

Institutionalizing gender and diversity: Interdisciplinary perspectives

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Abstract: Bringing together contributions on intersectional research, participatory methodologies, research ethics, and institutional responses to power abuse and sexual harassment, this introduction presents a special issue examining how universities have adopted, negotiated, and at times merely performed frameworks for gender and diversity. Drawing on case studies from Berlin and Germany more broadly, the contributions combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to make discrimination visible and measurable while critically interrogating the limits of such quantification. A recurring concern across the issue is epistemic: who counts as a knower, how positionality and reflexivity shape knowledge production, and how core concepts—such as „race”—travel unevenly across disciplinary and national contexts. Rather than resolving these tensions through a unified framework or glossary, the issue treats them as productive sites of interdisciplinary friction. Developed through a distinctive review process combining double-blind peer review with a collaborative in-person workshop, the issue closes with policy recommendations for university decision-makers, addressing challenges that extend beyond the German context to higher-education systems internationally. This introduction and the broader special issue emerged from the collaboration of four junior research groups funded under the Berlin University Alliance’s cross-cutting theme „Diversity and Gender Equality”: Fix the Numbers, Fix the Knowledge, Fix the System, and Fix the Institutions.

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Many universities are making active efforts to counteract the exclusion of marginalized researchers, for example through guidelines in hiring processes, mentoring programs, and diversity officers (Griffin 2020). Such diversity measures, however, focus disproportionately on access and less on long-term cultural change that would mean institutions' adapting to marginalized researchers rather than the other way around. Therefore, researchers with marginalized positionalities, such as women, racialized minorities, working-class individuals, and people with disabilities, remain underrepresented, particularly in positions of increasing seniority and power (Bennett et al. 2020; Casad et al. 2021; Durodoye et al. 2020; Gibbs Jr et al. 2016; Valenzuela/Romero Arenas 2020; Vogel/Zajak 2020; Wapman et al. 2022; Xierali/Nivet/Rayburn 2021; Zapfel/Zielinski/Schrauth 2021). In Germany, this also affects people of East German origin (Frisch 2020; Vogel/Zajak 2020). The structural exclusion of groups of people and their unique perspectives leads to knowledge that is incomplete (Longino 1990; 2002). Such knowledge may even be used to further justify their exclusion (Fricker 2007). Therefore, if academia is to avoid constantly reinforcing existing marginalization through one-sided knowledge production, diverse perspectives must be incorporated as an integral part of knowledge production at universities. In order to explore how a long-term cultural shift that prioritizes changing dominant frameworks for the institutionalization of gender and diversity at universities could be initiated, four junior research groups were established and funded as part of the cross-cutting theme "Diversity and Gender Equality" of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA).

The idea for this special issue emerged from the collaboration of four research groups headed by the editors: "Fix the numbers" (Principal Investigator: Pichit Buspavanich), "Fix the knowledge" (PI: Mirjam Fischer), "Fix the system" (PI: Sarah Bellows-Blakely) and "Fix the institutions" (PI: Aline Oloff). What unites us as research groups is our shared commitment to improving the status quo regarding gender and diversity in higher education. Our approaches are at times fundamentally different, due in part to the broad range of methodologies employed, but still complementary. The productive tensions that we have repeatedly encountered in our collaboration are also reflected in this special issue, as we will show below. Our goal with the present special issue is to foster a broad conversation about what has been included and what has been omitted as

universities have adopted and bureaucratically negotiated frameworks for gender and diversity. The range of topics covers intersectional research, research methodologies, participatory research, group dynamics, as well as power abuse and sexual harassment within higher education. In addition to contributions directly from the research groups, this special issue brings together further results of current research projects on the topic.

A particular thematic focus of the special issue lies on research ethics, methodological issues, and how intersectional research can contribute to a diversity-oriented and discrimination-critical university. Using a wide range of different methods, the contributions analyze how diversity and gender equity frameworks have and have not been taken up in particular institutional contexts of higher education, drawing on case studies from Berlin and from Germany as a whole. While the institutional contexts discussed are specific to Germany, the questions these contributions raise about how diversity frameworks are bureaucratically negotiated, how discrimination is made visible and measurable, and how institutional cultures resist or enable change are shared challenges across higher-education systems internationally. The special issue further discusses the development of quantitative and qualitative ways to measure gender and diversity within academic institutions, including how to make visible and quantify discrimination. The pitfalls and inherent limitations of attempting such data collection and quantification are also discussed. Additionally, it speaks to the institutional violences that have accompanied gender and diversity work within universities, which have too often either been merely performative (by which we mean to say void of deep, structural change). In fact, gender and diversity work within universities often has re-entrenched the very boundaries that these institutions attempt to transgress. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, the special issue aims to spark new, interdisciplinary conversations around what happens when gender and diversity frameworks meet university bureaucracies, university politics, and practices of measurement, quantification, and institutionalization.

