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GSWS 100

Intersecting Identities

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Oppressed Oppressor: Taking Responsibility

Everyone experiences oppression differently based on their social identities (gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, etc.). As such, the definition of minority is multidimensional and the intersection of biases at the level of an individual can reflect a number of disparities and social inequality at the social-structural level. American lawyer and civil rights advocate, Kimerl**e** Crenshaw, created the Theory of Intersectionality to address the complexities of discrimination and privilege in the context of an individual’s race, class, gender, sexuality and/or other identifying characteristics [1].

Intersectionality is the theoretical framework that addresses how discrimination can happen on the basis of several different factors at the same time. More interested in the extensive structural and systemic interconnectedness of inequality, Crenshaw required a paradigm for this phenomenon to better understand the tension that exists between the layers of privilege in the diagram the absolute privilege experienced in society to disrupt the idea that these tendencies are separable. In her essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh acknowledges her white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day” and the subsequent need and responsibility to address this unacknowledged privilege [2]. Relating abstract math to empathizing with other people, mathematician Eugenia Cheng compares intersectionality to factorization presenting the facets of intersectionality as factors of a larger number [3].

Disparities in access to opportunities and resources between marginalized and unmarginalized groups create harmful hierarchies of privilege and, consequently, pervasive and disturbing forms of oppression. As the United States, in particular, has a deep history of outright injustice towards marginalized groups, and the subsequent structural inequalities perpetrate this oppression. Toxic racial and gender dynamics exist throughout society, set on stage for institutionalized racism, sexism, and racialized sexism. Acknowledging the role of white women throughout this troubled history of America is important when learning how to actively be anti-racist and feminist today. During, the civil rights movement, white women were at the crossroads of their white privilege and gender discrimination. Some women adopted white feminism, another form of prejudice. As this mindset is evident in the long history of regulations and systems that have been created to benefit of white people, it is important to understand and advocate against race-based oppression especially when fighting for women’s rights.

I am looking to explore the involvement of three separate forms of identity development (race, gender, sexual orientation) to investigate my role as a person that identifies as bisexual, white, and female and how I can play my part to dismantle systemic racism and sexism. I often feel defined by my sexual or romantic partner at the moment, which can be a frustrating limitation as my sexuality is constantly misjudged. After speaking little of her sexuality publicly, *Riverdale* star Lil Reinhart came out as bisexual but admitted in an interview that she feared people would accuse her of ‘faking’ her orientation due to a history of past relationships with men [6]. As she had only publicly engaged in heteronormative relationships previously, Reinhart worried that the media would accuse her of fishing for attention. Nonetheless Reinhart’s disclosure of her sexuality on her social media platforms, like many other celebrities today, is refreshing considering the lack of bisexual representation in television and media growing up. There are a number of double standards regarding bisexuality with respect to gender differences as well. For example, women who are bisexual are often assumed to be ‘experimenting’ or considered promiscuous while it is not uncommon for bisexual men to be discriminated against for being homosexual.

White women have an important relationship with power and privilege as they have historically experienced benefits associated with their race. Naturally, greater access to education, suffrage, and a number of other advantages have made it significantly easier for Caucasian women to navigate difficulties in society as opposed to racial minorities. Although white women like myself have significant white privilege, females experience a distinct subset of gender discrimination. The gender position of white women allows them to experience the advantages of being a white while simultaneously affiliate with the oppression of females. As a white woman, it is crucial to distinguish my sexist experiences from those of women of color, for example, in order to acknowledge and mitigate the lack of understanding by white women regarding the possession of intersecting identities. In *The Culture of Privilege: Color-blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity*, Ferber discusses the reality that white women do not necessarily acknowledge their skin privilege when choosing to identify with their gender [7]. Further, many goes as far to say that white women disregard their racial privilege and actively choose to identify with victimhood of sexism rather than their role as perpetrators of white oppression [8]. The privilege of white women has gone largely unexamined and this attitude, as an oppressed oppressor, contributes to the inequalities faced by other people. As a white woman, I must educate myself and actively dismantle white feminism as it should not be explored in isolation.

The goal of intersectionality is to create a common ground; however, to do so requires understanding the rise of white feminism which is anti-feminist in nature since it discriminates by race. As such, the decision to attain the right to vote for white women meant that the concerns for women of minorities were largely recognized. Given this situation, it is important that white women support the equity for all in the feminist movement.

While they may have several intersecting identities, sometimes white women are absent when other marginalized groups are faced with discrimination. It is important to understand these prejudices that have developed alongside my understanding of race and gender. Over time, there has been a shift from “overt racism to covert racism” [9]. Harder to understand, covert racism is “the externalization of implicit bias” that can either be intentional or unintentional. Covert racism is rampant in American culture today as negative characteristics associated with an oppressed community are used to justify that community’s oppression. My family and experience becoming an adult have showed me how important it is to acknowledge the history of my identity and how I can be a part of the future generation of white woman fighting for equality.

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