

## Question

Why is it important to adopt an intersectional approach to the study of genders and/or sexualities? Answer using at least two pieces of illustrative social research from the course readings.

## Is Intersectionality A Worthwhile Concept?

Intersectionality is the idea that different social categories combine (“intersect”) to create unique situations for people. These intersections generate unique privileges and disadvantages beyond those that the individual categories confer. In many places, intersectionality is not taken seriously - either because the underlying categories are viewed as irrelevant, or the idea itself is ignored. While intersectionality can be applied to many categories, this essay will focus on the concept’s usefulness when looking at gender and race.

“Doing Gender” by Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman is a paper that has done much to revolutionise the way gender is understood. A major place that it challenges previous conceptualisations of gender is by adding an interface between sex and gender: “sex category”. Under their model, “sex” represents the biological characteristics associated with being male or female; “sex category” is how people assume a person’s sex without rigorous inspection; and “gender” is formed by the various gendered activities one does. Key to this is the idea that gender isn’t static, but something that is adapted to the circumstances. In other words, gender is performed differently depending on the environment.

For cisgender people, they learn the gendered behaviours that align with their gender identity implicitly as they grow up. This is not the case for transgender people. Instead, they experience a contracted version of learning how to display their gender during their transition. West and Zimmerman drew on a case study by Harold Garfinkel which focused on a transgender woman called Agnes. She was noted to be observing how to behave in a way that is perceived as feminine in order to be categorised as a woman (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.131)<sup>1</sup>. She felt the need to be “120 percent female” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.134)<sup>2</sup>, demonstrating the scrutiny that was placed on her femininity. In this case, Agnes is modifying the way she performs her gender to signal to others that she is a woman.

While Agnes noticed various ways that she had to act in order to be seen as a female, Bell Hooks focused on how people act *towards* those categorised as female.

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<sup>1</sup>West, C. and Zimmerman, D.H. (1987) ‘Doing Gender’, *Gender and Society*, 1(2), pp. 125–151.

<sup>2</sup>West, C. and Zimmerman, D.H. (1987) ‘Doing Gender’, *Gender and Society*, 1(2), pp. 125–151.

In particular, she wrote about how African women were uniquely oppressed during the Atlantic slave trade. Due to the fact that domestic labour was viewed as feminine work, female slaves were often assigned roles close to their masters (Hooks, 2014, pp.19-20)<sup>3</sup>. This put them in a position to harm their masters, which led to far greater measures being taken to ensure that they were unlikely to lash out. The solution the slavers found was to introduce an additional tool of terror: rape. Beyond the physical violence, starvation, and murder that male slaves faced, female slaves were repeatedly raped to break their spirits. Enslaved women were required to have all resistance crushed by the time they reached the homeland of their captives. As a result of the violence they faced due to their sex category, female slaves had to learn to do as their masters said or face more assaults.

Some may argue that the Atlantic slave trade is in the past and that intersectional discrimination no longer occurs. Numerous modern examples can be found to reject this notion. One such case was a trial in Missouri, USA where a number of women brought General Motors to court due to alleged discrimination. Their claims were supported by the fact that General Motors only began hiring black women after 1964. Furthermore, it was shown that “all of the Black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs in a seniority-based layoff” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.141)<sup>4</sup>. General Motors had returned to its ways of victimising black women after only six years. Despite this powerful evidence, the court rejected the notion of their race and gender intersecting. The case was divided into two claims: sexism and racism. Due to this, the court was able to disprove each claim individually and ignored the inequality that was occurring when womanhood and blackness overlapped.

More broadly, the workplace is a difficult place to navigate as a woman. They must simultaneously perform femininity while not appearing “too feminine” . In a space dominated by masculinity, anyone who does not fit with that sticks out. An interview-based study published in 2018 attempted to shed light on how women adapt to workplaces. Interviews with the men were rife with associations between professionalism and masculinity such as using a “suit and tie” as a proxy for formality and assuming he/him pronouns for workers (Hirst and Schwabenland, 2018, p.167)<sup>5</sup>. There was also a pattern of sexual metaphors. One interviewee compared the open-plan office to a nudist beach, while another joked about being unable to “grope somebody in a corner” (p.168)<sup>6</sup>. This reveals that the men felt that their sexuality was being put into plain view, where it would previously have happened behind closed doors. An open-plan office makes sexual misconduct more difficult and that may be what they are noticing.

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<sup>3</sup>Hooks, B 2014, *Ain't I a Woman : Black Women and Feminism*, Taylor & Francis Group, London. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [16 March 2022].

<sup>4</sup>Crenshaw, K. 1989 ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’,.

<sup>5</sup>Hirst, A. and Schwabenland, C. (2018) ‘Doing gender in the “new office”’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(2), pp. 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12200>.

<sup>6</sup>Hirst, A. and Schwabenland, C. (2018) ‘Doing gender in the “new office”’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(2), pp. 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12200>.

Women also remarked on the feeling of being observed, but in a very different way. One woman remarked on how the men sexualised recruits, saying that the male employees would “mark them” (p.170)<sup>7</sup>. Female recruits were not just judged by their abilities, but also their beauty. One female employee said that she would “definitely get a comment from all the men” if she walked into another section of the office. The author mentions that this sense of being “watched” was a theme among responses from female participants. As a result of feeling as if they stick out, the women began to perform their gender differently. One woman said that she felt the need to keep her hair in better order, wear makeup, and alter how she dressed so that she would fit in better. This was an adjustment only made by women.

This fear of being seen was experienced in yet another way by trans men. In a 2021 study, trans men were interviewed on their experiences in the workplace. Many noted a fear of accidentally revealing themselves as transgender. In response to this, one man adjusted his gender presentation by wearing suits more. Another said that it was crucial to dress “100% male... right haircut, right clothes”. Overall, there is a pattern of trans men having to put great effort into compensating for the extra scrutiny that their masculinity faces. This compensation can lead to an unhealthy relationship with work, as Jax states:

\*\*“I think that’s the only way I can compete as a trans man ... it’s exhausting ... I feel like my portfolio needs to be fifty times bigger than everyone else’s”\*

(Jeanes and Janes, 2021, p.1253)<sup>8</sup>

Despite being men, trans men face far more pressure to conform to masculine expectations than their cisgender counterparts. This self-inflicted overwork is a product of the idea that men should be hardworking. Just as Agnes felt she needed to do “120 percent”, Jax feels that he needs to overload himself with work to be perceived as a man.

In each case covered in this essay, people had to adapt how they performed gender to fit the circumstances. Without an intersectional lens, it seems isolated that transgender and cisgender people experience workplaces differently. Yet through intersectionality, it can be seen that transness acts as a layer on top of sex category in order to produce a unique experience. A similar theme appears in Hooks’ writing too, where black women had further systems of oppression applied to them beyond what black men were subjected to. This oppression extends into the modern day, where black women are denied opportunities due to how they are categorised. Intersectionality remains a key concept for understanding these situations and must be employed so long as these categories remain relevant.

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<sup>7</sup>Hirst, A. and Schwabenland, C. (2018) ‘Doing gender in the “new office”’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(2), pp. 159–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12200>.

<sup>8</sup>Jeanes, E. and Janes, K. (2021) ‘Trans men doing gender at work’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(4), pp. 1237–1259. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12675>

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