Work on this special issue included a distinctive and collaborative review process. In addition to one double-blind peer review, each contribution was discussed and revised intensively during a multi-day workshop with the authors, special-issue editors, and members of the Open Gender Journal's editorial team. At the workshop, we conducted a comprehensive and collaborative peer-review process by discussing each paper as a group. This helped the authors to hone in on interdisciplinary intelligibility, methodological rigor, and collective reflexivity. We see the double-blind peer-review process and collaborative, in-person peer review processes not as in opposition to one another but as complementary: the

former served as a partial check against bias and brought in outside perspectives; the latter allowed us to go deeper into many of the topics discussed and made clear on which issues comments from the group coalesced into a critical mass.

Commonalities and tensions in this issue

The breadth of disciplines represented in this issue is both a great strength and a significant challenge. Through the collaborative review process, it became clear that inter- and transdisciplinarity are not empty terms but mean demanding, ongoing work. Making oneself understood across disciplinary boundaries requires more than goodwill; it demands patience with shared terms that carry different meanings in different fields, willingness to remain uncertain, and a tolerance for the frictions that genuine intellectual exchange produces. A central topic running through the contributions to this issue is the question of how knowledge is made, under what conditions, through whose inclusion, and at whose expense. Several texts attend closely to the contingencies that shape research: the silences in archives, the gaps left by missing or suppressed information, the ethical standards that govern what can be asked and of whom, and the role of visual materials in constituting evidence. Across these contributions, reflexivity emerges not as a methodological supplement but as an analytical commitment and as a means of making visible the conditions under which knowledge is produced and legitimized. Who counts as a knower? What counts as knowledge? These questions are not merely philosophical but carry institutional weight. As such, questions regarding positionality and reflexivity are integral to the contributions to this issue, which we aim to highlight as a resource that grounds and humanizes academic work across disciplines and readerships. By making explicit the entry points through which researchers come to social-justice work, the texts in this issue invite readers from different fields to recognize their own situated stakes in the questions at hand.

A central theme that emerged from the array of methodologies represented in this issue concerns collaborative and participatory ways of working. Several contributions demonstrate what it looks like, concretely, to move beyond the figure of the singular, supposedly objective researcher. Collaborative methodologies appear across the issue in varied forms, each grappling with what it means to share the labor of inquiry across disciplines and across the boundary between researchers and those they research, subject and object. Participatory approaches feature prominently, and the issue pushes these beyond their more conventional shapes. The question is not simply whether communities are in-

cluded in research processes, but in what ways their expertise is recognized as knowledge. Too often, participatory frameworks remain extractive, drawing on community knowledge without reciprocating epistemic authority. The contributions here ask how research can take seriously the subjects of inquiry as knowledge producers, rather than merely as objects of study or data sources. This includes a critical examination of figures, numbers, and quantitative representations as hegemonic forms of intelligibility. Moreover, the issue presents innovative methodologies that do not always fit traditional molds. This innovativeness challenges the violent reproduction of some more established research methods, ultimately generating better scholarship.

Tensions in this issue arise in part from the joint presence of quantitative and qualitative empirical work. Rather than a fundamental irreconcilability between paradigms, what surfaces across the contributions is a recurring negotiation over which methods are considered rigorous and legible, and by whom. Contributors also differ in how explicitly they foreground subjectivity and positionality, reflecting disciplinary conventions about where such reflection belongs rather than opposing epistemological commitments. These are not divisions that the issue seeks to resolve, but they are worth naming as part of an honest account of what transdisciplinary work actually involves. Another source of tension made visible by authors during the collaborative peer review was how certain concepts and terms do not travel easily from one context to another. One such example is the concept of “race”; in German, there is no single term that can be considered equivalent to the English notion as shaped by US-American discourse, partly because many such terms were rejected following the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany (see e.g., Weider 2025). The contributions gathered here reflect different understandings of core concepts, differences that we have chosen not to resolve through a unified glossary. The terminological plurality is intentional; it reflects the lived reality of transdisciplinary work and resists the false coherence that harmonization would impose. Rather than smoothing over the frictions that inevitably arise, we have come to see these moments of irritation as productive, treating them as valuable sources of insight in their own right. An example for this is the term “monitoring”, which is often coded quantitatively but is used qualitatively in the contribution of Nilay Bayirti and Aline Oloff. It has proven fruitful to be required to use terms and concepts deliberately and to clarify what is meant by them in the given interdisciplinary and international space. All contributions work with the German context as a case study, but the conceptual and methodological challenges they engage – from operationalizing intersectionality in survey instruments to navigating ethics-review processes to archival silences around sexual harassment – are not unique to Germany. Re-

