

# Exercise

## Intersectionality

**AVERT**  
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in  
the Family Law System**



An Australian Government Initiative

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## Intersectionality Exercise

### Intersectionality defined:

By intersectionality, we refer to the connection between aspects of identity, and by 'intersectional discrimination', the different types of discrimination or disadvantage that compound on each other and are inseparable...(Pru Goward 2002)

Multiple forms of discrimination occurring simultaneously (*Ontario Human Rights Commission 1999*)

### Purpose:

The following exercise is designed to help us recognise how our various social categories and identities can have an impact on our lives and how these intersect with one another to compound their effects. In particular, the purpose is to look at how power and privilege is structured around these identities (such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality etc...) and how these can impact our lives even when we are not consciously aware that this is happening.

It is important to highlight that the purpose is not to judge or blame anyone for having more privilege or receiving more help in achieving their goals, but to provide an opportunity to identify the obstacles and benefits experienced across a range of human experiences.

In summary, the activity seeks to:

- Promote greater recognition of the fact that a person may be subject to discrimination based on several aspects of their identity at the same time and that this impacts on issues of access and equity when seeking redress or interventions in relation to family violence
- Demonstrate that applying an intersectional approach can help us to better address multiple discriminations and understand how different sets of identities impact on rights and opportunities.

### Materials required:

- PowerPoint – *Intersectionality*
- Set of 'Identity Cards' – to be handed out, one card to each participant
- Fact Sheet – *Intersectionality*



**Facilitator notes:**

- Facilitators might like to start by making a comment on the importance of ensuring that we recognise that every individual is influenced and impacted by the multiple dimensions of their diversity.
- Any approach that only takes one or two dimensions into consideration is unlikely to have the intended impact on target groups.
- The challenge is to try and address all possible dimensions that may impact on inclusion and accessibility.

**Process:**

1. Ask participants to form a straight line across the middle of the room, all facing one way and leaving equal space in front and behind them
2. Hand out an 'identity' card to each participant and ask that they not reveal the nature of their newly ascribed identity
3. Explain to participants that you are about to read out a list of statements, and that each participant will be required to respond to the statement on the basis of the identity they have
4. Explain to participants that the details of their identity are brief, and that they may decide for themselves any other additional aspects of their identity
5. Ask participants to take one step forward if they can answer in the affirmative to the statement or backward if they can answer in the negative. If they cannot step either way or are undecided, then they should remain still
6. Each step forward or backward should be an average length step. No one is going to check up on participants, so it is entirely up to them to take the step that they feel qualified to take. They are the judge of how they should respond to the statements that are read
7. At the conclusion of the activity, it will be obvious to all participants that some are considerably further ahead of the room than others
8. Invite participants to consider how they felt during the process, and the extent to which their 'ascribed identities' determined their decision to move either way
9. Also invite participants to consider the relationship between socially ascribed roles, intersectionality and its impact on privilege and power
10. You might also wish to explore with participants whether there were any realisations that emerged for them in relation to their practice with diverse groups of clients.



**Key things to draw out of the discussion:**

- There are a multitude of ways in which we are all alike and also unlike
- All differences are not created equal. Some have profound effects on our opportunities and experiences and some are less significant
- Powerful assumptions can be held about some aspects of diversity and we need to be cautious about applying these to individuals and families
- There is no benefit in applying a hierarchy of oppression and discrimination, rather all oppressions are interconnected
- Human rights focus on creating and maintaining an environment of mutual respect and understanding, and therefore a Human Rights approach within a community of culturally diverse peoples is an important starting point for responding to family violence.

**Statements to be read out by Facilitator**

- I can negotiate safe sex with my partner
- I can find the time to read the newspaper each day
- I can get a loan when I need extra money
- I can read and write
- I can refuse a proposition of sex for money, housing or other resources
- I don't have to worry about where my next meal will come from
- I can leave my partner if s/he threatens my safety
- If I have a health problem, I can get the help I need right away
- I have had or will have opportunities to complete my education
- If my sister were pregnant, I would have access to information to know where to take her
- I can determine when and how many children I will have
- If I become HIV positive, I can access anti-retroviral treatment when I need it
- If I have a crime committed against me, the police will listen to my case



- I can walk down a street at night and not worry about being raped
- I can travel around the city easily
- I could find a new job easily
- I am respected by most members of my community.

