What Is Intersectionality and Why Is It Important?

Building solidarity in the fight for social justice.

By Anne Sisson Runyan

In the almost thirty years since the term *intersectionality* was introduced, it has been taken up in a range of academic disciplines in the United States and beyond. It has even entered public discourse as a buzzword in the age of identity politics. Black feminist and critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the progenitor of the term, described intersectionality as "a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool" in a 2013 article she coauthored with other feminist scholars. The now-expansive use of the term speaks to its power to attend to what black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the "interdependent phenomena" of oppressions, whether based on race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, or other social categories.

Although Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in the late 1980s in the context of the rise of critical race legal studies and through her own research, it is based on a concept developed over many decades of thinking and struggle by black and indigenous feminists and other women of color. Within academe, the term has also traveled and developed well beyond legal studies to counter unidimensional and exclusionary analyses of oppression in many disciplines, such as the reduction of feminist inquiry to examining only the experiences of white, Western women or the absenting of women of color within antiracist scholarship and of indigenous women within decolonial scholarship. But as intersectionality becomes more institutionalized in academe and popularized in the wider culture, its meanings can also become diluted and even misappropriated. Too often it is reduced to ticking off identity categories in so-called politically correct ways or misrepresented in contemporary identity politics and culture wars, which have erupted recently into the right-wing politics of white male victimization. Thus, at this political moment, it is important to revisit the genealogy of this ever-evolving concept to understand both its theoretical and its practical value for addressing "gender issues" on campus and the costs of its dilution and misappropriation.

Crenshaw advanced intersectional analysis especially through her 1991 study of domestic violence against women of color, particularly immigrant women, in Los Angeles. She centered her analysis on the fraud provisions of the 1990 Immigration and Nationality Act. Because applications for permanent resident status could proceed only after two years of marriage and cohabitation and with the permission of spouses, the act effectively forced immigrant women to stay married to and cohabit with their US citizen or permanent resident spouses, regardless of any abuse suffered at the hands of these sponsors. Technically, spouses could escape an abusive partner without risking deportation if they reported the abuse. However, fear of reporting, economic obstacles to seeking

redress, and the failure of legal authorities and battered women's shelters to provide multilingual and other special services hampered the ability of survivors to do so. The confluence of these structural barriers acted to further subjugate women already vulnerable to racism, sexism, and classism while increasing the privileges (male, national, and, in some cases, racial or class-based) of abusive husbands who were enabled by official policy and practice to maintain legal, cultural, and social control over their wives.

Crenshaw argued that this "structural intersectionality" among forms of oppression based on race, gender, class, and national origin that emanated from both the state and intimate relations put immigrant women of color at most risk of violence. She also argued that this situation required the development of "political intersectionality," which recognizes that women of color are members of at least two subordinated groups—women and people of color—and, thus, are critical to developing antiracist and antisexist agendas for social movements. Like other feminist women of color, Crenshaw observed that mainstream feminism had become dominated by and catered most to the experiences of white women, while traditional civil rights groups privileged the leadership and experiences of black or other men of color. This state of affairs pushed women of color to the margins.

When officials and feminists alike disregard the experiences of women of color who are subjected to domestic and sexual violence, prescriptions for addressing such violence overlook how both sexism and racism conspire to perpetuate it. Racism not only denigrates the experiences and voices of women of color but also silences women of color who would report abuses they may suffer at the hands of men of color. Black feminists, for example, have highlighted how racism within institutional cultures—from the police to social services—leaves them unwilling to report domestic violence. They fear feeding into racist stereotypes, including stereotypes of black men, who are already imagined in a racist society as violent and thus are subject to all manner of violence themselves, ranging from police brutality and murder to mass incarceration. Not only does this dynamic result in underreporting and lack of assistance, but it can also sideline issues of domestic violence and sexism more generally within civil rights agendas and other antiracist organizing efforts. When these kinds of violence are not resisted along their many fronts, social justice movements are weakened.