searchers and institutions grappling with similar questions elsewhere will find the frameworks and critiques developed here directly applicable.

Overview of the contributions

The special issue begins with two contributions that comment and reflect upon quantitative research practices in gender and diversity research. “Quantifying intersectional analysis? Introducing a conceptual tool for identifying methodological challenges, designing intersectional research, and structuring reflexivity” by **Hannah Schönberger** explores the challenges of embedding intersectionality in the growing use of quantitative approaches that often lack sufficient theoretical grounding. To address this, the author introduces a conceptual framework drawing on Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge’s (2020) work, designed to help researchers rigorously evaluate and apply quantitative methods in intersectional research while remaining critically aware of how power structures shape knowledge production. In “Participatory knowledge under constraint. Tracing epistemic contingency in anti-discrimination data work,” **Lea Luttenberger and Selin Akgöz** investigate the concept of epistemic contingency as a way to propose a framework for more equitable knowledge production that moves beyond positivist assumptions and embraces participatory approaches. The authors critically reflect on the successes and limitations to the participatory design underlying the construction of quantitative survey instruments for anti-discrimination data.

The topic of evaluating the implementation of participatory research is carried forth in “Participatory development of a telemedicine platform for transgender and gender-diverse individuals. An interdisciplinary design-thinking approach to inclusive healthcare” by **Sophia Ersel, Michele Haink, Sina Pollmann, Hannah Weber, Kilian Flade, Daa Un Moon, and Pichit Buspavanich**. What is being evaluated is an interdisciplinary project for the development of a telehealth platform to provide psychotherapeutic support and self-help resources for trans* and gender-diverse individuals throughout their transitions. The platform was designed through a participatory design-thinking process that brought together community members with lived experience alongside professionals from psychology, app development, virtual reality, and health research, demonstrating the value of inclusive, needs-driven approaches for developing accessible mental- health services for marginalized groups.

In “Consideration of diversity in German medical ethics commissions’ application documents. A qualitative content analysis and recommendations for in-

corporating diversity into research projects," **Michele Haink, Calle Ira Heinze, Jamie Smith, Maximilian Berger, Gertraud Stadler and Pichit Buspavanich** present an application of mixed-methods content analysis. Specifically, this contribution examines how diversity is addressed in the application documents of German medical ethics committees, which are responsible for evaluating whether research projects are ethically justifiable and appropriate for participants, particularly vulnerable groups. This is followed by a contribution that challenges the strong quantitative focus that anti-discrimination data often have. In "Gruppendiskussionen als Element eines Antidiskriminierungsmonitorings," **Nilay Bayirti and Aline Oloff** offer qualitative alternatives to the ways in which universities generally seek to embed diversity and anti-discrimination policies within their structures. Thereby, the authors reclaim the terminology of monitoring by offering up the method of group discussion as integral to meaningful diversity monitoring. In "Silences or silencing? Tracing sexual-harassment policy at the Free University Berlin," **Anne-Marie Harrison** traces practices around reporting and dealing with sexual harassment in a case study of the Freie Universität Berlin. Harrison demonstrates how gaps – silences – in the archives of the university can be used as productive informative source material.

The next contribution continues this focus on transgressive behavior by reflecting on an interdisciplinary collaboration between a researcher and two designers working to communicate findings on harmful behavior in German creative higher education. In "Oscillating between disciplines. Reflexivity in interdisciplinary science communication on harmful behavior in creative higher education," **Marina Fischer, Yulia Ostheimer, and Laura Quade** analyze their process through the lens of reflexivity and identify three key dimensions: disciplinary understanding, topic sensitivity and communication formats, and language and visual representation. They argue that reflexive practice is essential for ethical science communication, particularly in interdisciplinary projects addressing gender and diversity. We end this special issue with a critical reflection on policy recommendations, which have been formulated based on the research conducted in our respective research groups.

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