**NB: The facilitator may choose to change or add statements as they see relevant to the particular participant group and issues being canvassed.**



## Identity Cards

<p><b>Refugee Woman</b></p> <p>35, recently arrived from the Congo under the Women at Risk Program.</p>	<p><b>Young Boy</b></p> <p>14, recently left home following a confrontation with his step father who has been physically abusive</p>
<p><b>Young Girl</b></p> <p>11, with a mild intellectual disability</p>	<p><b>Male Doctor</b></p> <p>42, Anglo Australian, married with three children</p>
<p><b>Female Doctor</b></p> <p>38, Anglo Australian, married with two children</p>	<p><b>Female Nurse</b></p> <p>28, Anglo Australian, single</p>
<p><b>Male Doctor</b></p> <p>35, Indian, married, two children, recently arrived under the skilled migration program,</p>	<p><b>Taxi Driver</b></p> <p>29, male, arrived in Australia as refugee three years ago, trying to sponsor family out to Australia</p>



<p><b>Lawyer</b></p> <p>42, female, born in Australia of Greek heritage, in long term relationship with female lover</p>	<p><b>Male Teacher</b></p> <p>27, Tongan background, single</p>
<p><b>Transexual</b></p> <p>32, male, Anglo Australian, considering legal and medical options related to 'transitioning'</p>	<p><b>Female CEO</b></p> <p>56, Australian born Chinese heritage, in defacto relationship, no children</p>
<p><b>Police Officer</b></p> <p>48, male, recently separated, three children, ranging from 16 -22.</p>	<p><b>Grandmother</b></p> <p>63, recently widowed, part time carer for daughter's four young children</p>
<p><b>Street Worker</b></p> <p>19, male, earning an income as a sex worker</p>	<p><b>Homeless Person</b></p> <p>37, male, recently retrenched from employment, evicted from rental accommodation</p>



<p><b>Unemployed</b></p> <p>56, male, Anglo Australian, married with two adult children, recently retrenched</p>	<p><b>Journalist</b></p> <p>38, female, born in Australia, Lebanese Christian background, highly successful</p>
<p><b>Lawyer</b></p> <p>45, male, born in Australia, Jewish Russian parents, recently separated, one child.</p>	<p><b>Social Worker</b></p> <p>49, female, Somali background, arrived in Australia 14 years ago, married with five children, wears hijab</p>
<p><b>Senior Police Inspector</b></p> <p>43, female, Anglo Australian, married, no children</p>	<p><b>Apprentice Hairdresser</b></p> <p>17, female, international student, limited English</p>
<p><b>Farmer</b></p> <p>56, female, recently widowed, running small dairy farm, adult children, living in small rural town</p>	<p><b>Asylum Seeker</b></p> <p>27, male, waiting for outcome of refugee application.</p>

# Intersectionality

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**Intersectionality** is the theory that social identities, related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination, and multiple group identities intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities. These aspects of identity are not "unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather ... reciprocally constructing phenomena".<sup>[1]</sup> The theory proposes that individuals think of each element or trait of a person as inextricably linked with all of the other elements in order to fully understand one's identity.<sup>[2]</sup> The term was coined by the American feminist legal scholar, critical race theorist, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw.

This framework, it is argued by its proponents, can be used to understand systemic injustice and social inequality in many ways.<sup>[3]</sup> Proponents claim that racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and religious or other belief-based bigotry and persecution—do not act independently of each other. Instead, these forms of oppression interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the "intersection" of multiple forms of discrimination.<sup>[4]</sup>

Under this hypothesis, identities usually are not addressed or mapped out in normal social discourses and often come with their own set of oppression, domination, and discrimination. Laws and policies usually only address one form of marginalized identity. The overlapping of multiple oppressed identities often go overlooked. Since these identities are ignored, there is a lack of resources needed to combat the discrimination, and the oppression is cyclically perpetuated.<sup>[5]</sup>

