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# Intersectionality

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**Intersectionality** (or **intersectionalism**) is the study of intersections between forms or systems of [oppression](#), [domination](#) or [discrimination](#). An example is [black feminism](#), which argues that the experience of being a black female cannot be understood in terms of being black, and of being female, considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other.<sup>[1]</sup>

This [feminist sociological](#) theory was first named by [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) in 1989, though the concept can be traced back to the 19th century.<sup>[2][3]</sup> The theory suggests that—and seeks to examine how—various biological, social and cultural categories such as [gender](#), [race](#), [class](#), [ability](#), [sexual orientation](#), [religion](#), [caste](#), and other axes of [identity](#) interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels, contributing to systematic [injustice](#) and [social inequality](#). Intersectionality holds that the classical conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, [sexism](#), [biphobia](#), [homophobia](#), [transphobia](#), and belief-based [bigotry](#), do not act independently of one another. Instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the "intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination.<sup>[4]</sup>

A standard textbook example of intersectionality theory is "the view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity".<sup>[5]</sup> A secondary textbook definition approaches intersection theory a bit more broadly as "the interplay of race, class, and gender, often resulting in multiple dimensions of disadvantage".<sup>[6]</sup> Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and [ethnicity](#).<sup>[7]</sup>

Intersectionality is an important paradigm for sociology and [cultural studies](#), but difficulties arise due to the many complexities involved in making "multidimensional conceptualizations"<sup>[8]</sup> that explain the way in which socially constructed categories of differentiation interact to create a social hierarchy. For example, intersectionality holds that knowing a woman lives in a sexist society is insufficient information to describe her experience; instead, it is also necessary to know her race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, etc., as well as society's attitude toward each

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of these in order to fully understand her position within society.

The theory of intersectionality also suggests that discrete forms and expressions of oppression are shaped by one another. Thus, in order to fully understand the **racialization** of oppressed groups, one must investigate the ways in which racializing structures, social processes, and **social representations** (or ideas purporting to represent groups and group members in society) are shaped by gender, class, sexuality, etc.<sup>[9]</sup> While the theory began as an exploration of the oppression of women within society, today sociologists strive to apply it to all people and to many different intersections of group membership<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>.

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## Historical background [edit]

The concept of intersectionality came to the forefront of sociological circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s in conjunction with the multiracial feminist movement.<sup>[10]</sup> It came as part of a critique of **radical feminism** that had developed in the late 1960s known as the "revisionist feminist theory". This revisionist feminist theory "challenged the notion that 'gender' was the primary factor determining a woman's fate".<sup>[11]</sup>

The movement led by women of color disputed the idea that women were a homogeneous category sharing essentially the same life experiences. This argument stemmed from the realization that white middle-class women did not serve as an accurate representation of the feminist movement as a whole.<sup>[12]</sup> Recognizing that the forms of oppression experienced by white middle-class women were different from those experienced by black, poor, or disabled women, feminists sought to understand the ways in which gender, race, and class combined to "determine the female destiny".<sup>[11]</sup> Leslie McCall, a leading intersectionality theorist, argues that the introduction of the intersectionality theory was vital to sociology, claiming that before its development, there was little research that addressed specifically the experiences of people

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who are subjected to multiple forms of subordination within society.

The term also has historical and theoretical links to the concept of "simultaneity" advanced during the 1970s by members of the [Combahee River Collective](#), in [Boston, Massachusetts](#).<sup>[14]</sup> Members of this group articulated an awareness that their lives—and their forms of resistance to oppression—were profoundly shaped by the simultaneous influences of race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>[15]</sup> Thus, the women of the Combahee River Collective advanced an understanding of African American experiences that challenged analyses emerging from Black and male-centered social movements; as well as those from mainstream White, middle-class, heterosexual feminists.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Intersectionality theory and feminist thought [\[edit\]](#)

The term *intersectionality theory* was first coined by [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) in 1989.<sup>[2]</sup> Crenshaw mentioned that the intersectionality experience within black women is more powerful than the sum of their race and sex, and that any observations that do not take intersectionality into consideration cannot accurately address the manner in which black women are *subordinated*.<sup>[17]</sup>

The term gained prominence in the 1990s when sociologist [Patricia Hill Collins](#) reintroduced the idea as part of her discussion on [black feminism](#). This term replaced her previously coined expression "black feminist thought", "and increased the general applicability of her theory from African American women to all women" (Mann and Huffman, 2005, p. 61). Much like her predecessor Crenshaw, Collins argued that cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Collins, 2000, p. 42).