But theorists of intersectionality stress that forms of oppression are not just additive, as if they were wholly separate layers of domination. Rather, women of color actually experience a different form of racism from men of color, just as they experience a different form of sexism from white women. In this sense, gender is always "raced" and race is always gendered. Racialized sexist stereotypes of white women portray them, under the still-prevailing legacy of the Victorian age, as passive, physically weak, undersexed, and needful and deserving of protection. In contrast, racialized sexist stereotypes of black women (which can also be read as sexualized racist stereotypes), under the still-prevailing legacy of slavery and colonization, construct them as aggressive, physically strong, oversexed, and undeserving of protection. As intersectional theory has traveled across national borders, feminist antiracist and anticolonial scholars have observed that racialized sexist stereotypes also vary with respect to constructions of women in different regions of the world. As I have noted in my own intersectional work on global gender inequalities, these constructions typically justify, for example, which women are assigned to specific subjugated roles in the global political economy over time. As factories spread across the global South in search of "cheap" labor—made so by neocolonial relations, economic desperation, and patriarchal family discipline—poor Latina women were initially viewed as quiescent labor with "nimble fingers." That changed when they began to organize and certain global factory work shifted to Asia, with poor Asian women taking on the imposed mantle of the most obedient and most suited for close work in garment and electronic assembly. With the fall of the Soviet bloc and its state-run economy, which left many state-employed women workers in that region unemployed, Eastern European white women were rendered available to and became preferred by Western white men as mail-order brides, on the assumption that they would not be uppity wives like their feminist-inflected Western counterparts. Thus, how women are simultaneously and differently racialized and sexualized (and classed) depends upon cultural and material legacies and contemporary cultural and material forces.

Intersectional theory has also traveled across more identity borders. Although Crenshaw's early work centered on heterosexual immigrant women of color, intersectional theory is now applied to understanding how we all carry multiple, albeit constructed and provisional, identities. The salience of such identities— based not only on race, normative gender, class, and nation but also on sexuality, nonnormative gender, physical (dis)ability, religion, and age—varies in different times and contexts, conferring either disadvantages or privileges on each of us, again in relation to time and context. This recognition has gone a long way toward disrupting hierarchies of oppression based, for example, on claims that class oppression trumps all other forms of oppression or that gender oppression is the originary oppression or that racial oppression must be primary to the exclusion of others. In this way, intersectional thinking has also opened the way to more inclusive and coalitional social movements and agendas. We are now witnessing the advent of (currently transnational) movements like the Women's March, Black Lives Matter, and the Global Justice Movement arising out of the World Social Forum, all of which are led or heavily influenced by women and prominently feature queer women and women of color. Such movements see struggles against racism, classism, neocolonialism, xenophobic nationalism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, ageism, Islamophobia, and ecological destruction as indivisible. In practice, of course, such movements are not always as inclusive or attentive to an intersectional analysis as they should be, especially when they are forced to respond to multiple attacks on many fronts, which causes them to prioritize certain issues and actors over others. Nevertheless, organizers and activists informed by intersectionality reject a monolithic movement based on a single, exclusionary identity or single-issue politics. Instead, movements informed by intersectionality remain flexible and forward-looking, continuing to listen for and to the

voicing of new or previously hidden inequities not addressed in social justice movements. In this way, intersectional theory and practice is "a work in progress," as Crenshaw and others have argued.

There have been, however, appropriations of the concept of intersectionality that have watered it down and wrested it from its radical foundations. Recall that multiculturalism in higher education has come to mean merely a respect for "different" cultures—a superficial celebration of many kinds of food, dress, music, and other such cultural expressions. In this diminished vision of intersectionality, institutional approaches to diversity are reduced simply to increasing the numbers of "different" bodies on campus, resulting in policies and practices that fall short of what is needed. Consider, for example, how campuses provide services to "diverse" students as if their bodies transparently cued a single identity, whether based on race, national origin, sex, or sexuality. Consider, too, the proliferation of separate offices and groups on campuses for women, racial minorities, sexual and gender minorities, foreign nationals, the disabled, and so on. Such practices are akin to what sociologist Sirma Bilge calls "ornamental intersectionality," a neoliberal approach that "allows institutions and individuals to accumulate value through good public relations and 'rebranding' without the need to actually address the underlying structures that produce and sustain injustice." Although "accommodating" difference in separate, serial fashion can reduce some barriers to teaching and learning, intersectional thought and analysis demands a far more transformative process in scholarship, the curriculum, and organization.

These are times of intense precarity within the academy and beyond. This political moment is fueled by what political theorist Wendy Brown calls "libertarian authoritarianism." Brown defines libertarian authoritarianism as both an extension and a result of neoliberalism: it simultaneously guts public institutions, undermines democracy, and defines freedom as the freedom to be sexist, racist, homophobic, and xenophobic and to engage in speech and actions that uphold the violence of white male supremacy. In this political and cultural atmosphere, deeper intersectional insights and actions are all the more needed. As a structural and relational theory and a method or analytic tool, intersectionality is poised to reveal both the intersections of institutions, systems, and categorizations that produce oppression and the intersections of identity categorizations within individuals and groups. Ideally, intersectionality can disable hierarchical exclusions and enable peoples subjugated in different but connected ways to coalesce around more expansive agendas for social (and ecological) justice. As such, it is the opposite of—and resistant to—the vulgar, ugly, divisive, and exclusionary identity politics of white male victimization fomented by libertarian authoritarianism, which obscures and distracts from how structural oppressions harm us all. Right now, labor of all sorts is continually casualized. Public welfare, education, and services are starved to provide ever more private capital for the few. Democratic decision-making and human rights, already insufficient, further erode. Many kinds of violence are increasing, including the reappearance of threats of nuclear war. Environmental protections continue to steadily decline on a planet already in the midst of a climate-change crisis. If present trends persist, there will be little left to lord over.