Intersectionality proposes that all aspects of one's identity need to be examined as simultaneously interacting with each other and affecting one's privilege and perception in society, and that these facets of identity cannot simply be observed separately.<sup>[6]</sup> As such, intersectionality is not simply a view of personal identity, but rather an overarching analysis of power hierarchies present within identities.<sup>[6]</sup> The framework of intersectionality also provides an insight into how multiple systems of oppression interrelate and are interactive.<sup>[6]</sup> Intersectionality is not a static field; rather, it is dynamic and constantly developing as response to formations of complex social inequalities. Intersectionality can be seen as an "overarching knowledge project".<sup>[1]</sup> Within this overarching umbrella, there are multiple knowledge projects that evolve "in tandem with changes in the interpretive communities that advance them".<sup>[1]</sup>

Intersectionality is an important paradigm in academic scholarship and broader contexts such as social justice work, but difficulties arise due to the many complexities involved in making "multidimensional conceptualizations"<sup>[7]</sup> that explain the way in which socially constructed categories of differentiation interact to create a social hierarchy. For example, intersectionality holds that there is no singular experience of an identity. Rather than understanding women's health solely through the lens of gender, it is necessary to consider other social categories such as class, ability, nation or race, to have a fuller understanding of the range of women's health concerns.

The theory of intersectionality also suggests that seemingly discrete forms and expressions of oppression are shaped by one another (mutually co-constitutive).<sup>[8]</sup> 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 of color within American society, today the analysis is potentially applied to all categories (including statuses usually seen as dominant when seen as standalone statuses).

Intersectionality is ambiguous and open ended, and it has been argued that its "lack of clear-cut definition or even specific parameters has enabled it to be drawn upon in nearly any context of inquiry".<sup>[4,0]</sup>

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## Historical background

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The concept of intersectionality is intended to illuminate dynamics that have too often been overlooked in feminist movements and theory.<sup>[12]</sup> As articulated by bell hooks, such an approach "challenged the notion that 'gender' was the primary factor determining a woman's fate".<sup>[13]</sup> This exploration sprang from a historical exclusion of black women from the feminist movement that had been challenged since at least the 1800s by black feminists such as Anna Julia Cooper. In many ways, the introduction of intersectional theory supported claims made by women of color that they belong in both of these political spheres.

The movement led by women of color disputed the idea, common to earlier feminist movements, that women were a homogeneous category essentially sharing 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>[14]</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>[13]</sup>

Leslie McCall argues that the introduction of the intersectionality theory was vital to sociology, claiming that before its development there was little research that specifically addressed the experiences of people who are subjected to multiple forms of subordination within society.<sup>[15]</sup>

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>[16]</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>[17]</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>[18]</sup>

### External video

 Kimberlé Crenshaw - On Intersectionality - keynote - WOW 2016: Southbank Centre<sup>[11]</sup>

## Feminist thought

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The term *intersectionality theory* was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.<sup>[3]</sup> In her work, Crenshaw discussed Black feminism, which argues that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black and of being a woman considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other.<sup>[19]</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>[20]</sup>

In order to show that women of color have a vastly different experience from white women due to their race and/or class and that their experiences are not easily voiced or pinpointed, Crenshaw explores two types of male violence against women: domestic violence and rape. Through her analysis of these two forms of male violence against women, Crenshaw depicts that the experiences of women of color consist of a combination or intersection of both racism and sexism.<sup>[5]</sup> Because women of color are present within discourses that have been designed to address either race or sex, but not both at the same time, women of color are marginalized within both of these systems of oppression.<sup>[5]</sup>

In her work, Crenshaw identifies three aspects of intersectionality that affect the visibility of women of color: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality deals with how women of color experience domestic violence and rape in a manner qualitatively different from the ways that white women experience them. Political intersectionality examines how feminist and anti-racists laws and policies have paradoxically decreased the visibility of violence against women of color. Finally, representational intersectionality delves into how pop culture portrayals of women of color can obscure the actual, real life experiences of women of color.<sup>[5]</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".<sup>[21]:61</sup> 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.<sup>[22]:42</sup> Collins referred to this as "interlocking oppression".<sup>[23]</sup>