According to black feminists, and many white feminists, experiences of class, gender, sexuality, etc., cannot be adequately understood unless the influences of racialization are carefully considered. This focus on racialization was highlighted many times by scholar and feminist [bell hooks](#), specifically in her 1981 book *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*.<sup>[18]</sup>

Feminists argue that an understanding of intersectionality is a vital element to gaining political and social equality and improving our democratic system.<sup>[19]</sup> Collins' theory is one of particular interest because it represents the sociological crossroads between [modern](#) and [post-modern feminist thought](#).<sup>[20]</sup>

Marie-Claire Belleau argues for "strategic intersectionality" (2007, p. 51) in order to foster cooperation between feminisms of different ethnicities.<sup>[21]</sup> She refers to different *nat-cult* (national-cultural) groups that produce unique types of feminisms. Using Québécois nat-cult as an example, Belleau acknowledges that many nat-cult groups contain infinite sub-identities within themselves. Due to this infinity, she argues that there are endless ways in which different feminisms can cooperate by using strategic intersectionality, and these partnerships can help bridge gaps between "dominant and marginal" groups (Belleau, 2007, p. 54). Belleau argues that, through strategic intersectionality, differences between nat-cult feminisms are neither essentialist nor universal, but that they should be understood as results of socio-cultural contexts.<sup>[21]</sup> Furthermore, the performances of these nat-cult feminisms are also not essentialist.<sup>[21]</sup> Instead, they are strategies.<sup>[21]</sup>

Although Belleau's idea of strategic intersectionality could help foster cooperation between feminisms that are isolated from each other, the notion of national-cultural identities as strategic may be problematic. Her argument implies that strategy and essentialism are a dichotomy. However, if identities are strategies, then their inherent value can be questioned and nat-cult identities cannot be defended and preserved for their own sake since they are simply tools to a greater end. If we reject strategic intersectionality, then, identities must be essentialist according to Belleau's dichotomy. Essentialist identities are also problematic, however, since they can foster stereotyping and discrimination. It may be more useful, therefore, to view nat-cult feminist identities as identities in flux. Using a dynamic understanding of identity allows nat-cult identities to retain their inherent values and also to avoid nat-cult caricatures.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Categorical complexity [edit]

There are three different approaches to studying intersectionality. The three approaches are anticategorical complexity, intercategorical complexity, and intracategorical complexity, and they serve to represent the broad spectrum of current methodologies that are used to better understand and apply the intersectionality theory.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Anticategorical complexity

The anticategorical approach is based on the "methodology that deconstructs analytical categories".<sup>[22]</sup> It argues that social categories are an arbitrary construction of history and language and that they contribute little to understanding the ways in which people experience society.<sup>[23]</sup> Furthermore, the anticategorical approach states that, "inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender".<sup>[13]</sup> Therefore, the only way to eliminate oppression in society is to eliminate the categories used to section people into differing groups. This analysis claims that society is too complex to be reduced down into finite categories and instead recognizes the need for a holistic approach in understanding intersectionality.<sup>[24]</sup>

### Intercategorical (aka categorical) complexity

The intercategorical approach to intersectionality begins by addressing the fact that inequality exists within society, and then uses this as the base of its discussion of intersectionality.<sup>[25]</sup> According to intercategorical complexity, "the concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing."<sup>[13]</sup> Proponents of this methodology use existing categorical distinctions to document inequality across multiple dimensions and measure its change over time.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Intracategorical complexity

