they may seem too “specialized” for the journals representing the typical psychology subfields (e.g., personality psychology, social psychology, organizational psychology). However, we urge the editorial boards of those journals to rethink the practice of automatically diverting research on gender or women to gender journals, studies of race or people of color to race/ethnicity journals, and so forth. It is critical that our field have journals devoted to gender, race/ethnicity, and other dimensions of social-structural location; but, given the compartmentalization of many psychologists’ review of the literature, it is equally critical that research attentive to social structure find a home in traditional venues as well. In fact, one could argue that outlets such as the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Research in Personality, and Journal of Personality ought to encourage and solicit personality articles that deeply engage with social structure, so as to promote a comprehensive science of individual persons (who are always, after all, embedded within social locations).

Looking beyond the personality journals, we have work to do as well in feminist and critical race publications. Let us emphasize that we applaud the leaders of the gender and race/ethnicity journals for creating much-needed venues for that scholarship. At the same time, we worry about a focus on one aspect of social structure (either gender or race/ethnicity) to the neglect of others (sexual orientation and social class). Journals specializing in gender and race/ethnicity psychology are known for taking the field in innovative directions, and they could innovate further by foregrounding neglected aspects of social structure.

More specifically, we encourage titles such as Psychology of Women Quarterly, Sex Roles, and Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology to expand practices that increase attention to social structure, particularly the structural dimensions that are currently underrepresented in the studies they publish. For example, these journals’ Manuscript Preparation Guidelines could explicitly advise contributors to collect and report information about participants’ SES and sexual orientation (we note that CDEMP’s Manuscript Preparation Guidelines already do this to some extent, but do not address sexual orientation). Editors and Associate Editors could repeat this advice in the standard instructions and checklists given to authors, even requesting an explanation when those participant details are not available. Editors routinely publish missions and vision statements, especially when steering their journals in new directions; these statements could emphasize the need for more articles addressing social class and sexual orientation, in addition to gender, race/ethnicity, and intersections of structural location. PWQ Editor Jan Yoder provided advice along these lines in her 2010 editorial: “I welcome (and encourage) manuscripts that explore the intersection of gender with other social categorizations, such as sexuality, race and ethnicity, (dis)ability, socio-cultural, and so on. . . .” (p. 2). Journals could also use special issues to enhance attention.
to understudied dimensions of structure (e.g., a gender psychology journal might organize a special issue on women and social class; a journal focused on race/ethnicity could host a special issue on LGBQ communities of color). These are just a few examples of editorial practices that journals could consider or extend. More generally, the message should be that a complete understanding of gender, race/ethnicity, and other aspects of human psychology requires careful attention to a range of social-structural forces.

**Importance of Attending to Social Structure**

Social categories act as social structures in that they are used to organize and structure social relations (Merton, 1968; Smelser, 1988). In order to develop a psychological science that fosters comprehensive understanding of human thought and behavior, we must have research practices that incorporate attention to social structures. Without structural perspectives we will inevitably make overstated generalizations (of relationships or effects that only hold for some people), miss relationships and effects that operate in opposite directions for people in different social locations, and alienate both researchers and students looking for psychological accounts that are adequate to the complex social worlds they inhabit. Our brief discussion of research that does pay significant attention to social structure as important to personality illustrates possibilities for this kind of exploration. Our own insights—and that which we cultivate in students—would be deeper, the boundaries and social context of phenomena better articulated, and therefore our science stronger and more credible, with greater attention to data that many of us are already collecting, but few are fully using.

Our article has primarily focused on the importance of social structure in the research study of personality. We must emphasize, however, that it is equally important in the teaching of personality psychology. In a recent survey of contemporary personality textbooks, we found these texts to be woefully inadequate in their coverage of sex and gender (Stewart et al., 2008). Although not the focus of that study, our guess is that mentions of race, sexual orientation, and social class are just as scarce (if not more so) in those books. We must pay greater attention to the intricacies and intersections of social structure in order to teach students, including the most junior, a full account of the psychology of personality. Our personalities are constrained, shaped, and influenced by various levels of social context. To ignore this in the classroom does a disservice to students, and it leaves psychology irrelevant to the demands of a student body that reflects an increasing public consciousness of the roles of social structure and the value of multicultural awareness in a pluralistic society.

**Conclusion**

As noted at the outset of our article, feminist psychologists (among others) have made cogent arguments about the importance of social structure to our understanding of individual psychology. Additionally, personality and social structure has historically been a recognizable area of specialization. We found that important studies of this topic continue today, but only on certain aspects of social structure—most commonly, gender and race—and primarily outside of publications specifically devoted to personality psychology. In other words, rigorous contemporary research is advancing our understanding of personality and (some aspects of) social structure, but that research is not always reaching personality audiences. Moreover, that work by and large overlooks sexuality and social class. Are course corrections needed in the field? Indeed they are—in personality psychology, gender and race psychology, and beyond.

**Acknowledgments**

Nicola Curtin is now in the Department of Psychology at Clark University. The authors are grateful to the following individuals for their comments on a prior version of this article: Nicola Newton, Joan Ostrove, Danielle Shapiro, and Alyssa Zucker.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**