Patricia Hill Collins sought to create frameworks to think about intersectionality, rather than expanding on the theory itself. As a field, she identified three main branches of study within intersectionality. One branch deals with the background, ideas, issues, conflicts, and debates within intersectionality. Another branch seeks to apply intersectionality as an analytical strategy to various social institutions in order to examine how they might perpetuate social inequality. The final branch formulates intersectionality as a critical praxis to determine how social justice initiatives can use intersectionality to bring about social change.<sup>[1]</sup>

Of course, the ideas behind intersectional feminism existed long before the term was coined. For example, in 1851 Sojourner Truth delivered her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech, in which she spoke from her racialized position as a former slave to critique essentialist notions of femininity.<sup>[24]</sup> Similarly, in her 1892 essay, "The Colored Woman's Office", Anna Julia Cooper identifies black women as the most important actors in social change movements, because of their experience with multiple facets of oppression.<sup>[25]</sup>

Though intersectionality began with the exploration of the interplay between gender and race, over time other identities and oppressions were added to the theory. For example, in 1981 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa published the first edition of *This Bridge Called My Back*. This anthology explored how classifications of sexual orientation and class also mix with those of race and gender to create even more distinct political categories. Many black, Latina, and Asian writers featured in the collection stress how their sexuality interacts with their race and gender to inform their perspectives. Similarly, poor women of color detail how their socio-economic status adds a layer of nuance to their identities, unknown to or misunderstood by middle-class white feminists.<sup>[26]</sup>

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>[27]</sup> Feminists argue that an understanding of intersectionality is a vital element to gaining political and social equality and improving our democratic system.<sup>[28]</sup> Collins's theory represents the sociological crossroads between modern and post-modern feminist thought.<sup>[22]</sup>

Marie-Claire Belleau argues for "strategic intersectionality" in order to foster cooperation between feminisms of different ethnicities.<sup>[29]:51</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.<sup>[29]:54</sup> 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>[29]</sup> Furthermore, the performances of these nat-cult feminisms are also not essentialist.<sup>[29]</sup> Instead, they are strategies.<sup>[29]</sup>

Similarly, Intersectional theorists like Vrushali Patil argue that intersectionality ought to recognize transborder constructions of racial and cultural hierarchies. Patil recognizes the affect of the state on identity formation, "If we continue to neglect cross-border dynamics and fail to problematize the nation and its emergence via transnational processes, our analyses will remain tethered to the spatialities and temporalities of colonial modernity"<sup>[30]</sup>

## Marxist-feminist critical theory

Collins's 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). The struggle faced by Black women in the economic sector, for example, demonstrates how the interrelated principles of Collins's theory come together to add a new dimension to Marxist economic theory. 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>[22]:44</sup> Du Bois omitted gender from his theory and considered it more of a personal identity category

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes expands on this by pointing out the value of centering on 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>[22]:44</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>[22]:45-46</sup> For example, anti-miscegenation laws effectively suppressed the upward economic mobility of black women.

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."<sup>[7]</sup> The three main domains on which we see the impact of intersectionality are wages, discrimination, and domestic labor. Those who experience privilege within the social hierarchy in terms of race, gender and socio-economic status are less likely to receive lower wages, to be subjected to stereotypes and discriminated against, or be hired for exploitive domestic positions. Study of the labor market and intersectionality provides a better understanding of economic inequalities and the implications of the multidimensional impact of race and gender on social status within society.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Categorical complexity

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Although Crenshaw never suggests one set methodology for the practice of intersectionality, in her article "The Complexity of Intersectionality" Leslie McCall suggests three different approaches to studying intersectionality. The three approaches; anticategorical complexity, intercategorical complexity, and intracategorical complexity, serve to represent the broad spectrum of

current methodologies that are used to better understand and apply the intersectionality theory<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Anticategorical complexity**