The intracategorical approach can best be explained as the midpoint between the anticategorical and intercategorical approaches.<sup>[24]</sup> It recognizes the apparent shortcomings of existing social categories and it questions the way in which they draw boundaries of distinction.<sup>[24]</sup> Yet, this approach does not completely reject the importance of categories like the anticategorical approach; rather, the intracategorical approach recognizes the relevance of social categories to the understanding of the modern social experience.<sup>[24]</sup> Moreover, the intracategorical complexity focuses on studying the neglected social groups in the point of intersection between anticategorical and intercategorical.<sup>[22]</sup> Further, in order to reconcile these

contrasting views, intracategorical complexity focuses on people who cross the boundaries of constructed categories, in an effort to understand the complexity and intersectionality of human interactions.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Key concepts [edit]

### Interlocking matrix of oppression [edit]

Collins refers to the various intersections of social inequality as the **matrix of domination**. This is also known as "vectors of oppression and privilege" (Ritzer, 2007, p. 204). These terms refer to how differences among people (sexual orientation, class, race, age, etc.) serve as oppressive measures towards women, and ultimately change the experiences of living as a woman in society. Collins, **Audre Lorde** (in *Sister Outsider*), and **Bell Hooks** point towards either/or thinking as an influence on this oppression and as further intensifying these differences. Specifically, Collins refers to this as the construct of dichotomous oppositional difference. This construct is characterized by its focus on differences rather than similarities (Collins, 1986, p. S20).

For example, society commonly uses dichotomies as descriptors such as black/white or male/female. Additionally, these dichotomies are directly opposed to each other and intrinsically unstable, meaning they rarely represent equal relationships. In a 1986 article, Collins further relates this to why black women experience oppression.

### Standpoint epistemology and the outsider within [edit]

Both Collins and **Dorothy Smith** have been instrumental in providing a sociological definition of **standpoint theory**. A standpoint is an individual's unique world perspective. The theoretical basis of this approach involves viewing societal knowledge as being located within an individual's specific geographic location. In turn, knowledge becomes distinctly unique and subjective—it varies depending upon the social conditions under which it was produced (Mann and Kelley, 1997, p. 392).

The concept of the outsider within refers to a special standpoint encompassing the **self**, family, and society (Collins, 1986, p. S14). This relates to the specific experiences to which people are subjected as they move from a common cultural world (i.e., family) to that of the modern society (Ritzer, 2007, p. 207). Therefore, even though a woman (especially a Black woman) may become influential in a particular field, she may feel as though she never quite belongs. Essentially, their personalities, behaviors, and cultural beings overshadow their true value as an individual; thus, they become the outsider within (Collins, 1986, p. S14).

### Resisting oppression [edit]

Speaking from a **critical** standpoint, Collins points out that Brittan and Maynard claim "domination always involves the **objectification** of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed" (Collins, 1986, p. S18). She later notes that self-evaluation and self-definition are two ways of resisting oppression. Participating in **self-awareness** methods helps to preserve the self-esteem of the group that is being oppressed and help them avoid any dehumanizing outside influences.

Marginalized groups often gain a status of being an "other" (Collins, 1986, p. S18). In essence, you are "an other" if you are different from what [Audre Lorde](#) calls the [mythical norm](#). "Others" are virtually anyone that differs from the societal [schema](#) of an average white male. [Gloria Anzaldúa](#) theorizes that the sociological term for this is "[othering](#)", or specifically attempting to establish a person as unacceptable based on certain criterion that fails to be met (Ritzer, 2007, p. 205).

Individual subjectivity is another concern for marginalized groups. Differences can be used as a weapon of self-devaluation by internalizing stereotypical societal views, thus leading to a form of psychological oppression. The point Collins effectively makes is that having a sense of self-value and a stable self-definition not obtained from outside influences helps to overcome these oppressive societal methods of domination.

## Applications [\[edit\]](#)

Some scholars have called for a wider net to be cast to include the practices in the political world,<sup>[26]</sup> healthcare,<sup>[27]</sup> employment, wealth, and property.<sup>[28]</sup> Within the institution of education, Jones' (2003) research on working class women in academia discusses the notion of meritocracy through the ranks of social strata but becomes further complicated by race and the additional external forces that oppress. In the systems of healthcare and people of color, researchers found that six months post 9/11 an increase in poor birth outcomes of children with parents with "Arab" or "Muslim" sounding names and how immigration policies also directly impact the fundamental causes of disease (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda & Abdulrahim 2012).

