

# Intersectionality

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**Intersectionality** is a theory which seeks to examine the ways in which various socially and culturally constructed categories interact on multiple levels to manifest themselves as inequality in society. Intersectionality holds that the classical models of [oppression](#) within society, such as those based on [race/ethnicity](#), [gender](#), [religion](#), [nationality](#), [sexual orientation](#), [class](#), [species](#) or [disability](#) 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>[1]</sup>

A standard textbook definition of intersectionality theory might be "the view that women experience [oppression](#) in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity" (Ritzer, 2007, pg. 204). 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](#), and [ethnicity](#) (Collins, 2000, pg. 42). Collins' theory is one of particular interest because it represents a time in sociological thinking that was at the crossroads of [modern](#) and [post-modern feminist thought](#).

Intersectionality is an important paradigm for sociological and cultural studies, but there have been many challenges involved in utilizing it to its fullest capacity. Difficulties arise due to the many complexities involved in making "multidimensional conceptualizations"<sup>[2]</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, her sexual orientation, her class, etc. The theory of intersectionality also suggests that discrete forms, and expressions, of oppression actually shape, and are shaped by, one another. Thus, in order to fully understand the racialization of oppressed groups, one must investigate and examine 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. While the theory began as an exploration of the oppression of women within society, today sociologists strive to apply it not only to woman but to discussions of all peoples.

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## [edit] Historical Background of Intersectionality

A comprehensive historical study of the development of the Intersectionality theory has yet to be documented. From the little documentation that exists, it is understood that the concept of intersectionality came to the forefront of sociological circles in the late 1960's and early 1970's in conjunction with the multiracial feminist movement. It came as part of a critique of radical feminism that had developed in the late 60's known as the "re-visionist feminist theory." This re-visionist feminist theory "challenged the notion that 'gender' was the primary factor determining a woman's fate"[3]. 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. Recognizing that the forms of oppression experienced by white middle class women were different than 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." [4] 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 in existence that addressed specifically the experiences of people who are subjected to multiple forms of subordination within society. [5]

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](#). 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. 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.

## [edit] Intersectionality Theory and Feminist Thought

The term "Intersectionality Theory" was first coined by [Kimberle Crenshaw](#) in the 1970's but gained

prominence in the 1990's 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, pg. 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, pg. 42). According to feminists of color, experiences of class, gender, sexuality, etc., cannot be adequately understood unless the influences of racialization are carefully considered. Feminists argue that an understanding of intersectionality is a vital element to gaining political and social equality and improving our democratic system. Collins' theory is one of particular interest because it represents the sociological crossroads between [modern](#) and [post-modern feminist thought](#).

## **[edit] The Complexities of Intersectionality**

There are three different approaches to studying intersectionality. Leslie McCall, a leading intersectionality theorist explains that these three perspectives are defined primarily by the way they "use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life." The three approaches are anticategorical complexity, intracategorical complexity, and intercategory complexity, and they serve to represent the broad spectrum of current methodologies that are used to better understand and apply the intersectionality theory.[\[6\]](#)

**Anticategorical Complexity:** The anti-categorical approach is based on the deconstruction of categorical divisions. 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. Furthermore the anticategorical approach states that, "inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender,"[\[7\]](#) 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.

**Intercategorical (aka Categorical) Complexity:** The intercategory approach to intersectionality begins by addressing the fact that inequality exists within society, it then uses this as the base of its discussion of intersectionality. According to intercategory complexity, "The concern is with the nature of the relationships among social groups and, importantly, how they are changing." [\[8\]](#) Proponents of this methodology use existing categorical distinctions to document inequality across multiple dimensions and measure its change over time.

**Intracategorical Complexity:** The intracategorical approach can best be explained as the mid point between the anticategorical and intercategory approaches. It recognizes the apparent shortcomings of existing social categories and it questions the way in which they draw boundaries of distinction. 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. Moreover it attempts to reconcile these contrasting views by focusing on people who cross the boundaries of constructed categories, in an effort to understand the ways in which the complexity and intersectionality the human experience unfold.

## [\[edit\]](#) Key Concepts

### [\[edit\]](#) 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" (Ritzer, 2007, pg. 204). These terms refer to how differences among people (sexual orientation, class, race, age, etc.) serve as oppressive measures towards females, and ultimately change the experiences of living as a woman in society. Collins 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, pg. 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. Notice in the dichotomies mentioned above, Black women typically fall into what is seen by society as the inferior halves. Internalization of this leads to further the oppression faced by women (most notably Black women) in society.

### [\[edit\]](#) 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 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, pg. 392).

The concept of the [outsider within](#) refers to a special standpoint encompassing the [self](#), [family](#), and [society](#) (Collins, 1986, pg. 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, pg. 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, pg. S14).

### [\[edit\]](#) 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" (Collins, 1986, pg 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, pg. S18). In essence, you are "an other" if you are different from what [Audre Lorde](#) calls the [mythological norm](#). "Others" are virtually anyone that differs from the societal [schema](#) of an average white male. [Gloria Anzaldua](#) 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, pg. 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. (In [psychology](#) this is known as a [self-fulfilling prophecy](#).) 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.

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

### [\[edit\]](#) Intersectionality and 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, 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.

### [\[edit\]](#) Intersectionality and the Labor Market

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>[9]</sup>

### [\[edit\]](#) A Marxist-Feminist Critical Theory

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" (2000, pg. 42). Interestingly, 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, 2000, pg. 44). 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 (Collins, 2000, pg. 44).

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 (pg. 45-46). 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" (pg. 46).

A historical example will clarify this and provide a more precise case of this application. Essentially, [anti-interracial marriage laws](#) effectively suppressed the potential economic rising of black women. Many times, a marriage can be economically stabling 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.

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## **[[edit](#)] External links**

- [Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination](#)
- [Black Feminist Thought](#)
- [A Brief History of Black Feminist Thought](#)
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