The anticategorical approach is based on the "methodology that deconstructs analytical categories".<sup>[15]</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>[31]</sup> Furthermore, the anticategorical approach states that, "inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender".<sup>[15]</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, according to the anticategorical approach.<sup>[32]</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 a basis for discussion of intersectionality.<sup>[15]</sup> According to intercategorical complexity, "the concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing."<sup>[15]</sup> Proponents of this methodology use existing categorical distinctions to document inequality across multiple dimensions and measure its change over time.<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Intracategorical complexity**

The intracategorical approach provides a midpoint between the anticategorical and intercategorical approaches.<sup>[32]</sup> It recognizes the apparent shortcomings of existing social categories, and it questions the way in which they draw boundaries of distinction.<sup>[32]</sup> This approach does not completely reject the importance of categories like the anticategorical approach, however; the intracategorical approach recognizes the relevance of social categories to the understanding of the modern social experience.<sup>[32]</sup> Moreover, intracategorical complexity focuses on studying the neglected social groups at the intersection of anticategorical and intercategorical.<sup>[15]</sup> 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>[15]</sup>

## **Key concepts**

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### **Interlocking matrix of oppression**

Collins refers to the various intersections of social inequality as the matrix of domination. This is also known as "vectors of oppression and privilege".<sup>[33]:204</sup> These terms refer to how differences among people (sexual orientation, class, race, age, etc.) serve as oppressive measures towards women and change the experience 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.<sup>[34]</sup> Specifically, Collins refers to this as the construct of dichotomous oppositional difference. This construct is characterized by its focus on differences rather than similarities.<sup>[35]:S20</sup>

Colorism<sup>[36]</sup> is skin tone stratification and it typically has the lighter skin tones at the top of the hierarchy while darker skin tones are treated less favorably and have been denied things allocated to those lighter. In America, a common expression of colorism stems from the notion that some African Americans with lighter complexions have ties to "house slaves" and African Americans with darker complexions have ancestral ties to "field slaves".<sup>[37]</sup> Some implications have been that those in the house were being treated better than those in the field because of the intensity of field labor as well as being inside. However, there are two sides that being a "house slave" came with the danger of being subject to more trauma, such as rape, as well as other dangers of interacting with the

white slave owners more often. Colorism also exists strongly today on an everyday level with tangible and long-lasting results, in, for example, the education system. How African-American and Latino/a students are treated by staff, teachers, administrators, etc. may be biased by the student's skin tone.<sup>[38]</sup>

Colorism is not a synonym to racism as colorism can occur, and often does, within racial and ethnic groups. The brown paper bag test<sup>[39]</sup> was used in America for black people to be further divided: those lighter than a brown paper bag were allotted some privilege that those darker were not permitted to. The brown paper bag test and colorism add to the fuel of intersectionality: recognizing the different identities of an individual in order to better understand one's lived experiences which can be different by race, gender, sexuality, as well as color,<sup>[40]</sup> amongst other qualities. The brown paper bag test is not used outright today but there are still implications of colorism; for example in media, lighter skin black females are often more sexualized than their darker counterparts.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Standpoint epistemology and the outsider within

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 views societal knowledge as being located within an individual's specific geographic location. In turn, knowledge becomes distinctly unique and subjective; it varies depending on the social conditions under which it was produced.<sup>[42]:392</sup>

The concept of the outsider within refers to a unique standpoint encompassing the self, family, and society.<sup>[35]:S14</sup> 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.<sup>[33]:207</sup> Therefore, even though a woman—especially a Black woman—may become influential in a particular field, she may feel as though she does not belong. Their personalities, behaviors, and cultural beings overshadow their value as an individual; thus, they become the outsider within.<sup>[35]:S14</sup>

## Resisting oppression

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."<sup>[35]:S18</sup> She later notes that self-valuation 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".<sup>[35]:S18</sup> 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 a certain criterion that fails to be met.<sup>[33]:205</sup>

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.