Additionally applications with regard to property and wealth can be traced to the American historical narrative that is filled "with tensions and struggles over property-in its various forms. From the removal of Indians (and later Japanese Americans) from the land, to military conquest of the Mexicans, to the construction of Africans as property the ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central feature of power in America...[and where] social benefits accrue largely to property owners" (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV 1995) that is visible through generations to date. One would apply the intersectionality framework analysis to various areas where race, class, gender, sexuality and ability are affected by policies, procedures, practices, and laws in "context-specific inquiries, including, for example, analyzing the multiple ways that race and gender interact with class in the labor market; interrogating the ways that states constitute regulatory regimes of identity, reproduction, and family formation" (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013); examining the inequities in "the power relations [of the intersectionality] of whiteness.. [where] the denial of power and privilege .. of whiteness, and middle-classness.." thereby not addressing "the role of power it wields in social relations (Levine-Rasky, 2011).

## Policies, practices, procedures and laws (PPPL) [\[edit\]](#)

Intersectionality is an interdisciplinary approach that considers (Hancock 2005) two or more intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability as "simultaneous processes" (Holvino 2010) that identify and rank members of society through systems of power and social relations (Jones 2003; McWhorter 2004) and influences "political access, equality and the potential for any form of justice" (Hancock 2005).

In addition to the definition of social structure: "rules [policies, practices, procedures, and laws] regulating the allocation of power and resources along race/gender lines" (Nakano Glenn 2004). A few examples of how the application of social structure existed historically can be seen in [Black codes](#) and [Jim Crow laws](#), however, the most recent application is [racial profiling](#). In order to understand how intersectionality applies in real world systems within PPPL one can draw attention to political and structural inequalities (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013). Two recent examples:

- *Voting Rights Act Section 5*: On June 25, 2013, the [United States Supreme Court](#) invalidated the formula used to determine which states are covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. This decision no longer requires pre-approval by certain states to change voting rules. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, Section 5 blocked laws in 2012 that restricted voting rights for minority American citizens; communities of color, elderly, disabled, and college students, in Texas, South Carolina and Florida. In the aftermath the Department of Justice is seeking to block North Carolina's restrictive voting laws.<sup>[29]</sup>
- *School-to-Prison-Pipeline: Zero-tolerance* policies in schools have led to a significant increase in disciplinary actions that involve the presence of law enforcement officers. In some states, such as Mississippi, one school district has police arrest students for minor classroom behaviors and a district in Alabama has a police officer onsite in their high schools (Elias 2013). There are disproportionate numbers of racial minorities and children with disabilities who are subjected to this institutional system of structural inequality.<sup>[30]</sup>

### Social work [edit]

In the field of [social work](#), proponents of intersectionality hold that unless service providers take intersectionality into account, they will be of less use, and may in fact be detrimental, for various segments of the population. Thus, service providers have an obligation to be aware of the seemingly unrelated factors that can impact a person's life experience and response to the service and to adapt their methods accordingly. For instance, according to intersectionality, [domestic violence](#) counselors in the United States that urged all women to report their abusers to police would be of little use to [women of color](#) due to the history of racially motivated [police brutality](#) in that population, and those counselors should therefore develop a different approach appropriate for women of color.

Women with disabilities encounter more frequent domestic abuse, with a greater number of abusers. Health care workers and personal care attendants are also perpetrators in these circumstances and women with disabilities have fewer options for leaving the abusive situation. There is a "silence" principle concerning the intersectionality of women and disability, which maintains that there is an overall social denial of the prevalence of the abused and disabled and this abuse is frequently ignored when encountered. The paradox is the overprotection of people with disabilities combined with the expectations of promiscuous behavior of disabled women. This is met with limiting autonomy and isolating the individuals, which place women with disabilities in situations where further abuse, or more frequent abuse can occur.<sup>[31]</sup>

### Psychology [edit]

Researchers in psychology has incorporated intersection effects since the 1950s and their work

predates the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Psychological interactions effects span a range of variables, although person by situation effects are the most examined category. As a result, psychologists do not construe the interaction effect of say, gender and race, as either more noteworthy or less noteworthy than any other interaction effect. In addition, oppression is a subjective construct, and even if an objective definition were reached, person-by-situation effects would make it difficult to deem certain persons as uniformly oppressed. For instance, Black men as perceived as violent, which connotes disadvantage in the context of police interactions, and attractive,<sup>[32][33]</sup> which connotes advantage in the context of courtship.