This special issue on gender on campus happily coincides with the one-hundredth anniversary of the AAUP's Committee on Women in the Academic Profession, long referred to as Committee W. This committee, which addresses such issues as pay equity, work and family balance, sexual harassment and discrimination, affirmative action, and the status of women faculty in rank and tenure, is now devoted to the advancement of all those who identify as women, femme, and nonbinary, in all their diversity. The committee's mission reflects the influence of intersectional theorizing, analysis, and praxis on thought about gender and gender politics. Certainly, with the rise of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, themselves transnational in scope, the pervasiveness of sexual violence appears to be at the top of feminist agendas on US campuses and in US culture. But what we have learned from intersectional analysis and organizing is that we must consider how race, class, citizenship status, and sexuality significantly determine who is most at risk, who will report sexual violence, how they are treated, what supports they have, and what remedies are made available to them. Otherwise, efforts to combat sexual violence will fall significantly short. Moreover, we must equip our students and ourselves with the ability to perform intersectional analyses. If we do not, coalitions across identity categories that make connections between sexual and other violence cannot be built. Intersectional analysis can also enhance coalition-building among faculty, students, and staff as well as among committees of the AAUP, such as the Committee on Women in the Academic Profession, the Committee on Historically Black Institutions and Scholars of Color, and the Committee on Sexual Diversity and Gender Identity. The complication of gender and other social categories by the rise of intersectional thinking and activism makes possible what Patricia Hill Collins calls "flexible solidarity" informed by the politics of feminists of color. Such solidarity forges alliances conditional on shared commitments to resisting not only race *and* gender oppression but also a range of other interrelated forms of structural and direct violence.

Anne Sisson Runyan, professor of political science and former head of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the University of Cincinnati, has served as chair of the AAUP's Committee on Women in the Academic Profession and published widely in the field of feminist international relations. Her latest book is Global Gender Politics *(2018). Her email address is anne.runyan@uc.edu.*

‹ November-December 2018 up Austerity Is Class War ›

R.L. Frankel (not verified)
Sun, 06/07/2020 - 4:42pm

permalink

Anti semitism

In the seventh paragraph the author lists a number of -isms, antis- and -phobics without the mention of 'anti-Semitism'. This invisibility is a growing danger, especially in regard to it's resurgence in what the author calls 'libritarian authoritarianism' politics of social justice activists. White passing Jews are marginalized between the lines of white supremacy and the BIPOC majority in this way, but Israeli Jews are catagorically and intellectually at a higher risk as well, for their Zionism and national identity. As a religious minority that has seen the impact of being alienated before, it is extremely unnerving. Its a small but significant detail and I encourage your association to consider adding it in revision of the article.

reply

John Smith (not verified)
Wed, 05/19/2021 - 8:05am
permalink

anti-Semitism overlooked by AAUP ‘educational’ treatise.

Interesting, in view of the predominance of Jewish teachers in the large school system of The City of New York - including at the management level.

reply

Rafael A. Mutis... (not verified)
Fri, 09/23/2022 - 5:02pm
permalink

And,

the misuse of the concept anti-Semitism to silence and cover up for Israel's daily war crimes in and of the occupation of the Palestinian people and their lands. Who exactly is at risk for their zionism?

Certainly Jews have to be defended and not attacked, like any other people. The genocidal zionist settler colonial state of Israel complicates and feeds into that, however. I learned this from my brilliant anti-zionist Jewish friends, just so you know.

So, just checking to see that you are not using code.

reply

Amna (not verified)
Sat, 03/27/2021 - 1:06pm
permalink

Same concern

Where is anti-semitism on here?

reply

Christiane Cullens (not verified)
Wed, 09/15/2021 - 10:30am
permalink

Art credit?

Curious as to who should be credited for the artwork at the beginning of the article. Thank you.

reply

Khand
Wed, 09/28/2022 - 9:21am
permalink

response to art credit question

Art credits appear in the print edition of the magazine. The art credit for this article is STOURNSAEH/ADOBE STOCK.--*Academe* editorial staff

reply