## Intersectionality in Practice

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Intersectionality can be applied to nearly all fields from politics,<sup>[43]</sup> education<sup>[15][25][44]</sup> healthcare,<sup>[45][46]</sup> employment, to wealth and property.<sup>[47]</sup> For example, within the institution of education, Sandra Jones' research on working class women in academia takes into consideration meritocracy within all social strata, but argues that it is complicated by race and the external forces that oppress.<sup>[44]</sup> Additionally, people of color often experience differential treatment in the healthcare system. For example in the period immediately after 9/11 researchers noted low birth weights and other poor birth outcomes among Muslim and Arab Americans, a

result they connected to the increased racial and religious discrimination of the time.<sup>[48]</sup> Some researchers have also argued that immigration policies can affect health outcomes through mechanisms such as stress, restrictions on access to health care, and the social determinants of health.<sup>[46]</sup>

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".<sup>[47]</sup> 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";<sup>[49]</sup> and examining the inequities in "the power relations [of the intersectionality] of whiteness ... [where] the denial of power and privilege ... of whiteness, and middle-classness", while not addressing "the role of power it wields in social relations".<sup>[50]</sup>

## Law and Policy

Intersectionality applies in real world systems within policies, practices, procedures, and laws in the context of political and structural inequalities. Examples include:

### Voting Rights Act, Section 5

On 25 June 2013, in Shelby County v. Holder, 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 has blocked laws established in 2012 that restricted voting rights for those of color, the elderly, the disabled and college students in Texas, South Carolina and Florida. After this decision, the Department of Justice sought to block North Carolina's restrictive voting laws.<sup>[51]</sup>

### School-to-Prison-Pipeline

Zero-tolerance policies in schools have led to a significant increase in disciplinary actions that involve law enforcement officers. A school district in Mississippi has police arrest students for minor classroom disruptions, and a school district in Alabama has a police officer on campus in all high schools. Racial minorities and children with disabilities are often subjected to this institutional system of structural inequality disproportionately to white and able-bodied children.<sup>[52]</sup>

## Social work

In the field of social work, proponents of intersectionality hold that unless service providers take intersectionality into account, they will be of less use for various segments of the population. For instance, according to intersectionality, the advice of domestic violence counselors in the United States urging 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, and those counselors should adapt their counseling 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 perpetrated abuse in these circumstances, and women with disabilities have fewer options for escaping 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. A paradox is presented by the overprotection of people with disabilities combined with the expectations of promiscuous behavior of disabled women. This is met with limitations of autonomy and isolation of the individuals, which place women with disabilities in situations where further or more frequent abuse can occur.<sup>[53]</sup>

## Psychology

Researchers in psychology have incorporated intersection effects since the 1950s, before the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Psychology often does through via the lens of biases, heuristics, stereotypes and judgements. Psychological interactions 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 demographics such as 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 are stereotypically perceived as violent, which may be a disadvantage in police interactions, or attractive,<sup>[54][55]</sup> which may be advantageous in courtship.<sup>[56]</sup>

Psychological studies have been shown that the effect of "oppressed" identities is not necessarily additive, but interact in complex ways. For instance, black gay men may be more positively evaluated than black straight men, because the "feminine" aspects of the gay stereotype tempers the hypermasculine and aggressive aspect of the black stereotype.<sup>[56][57]</sup>

## Criticism

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### Strong focus on subjective narratives

Intersectionality relies heavily on standpoint theory, which has its own set of criticisms. Intersectionality posits that an oppressed person is often the best person to judge their experience of oppression; however, this can create paradoxes when people who are similarly oppressed have different interpretations of similar events. Such paradoxes make it very difficult to synthesize a common actionable cause based on subjective testimony alone.<sup>[58]</sup>

Some commentators have claimed intersectionality can demonstrate a narrative of disadvantage with regards to black women's pay over other groups considered statistically to be underprivileged,<sup>[59]</sup> others, especially those based on multiple intersections of oppression are more complex.<sup>[60]</sup>

### Inverse hierarchy problem

A common criticism of intersectionality is that it does not eliminate the hierarchy of identity but inverts it in communities that try to practice intersectionality. Currently this manifests itself by ignoring the effect of social capital on intersectional relationships. The same tendency may present real issues in applying intersectionality far into the future or the past and into non-Eurocentric contexts. This creates a paradox in that any truly successful intersectional praxis is the opposite of our current world, with different groups suffering oppression, not a world that has eliminated oppression.<sup>[61]</sup>