Moreover, intersectionality theory has been falsified by psychological research showing that the additive effect of "oppressed" identities is not necessarily negative. For instance, Black gay men are perceived as possessing positive traits.<sup>[34][35]</sup>

Nevertheless, some recent publications point to the development of a psychology of intersecting identities.<sup>[36]</sup>

### **The labor market** [edit]

The intersectionality of race and gender has been shown to have a visible impact on the labor market. "Sociological research clearly shows that accounting for education, experience, and skill does not fully explain significant differences in labor market outcomes." The three main domains on which we see the impact of intersectionality are wages, discrimination, and domestic labor. Most studies have shown that people who fall into the bottom of the social hierarchy in terms of race or gender are more likely to receive lower wages, to be subjected to [stereotypes](#) and discriminated against, or be hired for exploitive domestic positions. Through the study of the labor market and intersectionality we gain a better understanding of economic inequalities and the implications of the multidimensional impact of race and gender on social status within society.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **A Marxist-feminist critical theory** [edit]

Collins' intersectionality theory and its relative principles have a wide range of applicability in the sociological realm, especially in topics such as politics and violence (see, for instance, Collins, 1998). A central tenet of interest is on the struggle faced by Black women in the economic sector. This provides a wonderful example of how the interrelated principles of Collins' theory come together to add a new twist to a [Marxist economic theory](#). A brief historical perspective will allow for better understanding of how Collins used her insight and built a dynamic theory of political oppression as related to Black women in particular.

[W. E. B. Du Bois](#) theorized that the intersectional paradigms of race, class, and nation might explain certain aspects of black political economy. Collins writes "Du Bois saw race, class, and nation not primarily as personal identity categories but as social hierarchies that shaped African American access to status, poverty, and power".<sup>[37]</sup> Du Bois omitted gender from his theory, and considered it more of a personal identity category.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes further expands upon this by pointing out the value of centering upon the experiences of black women. Joy James takes things one step further by "using paradigms of intersectionality in interpreting social phenomena". Collins later integrated these three views



by examining a black political economy through both the centering of Black women's experiences and using a theoretical framework of intersectionality.<sup>[37]</sup>



Collins uses a "[Marxist feminist](#)" approach and applies her intersectional principles to what she calls the "work/family nexus and black women's poverty". In her 2000 article "Black Political Economy" she describes how the intersections of [consumer racism](#), gender hierarchies, and disadvantages in the labor market can be centered on Black women's unique experiences. Considering this from a historical perspective examining interracial marriage laws and property inheritance laws creates what Collins terms a "distinctive work/family nexus that in turn influences the overall patterns of black political economy".<sup>[38]</sup>

For example, [anti-miscegenation laws](#) effectively suppressed the upward economic mobility of black women. Many times, a marriage can be economically stabilizing for both husband and wife. However, since black women were outlawed from marrying white men, black women were denied access to sharing the prosperities of white male property. In essence, their biracial children were deprived of this as well. A perhaps [latent consequence](#) of this was the regulation of wealth for black women.

## See also [edit]

- [Humanism](#)
- [Kyriarchy](#)
- [Womanism](#)

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37. <sup>^</sup> <sup>**a**</sup> <sup>**b**</sup> Collins, 2000, p. 44
38. <sup>^</sup> Collins, 2000, p. 45-46

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- [The Intersectional Feminist Archives - GirlwPen.com](#)
- ["Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender"](#) , interview with Kimberlé Crenshaw, [American Bar Association](#), spring 2004

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