### Incomplete class analysis

Intersectional theory sees class as just another intersection, while economic class has a far more complex relationship with other marginalized identities. Marginalized people typically earn less than non-marginalized people, meaning marginalized are more likely to be economically oppressed as well. In this sense economic class is a mechanism of oppression, not just another intersection. For this reason, many marginalized groups can find common cause fighting economic oppression. Coatoan said "To say that poor people of color, queers, or immigrants are not interested or not profoundly impacted by the economy, and instead interested only in reaffirming their identities within existing hierarchies of power, is to work within a rigged zero-sum game for the liberation of a particular oppressed identity at the expense of all the others."<sup>[62]</sup> Some have accused intersectional theorists of furthering a neoliberal agenda by discussing only the distribution of resources within our current system of income inequality, without questioning income inequality itself.<sup>[63][64]</sup>

### Encouraging paralyzes in attempting perfection

Intersectional theory creates a unified idea of anti-oppression politics that requires a lot out of its adherents, often more than can reasonably be expected, creating difficulties achieving praxis. Intersectional philosophy encourages focusing on the issues inside the group instead of on society at large. Intersectionality is "a call to complexity and to abandon over simplification. However, this has

the parallel effect of emphasizing 'internal differences' over hegemonic structures.<sup>[64]</sup> In emphasizing internal differences over hegemonic structures, and having complex and, at times, contradictory recommendations, it can create paralyses because it is not very accessible. "People are not perfect, and they do not have unlimited time and resources. I've given the example of disability, because I think most people would agree that obviously, any public meeting should be accessible to wheelchairs. But what about the deaf? The blind? Should a group of feminists starting their own meet-up in a university hall enlist someone proficient a sign-language in case that's needed? Should they print their leaflets in braille?"<sup>[65]</sup> This also complicates building alliances, because imperfect humans cannot live up to the standard intersectionality promotes, and may stop attempting intersectionality for this reason,<sup>[66]</sup> an affect that can create a broader political problem building intersectional alliances or mass movement<sup>[67]</sup>

## Dismissal as nonacademic

The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt thinks that the conflation of various left-wing causes under the banner of intersectionality trains students to divide people up by their race, gender, other categories, assigning them moral merit based on their level of privilege, which is bad, and victimhood, that is good. To him Intersectionality is a totalizing perspective that reduces all social problems to a simple framework.<sup>[68]</sup>

Alan Dershowitz derided the theory of intersectionality as the "phoniest academic doctrine I have encountered in 53 years" in academia, during a lecture at Columbia University. Dershowitz sees the concept as an oversimplification of reality that makes LGBT activists stand in solidarity with advocates of shariah, even though Islamic law denies the rights with the former. He feels that identity politics do not evaluate ideas or individuals on the basis of the quality of their character. Dershowitz argues that in academia, intersectionality is taught with a large influence of antisemitism. He states that Jews are actually more liberal and supportive of equal rights than many other religious sects.<sup>[69]</sup>

## Lack of ideological diversity

Helen Pluckrose argues that intersectional feminism primarily draws on far-left ideologies and ultimately ends up excluding women, lower economic classes, people of colour, LGBT and disabled people who do not share similar political views. Pluckrose also states that these groups are politically diverse and that they often have views that are incompatible with intersectional feminism, or alternatively, they express opinions that it is intolerant of, as it violates intersectional stereotypes of these marginalized groups. Pluckrose argues that proponents of intersectional feminism aren't representative of the groups they claim to represent but rather that "It is clearly misguided to assume that by listening to intersectionals, we are listening to women, people of color, LGBTs and the disabled. We are, in fact, listening to a minority ideological view dominated by people from an economically privileged class who have had a university education in the social sciences and/or the necessary leisure time and education to study intersectionality, critical race theory, queer theory and critical analyses of ableism."<sup>[70]</sup>

## See also

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- Humanism
- Kyriarchy
- Triple oppression
- Womanism
- Standpoint theory
- Black feminism
- Privilege (social inequality)

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## External links

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- Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination
  - Collins, Patricia Hill. "Black Feminist Thought". Women of Color Web. Archived from the original on 11 December 2006.
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  - Intersectionality Theory
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